



SPIRITUALITY OF WATER

INDIAN TEMPLE TANKS

**Year 7 Water in the World –
A Stage 4 Geography resource
by Dr Susan Bliss**

SPIRITUALITY OF WATER: Indian temple tanks

Figure 1: Photograph of World Heritage Stepwell. Rani ki Vav (Queen's Stepwell), Patan, Gujarat



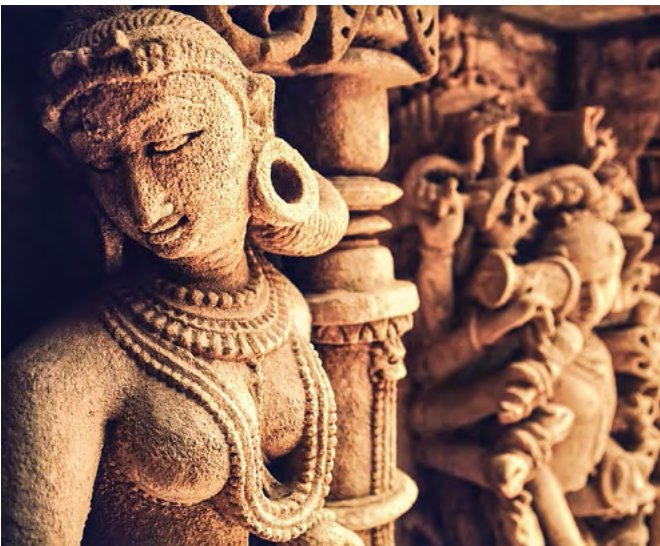
(Samir S. Patel) Source: http://archive.archaeology.org/1105/features/india_gujarat_stepwells_ran_ki_vav.html

Content Descriptions

The economic, cultural, spiritual and aesthetic value of water for people, including peoples of the Asia region (ACHGK041)

Water is central to the lives of people living in India as it provides essential **services** such as irrigation for crops, drinking water, hydro-electricity and transport as well as supports aquatic ecosystems. When meandering rivers drop alluvium on the plains during floods, they produce fertile soils which contributes to an increase in agricultural productivity and extra crops to feed the 1.2 billion people. However these floods cause death, landslides and damage to properties.

In India water not only delivers essential services but also offers important **spiritual** and **cultural** values. As it has the power to create or destroy life, Indian religions and customs have been woven around rivers,



The detailed sculptural reliefs of Rani Ki Vav, Patan, Gujarat.
Source: Wikimedia Commons

lakes, ponds and sacred tanks, especially the purifying and cleansing quality of the Ganges River to the Hindu religion.

'In India, water is given much importance starting from the period of Rigveda...'The Rigvedic called the waters Goddesses as they quenched the thirst of their cattle'.... 'They are mothers, or young wives; they flow in channels to the sea, but they are also celestial. The waters bestow long life, wealth and immortality. They clean and purify the worshipper, even from moral sins such as telling lies, cursing and violence. The Atharva Veda also praises water as a purifier.'

Source: <http://orissa.gov.in/e-magazine/Journal/journalvol1/pdf/orhj-13.pdf>



Surya Kund, Sun Temple, Modhera. Source: Wikimedia Commons

Temple tanks

Water has played a central role in Indian religious rituals and as a result many places of worship have water bodies associated with them. *'The temple tanks are revered no less than the temple itself. Their waters are believed to cleanse all sins. In fact, devotees are required to wash their hands and feet in the temple tank before entering the temple. The waters are also used to perform the daily ritual bath of the temple deity. Annual float festivals are conducted in the tanks, when the idol of the deity is floated around the tank on a decorated raft.'*

Source: [http://ecoheritage.cpreec.org/innerpageof.php?\\$mFJyBfKPkEB](http://ecoheritage.cpreec.org/innerpageof.php?$mFJyBfKPkEB)

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The hundreds of tanks across India are used for ritual cleansing and are alleged to contain sacred water from the Ganges River. In southern India most temple tanks are referred to as Shiva Ganga as the temple tanks are purported to be connected to the Ganges River in northern India.

Figure 2: Map showing the distribution of sacred tanks across India



Type and number of sacred water bodies by state

State	Local term for temple tank	No. of tanks listed
Andhra Pradesh	Kalyani , Temple Tank, Pushkairni	13
Arunachal Pradesh	Kund	1
Assam	Pukhuri	5
Bihar	Sarovar, Temple Tank	1
Delhi	Baoli	9
Gujarat	Vav, Vaav, Kund, Sarovar	11
Haryana	Baoli, Holy water bodies, Sarovar	9
Himachal Pradesh	Kund	2
Jharkhand	Sarovar, Holy water bodies	1
Karnataka	Kalyani, Temple Tank	20
Kerala	Temple Tank	24
Madhya Pradesh	Kund	10
Maharashtra	Temple Tank, Kund	68
Manipur	Sacred Ponds	1
Meghalaya	Sacred Tanks, Lake	3
Odisha	Temple Tank, Sarovar	7
Puducherry	Kovil Kulam	1
Punjab	Kund / Sarovar	5
Rajasthan	Baori, Baoli, Baudi, Bawdi	9
Sikkim	Lake	3
Tamil Nadu	Kovil Kulam, Temple Tank	116
Tripura	Sacred Ponds	2
Uttar Pradesh	Kund, Bowli	31
Uttarakhand	Kund	7
West Bengal	Kund	5

Source: http://www.cpreencnis.nic.in/Database/Sacred_waterbodies_928.aspx

Figure 3: Aesthetic and cultural values - Stepwell carvings – Bundi, Rajasthan



Source: <http://design-flute.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/09/venu-salsa11.gif>

World Heritage List- aesthetic, spiritual and cultural values

Temple tanks are found in square, rectangular and stepped designs. A stepwell is a deep well with steps going down to the well's water level. Stepwells have been constructed since the 3rd millennium BC and



Above ground view of the entrance to Rani-ki-Vav (the Queens Stepwell), Patan, Gujarat. Source: Wikimedia Commons

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have evolved from a pit in sandy soil to an elaborate multi-storey construction. In Gujarat and Rajasthan, the step wells were decorated with sculptures (**Refer to Figure 3**).

In 2014 the Rani-ki-Vav (the Queen's Stepwell) at Patan, Gujarat (India) **was placed on the World Heritage List**. The Stepwell *'is located on the banks of the Saraswati River and was built as a memorial to a king in the 11th century AD. Designed as an inverted temple highlighting the sanctity of water, it is divided into seven levels of stairs with sculptural panels of high artistic quality; more than 500 principle sculptures and over a thousand minor ones combine religious, mythological and secular imagery. The fourth level is the deepest and leads into a rectangular tank 9.5 metres by 9.4 metres, and to a depth of 23 metres. The well is located at the westernmost end of the property and consists of a shaft, 10 metres in diameter and 30 metres deep'*.

Source: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/922/>



Ritual bathing in the Mahamaham tank at Kumbakonam, Tamil Nadu.

Source: Wikimedia Commons

Multi-purposes values

Sacred tanks form an important part of Indian temples. They are generally fed by precipitation and/or groundwater. These temple tanks have inlets which funnel excess precipitation, during the monsoon summer, to runoff into the tanks.

Temple tanks are treated with respect as they provide **service, spiritual** and **cultural** values such as:

- serving the temple's ritual needs – pilgrims bath in the tank to cleanse themselves before going into the temple.
- acting as percolation tanks that recharge groundwater
- reducing runoff and soil erosion
- restricting use of water unless there is a drought
- serving as places for cultural celebrations and social interactions for local people

- maintaining aquatic species. Some sacred tanks support fish, which help sustain the cleanliness of the tank. Fish consume algae which would otherwise turn the water cloudy.
- curing several diseases –some pilgrims dip in these water to cure their diseases

Many of these **aesthetically** beautiful sacred tanks (**Figures 1, 3, 4b**) have become tourist attractions and are **economically** important for local businesses. Every 12 years Hindus take a holy dip in the Mahamaham tank in Kumbakonam in Tamil Nadu. The Brahma Sarovar Tank at Kurukshetra (**Figure 4a**) has annual celebrations with a ceremony of floating lamps on water and the Banganga tank in Mumbai (**Figure 5**) is a popular tourist site.

Aesthetic, cultural and spiritual values of sacred tanks

Some of the tanks are significant either on account of their shape, size, beauty or religious sacredness.

Figure 4a: The Brahma Sarovar Tank at Kurukshetra



Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brahma_Sarovar#mediaviewer/File:BrahmSarovar.jpg

This is one of the holiest tanks in India. It is dedicated to Lord Shiva and is believed that Lord Brahma created the universe from this place.

Figure 4b: The Harmandir Sahib Tank



Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harmandir_Sahib#mediaviewer/File:Golden-Temple-Jan-07.jpg

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The **Harmandir Sahib Tank** referred to as the 'Golden Temple', is a prominent Sikh Gurdwara located in the city of Amritsar, Punjab, India.

Decline and deterioration of sacred tanks

Most of the ancient temple tanks are no longer used, some have become structurally unsound while others have become **sinks** for sewage and garbage. Overuse of water extraction has led to many of them drying up, inlets have been blocked by construction activities, and population pressure resulted in some drained and used for other purposes. For example in Bangalore, the Dharmambudhi tank has been drained for the Majestic Bus Station.

The Banganga Tank (Walkeshwar Temple) in Mumbai is threatened by water pollution promoting community clean-up activities each year for the Banganga Festival of Music. This annual activity is organised by the Maharashtra Tourism Development Corporation (MTDC).

Figure 5: Water pollution in the Banganga Tank



Source: <http://www.kemmannu.com/index.php?action=topstory&type=6062>

'The Banganga tank at Walkeshwar temple on Malabar Hill is slowly depleting, resulting in the death of aquatic life as well as birds that frequented the waterbody. This tank, whose water was once considered therapeutic, is currently lying in a state of neglect, surrounded by garbage. Residents of the area have noticed that species like the Mallard duck, black swan, mute swan and tortoise, which had made the tank their home are dwindling in numbers. The older residents believe this is due to sudden reduction in the tank's water level this summer.'

'The water level has mysteriously reduced in the tank. Out of 150 ducks, nearly 50 have died. Some are either eaten by cats or succumb to diseases. We used to call an NGO who would treat the ducks for free,' said Yogendra Prabhu, a resident.

' Source: <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/Depleting-Banganga-killing-aquatic-life/articleshow/8593788.cms>

Geofacts

- Stagnant waters include kundas, ponds, lakes, well, tanks and pits.
- Many of India's stepwells were abandoned when the English declared them unsanitary. Recently some have been restored.
- Water collected from seven rivers (Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Saraswati, Narmada, Sindhu and Kaveri) are placed in a ritualistic pot, then used during worship.

Activities

Knowledge and understanding

1. Water is the servant and master of humans. Explain this statement.
2. Describe the **spiritual** and **cultural** values of temple tanks in India.
3. Discuss the multi-purposes of sacred tanks in India.
4. Describe the **aesthetic** value of sacred tanks
5. Explain why many of the sacred tanks are declining in importance and are structurally deteriorating. Suggest strategies to reduce this trend.
6. What are the economic, service, sink and spiritual values of sacred tanks? Present answer in a three column table.

Inquiry and skills

7. Refer to **Figure 1**: Photograph called the Queen's Stepwell in Gujarat. Explain why this stepwell was listed as a World Heritage Cultural Site in 2014. Research how this special cultural site will be sustainably managed as an oral report.
8. Refer to **Figure 2**:
 - Which state has the largest number of sacred temple tanks?
 - Where are most temple tanks located? – north or south India?
9. Refer to **Figure 4**. Using technology design an annotated collage of ten water tanks. Describe their location and significance.
10. Refer to **Figure 5**: In groups research the Banganga Tank (Walkeshwar Temple) in Mumbai and present an essay on '*Heritage in a Concrete Jungle*'. Include its spiritual significance, environmental threats and clean-up activities. Include annotated photographs.

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Geolinks

- Concept and origin of sacred tanks – <http://orissa.gov.in/e-magazine/Journal/journalvol11/pdf/orhj-13.pdf>
- Slideshow of the Islamic Stepwells of Gujarat, India – http://archive.archaeology.org/1105/web/india_slideshow.html
- World Heritage site – Rani-ki-Vav (the Queen's Stepwell) at Patan, Gujarat (India) – <http://whc.unesco.org/en/news/1157>; <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/922>
- Banganga Tank (Walkeshwar Temple) – http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Banganga_Tank; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walkeshwar_Temple; http://goindia.about.com/od/mumba1/ss/Mumbai-Architecture_19.htm;

- <http://www.mumbaimania.in/2008/08/banganga-tank-heritage-in-concrete.html>;
- <http://www.ixigo.com/banganga-tank-mumbai-india-ne-1314120>;
- <http://www.kemmannu.com/index.php?action=topstory&type=6062>;
- http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Banganga_Tank
- Cultural and spiritual value of rivers in Indian context – <http://archive.riversymposium.com/index.php?element=B2B+SWARUP.pdf>

YouTube

The Banganga Tank, a sacred place for the Hindus – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TPtzMeqZ1So>
“Err-bane” Truth – Dharmambudhi Tank – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f5zKPovja5I>



The striking geometric design of Chand Baori, Abhaneri, India. Source: Wikimedia Commons