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INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL
OF
DIGITAL HUMANITIES
AND
UBIQUITOUS SCHOLARSHIP

IJDUS

Volume 1 Issue I January-June 2022

ISSN: 3048-9113 (Online)

CHAPTER 3

Negotiating Water: Baolis of Delhi, A Historical Perspective

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Abstract

The paper titled "Negotiating Water: Baolis of Delhi - A Historical Perspective" explores the historical significance and the evolving functionality of baolis (step wells) in Delhi. The study delves into the medieval period when Delhi, despite having the perennial Yamuna River, faced water scarcity due to its low water table and topographical challenges. The rulers of the Delhi Sultanate experimented with various methods of water extraction and storage, leading to the construction of reservoirs, barrages, and eventually, baolis. These baolis served not only as water sources but also as communal spaces, reflecting a blend of utilitarian and social functions. The paper highlights the role of different societal segments, including state nobles, Sufi dargahs, and trading communities, in the proliferation and maintenance of these structures. The study emphasizes the need for a modern approach to integrating these historical water systems into contemporary urban planning. He advocates for the revitalization of baolis to address current water challenges, suggesting community involvement and sustainable practices to preserve these historical assets for future generations. The study offers insights into the socio-cultural and environmental interactions of Delhi's past, providing valuable lessons for present-day water management and heritage conservation.

Keywords: Baolis, Water Management, Delhi Sultanate, Urban Planning, Heritage Conservation

Negotiating Water: Baolis of Delhi, A Historical Perspective

In the early 13th Century Delhi became the capital of the newly established Delhi Sultanate. A large number of military men suddenly made Delhi their home with a large number of animals, slaves

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and some even with families. To cater to the traders, scribes and various men and women of service sectors and a few other sectors, lots of water was required but the topography of Delhi despite a perennial river was water deficient. In Mehrauli area there are historical wells that had not yielded water. The distance from the river and being the end of rocky Aravali were the two factors that troubled the Delhi Sultanate. The water table was naturally very low. To add to the problem, the new rulers were poor in hydraulic engineering, and having a very poor idea of water management. They were fighting an army with a mobile population and very little idea of water storage and continuous usage.

They constantly experimented with water extraction, and storage and tried to get safer access to natural sources like a river. It was easier said than done. First, the new rulers were not water people, the Islam religion put no ritual pressure on them for use of water, and Muslim warriors were trained to consume less water, both in food habits and lifestyles, all these helped in lesser need of water but their huge army kept with themselves larger battery of animals which created the need for a certain amount of unquantifiable water for stationary men and animals parked in Delhi for a longer duration. Never before did Delhi have any requirement for this quantity of water all year long.

Delhi had its unique problem. It was of flood-prone Yamuna River and low water table making easy access to water a grave problem. And the immigrant Muslim settlers had another set of cultural issues. They were not used to perennial rivers, did not understand the South Asian terrain and its hydraulic ecosystem, and ironically needed water for their men and animals. The dichotomous environment obtained was too complex for them to have solved instantly. They went with the time and grew in dealing with water as it came. From surface level water bodies that were obtained by digging the large tract of land to make reservoirs like Hauz- i Shamshi, Hauz Khas they slowly graduated to more controlled hydraulic engineering of barrages and sluice gates to allow storage and drainage of water for popular consumption much like Satpula near Khirki Village in Malviya Nagar area. By the 14 century, they were confident to store and use water for wider usage through artificial channels.

All this while the rulers were concerned for micro water bodies for individual or communal access to water. By the 14th Century, Delhi had become bigger and rather spread out horizontally. Many rulers had built cities to achieve their ego and also accommodate the ever-expanding

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population necessitated by the intensification of state apparatus. This meant the growth of residence settlements with varied water usage habits. Most dwellers were economically better off and could pay for the water. Hence the emergence of localized water bodies with storage of water not limited to drinking emerged, Baolis and Hammams being the foremost.

Baolis or Step Wells were not local to Delhi but at the same time, people of Delhi were not alien to the concept of some type of communal water storage. Even before the establishment of Muslim settlements in various parts of Delhi, the Tomar rulers had constructed a huge water body at Surajkund. Though not a Baoli but the idea of storage of water for other than irrigation and drinking purposes was not new. Delhi being contiguous with Rajasthan topography always knew communal storage of water. The large number of Baolis listed in the reports of Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), many are lost to us without a trace, was inconspicuous in style and built quality. Many were not even concrete or at best made more useful with a stone lining. Bricks were difficult to get and must have been an expensive proposition too.

Baolis or step wells were human response to scarcity of water in rather rain deficient regions like Rajasthan and Gujarat. With meagre rainfall, it was technological response by people to better the very basic surface level water storage like ponds or lakes. Baolis unlike pond were smaller in scale, were meant to cater to smaller and dense population, and could be used for multiple purposes. Made usually in concrete, with a deep pond for storage of water and a flight of descending steps to access the stored water, its design depended on the wealth and the taste of the patrons. It could be a simple water tank to store water for limited use but in case of affluent communities the baolis were as ornate as that of Rani Ka vav (Gujarat) or Abhaneri (Rajasthan) with extremely carved spaces, many chambers, gateways and elaborate and complex channels for water supply. these ornate baolis were show of wealth and power to appropriate the general people. These ornate baolis were tools and symbols of social domination and perpetuation of hold over the society. Water being the essential requirements of the human beings, any person having control over it or capacity to provide it to a large population, tends to become one who shapes the social structures.

Water often controls the social structure, economic behaviour and agricultural and ritual landscape. In a tropical country like India where the monsoon was erratic and land highly fertile, water happens to play a very important role to perpetuate the ecological dichotomy. All political

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formations in India, in all regions have had political structures that used the distribution of water to exact political and social compliance in a very strict manner. In western India where scarcity of rainfall and coupled with low ground water water became the main source and means of social and ritual power.

In Delhi which was getting dense, there was need to store water locally. almost all settlements whether royal forts like Old Fort, or Kotla Firuz Shah or Red Fort had baolis factored in. All dargahs that attracted lots of visitors and devotees had simple and yet embedded baolis albeit with magical qualities to cure diseases and empower the devotees with good health and barakat. some baois were not embedded to the dargahs and yet had power to heal, come thing which was quite common to Islamic communal practices where shrines, dervishes and pirs had exorcist powers. The *Gandhak ki Baoli* in Mehrauli is said to have some such properties, though people also attribute the name Gandhak to the perfume makers who may have lived close by. this practice is not unknown as just few hundred meters away there is one famous and elaborate baoli called Rajon ki baoli, where rajon meant the masons who had gathered there for construction of Qutb Minar, though the fine architecture we get to see in this baoli sufficiently point towards later improvements and additions. and then there were baolis other than these which were built and patronised by common people that largely had non-muslim patrons. Among them would come the scattered baolis of Dwarka (sector 6), one in RK Puram (Near DPS school), one in the compound of Bara Hindu Rao hospital and so many others recorded in ASI reports but now untraceable. These types of baolis like one in Matia Khan were for normal usage and people even took water for drinking and other domestic purposes. These baolis were not very ornate and water from some like Matia Khan are used even today, both by common people and also Delhi Jal Board. and alst type of baolis were existing ones possibly built by Hindu communities like Agrasen or Ugrasen ki Baoli at Hailey Road in central Dehi. its is obvious by the built structure of the Ugrasen baoli that it was built by affluent community and that it had borrowed heavily from the existing baolis of Rajasthan and even Rajon Ki Baoli of Delhi.

From the discussion above it is clear that the medieval Delhi was struggling to understand the power of water and was trying to use it for both daily use and domestic harnessing. from Surface level water storage to barrages to hammams and finally baolis, people and rulers of Delhi had come a long way in negotiating with water. but it was neither sudden nor acquired, they learnt it harder

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way in centuries to come. while state, nobles and powerful Sufi dargahs played important role in spread of baolis in Delhi, trading communities and common men too bult their own baolis to conserve and use the water stored therein. The water stored in these baolis were a mix of rain water and through the well attached to them. since Delhi was in the heavy rainfall zone, obviously all baolis had made provisions for local extraction of water, something that precluded some reliable knowledge about water table on the spot and also a clever management of human labour to extract water and fill the baoli with the water. while do not know what exactly was the system of labour management, who organised them, who paid them, at what intervals, how these baolis were maintained, we know that the very fact they have existed till date points to an efficient system of man management.

The manager of Dargah Qutbuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki at Mehrauli, located not far from its illustrious neighbour, the Qutb Minar built by 13th Century Sultan Iltutmish, Fauzan Ahmad is an enlightened religious man. He thinks ahead of his times and wants better use of Muslim structures. Meeting him opens your eyes and hearts both and ignites the mind. There is a hidden rather embedded baoli at the Kaki Dargah which has been kept under lock and keys to prevent its unintended use. It's a rather small baoli, may be meant for use of smaller population who visited the dargah. British added a meeting place or hall that may have been used for some social gathering when the dargah was not frequented. In fact, British in their rather imperial and colonial frame of mind had made such use of many magnificent and even royal structures like few buildings of Delhi Red Fort and even Humayun Tomb again in Delhi. The idea would have been to heap cultural insult on the Indians in general and Muslims in particular. This baoli at Kaki dargah was obviously used for such recreational meetings by the colonial powers. Today despite all restoration efforts of government bodies and even private entities like Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH), it's pretty unusable. I personally saw dead birds, small animals, and lots of rubbish. The INTACH efforts to.clean were more of sarkari whitewash, as they left soon they exhausted the ten lakh rupees allotted for this. Fauzan sahab is very progressive person. He wants to let academic seminars and such activities happen at this place if it is cleaned.

I think this is the great solution that he suggested on the sly. At Ugrasen ki Baoli, which is near CP and centrally located, the guard of ASI was grumbling of love birds assembling there and thus

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spoiling the ambience. But frankly is it not space meant for young people to meet and have an ice cream! What we want of our monuments? Some sanctified sanctuaries where no one can enter? One can climb to the top of the Eiffel Towers and have a beer or cup of coffee, but lovebirds are shooed away from a baoli. Same story for Rajo ki baoli. Its heavily guarded and visitors fear the guards. When i visited it my students, we thought of imagined qawwalis, musical evenings and many such events.

Fauzan sahab went even further and suggested that baolis like that at the Kaki dargah which was in the middle of dense population, can be allowed to store water and then supply to the neighborhood. Only baoli of Matia khan serves this end to little measure, rest are too guarded, dry or sanctified to serve the nearby population. Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya blessed the society with a baoli to overcome the water scarcity in the area but today the dargah management does not allow access to it for any other purpose but religious ones. What was suggested for Kaki baoli is good to be implemented everywhere. All Delhi baolis were practical, were constructed to cater to the local people and should be allowed to collect water in rains and recharge the water table as well as draw water for domestic use. Unlike the ornate baolis of Rajasthan and Gujarat, the baolis of Delhi can be used to be the lifeline for the people of neighborhood. The solution to depletion of water table is here and we need to tap the ample rain water to solve a problem in whatever little extent we can. History can be used to teach lessons in water harvesting.