Contemporizing Traditional Water-Architecture

BIRKHA BAWARI

{A 21st century step-well in India}

Step-wells, subterranean aqua-structures, (Bawari or Vav in local dialect) were an integral part of Indian communities from 2nd century A.D. till the end of 19th century. Relegated in favour of canal and piped water-supply, these exquisite step-wells were gradually abandoned and forgotten.

However, after a hiatus of over a century, as ecological and sustainability issues took centre-stage amidst growing concern over the deepening water-crisis, it became vital that ancient wisdom of harnessing water be re-visited and contemporized by resurrecting the traditional ones, creating new ones, rationalizing the modern and integrating the entire gamut of aqua-architecture to build a sustainable water-network.

Using traditional language in contemporary context, a new subterranean structure, Birkha Bawari, fashioned like a step-well, was built in Umaid Heritage Housing Township in Jodhpur, a water-stressed city on the fringe of the Thar Desert of India. With a capacity to hold over 17.5 million litres of rain-water, this Bawari and its unique structural system were designed by Jodhpur (India) based architect A. Mridul. Its creation is especially significant as it is constructed of site-quarried sandstone, built by local craftsman, to harvest a renewable resource without expending non-renewable energies.

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