

Documentation of Ancient Baolis In Bindraban, Kishtwar, Jammu And Kashmir- A Field Study

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INTRODUCTION

Different regions call *Baolis* or step wells by various names. Locally known in *Bhadernabi* and *Kishtwari* as *bain*, in Gujarat as *vars* or *ravdi*, and in Rajasthan and Northern India as *baoli*, *baori* or *bawdi* or *bavadi*. The present study focuses on documenting the newly discovered *baolis* near the Bindraban Ancient Temple site in the Kishtwar district of Jammu and Kashmir. We conducted a fieldwork study in November 2023, during which we gathered a wealth of information about the *baolis* and the architecture of the temples. The Bindraban *baolis* are reported for the first time in this documentation. We took photographs and measured the sculptures of the *baolis*- their location, the iconographic symbolism used in these sculptures, and the art and architecture of the *baolis* themselves. The photo documentation plays a crucial role in highlighting aspects not addressed in the text, thereby bringing the region's art and architecture to life with its vibrant culture.

Kishtwar is located in the Middle Mountains, beside Udhampur, Rajouri, Poonch, Doda, and Bhadarwah. Several tribes held their rituals and festivals near the springs or *baolis*. The region is said to produce blankets and *pattus* and a better quality of saffron than Kashmir which might be exchanged with other items in other areas. The inhabitants of Sunjam travel to Kishtwar to exchange sheep with grains when the harvest fails. This proves that the region produces a surplus. Many precious and semi-precious stones are found in Padar which might also serve as an item of trade. The roads describe the cultural links with other regions, paths and passes connecting Kashmir, Leh, Bhadarwah etc. Bindraban has a group of *baolis* which indicates the presence of cultural give and take with other areas. The structure of the *baolis* is a great artistic skill with the symbols of animals, temples, snakes and other decorations. There are indications of the Greek architectural designs of these *baolis*. The presence of *baolis* near the temple makes it sacred and useful for conducting rituals and ceremonies.

GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION

Kishtwar is present in the Jammu and Kashmir Union Territory. Kishtwar is approximately 58 kilometres from Doda and 210 kilometres from Jammu. Bindraban *baolis* are about 7.4 kilometres from Kishtwar. Bhandarkot is about 14 kilometres from Kishtwar.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Situated in the southeast of Kashmir the Valley of *Kastharata* or Kishtwar is on the upper Chenab. It is mentioned by Kalhana as a separate hill state in the time of Kalasa. (Stein, 2022, p. 431). Hutchison and Vogel (1994) described Kishtwar as present in the inner Himalayas, east of Kashmir. Ladakh borders Kishtwar on the north, Padar

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lived at the Hoderi spring in the southern part of the plateau and held a special festival and certain religious ceremonies in February and March. Kahn Sen from Gaur, Bengal subdued *Panjsasi* and other tribes and built a palace on the ridge after returning to Kishtwar by Bhandarkot (Hutchison & Vogel, 1994, pp. 643-644). Bates (1873) noted the presence of several stone fountains. Bhandarkot is on the right bank of the *Chandra Bhaga* River confluence with the Maru Wardwan River. When travelling to Kishtwar, there is a rope bridge over the Chenab River (Bates, 1873, p. 135).

Kaul (1993) noted that Kishtwar covered the region from Nag Seni to Ramban. The key event in Kishtwar is the dialogue between Nag Sen and King Menander in the second century B.C. In Menander's time, numerous Buddhist monks and ascetics settled on the protected slopes of Nag Seni to achieve their spiritual goals. Pathik (1980) described that the Buddhist monk Nag Sena of Kishtwar fulfilled Menander's desire for knowledge. Scholars believe that *Milindapanho* was written in the *Kishtwari*.

Kaul (2001) referenced a cave inscription in Bhandarkot, Kishtwar belonging to the seventh and eighth century A.D. The inscription at Bindraban Temple in Kishtwar was on the base stone of the lost ancient statue of Dattatreya and contains an elaborate inscription in the Sarda script (Kaul, 2001, p. 91). Bindraban functioned as a lookout point or a site of religious significance and was an ancient principality of Kishtwar located a few kilometres from Bhandarkot. Several fountains with *baolis* and chamber enclosures constructed from substantial stone blocks are in bad condition.

Bamzai (1994) mentioned the Middle Mountains which includes the valleys of Bhadarwah, Kishtwar and Padar. Kishtwar or *Kashvatta* is in the southeast of Kashmir on the upper Chenab. Raina (1981) described Kishtwar as a small valley surrounded by peaks. The climate in the Kishtwar region is extreme with a long cold winter and a short rise in temperature in summer. There is a route to Kishtwar from Verinag to Kokarnag via Sinthan pass.

Aash (1992) described Kishtwar as an area of peace and a welcome place for the Kashmir kings, a safe hiding place for war prisoners, warriors and revolutionary intellectuals. Kishtwar's vicinity includes the village of Bhandarkot. The existence of the *Naga* race and its influence on socio-religious life can be seen while the Buddhist influence can be traced by huge megaliths in Kishtwar. There are nine spring festivals: *Sidan*, *Satan*, *Kakaland Nikas*. Bhandarkot is mentioned as a place where two rivers meet together one from Padar and the other from Marwah. Nagsen, a saint, philosopher and authority on Buddhism was born in Kishtwar. He wrote his famous book *Malindapanha* in the Kishtwari language. There is a village in Kishtwar known as Nag Sen or Nagseni.

Drew (1875) mentioned that the Chenab River flows a deep many hundred feet below the Kishtwar plateau. A road from Kishtwar to Kashmir crosses the river just above the junction of the Wardwan stream which flows in from the north. There are also routes from Srinagar to Kishtwar and from Kishtwar to Leh. Drew (1877) described the Region of the Middle Mountains which includes Bhadarwah, Kishtwar, Doda, Ramban, Rajauri, Poonch and Muzaffarabad. The climate of Kishtwar is something like that of Bhadarwah but is warmer and receives less rain and snow.

Enriquez (1915) cited a challenging route from Kishtwar to Leh. A path exists from Kishtwar to Kashmir across the Sinthan Pass, passing by Chatru and Chinigam.

Rothfeld (1918) referenced the *baolis* located at Tugudor Tagood in Mugal Maidanand Katan, exhibiting Greek architectural design. These were actual structures featuring roofs and columns. Water emerged from the stone rosette in the centre of the rear wall. The design of the flat roof and pillars is truly Grecian. The construction of these stone wells has been expensive. There has been a much more advanced civilisation with outposts in the hilly area of Kishtwar, influenced by Greece, as identified by Rothfeld. The Chenab and Kishtwar valleys lie on the path from Punjab to Ladakh and Turkestan.

METHODOLOGY

Fieldwork served as a crucial methodology for establishing the narrative of the study. Photo documentation serves as a way to record various structural activities and monuments. The elaboration of the monuments would also function as a crucial connection to accomplish the study's objectives. Moreover, the photographs of the idols, monuments and structures will be taken in situ for information. The detailing of the sites is important according to the leftover part and visible sculpture of the area, including the nearest water sources, religious and sacred sites, and condition of sites with the finding of the reason for installation which supplements the expertise of the sites.

PLAN, ART AND ARCHITECTURE

The water storage tank called the *baoli* or *bain* collects water from beneath the earth or the hose just above the tank. What differentiates the *baolis* of Bindraban from Bhadarwah is the roof attached to or is present in Bindraban and not in the *baolis* of Bhadarwah. Bindraban *baolis* are rectangular and square in plan (Figure 1 illustrates the shape and structure of the *baolis* with the roof). The *baolis* include three enclosing walls adorned with high reliefs of decorative motifs, comprising various ornamental and stylistic elements to protect the whole cistern. This represents Greek architecture. The back wall has much decoration and in the centre of a hose or stone rosette with a design is present for the water to flow. The walls of these *baoli* are seen with fewer joints which attract its view and mark the great artistic skills. In some *baolis* there are double-joint hoses or stone rosettes; in others, there is a single hose (Figure 2 illustrates the two types of hoses with decoration).

The roofs consist of large flat stones as long as ten feet showing great artistic skills. There are decorations on the walls with animal figures, temple structures, and an individual in a welcome pose (Figure 3 illustrates different symbols). The roof has a circular design with a *chakra* shape and on the outer circle, there are two *nags* or snakes interconnected like a braid in a circle (Figure 4 illustrates the roof of the *baoli*). This is generally found in every *Nag* or serpent temple. The roof stone is flat and engraved in a shape to its size in the middle of which is found the *chakra*. The decoration and engravings on walls and roofs are damaged by the weather and the structures are not taken care of by the locals and the authorities. The architecture and sculpture of these *baolis* are exceptional. The tank or the place where water is collected is not visible in the *baolis* of Bindraban either because it is covered with a heap of soil up to the walls or is

not present at all. If the second is the possibility, then it can be taken into consideration that the people did not feel the need for the tanks or the water directly drains out or the possibility of water being used up or there might be some temples which do not need any tank inside it.

The length of the *Baoli* is 54 centimetres and the breadth is 53 centimetres. The hose length is 69 centimetres of the combined hoses that is 34 centimetres of each and breadth is 35 centimetres. The height of the hose hole is 15 centimetres and the length is 18 centimetres.



Figure 1: Bindraban *baoli* is rectangular and square named K1 and K2 respectively (Source: Author)



Figure 2: The double hose or rosette is named K3 and the single hose is named K4, with a design around the hole (Source: Author)



Figure 3: The horse symbol is named K5, the Temple structure is named K6 and an individual in a welcome pose is named K7 (Source: Author)



Figure 4: *Chakra* or round-shaped roof design with the serpents in a circular braid form, named K8 (Source: Author)

SPECIAL ABOUT THE BINDRABAN *BAOLIS*

The presence of step wells tells a great deal about the ecology and history of the area, as do the beautiful stone cisterns that comprise lattice like walls, carved columns, decorated towers and elaborate sculptures (Livingston 2002.) Some stepwells receive water from underneath the earth while others receive the water through the water springs with hoses. To the front and by the side there are some mounds and a well and evidence of stone nearby (Figure 5 illustrates the mound which is under the ground and a well), it can be taken into consideration that these *baolis* near Bindraban were the main centres of some authority having a great exchange of trade or commerce or the religious centres or the resting places. The fact that it might be a trade centre or a main town can also be proven by the fact that just above these *baolis* there is a road which connects to Kashmir via Sinthan Top. In summer months, stepwells are used for relaxation, social and religious gatherings and water conservation. For religious ceremonies or ritual performances, the water can be used from these stepwells or natural springs like the Mohenjodaro where the Great Bath served the purpose of some ritual bath. The stepwells in Bindraban have roofs and walls, proving this fact being used for religious purposes and ritual baths. It served as a watch post or a place of religious sanctity and as an ancient principality of Kishtwar.

Stepwells possess religious and spiritual importance for individuals for many water deities are associated with fertility, creation, and the attributes of the mother goddess. This may explain why stepwells are frequently constructed alongside a temple or shrine (Neubauer 1999). Bindraban *baolis* are near the temple as these water bodies can serve water for rituals and worship of the deities and also provide sanctity to the *baolis*.

Baolis are the ancient water-harvesting cultural practices in the North-Western Himalayas. Individuals manage water resources for many purposes. The locals have ownership over the use and benefit from the natural resources. Near the temples, *baolis* were built with the twin aim of performing rituals and protecting the sacredness of the place.

Near the *baolis* is the Bindraban Temple inscription on the base stone of the lost ancient statue of Dattatreya (replaced by the idol of Shiva) which carries a detailed inscription (Figure 6 illustrates the inscription at the base stone in the temple) in the Sarda script (Kaul, 2001, p. 91). This is the only Temple found near the *baoli* site. The temple has only the base stone and carries a detailed inscription in Sarda characters of the eleventh and twelfth century A.D.



Figure 5: Mound and a well show some resemblance to the religious centres or resting places (Source: Author)



Figure 6: Bindraban Temple inscription in Sarda script on the base stone of the lost ancient statue of Dattatreya (Source: Author)

DISCUSSION

An inscription from the fifth century AD provides the oldest recorded mention of a step-well on the Indian subcontinent. The *baoli* flourished from the seventh to the seventeenth centuries however, certain scholars assert that stepwells date back to the Indus Valley Civilization (Swarnkar 2011). There are several different names for step wells including *bandi*, *baoli*, *van*, *vandi*, *vai*, *Kalyani* or *pushkarni*. They are either water ponds or deep-dug trenches accessed by a descending line of stairs or steps (Chandra 2015). Noblemen constructed step wells for both defensive and humanitarian purposes. If a stepwell lies in or near a settlement, it could serve as a venue for community gatherings and meetings. It may also serve as a rest stop if it emerges on the trading route (Wilhelm 2013). Different types of step wells are defined by their size, arrangement, materials and shape. There is a distinct individuality to every stepwell (Chandra 2015).

In addition to providing water, a stepwell benefits the community by working as a meeting spot. Additionally, it serves as a place for men to congregate during their free time, and women to discuss while fetching water for the home (Neubauer 1999). Stepwells function as venues for communal gatherings and social interaction during religious ceremonies (Chandra 2015). Stepwells offers an essential solution for conserving cultural heritage and managing watersustainably. Stepwellsprovide water for agriculture and drinking (Piplani and Kumar 2019).

ICONS AND SYMBOLS IN *BAOLIS*

The *baolis* received patronage from the authority for being the ancient water storage medium. There is different iconographic symbolism depicted on the walls of the *baolis*. The figures depict with a meaning constructing and reconstructing the cultural and religious history of the area. The animal figures (mostly horses and snakes), temple structures, a man or a woman in a welcome pose and someone riding on a horse are some iconographic symbolisms in the Bindraban *baolis*. People venerate these symbols. Sometimes water springs or *nag* or the serpent deity are designed with a floral shape, alligator or *Makara* and tortoise are worshipped and considered sacred as the female divinities have been associated with water or water animals. The welcome pose symbolises greetings, gratitude or respect.

The Temple symbol is considered a sign of devotion and sacredness built along with the idols so that these natural water springs or *baolis* are not polluted. This also marks the performance of some ritual practices near these *baolis* in temples. The stonework in all the *baolis* is a mark of veneration or the representation of some authority as the horse symbol proves.

CONCLUSION

The Bindraban *baolis* requires protection and preservation because of its cultural heritage significance. The great artistic skills can also contribute to the culture of the region. To maintain and safeguard these *baolis* and water bodies, research on the regeneration of these water management strategies must be undertaken. The future potential of these is particular, as the knowledge may be transmitted to future generations owing to its rich heritage and lasting habits.

The *baolis* create access to natural resources and serve as the meeting place and locations for the exchange of information. Unaware of its cultural value some people have burnt bushes and thrown garbage inside and near these *baolis* which demands the attention of the authorities. The *baolis* at present have lost their earlier importance of the performance of rituals, drinking or irrigation. Nowadays these have attracted only destruction and caused its extinction due to the neglect of proper management. The sculpture could provide further research on these ancient water storage systems. These *baolis* can be served with the purpose of drinking, rituals and irrigation as a tourist attraction, social interaction and traditional commercial centres. There is some tinge of the locals and the authorities who have taken some steps to reveal the importance of these ancient water storage systems which gave some inspiration in preserving the rich heritage.

The study examines the *baolis* and their artistic skills and historical importance and also provides a solution for sustainably using water resources and helps provide ways to preserve the culture for the future. There is a need to conserve the cultural heritage of traditional water storage systems.

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