

# The Ponds are Still Relevant

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'Aaj bhi Khare Hain Taalab'

by  
Anupam Mishra

&

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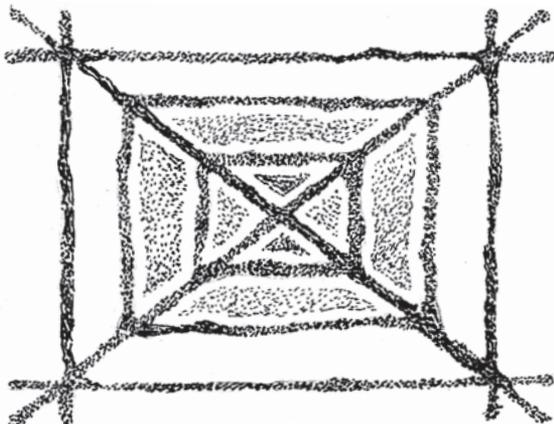
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The first edition was published about eighteen years back. Since then, Gandhi Pratishtan has published five editions of this book. It was kept free from copyright. Beside these five editions several newspapers, periodicals institutions, movements, publishers and governments have promoted it in their own respective ways during these eighteen years- known or unknown.

The earlier pages carry the names and addresses of some of them. The number of copies published by them is also given against some of them. It amounts to approximately 32 editions with about 2 lac copies. About 21 Akashvani Kendras have broadcast it completely while some of them on the demand of listeners have repeated it twice or thrice as well.

This book has received abundant love from its readers. One of its countless readers has brought it down to earth from out of the paper. Now they feel like sharing the invaluable love it has got from the society, among all. That is why this sixth edition brought out by Gandhi Shanti, Pratishtan has become invaluable for us. Hence no price-tag to it.

Now this book is of the people and for the people in real sense of the term.

**These hundreds, thousands of ponds,  
had not emerged out of the vacuum.  
They had behind them,  
a unitary force.  
Of those who inspired them and  
tens of those, who dug them out.  
These ones and tens then  
multiplied in to hundreds and thousands.  
But for the last couple of centuries, sprang  
a crop of new semi-literates, who  
turned these ones, tens, hundreds and thousands,  
in to,  
a big zero.**

## The History, Perched on the Banks of Ponds

“Keep doing good deeds.” The king had advised Kooran.

Once there were four brothers: Kooran Boorhan, Sarman and Kaunrai. They would get up early in the morning and leave for their fields. At noon, would come Kooran’s daughter with a bundle of lunch for them.

One day while on her way to fields from home she stumbled with a sharp-edged stone. She felt enraged. She tried to dig that stone out of its place with her sickle. But Lo! To her utter surprise, the sickle at once turned in to gold with the very touch of the stone. Then starts a corollary of events emanating from this incident. The girl picks up the stone and rushes to her field. Breathlessly, she narrates the tale of the magic stone to her father and uncles. The four brothers miss a heartbeat to listen all this. They come to realize that they have in their possession no ordinary stone, but a paras\* indeed! Whatever iron object they touch with the miraculous stone, it at once dazzles their eyes by transmuting in to gold.

But this dazzle is just short lived. It doesn’t last long. Kooran thinks that sooner or later this news will reach the king’s ears and result in dispossessing them of the paras. Then why not go to the king willingly and apprise him with the whole thing?

The story moves further. Then what happens is not a saga of touching iron but society with the paras.

The king neither accepts the magicstone nor the gold.

Returning everything to Kooran, he, says

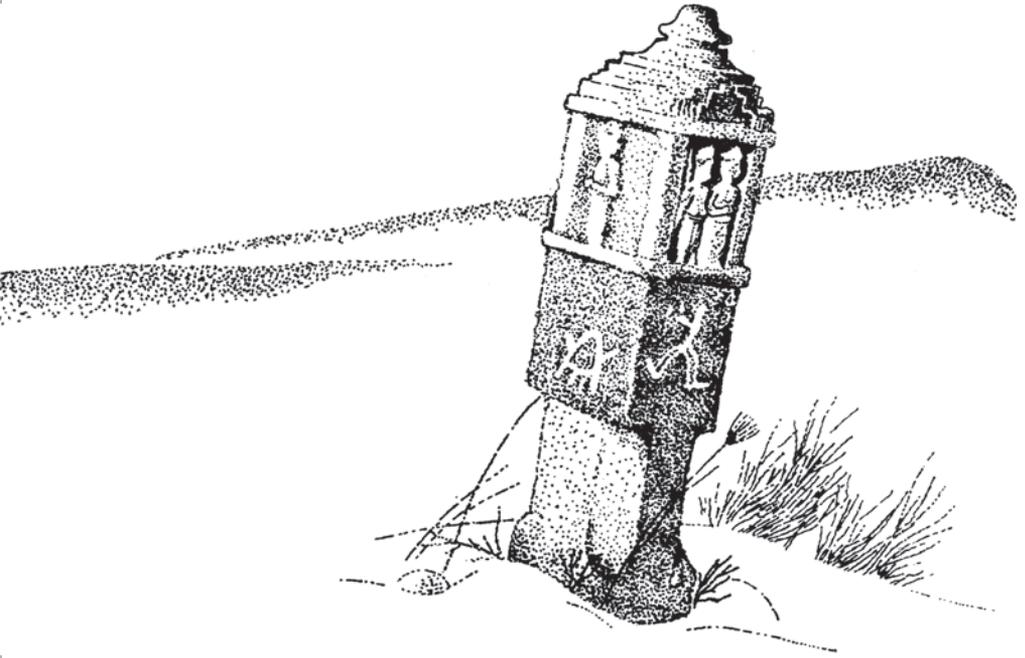
“Go and do noble deeds with it. Keep digging ponds.”

Nobody knows whether this story is true or historical. But in a big central part of the country, it has become a part of the public psyche thus mocking at the history. Four big ponds are still available in the Paatan regions of this very locale and put to



shame those who try to test the veracity of this story through the yardstick of history. All the four ponds are constructed in the names of these very four brothers. There is Boorha Sagar in Kuangram and Kundam Sagar in Kundam village. In 1907, an Englishman on the itinerary to write the chronicled history of India through Gazetteer, too had heard this legend from many people and then examined these four big ponds. Sarman Sagar was so expansive even in those days that it had on its bank three huge villages and all the three villages had divided this pond according to their own names. But this vast pond linked the three villages and was known as Sarman Sagar. The history did not remember Sarman, Boorhan Kaunrai and Kooran but these people made ponds and set aside the history on their banks.

This tale throbbing in the heart of the country's heartland can be heard anywhere in any form in North, South, East and West. And it is accompanied with hundreds and thousands of ponds. No exact number of these water bodies is available today. Not counters but constructors of these numerous ponds kept coming and the ponds kept emerging persistently.



Some of these ponds were made by a king or queen, some other by an ordinary householder, still another by some widow and further still any other by an enlightened ascetic. Whosoever made a pond was revered by the people as Maharaj or Mahatma i.e. a pious soul. The grateful society immortalized its pond- makers and the people too expressed their sense of indebtedness by making ponds themselves,

The phase of close coordination between the society and its members was no small a phase. Even if we leave aside the period ranging from Mahabharata and Ramayana for the time being, it can aptly be said that right from fifth century up to the fifteenth, the ponds kept coming in to existence from one corner of the country to the other. In this continuous tradition spreading over about one thousand years, some obstacles had started coming after the fifteenth century but even during those times this process never came to a complete halt. That period of turmoil failed to put a full stop to the task performed by the society in a systematic manner over such a long time. The ponds kept being constructed here and there even till the end of eighteenth and nineteenth century.

But then the number of pond makers also started dwindling gradually. The enumerators did come of course but vis-a-vis the magnitude of the task, their number was quite small. Due to their microscopic number and inefficiency, no exact calculation could ever be possible. As a result the ponds were counted piecemeal but no summation of the pieces could ever be worked out. But the glimmer of these pieces can show the kaleidoscopic view of the entire picture.

From where to start the attempt at rolling the ponds filled to their brims in to dry statistics? Let us return once again to the nucleus of the country.

Village Jodauri of district Reeva with a population of 2500, has 12 ponds in it. Quite in its vicinity is taal Mukedaan with a population of 1500 only but having 10 ponds. This hamlet-small for those who have a penchant for working out average in everything-provides facilities of a good pond to 150 people even today. The population was even lesser during the period when these ponds were constructed. What is meant to emphasize here is that the people in those days had a strong craving to preserve each and every rain drop and create a reservoir so as to distribute water to the neighboring areas in the hours of crisis. The bounty of water god Varuna was received as 'prasad' i.e. sanctified food by the village with a spirit of devotion.

And there is hardly any scope for wasting a single particle of 'prasad' where it is scarce. Thousands of villages are named after ponds in Rajasthan-the most rain-starved region of the country and that too in the Thar Desert. The word 'sar' (pond) is suffixed to their names. No village can be imagined without 'sar.' Here rather than counting ponds, one can just count villages and then multiply the number with two or three.

Where population increased and the village turned in to city, neither water was borrowed nor stolen from anywhere else unlike the modern cities. The cities, too, managed their water sources on their own like the villages. What to talk of other cities, Delhi had reportedly 350 big or small ponds at a time.

From city let us come to the state now and return to Reeva. By modern standards, it is called a backward area but going by

water- management criterion, it had 5000 ponds during the last century.

A study in to the southern states reveals that about hundred years prior to independence, 53000 ponds were counted in Madras Presidency. In 1885, the 14 districts were doing well with 43000 ponds. Similarly, in the phase of neglect in Mysore, about 39000 ponds were serving the people in one way or the other by 1980.

Putting together all these scattered statistics, it can be said that till the beginning of this century about 11-12 lac ponds were filled to the brims from first day of Aashaadh to the last day of Bhadon, the fourth and sixth month respectively, according to the Bikrami calendar. And they used to distribute the 'prasad' of Varuna consistently up to the next Jeth (the third Bikrami month).

It was all because of people's perseverance in doing good deeds.

\* 'Paras' is mythically believed to be a stone that turns base metals in to gold with its very touch. A very famous story of King Midas is quite popular under the title "Golden Touch".



## From Bottom to The Top

It is eleventh today. The day of free choice. Even the gods are holidaying. Hence, no need to consult anybody for the inauguration. Still the people are joining heads together to consult each other. They are out to start the construction of a new pond.

The reader may look forward to read the details about constructing the pond-a meticulous detail implying the entire process, right from the building of embankments to filling it with water. We too, looked forward to such minute details, but all in vain. Non-availability of complete details of pond-building looks strange particularly at a place where thousands of ponds were dug out down the centuries. It was, however, a tradition of building the ponds thus, rather than 'how to build ponds.' Nevertheless, if we try to collage some small bits together, a workable picture if not very beautiful is likely to emerge out.

.....It is eleventh- the day of free will. What to ask now? Everything has been selected. God knows how many rains have descended in to the eyes of decision-makers. Therefore no questions like where does water come from how much it comes and how much of it can be stopped and where, arise there. These are no questions. Rather these are very plain things, as clear as your palm. Some of these eyes have excavated ponds earlier as well. Still there are some of these very eyes which have been doing this down the generations.

Although all the ten directions are open yet many things have been taken care of while making a choice of the site. This is a pasture for cows; this is a slope, low-lying area where water will come. It is seen whether people don't frequent that site for answering the call of nature or whether there is no compound for peeling off the dead animals' hide near around.

Only experience adds to the experience. The experienced eyes have a look at the well-contemplated site. Having reached here, it is thought as to where the water will come from and then its cleanness and protection is ensured. The nature of water source is also examined. The facts like height, width, starting, terminating point etc. too are judged. After the pond is filled where will be the point to raise a dam to contain it?

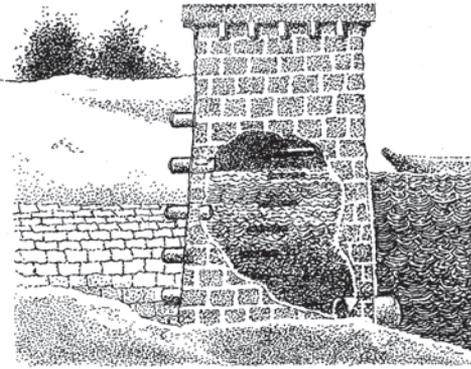
All the people have gathered now. A glittering platter is well-equipped for the ceremony. What are they waiting for now? The rays of the sun are adding more shine to the ceremonial platter which is quite ready with its contents viz. a water urn, roli (a mixture of turmeric and lime), turmeric, mauli (multi-strand and multi-colored yarn) a little quantity of rice and a holy red lump of soil. The encomiums in praise of earth and water have started reverberating in the air.

Varuna, the water-god is being remembered. Whatever and wherever may be the site of the pond, the rivers flowing in all corners of the country are invoked. The chants of shlokas cease with the spades hitting the earth. Five persons dig out soil and fill five troughs with it. Ten hands lift the troughs and empty them out on the bank. Here will be raised the embankment. The jaggery is distributed thus giving a finishing touch to the inaugural ceremony. The pond in essence so far, starts coming in to existence with the mark made by the scraper. The specifications like the place from where the earth will be dug out and then where it will be dumped are made. How much distance has to be observed from the embankment while digging so that the depth near it does not reach such a stage as to make water pressure weaken it to an alarming extent.....

This much could be done even on the eleventh. If work was not started then an auspicious date and time was decided through almanac or by the people on their own. Almanacs available everywhere in villages and cities foretell the auspicious time i.e. *mahoorat* to start the construction of a well, step-well or pond even today saying, "Start the work under the patronage of stars viz. *Hast, Anuradha*, all the three *Uttras, Shatbhiksha, Magha, Rohini, Pushya, Mrigshira*, etc. on a Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and

Friday but avoid dates like 4, 9, and 14. The excavation of pond is auspicious if *Guru* and *Buddh* are stronger, sin is feeble, Friday's moon watery constellation or the 4th. *Guru* and *Shukra* should not be in a setting position and no *Bhadra*."

Most of the people amongst us today will hardly understand only a few names of days out of entire sacred tradition but still the mental clock of a sizeable chunk of society synchronizes with this clock. Not in the very remote past the whole society relied upon this clock only.



..... The actual moment has been worked out. The people have returned to their respective homes. Now within a day or two the work will start according to everybody's convenience.

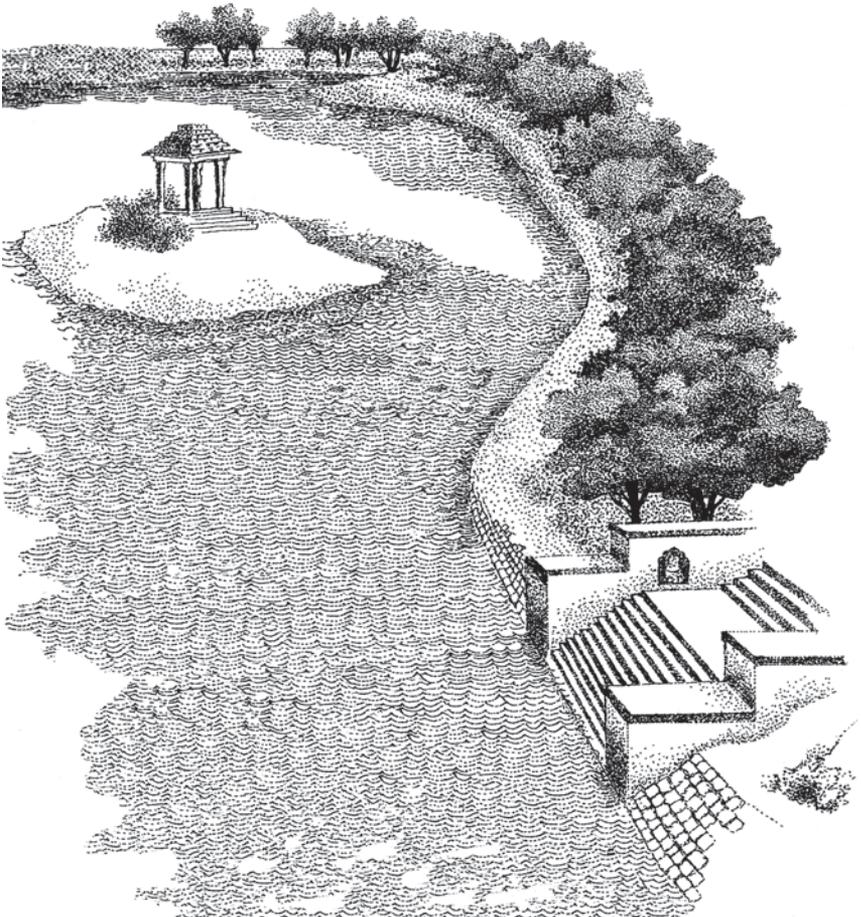
The well- experienced eyes don't even blink as the spate of questions stare them straight. What will be the size of the pond? What is the quantum of work? How many people will be engaged? How many implements are needed? How many mounds of soil will be unearthed? How will it be heaped on the bank? How will the earth be transported? In basins or slings? Or it will be carried on donkey backs? Such questions rise like ripples and then calm down in the depths of experienced mind. It is a very heavy task to transport mounds of soil. It is just like persuading the flowing current of water to stop. Playing with water is no less hazardous than playing with fire. The whole village gets to gather at the site of work. All the people will join hands for making this project a success. And together they will return home.

Hundreds of hands get busy digging out the earth and an equal number throws mass of soil on the bank. Gradually, the first layer becomes visible. Some protuberance comes into sight. Then starts the process of pressing it down. This task is performed

by the oxen. The whole weight comes upon the four sharp hoofs of the ox. The first layer is followed by the second one. Water is sprinkled on each layer and the oxen are made to perambulate on it. Hundreds of inspired hands work very nimbly and the banks keep rising at a gradual pace.

What was hithertofore only a vaguely visible line drawn by the rake turned in to an embankment of soil now. At places, it is quite straight and somewhere it meanders also. The bank is strengthened most at the spot that is vulnerable to the might of water. It is called 'elbow' also because the embankment takes an elbow-turn here.

Since the site is near the village the people go home for food. But if it is far off, the food is also taken on the spot. The gur-sweetened



water is served to all throughout the day. The water project is a project of love and virtue of course. So to expect sweet water from the pond, serving sweet water is treated as a good omen.

This pond of nectar will be guarded by its banks. The height and width of the embankment don't lie upon mathematics or science. If one tends to measure the arithmetic skill of the experienced visionaries, the height will be half the breadth of the foundation and on completion, the upper breadth will be half the total height.

Soft sand work is over. It will be followed by hardening the banks. The lime workers have softened the lime grains. The mud plaster is ready. The masons have busied themselves in the placement of stones. The defense wall will be protected by *neshta* i.e. spillway- the place that will release the superfluous water without damaging the wall. An etymological guess reveals that the word '*nesta*' must be having its origin in its original '*nisrish*' or '*nistarn*' or '*nistaar*'. Through erosion by the pronunciation of native pond-builders it might have taken the shape of '*neshta*' in such a way that now for some hundred years it has not shed off even a single syllable.

*Neshta* will be a little below the height of defense-wall with the result that it will let the water flow away without doing any harm to the wall. From ground-level, its height will be proportionate to the height of the wall and the ratio will be 10:7 spans of an arm i.e. from the hand up to elbow.

With the completion of defense-wall and drainage, the nucleus of the pond is ready to receive water from all sides. The experienced eyes once again measure the nucleus and its surroundings. Is the capacity of the nucleus more or less than the water coming from all sides?

Finally, the *dugdugi* (a two sided drum with lashes attached for dubbing) is drubbed. The work is completed but the people will gather again today at the banks of the pond. The decision taken on the eleventh, the day of free will is executed today. What remains to be done is the fixation of a stone in the center and installation of the deity Ghatoyia on the wall. Ganesha perched on the pillar of the *agaur* i.e. water source.

Beneath, is Ghatoyia-the deity known as the king of serpents who will guard the pond from the embankment.

Today, all will dine together. The pond besieged by bountiful and strong walls looks like a beautiful shining platter from distance. The anonymous builders will christen it with a beautiful name today by distributing 'prasad'. This name will not form a part of revenue records; it will be etched in the memories of people for ever.

But the task is not finished just with naming. With the appearance of the star Hathiya in the pond, all the people will again converge at the beautiful site. It is only today that the experienced eyes will come true on the criterion of their conventional wisdom. People are roaming about on the wall with spades, rakes, bamboos and sticks in their hands. The beautifully designed defense-wall too does not gain strength without consuming



the water of the first cascade. There may be leakage here, cracks there and how much time does it take for the rodents to make burrows. Walking attentively on the wall the people keep stuffing the burrows by pressing them with their bamboos, sticks etc.

Water is rising at the center today as gracefully as the wall was rising yesterday. Today it is converging towards the center in fulsome grandeur.

*Simat simat jal bharhin taalaba  
jimi sadgun sajjan pahin aava.*

(Water is flowing in to the pond from all sides exactly as the virtues flock to concentrate in a virtuous man)

The water heard the prayer of anonymous hands.



# The Unsung Heroes of the World

Who were these anonymous people?

Hundreds and thousands of ponds had not sprung all of a sudden from the thin air. They had behind their existence a unitary force which made them join together to build and tens of those who built them. These units and tens joined together to multiply in to hundreds and thousands. But for the last two hundred years, a semi-literate society has reduced the ones, tens, hundreds and thousands into a zero. This new society was not eager enough to know as to who used to construct ponds in so large numbers in earlier times. It has not bothered to evaluate this mega task with even its own yardstick evolved through IITs and Civil Engineering.

Had this been done, it would at least have tried to explore the IIT of yore. Where was it situated? Who was its Director? What was its budget? How many civil engineers did it produce? These questions would certainly have created a quest in the modern society but it treated all this as a bygone phenomenon. The educated technocrats made tall claims and promises to solve the crisis of water through novel techniques. What to speak of villages and towns, the whistling sound emanating from the municipal taps of big cities is enough to ridicule the claims and promises made by the techno-administration. Even if we measure the claims of this society with its own measure-rod, sometimes the claims fall short and at times, the yardstick proves smaller.

Let us leave this yardstick here and now and slide back to the lanes of the past. Those who have become anonymous today were big names in their own times. The ponds used to be built all over the country and the builders too have fanned out to every nook and corner of the country. Somewhere this education was imparted in the alma mater of caste and somewhere else it formed

a line of such artisans beyond the barricades of caste. Sometimes, the pond-builders were found concentrated at a particular place and sometimes they used to do this job by travelling from this place to that.

'*Gazdhar*' is a beautiful word to remember the pond-builders with deference. This word still exists in some parts of Rajasthan. *Gazdhar* means the one who wields the 'gaz' i.e. literal yardstick. But in spite of this, the society did not treat him just as someone wandering here and there with a three-foot long iron stick. He was conferred the status of someone capable enough to fathom the depth of society.

*Gazdhars* were architects. Be it rural society or urban, the responsibility of its rebuilding and maintenance was performed by them. From town-planning to the meanest construction works, everything lay on their shoulders. They formulated plans, worked out the cost of entire project and managed the necessary material for the same. And, in lieu of all this, they never demanded any such thing from their client as he might not be able to give. The people too were generous enough to give them whatever maximum they could.

After completion of work, the *gazdhar* was bestowed with honors also along with the remuneration. Offering a robe of honor called *siropa* in common parlance, has been preserved by the Sikhs only but until recently, the tradition



of honoring with *siropa* has been in vogue in Rajasthan. Beside adorning *pugri* (turban) on *gazdhar's* head the buttons of silver and at times gold were also gifted to him. Land too was registered in his name. After wearing the turban, the *gazdhar* would name some of his associates who too were given something as gift along with the remuneration. This sense of gratitude was reflected most of all during the community meal after the work of pond-building was completed.

*Gazdhars* were Hindus and later Muslims also. A community named *silaavata* has earned great accolades for its dexterity. The word '*silaavata*' owes its origin to '*shila*' i.e. stone. The *silaavatas*, too, were in larger numbers like *gazdhars*. Population-wise they were in large numbers. They had their own localities. Even today, one can find *silaavatparas* in the old cities of Rajasthan. *Siavatasla* have the full-fledged *mohalla* at Karachi in the Sindh area. *Silaavatas* and *gazdhars* sometimes were the same despite these being two different names. The heroes of *silaavatas* were known as *gazdhars* in Jaisalmer and Sindh. They were held in high esteem at Karachi also. After partition, Hakim Mohammad- a *silaavata* had made way to a ministerial berth in Pakistan's cabinet.

One of their streams dates back to Tomar dynasty and had been touching heights of social building. Anangpal Tanwar, too had hoisted his flag in Delhi.

The *gazdhars* were a beautiful example of experienced eyes. The training was imparted through mentor-disciple tradition.

The old hand taught the new hand so fervently that after sometime the latter would become a *jodia* i.e. the credible comrade of *gazdhar*. A *gazdhar* had several *jodias*. Some *gazdhars* with *jodias* would attain so much elevation that then they would remain *gazdhars* in name only while the gaz i.e. yardstick was dropped. A good *gazdhar* was defined as one who did not touch the tools. He decided only by just checking the site and also what had to be done. The *gazdhars* would sit at one place and everything was carried out at their oral instructions only.

Reaching a place of elevation through constant use of tools is something but showing the same efficiency without even touching the tools is quite different. Such mystics were known as *sirbhavas*

who would tell the real location of underground water without using any tool whatsoever. It is said that they were guided by intuition only. They did not belong to any particular tribe. Some blessed persons would simply reach this stage. *Jalsoonghas* i.e. those who could identify the existence of underground water just by the power of smelling were also like *sirbhavas*. But they indicated their finding with the help of a twig of mango or jamun tree. This style is in vogue even today. The tubewell companies first select the site mechanically and then call these *jalsoonghas* to confirm the availability of water at that particular spot. The public sector also avails their services but without putting their contribution anywhere on record.

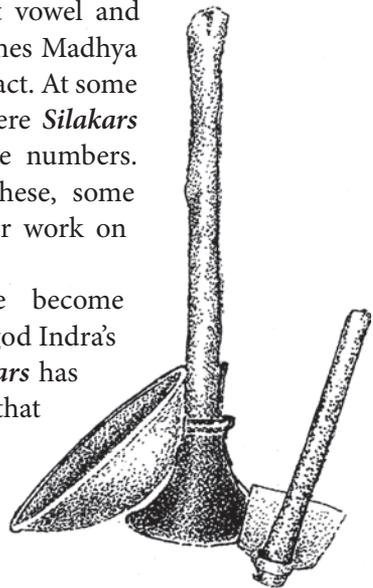
The word '*silavata*' loses its last vowel and becomes '*silavat*' by the time it reaches Madhya Pradesh but its properties remain intact. At some places in Madhya Pradesh, there were *Silakars* also. Gujrat also has them in large numbers. There they are called *salaat*. Of these, some have gained great fame due to their work on Hira *salaat* stone.

In Kutch the *gazdhars* have become '*gaidhars*'. Their lineage starts from god Indra's son Jayant. Another name of *gazdhars* has been *sutradhar* also. It was this only that became '*thar*' in Gujrat and '*suthar*' in many parts of the country.

A classical name for *gazdhars* was *sthapati* as well which is popular even today like '*thavai*':

*Pathrot* and *takari* were also known for their expertise in every kind of stone-work and they engaged themselves in pond-construction also. The villages and localities named *pathrouta* remind one about these people even today. The *takar*is fanned up to far south and their localities were called *takerwadis*.

The world is made of soil and there was no dearth of those who know this world of soil in entirety. Somewhere they were *matkoots* and somewhere else *matkooda*. The villages inhabited by them



were called *matkoolis*. The word 'sonkar' or 'sunkar' were meant for goldsmiths. But this gold was soil, not gold in reality. Sonkar or Sunkars were called *rajlahariyas* also. They used to link their lineage with the sons of Sagar, the emperor of Raghuvansh. To recover the stolen Ashvamedh yajna horse, the Sagar sons had dug out the whole earth and ultimately earned the wrath of Kapil, the sage. It was owing to that curse that the *sonkars* used to dig out soil from the ponds but now they earned blessings not curse. They have been very adept hands at brick-making also. The *khantis* were also called to dig out the ponds. Wherever they were not found, the potters were consulted about soil in the ponds.

While selecting site for a pond, the *bulais* were called. They were well familiar with the village. They knew by rote about the kind of land, where it was and who owned it where have the ponds, step-wells etc. already been built and where else can more be built. Along with knowledge by rote, this information was also available in black and white with them.

In the Malwa belt, all this information was recorded with the help of *bulai* only. This record was always safe in every fief.

The *bulais* were also called *dhers* at some places. Similarly, there were *mirdhas* who maintained the measurement and accounts of the land along with the settlement of disputes.

The task of bricks, lime and preparing mud-plaster was performed by the masons. In spare time salt-trade was also carried out by them. In modern Madhya Pradesh, the population of masons was more than 25000 in 1911. In Orissa they were known as *liunyas*, *murhas* and *mansiyas*. During the British regime, the *sansiyas* dwindled away when declared as a band of criminals by the state.

The new age people kept forgetting the ponds and their builders also. The list of those thrust in to oblivion includes *ladia*, *dusaadh*, *naunia*, *gond*, *pardhan*, *kole*, *dheemar*, *dheenvar*, *bhoi* etc. There was a time when these people were known as specialists in pond construction. Today we have lost even the necessary details helpful in understanding their contribution.

*Kori* or *koli* tribe too had contributed a lot towards pond making. Not even a single line is available today on *koris* who built hundreds of ponds. But there was a time when many a region

offered several kinds of facilities to attract the members of *koli* tribe to settle there. They were exempted from the land revenue on land given to them in several villages of Maharashtra and Gujrat. Such land was called '*bara*' or '*varo*'.

The agarias were iron-men in real sense of the term. They were known for their trade of ironsmith. But there were places where *agarias* built ponds also. The makers of implements like spade, pick, rake, troughs etc. knew how to use them also.

The gardener community too had a great contribution towards pond-building and then planting lotus, *kumudani* flowers etc. in it. At places, the land on the banks of ponds was kept reserved for the gardeners. Their subsistence depended on the pond with the result that they looked after the pond throughout their life.

The *bhils*, *bhilalas*, *sahariyas*, *koles* etc. have become a part of the Scheduled Tribe (ST) list these days but there was a time when they had their own big or small kingdoms. They looked after the entire management of ponds themselves in their respective kingdoms. The *bhils* possessed the talent of knowing where the river water has to be dammed and then how far the dammed water has to be taken for irrigation. They possessed this expertise as easily as they kept bow and arrows on their shoulders. Thus they had full information on the dams and the pressure of water. How much is the pressure and in how much area it will replenish the wells -was the mystery they could demystify by drawing a line with their arrow.

In Rajasthan, this task was performed by the meenas. Tarun Bharat Sangh, a small organization in Alwar district has built more than 7500 ponds during the last twenty years. Every village as a whole knows how to build a pond. The organization did not have to seek any external advice even in the most difficult situations, because of *meenas* who have been building ponds here for generations.

There were various kinds of *bhils*: *nayak*, *nayaka*, *choliwala nayak*, *kapadia nayak*, *big nayak*, *small nayak* and then *talavir*, *grasia* etc. all were known as heroes in the field of pond-building.

In Maharashtra, Konkan, the position of *naik* existed in the *banjara* community also. Vanchar i.e. the forest wanderers came

to be called *banjaras* in due course of time. Living in miserable conditions today, once upon a time they used to set out for trading by loading their merchandise on hundreds of animals. They would transport gur from the sugarcane region to the paddy areas and then bring paddy from there to sell it in other areas.

When Asif Jehan, a vizier to Shah Jehan had come to Deccan in 1630, the luggage of his army was carried on the bullocks of *naik banjaras* names Jangi and Bhangi. The number of bullocks was one lac eighty thousand. The royal army could not move without Jangi and Bhangi. Asif Jehan, in recognition of his valuable service, had given him a Tamra patra (a citation plate made of copper) with inscription in golden letters.

There may be some exaggeration in description but their caravans, had cattle heads in so large numbers that it was difficult to count them. Then it was considered as a caravan of one lac cattle and the leader of people walked along with this caravan of thousands of animals. The size of demand for water even for a one-day sojourn of such a huge gathering can be anybody's guess. If there was no pond at the place they visited, they deemed it their duty to build one. The beautiful and vast pond at Sagar in Madhya Pradesh was built by any such Lakha Banjara. In Chattisgarh, even today, the people of many villages associate the existence of their ponds to one or the other Lakha Banjara. The list of known ponds made by the unknown Lakha Banjaras will include the names of several provinces.

*Gond* community has had its deep connectivity with the ponds. This quality of *gonds*, will be discernible everywhere in Mahakaushal in the form of ponds here and there. The pond made by Kooran near Jabalpur is still serving the people, thousands of years after it was made. It was this community which produced queen Durgawati who had filled a big part of her kingdom with ponds during her brief tenure.

The *gonds* not only themselves built or made others to build ponds but honored others also who made contribution to this line. The gond kings had brought the *kohlis* from North India to settle in the Bhandara district of Maharashtra. That is why very fine ponds are available in Bhandara also.

Among the big ponds, the most famous Bhopal pond was made by Raja Bhoj but it could be completed with the help of a *gond* Chieftain Kalia. Kalia Sot River flowing in the Bhopal Hoshangabad valley is known by the name of this very *gond* Chieftain.

The names like *odhia*, *odhahi*, *odh*, *aud*-kept changing from place to place. They had only one work to do -digging wells and ponds day and night. These water bodies were so much in number that it was difficult to count. The proverb goes that *odhs* drink water from a new well every day. No better example of oneness between the maker and the made is available. They spread right from Gujrat in the west to Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bulandshahar and its surrounding areas, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa etc. They must have been in large numbers. There is a story of nine lac *odhis* reaching Dhar city at the time of some crisis. They reared donkeys. Somewhere, they made only banks by carrying soil on donkeys and sometimes they scraped clay from the pond. The *odhis* were good connoisseurs of clay. They used to read the nature of soil from its color or smell. They also understood well the surface and pressure of soil. A proverb: The *odhis* never die with caving in of earth.

The famous folk heroine Jasma was working on such a pond one day where Raja Bhoj had decided to give up his empire for her. He had seen in her an *apsara* made of gold. But Jasma was a part of the tradition which treated not only human body but the whole world as a mass of soil. The legend says that enamored with Jasma, the king was ready to do anything to attain her. In utter neglect of his duties, he had started doing what was not worthy of him to do. Jasma preferred death to becoming queen of such a king. The king's name has faded from the memories of people now but even today Jasma's fair repute is spread all over from Orissa to Chhattisgarh, Mahakaushal, Malwa, Rajasthan and Gujrat. Hundreds of years have passed but in these areas people sing songs in glory of Jasma Odhan throughout the night after the harvesting is over. The folk theatre i.e. Nautanki is also played. From the stages of Bhavai to Bharat Bhavan and National School of Drama, everywhere the touch of Jasma's feet has been felt.

The deference for Jasma, the *odhan* woman is still reposed in the minds of people but the repute of her tribe's folk has long since been thrown to the winds by the people of new age. Those who were the real nation builders have been forced to wander from pillar to post in search of their daily bread. Some *odhis* are still engaged in their ancestral occupation. Thousands of them had worked for the construction of Indira Canal but their contribution has been forgotten altogether.

In Orissa, beside *odhis*, *sonpuras* and *mahapatras* have also been builders of wells. They had spread out in the cities like Ganjaam, Puri, Konark and surrounding areas. *Sonpuras* were the people hailing from Sonpur village. On one side, they went to Madhya Pradesh and on the other down to Andhra Pradesh. *Kharia* tribe worked on ponds, small dams and canals near around Ramgarh, Bilaspur and Sarguja. The 1971 census describes their population as 23 thousand.

The *musahars* in Bihar, *luniyas* in the parts of Uttar Pradesh adjoining Bihar, *nauniyas*, *dusaadhhs* and *koles* in Madhya Pradesh remained engaged in pond-building. The *musahar*, *liunyas* and *nauniyas* were not then as helpless as they are today. Till 17th. Century, the *musahars* were given land also along with their remuneration after the completion of pond. *Nauniyas* and *luniyas* were worshipped on this occasion. The connoisseurs of soil, the *musahars* had their powerful leader. Shri Sales (Shailesh) was the adorable deity of *dusaadhhs*. Their songs are sung everywhere, here and there and they are held in esteem by others also. *Dusaadhhs* perform yajnas to propitiate Shri Sales. The people from other tribes also participate in them.

These very areas were inhabited by another tribe viz. *dandhi*. The *dandhis* were known to be industrious and very hard-working. Their list of arduous tasks includes construction of ponds and wells. In Bihar, even today they are remembered in case no solution to a difficult work comes in sight. They were men of beautiful physique with broad shoulders. Their well-built stout and muscular bodies tempted one to count the muscles.

The santhals settled in Bihar and Bengal today also built very beautiful ponds. After so much has vanished in *Santhal* pargana

with the ravages of time, some ponds are still there to remind us of the *santhals'* dexterity.

The *kohlis* made so many dams and ponds in the Nasik area of Maharashtra that famine could not even touch it. The coastal regions Goa and Konkan are the regions of heavy downpour. But here the rainwater joins the vast saline sea within no time. It was only the artistry of *gaavdi* tribe due to which the rainwater was held up for the whole year in the ponds on western hills. Here and nearby in some northern Kannad region of Karnataka, a stone named *cheere* is found here. Heavy showers and fast current can be stemmed only with the help of this stone. After extracting it from the mines, the *cheere* stone is chiseled to a standard size. Not even an iota of change has come in this size.

Such a systemized work could not be done without any systematic infrastructure. Without a proper synchronization of intellect and organization, neither so many ponds could be built nor sustained in the country.

How much efficient and accurate must have been this organization can be known from a glimpse of the south.

In the south the ponds built for the purpose of irrigation are called '*eri*' The *eris* were available in each and every village and despite 200 years of neglect, thousands of *eris* out of these are still serving the people. In the village there used to be another institution viz. *eri varyam*, within the Panchayat. In *eri varyam*, six members from the village were elected for one year. Everything relating to *eri* including its formation maintenance fair and impartial irrigation system as also steady management of wherewithal for all these things was the responsibility of *varyam*. In case, the six members failed to perform their duties properly they could be removed from their office prematurely also.

Here the task of making *eri* was done by *voddars*. There was only one officer to see the entire irrigation system. It was known variously in different areas as *neerghant*, *neerganti*, *kambak katti* and *maiyyan thoti*. The worries like how much water is there in the ponds, how many fields are to be irrigated, how the water has to be allocated etc. fell to the share of *neerghant's*. In most of the regions, the office of *neerghanti* was given to a Harijan only and with regard

to irrigation, his decision was final. The farmer, irrespective of his economic status was considered subordinate to *neerghanti*.

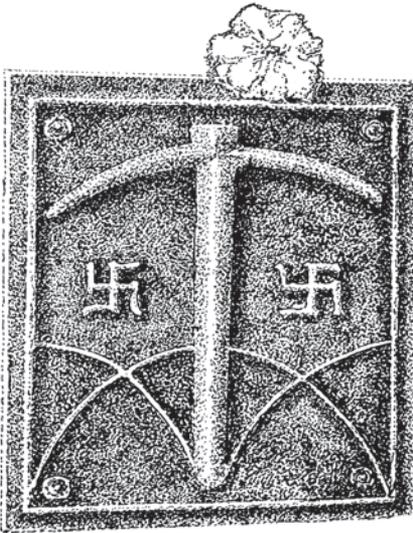
On one hand there were Harijans like *neerghant* in the south while on the other there were Paliwal Brahmins in the west. Due to having settled in Palli city near Jaisalmer and Jodhpur during the tenth century, these came to be called Palliwal or Paliwal. These Brahmins had become experts in harvesting whatever rain fell in the deserts. They were good builders of *khadeen*. A *bandh*-like field prepared with special artifice by blocking the water with a desert rock is called *khadeen*. *Khadeen* is first a pond and then a field. Food grain in hundreds of mounds was grown in these very

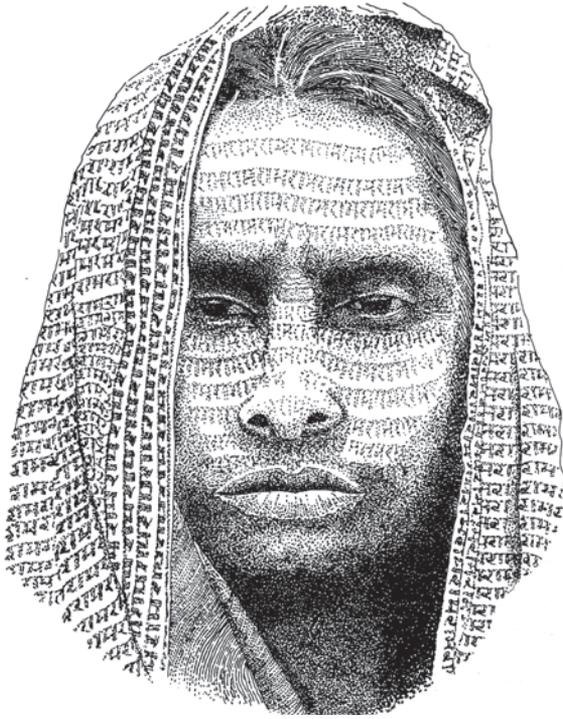
*khadeens*. Even today, there are hundreds of *khadeens* in Jaisalmar region.

Along with water there is something we call self-esteem. The Paliwals were well aware of this fact. There were so many villages of Paliwal brahmins in Jaisalmer. However their villages were deserted over night due to some altercation with the king. Leaving behind their beautiful rich houses, wells, *khadeens* etc. they quitted the state. Today, the guides

proudly show their desolate villages and houses to the tourists. Leaving Jaisalmer where did the Paliwals go, nobody knows clearly. But a mainstream of them had settled in Agra and Jodhpur.

In Maharastra the Chitpaavan brahmins were also associated with the pond-building. Some other brahmins did not like that a brahmin should do the menial job of digging the earth and then carry it also. A legend regarding a Chitpaavan brahmin named Vasudev Chittley says that he had built many ponds, wells and step-wells. When he was building a pond in Parshuram area and many brahmins were also scraping earth, a group of brahmins





from Devrukh protested. Then Vasudev cursed them saying that whosoever Brahmin will support them will lose all luster and invite public condemnation on him. Due to the curse of this Chitpaavan, these people were later called Devrukh brahmins. Nobody knows whether or not the Devrukh brahmins lost their radiance or invited public condemnation but the Chitpaavan brahmins have always made their presence felt in their region and the country as a whole.

It is said that the Pushkarna brahmins had also got the brahmin status through ponds. Hailing from Pokharan near Jaisalmer, this group was very much in the sacred work of building ponds. They were entrusted the job of preparing a pond of Pushkar, a place of pilgrimage. In a very difficult sand- surrounded area, these people worked day and night and dug out a beautiful pond.

A Lord Rama's devotees of Chhattisgarh, with the name of the Lord tattooed all over their bodies and wearing the sheets of Rama's name on their persons were the great specialists in the art

of pond-building. The earth work was that of divine nature for them. Spread over districts like Raipur Bilaspur and Raigarh, the people of this community have been digging ponds in Chhattisgarh area. Probably it was their wandering routine that gave them the sobriquet '*banjara*' In several villages of Chhattisgarh you will find people saying that their pond was built by the *banjaras*.

The families having faith in Lord Rama did not cremate their dead. They preferred burial because for them nothing was more valued than earth. What can be more sacred a funeral ritual for someone who worked with earth in the process of pond-building throughout life with the name of Lord Rama on his lips?

Today all these names have gone in to oblivion. The rosary to remember their names from *gazdhar* to *Ramnamis* i.e. Rama's devotees, is incomplete. The ponds were built everywhere and everywhere there were people who built them.

Hundreds or thousands of these ponds had not appeared from vacuum after all but those who constructed them have been marginalized today.



## The Source of Ponds

Pond by itself is a big depression.

And, it has not been made by the hoofs of animals for the rainwater to flow into it. It is made very skillfully and meticulously. Whether big or small every pond has its several parts -each having its own function and therefore, a specific name also. Along with its existence as a pond, it was also proof of the richness of language or dialect of the society that made it. But as the society kept becoming poor in respect of ponds, these words and names too dropped out of the language in due course of time.

The clouds appear in the sky, rain down and whenever the water falls, there is a place where it settles. This is a process for the same i.e. *agaurna*, a verb that means pooling. The word '*agaur*' is derivative of this very verb. *Agaur* is that part of the pond from where comes in its water. This is a slope where the rained water starts flowing towards one direction only. One of its names is '*pan-dhaal*' also. In some parts of Madhya Pradesh, *agaur* is called *paithu*, *paura* or *pan* also. Now a new word '*Jal aagam & Kshetra*' has come in vogue in Hindi, for this part of the pond, thus discarding all other indigenous words. We find it everywhere in newspapers and institutions. It has come as an equivalent of the English word 'Catchment area.' This is wrongly translated, artificial and to some extent a misnomer. *Jal-aagam* has been in use to mean rainy season.

The place where the water of *agaur* is pooled, is not called pond. That is *aagar*. Pond is a sum total of its parts and sub-parts. *Aagar* means abode or treasure to contain all the water that comes. In Rajasthan this word is used differently from pond. The depots of state transport buses are also called *aagar*. The city Agra too owes its name to this word. Some village with *aagar* as suffix to their names can be found in several provinces.

*Aagaur* and *aagar* have been treated as two major parts of Sagar. In different places they are known differently. Somewhere we find them getting simplified by wearing down from their Sanskrit originals while at some places they carry the dialect of the countryside straight to Sanskrit. *Aagam* is *aav* at some places and somewhere it is *paitaan* i.e. the footrest of the pond. *Aayatan* is where this expanse shrinks. At some places it is called *bharaav* also. In Andhra Pradesh it is *parivaah pradesham*. From *aagaur*, water comes into *aagar* but sometimes a well is also dug in the centre of *aagar*. Water comes into the pond from the source as well. It is called *bogli*. There are hundreds of ponds with *bogli* in Bihar. Another name for *bogli* is *choohar*.

*Aagar*, The valuable treasure, is guarded by *paal* i.e. the defense wall. The word '*paal*' must have come from *paalak* which means protector. At some places it was called '*bheend*' or '*peend*' if small in size. '*Bheend*' is also '*bhind*' in Bihar. The word '*pushta*' seems to have come later. In some areas, it is '*paar*' in the sense of shore. '*Paar*' is also accompanied with '*aar*' i.e. this side of the pond. So from this side to that side of the pond, it is '*aar-paar*'. It is *paar-aar* in the same way which engenders the word '*paaravaar*' also. Today the word '*paaravaar*' has liberated itself from the confines of pond and come to mean 'bliss.' May be earlier it meant bliss one gets from water.

*Paal* is very strong but this guard too has to be guarded lest the water flowing from *aagaur* in to *aagar* incessantly should cross it. Then the tremendous velocity and force of water may decimate it within no time. This part which protects the pond from destruction is called *afra*. *Aagar* is the stomach of the pond. So it should be filled to a bearable extent only. Only then pond has some relevance throughout the year. But if it crosses that limit then it becomes a threat for the '*paal*'. The stomach has reached the stage of flatulence. Now it has to be emptied. This function is performed by *afra* and saves the belly from explosion. In simpler words, the metaphor means that it protects the defense- wall from breaking.

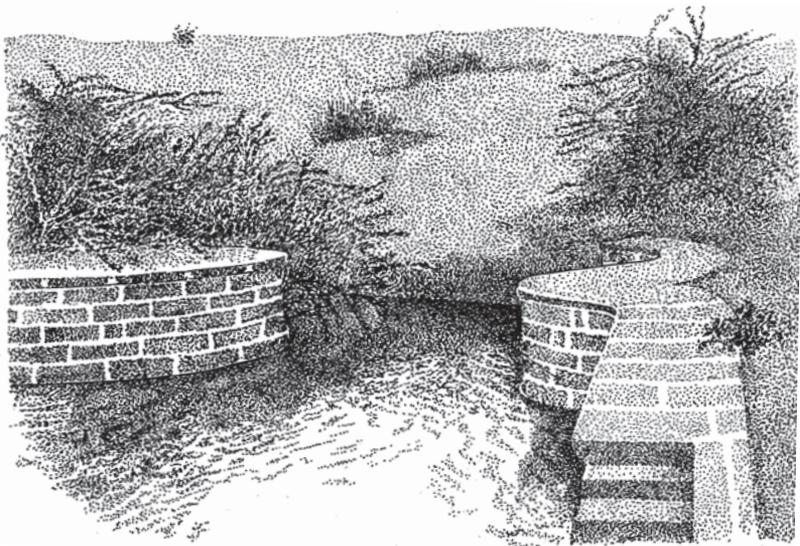
This part bears several names. *Afra*, somewhere becomes *apra*. There is '*obra*' and '*obra*' also which perhaps gives the meaning of *ubrana* i.e. to save. These names are popular in Rajasthan. If

there is good rainfall and the pond receives so much water that it starts flowing from the *apra*, then it is called the 'flowing of *apra*.' In many parts of Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, it is called '*chaadar chalna*' (the sheet flowing). In Chhattisgarh the name of this part is '*chhalka*' i.e. spill-over, from where the water may spill over the '*paal*' without damaging it.

The old name of this part was '*uchhvaas*', in the sense of release. i.e. '*nikaas*' or '*nikaasi*' in '*neshta*'. This is *neshta* without losing a single syllable of it in the Thar region, Jaisalmer, Bikaner, Jodhpur and all cities and villages of Rajasthan. Across the borders, it is the same in Sindhi also. If it is '*Kalangal*' in the South, then in Bundelkhand, it is '*bagran*' i.e. the place to release the surplus water.

In the first year, '*neshta*' is made smaller in size. Sufficiently below the *paal*. The new *paal* will also consume water; will sink-in a bit. That is why the temptation to conserve more water in the pond was done away with. When one season's rain strengthens the pond, then next year, The '*neshta*' is raised a little more. In this condition the pond can keep more water.

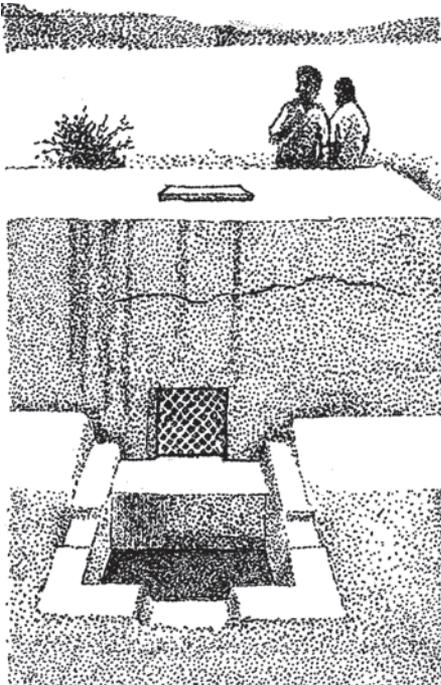
*Neshta* is a less elevated part of the mud-wall but still it resists the might of water. Therefore, it is made stronger with stone and lime. The surrounding part of *neshta* is hemi-spherical so that the velocity of water crumbles by striking against it. This hemi-spherical



component is called *naka*. If it is built on a small *bandh* built to stop the flow of a rivulet instead of a pond, it is called ode. Being of a fan's size it is called *pankha* (Fan) also at some places.

*Neshta* is purely technical constituent but sometimes it was built so beautifully that the technology bordered on art. Such artistic works were done with effortless ease by the hands of the inspired *gazdhars*, mentioned earlier. In Jodhpur district of Rajasthan, there is a town named Falaudi. There is a pond by the name of Shiv Sagar in that town. Its *ghat* i.e. bathing place is made of red stone. After a specific linear length, the *ghat* takes a beautiful serpentine shape. This hemi-spherical structure thwarts the velocity of water gushing out of the pond. This beautiful geometrical device protects Shiv Sagar very artistically in a play way method without employing any cumbersome technology.

Now back to *aagaur*. This is from where water comes into *aagar*. Just water has to be brought and soil and to be stopped. Therefore, steering the path of small streams in the *aagaur*, they are brought towards *aagar* through some major routes and much before they



reach the pond, a *khura* (barrier) is put against these streams. Some big stones are joined together in such a way as to let the water in and keep clay and sand outside to settle down.

In desert areas, the quantity of sand is far more than that in the plains. Therefore, in these areas the *khuras* (Being like the hoof of a beast in shape it is named like this) are more systematic and stronger rather than the mud-plastered ones. Fitting the stones with

mud plaster and lime, such a two-storeyed culvert is made that water passing through its upper windows flows into drain from the lower ones. Thus the water leaving behind sand and pebbles passes well-filtered through the windows of the first storey and heads towards *aagaur*. This structure which sends the filtered water to the *aagar* is called *chhedhi* i.e. filter.

The sand thus stopped too, has several names. Somewhere it is 'saad', somewhere 'gaad', 'laddi' or 'talchhat'- all meaning silt. In spite of taking all care, every year some silt enters aagar with water. The methods to rid the pond of this silt too, have been variegated. But their detail shall be given at some other time.

Now back to *paal* again. Paal is at places quite straight, at others crescent, something like the shape of dooj moon (like the shape of moon on second day of lunar night) and somewhere turns like human elbow. This turn is thus aptly called 'kohni' i.e. elbow. Wherever *paal* is vulnerable to the big jerk of water from *aagaur*, there it is given an elbow turn to give it strength.

Wherever there is possible and capacity is also there, the pieces of stone are fixed between the paal and water. The process of joining the stones is called 'juhana'. Small stones were fixed with stone and mud plaster which had in it sand, lime, 'bel' leaves, *gur*, *resin* and *methi* and sometimes rosin also. The big, heavy stones were drilled and then fastened with nails. The artisans drilled a hole in one stone and fixed a nail of the size of hole in another. Sometimes the heavy stones were joined together with the help of an iron-plate. This iron-band was called 'jonki' or 'akundi'. The stones stop the *paal* sand from falling into aagar. This stone marked zone is called 'pathial'. There is a trend of building beautiful temples dome, baradari or *ghat* on the *pathial*.

If the pond and *paal* are quite large in size, then stone-steps are also made on the *ghat*. If the pond is very huge and deep, the number and length of steps is increased proportionately. In such a case, every care is taken that the steps are also as strong as the *paal* failing which the water can cut into the steps. To support the steps, big steps designed like a tower or ridge are made in between them. This structure built after every eight or ten steps is called 'hathni'.



In anyone of this-like walls, a big niche is made to install the idol of Ghatoiya Baba in it. The deity guards the *ghat*. The idol is normally installed in accordance with the height of *apra*. Thus, if the water level in *aagar* starts rising continuously due to heavy downpour and threatens the pond, *apra* will start flowing after the water touches the feet of the deity and the water level will cease to rise. Thus, the *ghat* is protected jointly by the human and divine force.

The idol of Ghatoiya Baba used to be installed on the river *ghats* also like on the pond *ghats*. During the days of flood, the aged grandparents who themselves could not go to the *ghat* would ask their grandchildren returning from there the level of water and whether it had reached the feet of Ghatoiya Baba. Once the water touched his feet, the thing was done. If *aagar* has this much water, it will suffice for the whole year.

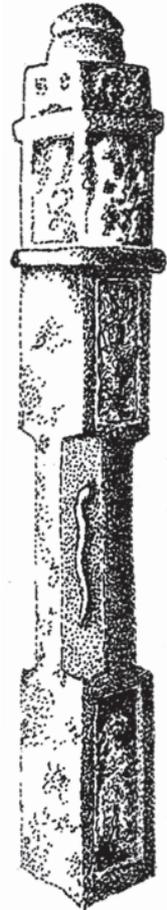
The task of measuring the treasure of water in the *aagar* throughout the year is performed by the pillars raised here and there '*Naagyashti*' is a very old word used for pillars having the snakes engraved on them. Those without this work of art were called '*yashti*' only. With the passage of time this word became '*laath*.' This is also called '*stambh*', '*Jalthamb*' or just '*thambh*'. At some places it was called '*pansaal*' or '*pausara*' also. These pillars

are raised at different places and the occasions and purposes are also different.

Pillars are made in the middle of the pond, on *apra, mokhi*, i.e. the place from where irrigation is made and in the *aagaur*. Rather than making marks of feet, yards etc. on them signs of *padam* (lotus), *shankh* (conch), *naag* (snake), *chakra* etc. are made to indicate a specific depth of the pond. In the ponds meant for irrigation when water-level descended to a particular mark, its use was stopped immediately and water was preserved for usage in some period of crisis. Sometimes, pillars are made on the *paal* also. The submersion of *paal* pillar necessarily means *pralaya* (deluge).

The pillars were made of stone and wood. The type of wood was chosen on the basis of its strength so as to save it from rot in water. An old name for such a wood was *kshatriya kaashth*. Normally, the wood of trees viz *Jaamun, Saal, Taad* and *Sarai* was used for this purpose. Many proverbs hinting at the strength of saal wood have not died as yet. It is said about *saal*. "*Hazaar saal khara, hazaar saal para, hazaar saal sara.*" (Saal keeps standing erect for one thousand years and for another one thousand years it keeps lying on the earth after falling and still another one thousand years it takes for rotting.) Many ponds in Chhattisgarh still have pillars of Saal wood in them. An archaeological museum in Raipur really has centuries old piece of *Saal* tree. It is a part of a water-pillar which has been found from Hirabandh pond in a village Kirani of the same area now in Chanderpur of district Bilaspur. Hirabandh belongs to the Satvahans of second century B.C. It bears the names of state officers who probably, were present in the celebrations on the occasion of filling the pond.

If the conditions don't change, wood never rots. The pillars always remained fixed in water and therefore never rotted for years.



At some places, a good variety of graffiti was made at different heights on the full wall of *paal* or *ghat*. These depicted only the faces of animals. At the lowest was horse and the elephant was poised the highest. The rising water level in the pond touched them sequentially thus communicating to one and all the level of water that year. An ever-lasting example of this style can be seen in the form of pictures of horse, elephant and lion on the wall of Amar Sagar in Jaisalmer.

The pillar and *neshta* linked to each other created a wonder. About 100 kilometers from Alwar there is a pond Shyam Sagar far on the hills of Aravali- quite distant from the habitation. It was probably made in the 15th century to cater to the needs of the army during war. On its bank, is a pillar of god Varuna. In keeping with the height of the pillar only, there is the *apra* of Shyam Sagar at a distance of about one furlong. The moment water level touches the feet of *Varuna*, *apra* starts flowing and then water doesn't cross that level in the pond and Varuna never drowns.

The pillars were indicators of the water-level of pond but its depth was measured by a measure named '*purush*' The distance between one hand and another of a man standing with both his arms widespread is called *purush*. In feet it comes to about six feet. Thus a pond of 20 *purush* depth is considered ideal. The pond-builders aspire to touch this twenty only.

Normally, to break the velocity of waves against *paal* in 20 *purush* or even deeper ponds, there has been a tradition of making islands between *aagaur* and *aagar*. While building such ponds, there is hardly any need of throwing all soil coming from deep excavation on the *paal*. In such a situation it becomes very difficult to carry it outside at a distance from the pond. Hence the need of islands in 20 *purush* deep ponds due to technical and practical reasons. The dug out soil was also layered on them. Beside giving the pond technical strength and practical convenience, these protuberant islands in the middle made it more scenic.

The words like *taapu*, *tipua*, *tekri* and *dweep* are certainly available for this constituent but in Rajasthan this particular part has a special name '*laakheta*.'

*Laakheta* does soften the fury of waves but simultaneously, it links the pond with the society. Wherever, *laakheta*s are found, there you find a beautiful dome made in memory of some mystic or any memorable personality for that matter. If *laakheta* is big enough, there will be trees like *khejri* and people also along with the dome.

The biggest *laakheta*? Today, there is a railway station a bus-stand and a prestigious industrial area having big factories like Hindustan Electro Graphites as well. Manidweep, a station on Bhopal Itarasi route was once a *laakheta* of Bhopal Taal. Once spread over 250 square meters. This huge pond was broken during the reign of Hoshangshah. Today, it has shriveled into very short-size but still it is counted among the big ponds of the country. It is only with its evaporation that Manidweep is not an island today. It has become an industrial town.

'*Pornali*' and '*Saarani*' are the two words pertaining to ponds but in linguistic journey, their usage has expanded. At some time, they were drains of irrigation from the ponds. Today '*pranali*' denotes system and '*saarani*' has come to mean railway time-table also.

The major drain of irrigation has a particular spot called '*mukh*', '*mokha*' and '*mokhi*': The main canal is called '*rajbaha*' i.e. distributary.

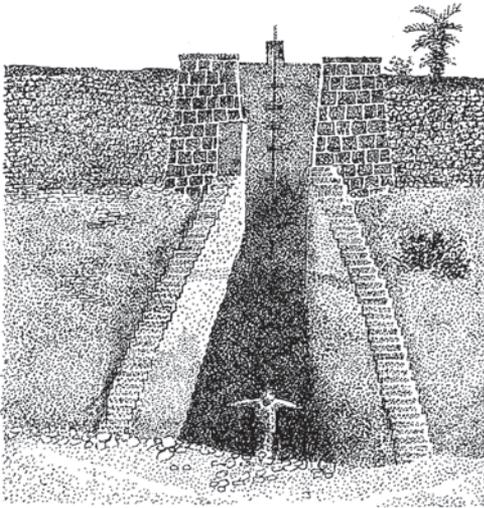
The '*rajbaha*' of very specific ponds passing from this mundane world would touch the other world also, the world of gods. Then it gets to be known as *Ramnaaal*. The irrigation of Bara Bagh, a beautiful garden in extreme desert area of Jaisalmer, has ab initio been done by a Ramnaal emanating from Jaitsar-a big pond. The mango groves of this place are so dense that the fire spitting desert sun too must be coming here to seek coolness and that too imbued with verdant color.

Other canals flowing out of *rajbaha* are called *bahtal*, *barha*, *bahiya*, *baha* and *baah*. The area inhabited later on the pathway of water, has been named on this very basis e.g. Bah *tehsil* of Agra.

Even in the small ponds meant for irrigation, there has been very systematic arrangement of drainage. One end of the pipe passed across any part of the paal is kept plugged on the pond side. When the water is to be released, it is unplugged. But for doing so one

must plunge into the water and remove the plug by reaching that depth and the same will be the method of plugging it again. This adventurist task is facilitated by the plug part i.e. '*daat*':

*Daat* is a small though deep tank-like structure built in the pond towards the *paal*. This square tank is of two–three arm-spans. Two–three holes are drilled into the wall by the side of water, as per need, on different levels of height. The diameter of



the hole is as much as can be plugged with a stick. The similar holes are drilled into the opposite wall also. But only downwards. These help water flow out to the other side of the wall. The tank is eight to twelve arm-spans deep and stones are fixed at each span to step down in to the tank.

Due to this structure one doesn't have to step into the pond to remove the plugging. Just you have to step down from the stones fitted in the dry tank and water is released by removing the plug. It starts flowing out of the *paal* pipe. The structures similar to '*daat*' are available in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Goa. The names definitely change e.g. *chukrand*, *churandi*, *chaunda*, *chunda* and *urand*. All belong to the process of throwing water out. That is why all these words have a consonance of pouring out.

The water thus poured out in to the canal is taken far away through a slope. But in some big ponds where, the pressure of water is too much near the *mokhi*, the pressure is used to lift the water in the canal. This way, the water flowing from the *mokhi* rises a few arm spans and travelling on the canal slope not only goes farther but can also reach the field situated a little above this level.

On both sides of the main canal, wells are also made at small distances. Through Persian wheel, water is lifted again. The grand quadruple of pond, canal, well and Persian wheel keeps linking the fields one by one for irrigation. This system is still functional in Barua Sagar and Arjan Sagar built in one thousand acres each during the period of Chandels and Bundels in Bundelkhand. Barua Sagar was made by the king of Orchha Udit Singh in 1737 and Arjan Sagar by Surjan Singh in 1671. The canals of the huge ponds are adding to the repute of Uttar Pradesh irrigation department these days.

Smuggling of water? Even though all arrangements are made but if the smuggling of water is not stopped, a full-fledged pond dries up in no time. The pond is replenished fully to the brinks in rainy season, gets emerald blue in autumn, chills in winter and in summer the sizzling sun will sap all the pond water. It was perhaps in the context of pond only that the sun was given a peculiar name *ambu-taskar*. If sun is the smuggler and the *aagar* i.e. treasure is lying open and unguarded then how much time does it take to steal it?

All effort is made to curb this pilferage by making the *aagar* sloping. When water starts decreasing, it is stopped from expanding in a large area. With slant in *aagar*, water remains aplenty in small area and does not evaporate so easily. Slant surface is given a little depth also. Such deep depression is called 'akhara' or 'piyal'. It is 'bhar' in Bundelkhand ponds. At some places it is known as 'bandaro' or 'garl' also. This part is kept towards the main *ghat* or in the middle of the pond. Due to being deep inside the pond starts drying up from all sides. In such a situation water leaves the *ghat*. It does not look good. Therefore, keeping *piyal* towards the main *ghat* has been more in practice. In that case a little bit of smuggling of water continues from three sides but water is retained well in the fourth main arm.

As the summer departs, clouds start appearing in the sky again. *Aagam* fills the *aagar* and the pond is again enriched.

If the sun steals water, it is also the sun which gives it back.



## The Clear Hearted Society

Water comes into pond and goes out. This act of coming and going has its impact on the whole pond. The soil in the *aagaur* is washed with heavy downpour and dissolves itself in the aagar. The *paal* soil erodes and stuffs the *aagar*.

This play of deforming the nature of pond goes on constantly. Therefore, the society that built the pond, has been working systematically to save it from deformity as well. The ponds which have been destroyed for the last fifty or hundred years, had set the things right in the society for some hundreds of years.

As soon as water was filled for the first time, the task of its protection, its maintenance would start. It was no easy task. But as the society had to maintain the ponds from this corner of the country to that, it had systemized this difficult task in such a way that it would go on in a very facile manner.

As you put your foot in *aagaur*, the first sign of maintenance would come in sight. In several areas of the country, the beautiful stone-pillars indicate the existence of *aagaur* a little before it actually approaches. Remember at the very sight of the pillar, that you are standing in the *aagaur*-a point to be filled with water. Therefore, this place has to be kept clean. You are not to enter the *aagaur* with your shoes on. What to speak of defecating even spitting has remained prohibited here without putting up any boards bearing instructions: "Don't enter with footwear on" or "Spitting is strictly prohibited." The people only respected the unsaid instructions of the pillars.

The task of maintaining the cleanliness and purity of *aagar* water would also start from the very first day. The day water was filled in the pond; the same day aquatic life was released into it. These living beings included fish, crabs and even the crocodiles if

the pond was big enough. At some places even the gold or silver animals were also immersed along with the living beings according to the capacity of the people. About fifty-fifty five years ago, the turtles were released with gold nose rings in ponds at Raipur city of Chhattisgarh state.

During the first year, a particular kind of vegetation was also put into the pond. Its nature and category varied in different areas. But the mission was the same-keeping the water clean if it was '*gadiya*' or '*cheela*' in Madhya Pradesh, it was *kumudini*, *nirmali* or *chakhush* in Rajasthan. There might have come a time when *chaksu* plant must have been used to cleanse the pond: '*Chaksu*' is a derivative of the word '*chakshus*'. These days, it is the name of a big town near Jaipur. The town must have been christened by way of expressing gratitude towards the *chaksu* plant.

The trees like *peepal*, banyan and *goolar* were grown on the *paal*. There always seemed to be a competition of longevity between these trees and the pond. Which lasts long? But this question has always remained unanswered. The both have liked each other's prolonged company so passionately that in the present age of neglect, whichever goes first, the other follows it in utter grief. As the trees are felled, the pond too evaporates in not a very long time. And, if the pond perishes first, the trees too find themselves unable to last longer.

Mango tree is also grown on the banks of ponds quite often but it is available more on the low-lying land than on the *paal*. In Chhattisgarh, most of the ponds are treated as the abode of Goddess Sheetla. Therefore, the *neem* trees were grown on the banks of such ponds. A *paal* without trees is just like a temple without idols.

In Bihar and many parts of Uttar Pradesh the *arhar* trees were also grown on the *paal*. In these very areas the oil-cake was incensed on the *paal* of a newly-made pond so that the rats may not weaken it by making their burrows.

These are the tasks which have to be performed once after the pond is built or sometimes a bit of it again also in case of necessity. But soil gets deposited in the pond every year. Therefore, desilting it every year was planned very beautifully. Sometimes, the hardness

of labor implied in this work was converted into a festival, rather festivity and sometimes it was arranged in such a proper way, that silt was taken out of the pond as silently as it had settled over the year and deposited on the *paal*.

The timing of desilting was decided in accordance with the weather conditions of that particular place. At that time the quantity of water should be minimum in the pond. In Goa and the coastal regions of western *ghat*, this work is done immediately after Deewali. In a large part of north it is done a little earlier than the Chaitra month while it is timed before the rainy season in Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Bengal, Bihar and South.

Today, the society which is quite detached from the ponds and the administration that runs it views the desilting work as a problem and rather than facing it, looks for various excuses to evade it. The administration finds it very expensive. Some collectors have put forward this very reason saying that the expenditure on



desilting is so high that a new pond can be built within the range of funds to be spent on it. The old ponds were not cleaned and the new were never built. In fact, not ponds but the mind of the society has to be desilted.

The mind of that society was clean. Rather than taking silt as a problem, it took it as *prasad* from the pond. The takers of this '*prasad*' were the farmers, potters and householders. The farmers who wanted this *prasad* would fill their bullock carts by cutting it from the banks and increase the productivity of their land by spreading it in the fields. In lieu of it, they would pay something in cash or part with some of their produce to deposit it in the village-fund. This amount was then used for the repair of ponds. In Chhattisgarh even today, the desilting is done by the farmers mainly. In spite of the soap having made its access to each and every corner of the country, in these days also silt is used to wash the head and bathing.

In Bihar the desilting work is called *urahi*. It is a gratuitous social service i.e. donation of labor. The workers from every home in the village would gather at the pond. Each home extracted two to five mounds of silt. The *gur*-sweetened water was served during the working hours. A portion of revenue collected by way of penalty in Panchayat, was spent on *urahi* arrangements.

In south, there was *dharmada* tradition. At some places a chunk of common village land was donated for this purpose. Such land was called '*kodgay*'.

If the state and society join hands to do something, there is hardly any scope for laxity. In south, the coordination of state and society for the maintenance of ponds was very systematic. Grant was released for this purpose from the state exchequer but at the same time, there was an arrangement of raising a separate fund in every village as well.

Every village reserved a field or a part of it for the upkeep of the pond. This land was called '*manyam*'. Saving, income or crop received from *manyam* was given away to the people engaged variously in the works pertaining to the pond. As many kinds of task, as many kinds of *manyam*. The place of work was chosen

according to its nature and there itself the expenditure to be incurred was managed.

Through *alauti manyam* was managed the remuneration of laborers. *Annaikaran manyam* was meant for those who looked after the pond throughout the year. The livelihood of the families which prevented the cattle from going to the *paal* of the pond was also run from here. Like on *paal*, the cattle were not allowed access to the *aagaur* of the pond. The people engaged themselves in this work throughout the year. Their arrangements were made by *bandela manyam*.

Releasing canal water by opening its gate for irrigation was a different responsibility that was discharged through *neermunakk manyam*. The salary of those who kept vigil whether the farmers are not wasting away water was given through *kulamkaval manyam*.

The issues, like how much water has come, what has been sown in how many fields, who needs how much water, were solved by *neerghunti* or *neerukutti*. This office was given in south only to a Harijan family. The *neerukuttis* inherited a unique capacity to judge the judicious distribution of water by just seeing the water level of the pond. Some neo-sociologists of today allege that the Harijan family was given this office only under the sway of selfish motivations. Since the Harijan families didn't have any land of their own, they could afford to be impartial in the disputes arising out of the distribution of water. If only landlessness was the sole criterion of ability then the landless brahmins were always available. But let us leave it here now and return to *manyam*.

Beside irrigation the water of some ponds was used for drinking also. Salary for the carriers of water from such ponds to the doorstep of people was given from the *urni manyam*.

Normal breakage of ponds was repaired with *uppaar* and *vaadi manyam*. *Vayakkal manyam* was spent on the maintenance of canals streaming out of the pond. Trees were planted from the *paal* up to the canals and all the year round, the work on their rearing, pruning etc. went on.

'*Khulga*' *manyam* and '*patul*' *manyam* took care of the expenditure on the excavation of new ponds beside repair.

That so many tasks relating to one pond and so many services should carry on properly throughout the year was also something to be supervised. The aspects like how many persons have to be employed in which task and from where some of the men have to be removed were taken care of by *kareimanyam*. It was called *kulamvettu* or *kanmoi vettu* also.

This brief description of south cannot encompass the complete system of pond culture. This is unfathomable. This-like or akin to it, many a system would have remained in vogue in all parts of India whether north, east or west. But some things dwindled away in that age of slavery and everything became haywire in the new era of bizarre freedom.

However, people like Gang ji Kalla have been coming to set the things right in this scattered society. His name was Ganga ji but nobody knows how it turned in to Gangji. It must have been distorted due to the love and affection of the people. Eight elegant ponds surrounding his city for some centuries had started eroding and degenerating due to the gradual neglect and outcome of the crumbled pond system. Different generations had built them in different times. But six out of eight had been placed in one chain. Their maintenance too must have been done by those generations in a series. That systemized series then broke apart at some stage.

When did the sound of the breaking of this chain reach Gangji's ears, nobody knows. But the elders of Falaudi city have only one image of Gangji in their minds: Wearing old worn out *chappals*, Gangji would make rounds of ponds from morning to dusk. He would admonish anyone found dirtying the bathing *ghats* or the ghats used for drawing water in a fatherly manner.

At times he would examine *paal* and sometimes *neshta*. Which pond requires repair at which place, was enlisted by him in his mind only. He himself would play with the kids who came to play there and made them play many kinds of games. It takes three hours to take a round of the ponds surrounding the city from three sides. Gangji would now be seen at the first pond and after some time at the last. In the morning he was seen

here, in the noon there and in the evening somewhere else. Gangji had become the protector of ponds voluntarily.

By the end of the year, a time would come when he was seen roaming about in the streets of the city rather than on the banks of ponds. A platoon of children would accompany him all the way. With the opening of every door he would get one rupee. As the fund collection completed, he would gather the children from all over the city. Along with the children a large number of baskets, rakes, troughs and spades would be collected there. Then started the projects of cleaning one pond after the other. The silt extracted from the pond would be layered on the paal. The garbage of every pond was also cleared in the same way. Every child was given an honorarium of two *annas* for one trough of slush or garbage each.

Nobody knows today for how much time Gangji Kalla had been doing this. They know only this much that it went on till 1955-56. Then Gangji passed away.

The city does not remember any death that might have unleashed such a wave of mass grief. The whole city had joined his funerals. He was cremated on one of the *ghats* built beneath a pond. Later, a tomb was made on that very place to perpetuate his memory.

The pond-builders were revered as saints by the society. Gangji was not a maker but a protector of the already existent ponds. He too was elevated to the position of saint.

While the pond-cleaning was done by the saint in Falaudi, in Jaisalmer it was done under the stewardship of the king himself.

Everybody knew about such a project beforehand but still it was trumpeted throughout the city. There used to be an invitation to play Lhas (a game) at the biggest pond of the city viz. Gharsisar from the king on the last day of the year i.e. 14th (dark) of Phalguna. That day the king, his entire family army, civilian public all would gather at Gharsisar with spades, rakes, troughs etc. The king would fill the first trough with scraped earth and empty it himself on the *paal*. Then Lhas started with the beat of trumpets. The meal for all was arranged by the royal court. The hands of all including the

king were smeared with the dust. The king would get so much engaged in work that anybody could rub his shoulder with him. One, whom you can't easily approach in the royal court, became accessible to all carrying loose-earth loads at the pond. His body guards, too, are busy doing the same.

It was during such a Lhas that Raja Tej Singh of Jaisalmer was assaulted. He was killed on the spot but Lhas festivities continued. This went on with its usual momentum. Lhas is played in the Bhil tribe of Madhya Pradesh and it is there in Gujrat also. There, this tradition transcending just pond maintenance had taken form of something which needed the help of one and all.

Help of all, help for all. It was this tradition by which the ponds were built and then maintained. The earth was scraped and the soil was put somewhere. This playful social work was done with the merry-making of Lhas.



## Names Galore

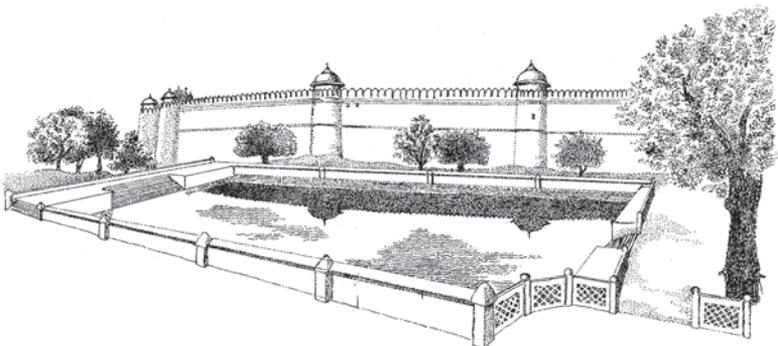
Prone to linking the ecstatic state of existence to the heights of philosophy, the people in our country have always been treating human life as a water-bubble only and this world as a vast ocean. Generations come, generations go. The epochs come; the epochs go just like the waves. Aiming at crossing over the ocean of this mundane life, the society made a good variety of ponds and named them very tastefully. These names were based on the properties of the pond, its nature or at times on the basis of a particular event also. The names grew so large in number and variety that if the treasure of language fell short, they were borrowed from the dialect or chaste Sanskrit was resorted to.

*Sagar*, *sarovar* and *sar* are so common to be available everywhere. With affection *sagar* turns in to *sagra* also and is generally taken to mean a big pond. Similarly, *sarovar* is *sarvar* also at some places. The word '*sar*' is an abridged derivative of the Sanskrit original '*saras*'. And the villages have been savoring its *ras* (juice) for centuries. The names of big and small ponds are found in the form of male-female couples e.g. *Johad-Johadi*, *Bandh-Bandhiya*, *Taal-Talayya*, *Pokhar-Pokhari* etc. These pairs are seen everywhere mainly in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Bengal and across the border in Nepal. The word '*Pokhar*' comes from the Sanskrit '*Pushkar*'. At other places, *pokhars* used to be in each and every village. Generally small *pokhars* made at the backside of the house were used for miniature pisciculture. There the word '*Pushkarni*' has also remained in currency along with '*Pushkar*'. When suffixed the respectful word '*ji*' to *Pushkar*, it no longer remained an ordinary pond; it rather gained a sort of sanctity. *Pushkar* is a very famous pilgrimage near Ajmer in Rajasthan. There is Brahmaji temple here.

The most popular word, of course is '*taalaab*' but it's rarely available in the various names given to the ponds. The word '*diggi*' was quite popular in Haryana, Punjab and Delhi. It is used to denote a small hauz i.e. tank and even a big pond. Once upon a time, there was a very big pond named Lal Diggi just opposite Lal Qila in Delhi. There are still many ponds in Ambala which are called diggi. The word '*diggi*' must have transformed in its modern shape from '*Deeghi*' or '*Deerghika*'. Both are the Sanskrit words.

Kund is also a small but cemented kind of a pond like *hauz*. But we see the words '*kund*' or '*hauz*' appended to the names of quite bigger ponds. In Khandva city of Madhya Pradesh, there are many ponds with '*kund*' affixed to their names. The best example of *hauz* is the Hauz Khas of Delhi which is known more as a locality than a pond.

*Taals* are found at several places but a similar word '*chaal*' has got restricted to a particular region. This is the Himalayan region of Uttar Pradesh. In these hilly districts there used to be *chaal* in every village at a particular point of time. In plains, the *chaals* are made in the midst of habitation or near it while in the hilly villages; *chaal* was made a little above the village. The *chaals* were not used straightway for drinking water but due to these, the waterfalls of the village remained active throughout the year. The *chaals* were so popular to brave the velocity of heavy downpour, to resist the flash floods and keep water flowing all the year round that the villages would make 30 to 40 *chaals* in the mountains above them.



*Chaal* used to be 30 steps long, equally wide and about 4-5 arm-spans deep. It was not for only a particular community to make it. Everybody knew how to make it and all engaged themselves in its cleanliness drive. It was a source of drinking water not only for the domestic cattle of the village but for wild animals also.

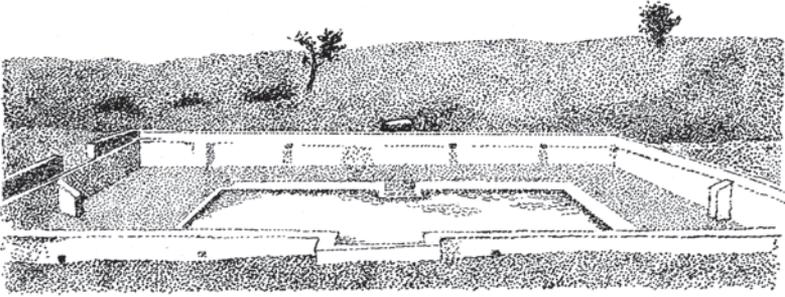
In Himalyas *chaal* is somewhere *khaal*, somewhere it is *toli* and somewhere else *chaura* also. The neighboring villages are known by their names only e.g. *Ufren Khaal* or Rani Chaura and *Doodha Toli*. These extremely northren words go up to south. In kerala and Andhra Pradesh, the words '*chair*' and '*cheruvu*' are spoken to mean pond only.

The ponds with the rectangular bricked or cemented *ghats* are *chaupra* or even *chaupda*. *Chaupda* is there in the ancient city of Ujjain, historical city Jhansi and literary city *Chirgaon* as well.

Another word with the similar consonance is '*chaughara*'. The pond surrounded by cemented or concrete ghats from all sides is called *chaughara*. In the same way, *tighara* is also there. In it probably one side towards *aagaur* is left unbricked. Moving ahead of four or three *ghats*, there were *athghatti pokhars* also. It means ponds with eight *ghats*. The different *ghats* were variously used. At some places, different ponds were built for different castes and somewhere else different *ghats* were built for different castes on a bigger pond. There was different arrangement for men and women. In Chhattisgarh, Dauki *ghats* were constructed for women and Dauka *ghats* were built for men. At some place, goddess Durg's idol was installed, somewhere Lord Ganesh's while at some other place *tazias* also. All had their separate *ghats*. Thus this kind of ponds had eight *ghats* with the result that they were called *athghatti*.

*Athghatti taals* could be seen from quite a distance but *guhia* pokhars became visible only when you reached there. *Guhia* means hidden in Hindi. They were small in size and emerged on their own with the accumulation of rain water. In Bihar, *guhia pokhars* are available even today in the desolate barren land lying between two villages.

Some other self-built ponds are called *amaha taals*. In Chhattisgarh '*amaha*' means sudden. In the dense forests near



the villages, water is pooled in the low-lying land. Moving around with the cattle, such ponds come in sight all of a sudden. Generally, people coming that way mend these ponds a little and start using them.

One more meaning of *amaha* is mango. The *taals* surrounded by mango groves are called *amaha taria taals* or *aama taria*. Same is the case of Amroha. This is a city but there was a time when it was the name of a pond surrounded by mango trees. At some places such *taals* were called *amrah* also. Then on the pattern of *amrah* is *piprah* meaning thereby the elegant *peepal* trees grown all over the *paal*. In the case of *amrah* or *piprah* the trees grown on the *paal* or below it can be counted irrespective of their number. But *lakhpeda taal* was surrounded by lacs of trees. Here lac means simply innumerable. These-like ponds have been called *lakhraanv* also at some places.

One that left behind even *lakhraanv* was Bhopal *taal*. Its vastness had turned the pride of those living near around into conceit. The following proverb recognizes only Bhopal *taal* as a *taal* and none else: “*Taal to Bhopal taal baaki sab talayya*”. (Bhopal *taal* is the only pond, all others are just pigmy pondlets before it). Even the brief description of this vast pond is eyebrow-raising. Made in 11th century by Raja Bhoj, this *taal* spread over 250 square miles carrying 365 rivulets and streams. Hoshangshah, the sultan of Malwa destroyed it in 15th century due to strategic reasons. But this task was no less than a war for him. Hoshangshah had to press his whole army into breaking the *Bhoj taal*. Such a massive force took three months to perform this mega task. Then for three years the water of this pond kept flowing till the bed

became visible. But still the marsh of its *aagar* remained for full thirty years. It was only after it dried up altogether that cultivation started here. Since then till today, this place has been growing a fine crop of wheat.

Leaving aside the big ponds, let us get back to the small ponds. Shallow and small sized ponds were called *chikhaliya*. This name had developed out of *chikkar* i.e. slush. An old name for such ponds was *daabar* also. Today, its remnant can be seen in the word '*dabra*'. *Bai* or *baar* was also a name for small ponds. Then this name became a part of *baavadi*. Today in Delhi a *baavadi* named *Raajon Ki Baav* near Qutub Minar has become outdated like this word.

Among the old names *nivaan*, *hrid*, *kasaar*, *tadaag*, *taamraparni*, *tali*, *tall* etc. can also be remembered. Of these *tall* is a name which is used even today in the form of *talla* in Bihar and Bengal. Similarly, *Jalashya* which was lost in the abysses of past has also appeared again in official Hindi and irrigation department. At several places some names of old ponds vanished when not found memorable by the society. But again they would find a new name: *puhnaiha* i.e. very old pond. Counting the number of ponds made near around the latest ones came to be called *navtaal*, *nautaal*, *naya taal* etc. They continued to be called like this even when they grew old.

*Guchkulia* is a pond which is small in size but which becomes deep from the shore itself. *Palwal* was also an old name for such a deep pond. With the flight of time, this name too has lagged behind. Today its remains are available in the form of a very small town and railway station Palwal near Delhi. Now the trains pass through Palwal without stopping.

*Khaduan* is the name of such ponds in Chhatisgarh where the water always remains crystal clear and drinkable. *Pankhatti* ponds are used for drainage only. Similarly, *Lendya taals* and *khur taals* are meant for drainage, defecation and quenching the thirst of animals.

Beside building independent ponds, a chain of ponds linked to each other, was also formed at some places. The surplus water of one would flow in to the second while that of the second would

flow in to the third pond. This method is used in the rain-starved Rajasthan, Rayalseema region of Andhra Pradesh, in Bundel Khand and Malwa region with average rainfall and equally in Goa and Konkan. In north, their name is *sankal* or *sankhal taal* and in south it is *dashphala paddhati*.

This chain of ponds ranges from two to ten. If there are only two ponds in the chain and the second pond is very small in comparison to the first one, then it is *chhipilai* meaning there by the *chhipitalai* i.e. small pond hidden behind the bigger pond.

But whatever pond is before us and beautiful too, it is called *saguri taal* irrespective of what name it has. The pond infested with crocodiles was called *magra taal nakaya* or *nakra taal* by the people themselves by way of precaution even though otherwise it was named after a mighty king. The word *nakra* is a distortion of Sanskrit word '*nakr*' which means crocodile. There are *gadghaya taals* also but it does not mean that like crocodiles, donkeys (*gadha*) lived in them. Donkey is a beast of burden. The pond as deep as the length of a thick rope a donkey can bear in terms of weight was called *gadghaya taal*. At times some incident or accident would erase the old name of the pond. *Bahmanmara* ponds are also found here and there. Their names might have been different at some time but a brahmin must have drowned or met with any other mishap here with the result that later they were remembered as *bahman mara*. There is another similar name *bairagi taal*. Someone must have reached a state of utter detachment (*bairag*) while sitting on its *paal*.

*Nadya taals* are available on river in banks. Such *taals* were filled not from its *aagaur* but with the water of river in spate. The pond linked to some underground source rather than river was called *bhoo-tod taal* i.e. earth breaking pond. Such ponds existed in those places where the ground water level remained quite high. In north Bihar there are still such kinds of ponds and some new ones have also been made.

Even during the good old times of proper maintenance, one or the other pond here and there would become redundant. Such ponds were called *haati taals*. The word '*haati*' is a derivative of the Sanskrit word '*hat*' i.e. to perish. In popular admonitory expressions

like '*hat tere ki*' also, the sense is that 'your destiny should perish'. Similar is the case with '*hat-prabh*' or *hat asha* or '*hatasha*'. Thus *haati taal* was a name for the deserted pond. But *haathi* is different altogether. It means a pond as deep as the height of an elephant.

Now back to *haati taal*. Worn out with its long journey from Sanskrit it sprouted into many new names in the common man's language viz. *phoota taal*, *phutera taal* etc.

Whichever pond accommodated ten-twelve marriage parties on its banks was called *baraati taal*. But *dulha taal* of Mithila (Bihar) is something special. Mithila is the parental town of Sita. To commemorate her *swayamvar*, a ritual for selecting bridegroom on the basis of some specific performance like in Ramayana) *swayamvars* are held here even today with the only difference that now the selection of bridegroom is made by the bride's kins not the bride herself. On some particular dates, the relatives of marriageable boys gather at the *dulha taal* with their sons. Then the people from girls' side select suitable bridegrooms for their daughters. Some ponds of this kind are there in Chhattisgarh also with the name *dulhara taal*.

The names of some ponds owe their origin to the long stories at their back. For a long time, these ponds have been serving the society and for long the people have remembered their stories as such. One among such ponds is *Ha Ha Panchkumari Taal* near Munger in Bihar. It is made beneath a high mountain. According to the legend, five daughters of the protagonist king committed suicide due to some sense of discontent by plunging into the pond from the mountain. In grief the actual name of the pond sank into oblivion and it came to be remembered by the people as '*Ha Ha Panchkumari Taal*' and it is the same till date.

It was also in Bihar that at some time 365 ponds were made in just one go near around Lakhisarai area. The legend goes that a queen wanted to take bath everyday in a new pond. This quaint wish of the queen filled the whole region with ponds. About one hundred ponds of this story are available here even today and that is why the water-level of this area is very much favorable.

The word '*pokhar*' is normally used for small ponds but in Barasana (Mathura) it has been used for a big pond also. Radha is

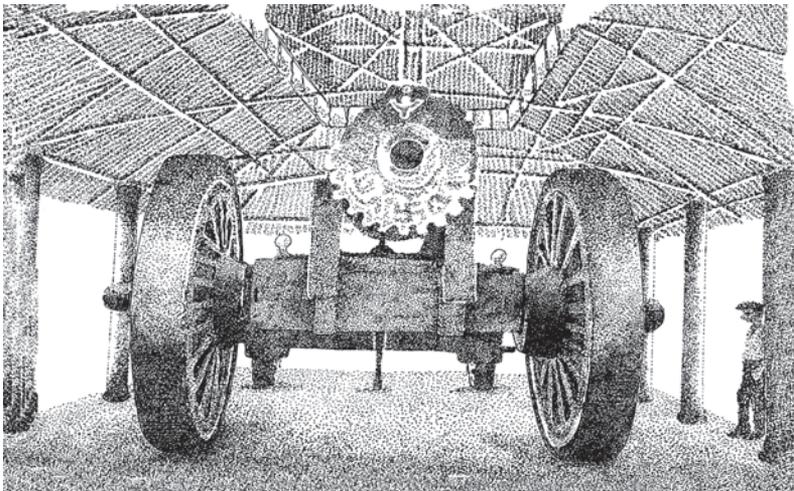
said to have washed the henna off her hands into it thus turning the pond water yellow. So it was named *Peeli Pokhar*.

Now, from color let us switch over to taste. In Mahaad region or Maharashtra, the water of a pond was so sweet that it was deservedly called *Chavdaar Taal* i.e. tasty pond. During the age of social degradation the entry of some castes was banned here. Bhimrao Ambedkar had launched his anti-untouchability campaign in 1927 from *chavdaar Taal* only.

Among the mysterious ponds is the Nakhi Sarovar also. It is near Abu Mountain in Rajasthan. It is said that the gods and seers had dug it out with their nails only. A society in which even the common people did not lag behind in building the ponds, there restricting the contribution of gods to only one pond goes beyond understanding.

In Garhwal, there are actually hundreds of ponds in Sahasra Taal region. This Himalyan region is at an altitude of 10 thousand to 13 thousand feet. Here vegetation-one form of nature-goes and another i.e. snow is ready to establish its reign. There is no human habitation near around. The nearest village is 5000 feet below where people tell you that Sahasra Taal was made not by them but by gods.

Gola Taal made near Jaipur does really deserve mention among the ponds which sprang out of the queer incidents. It is said that



it was made with the shell of a canon. Jaipur did not exist at that time. Aamer was its capital. Jaibaan the king of Jaipur had developed a very big canon with a great target range. Its shell could hit up to 20 miles. The canon was designed in the factory situated in the Jaigarh fort. To test its hitting capacity, it was carried atop one of the fort's minarets and the shell was let off. The shell landed at *chaksu*, 20 miles away. The explosion was so powerful that a big deep depression was made there. The next rains filled it with water and it never dried up again.

This is how Gola Taal was made. Jaibaan canon was never used again. The explosion was followed by the lasting peace. They say that nobody dared to invade that side again. Gola Taal is full even today and is giving water to Chaksu town. There was a great talking over the peaceful utilization of atomic power in our country. Explosion was made in Pokharan but no Gola Taal emerged out of it. Had it become, it would have harmed more due to radiation than by not becoming.

Sometimes a single pond in a particular area would catch the fancy of people in such a way that it was called *Jhoomar Taal*. *Jhoomar* is an ornament of head. Thus *Jhoomar* taal would raise the head of that area high with pride. Then as we affectionately address our beta (son) as 'bitya' (daughter) similarly, people would address *Jhoomar taal* as *Jhoomeri talayya* with sheer affection. In an entirely different context, the name of *Jhoomeri Talayya* had become very popular all over India due to the Vividh Bharti programme of Akashvani.

The variety of language with regard to the names of the ponds and pondlets of India was really the pride of our society.



## The Mirage-Defiant Ponds

Working for water all over the country, this region was surrounded by mirage.

This is the hottest and driest region with about 3 to 12 inches rain in the whole year. Jaisalmer, Barmer and Bikaner receive only that much of rain fall in the year which the other parts of the country receive in a day. It is here that the sun shines the most with its full sizzle. It seems as if summer enters the country from this very state and then having marked its attendance in other states, returns here again. People's respect for temperature is curtailed if it does not touch 50 in the desert. The ground-water too is the deepest only here. The scarcity of water has been treated as the very nature of the desert. But the local society has taken it not as a curse but as a part of a big game and then like an adept player it joined the game very gracefully.

While laying the foundation of a vibrant culture in this scorching desert, this society must have studied the minutest details regarding water. It tried to detect a trace of life in every situation thirsting for water and defying the mirage, made all kinds of arrangements here and there.

Where there is no pond, no water, there is no village also. First, the pond will appear and then the village. Hundreds of villages in the desert have been named after the ponds. In Bikaner tehsil of Bikaner district there are 64 villages bearing the suffix *sar* (pond) with their names. In Kolayat tehsil 20 and in Nokha area 123 villages have their names based on *sar*. One of the tehsils viz. Loonkaransar has '*sar*' as a part of its name while 45 villages of this tehsil have the word '*sar*' appended to their names. The ponds can be seen even in the remaining villages which have no '*sar*' suffixed to their names. On the contrary there are some villages which bear '*sar*' to their names but have no pond there. While christening a village

the wish to have a pond loomed large exactly as we expect similar qualities from our sons and daughters at the time of giving them names like Ramkumar, Parvati etc.

The water management project was completed in most of the villages and the will to see its execution at wherever it was incomplete, had turned the desert society in to a regular organization so far as water scarcity aspect is concerned.

The expanse of desert is found in the eleven districts of Rajasthan viz. Jaisalmer, Barmer, Jodhpur, Pali, Bikaner Churu, Sri Gagagnager, Jhunjhunu, Jalaur, Nagaur and Seekar. But the desert goes dense in Jaisalmer, Barmer and Bikaner. It is this very place which has the minimum rainfall in the country, maximum temperature, sand storms and the huge sand dunes flying from here and there. These three districts should have been suffering from the acutest water-scarcity. But going through the census report one fails to believe that all villages of these districts have clean drinking water facility. And this all was managed by the desert society on its own. It was so firm that despite the fresh unending phase of neglect, it is steadfast in one form or the other.

The description of Jaisalmer is very frightening in Gazetteer: There is not even a single ever-flowing river. The level of groundwater is 125 to 140 feet at some places and somewhere its depth is below 400 feet. Rainfall is incredibly low i.e. 16.4 centimeters only. According to a study conducted during the last 70 years, out of total 365 days, 355 have been noted as dry. It means that 120 days long rainy season makes just a guest appearance here for 10 days.

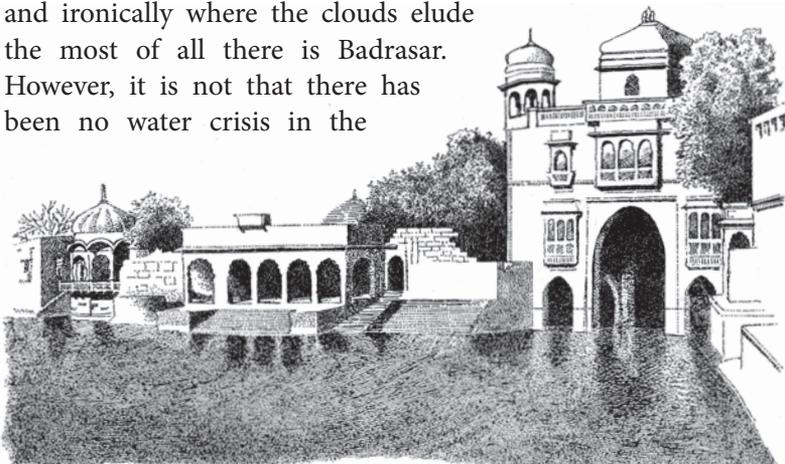
But all these calculations have been made by some new age people. The desert society probably saw crores of water drops in the 10-day rain and then started working to gather them in every home every village and cities. The outcome of this sweaty dedication is before us.

There are 515 villages in Jaisalmer district. Of these, 53 villages have become desolate today, leaving behind 462. Among these, barring one, all the villages have the drinking water facility. It is available even in the deserted villages. As per governmental statistics 88.78% villages of Jaisalmer have ponds, wells and

other sources of drinking water. There are hardly any modern arrangements. Of these, modern facilities like water-taps; tube wells etc. are very rare. God knows what is meant by 1.73% village. But only this much number of villages out of total 515 of this marginal district, have electric connections. It means that most of the tube wells are run not by power but diesel that comes from far off areas. In case the oil-tanker doesn't come, the tube wells will not run and there will be no water. If everything goes fine, the groundwater level is bound to dip sooner or later. For the time being there is no way to contain it as such.

Let us reiterate that in this most dreadful desert region, 99.78% villages have drinking water facility and that too due to its people's own venturesome spirit. Besides, let us have a look at those facilities granting which is otherwise the responsibility of the new institutions of new society and particularly the government. Exempli gratia, only 29% villages have so far been linked to metalled roads, only 30% people have access to the postal services and only 9% people are beneficiaries of medical facilities. The situation of education facility is still better i.e. in 50% villages. Coming back to water, there are 675 wells and ponds in 515 villages. Of these, the number of ponds is 294.

A little this side of Indo-Pak border, there is Asutaar i.e. the well of hope in the area treated as one of despair by the people. Where the mercury touches 50, there is sitalai i.e. cool pondlet and ironically where the clouds elude the most of all there is Badrasar. However, it is not that there has been no water crisis in the



desert region. But the society here never bemoaned it. It hoped for dissolution of the crisis to some extent and on the basis of that very hope it molded itself in to such an organization that on one hand, it preserved each and every drop of water and on the other used it very judiciously

Unable to understand the nature of thrift coupled with prudence, the Gazetteers as well as the state and the society they represent, look at this region as 'desolate' monstrous, inactive and lifeless. But when even the one who has recorded these epithets in the Gazetteer, reaches Gharsisar, he forgets that he is en route to a desert.

On paper maps of tourism department Gharsisar pond is as big as Jaisalmer city itself. Like on the paper, they stand adjacent to each other even on the desert. Jaisalmer is a nonentity without Gharsisar. In this about 800 years old city, each and every day in about 700 years, has been enamored to each drop of Gharsisar.

Lo, there is a huge sand dune before us. It is very difficult to comprehend even after reaching very near to it that it is no sand dune but a full-length *paal* of Gharsisar. Moving further ahead, we find two minarets and five beautifully engraved stone oriels and a majestic gateway. As we proceed further, newer spectacles keep adding to the view from the gateway. Here, it becomes clear that what looks like the azure sky from the gateway is blue water indeed. Then there is a spectacular scenario including beautiful concrete *ghats* on right and left, *pathial baradari*, verandahs adorned with several pillars, rooms and what not. When the panorama comes to a stop near the pond, the eyes fail to rest anywhere at one place because of the beautiful scenes flitting before them. Every moment the pupils want to evaluate that unique view.

But the eyes cannot do so. The *aagaur* of this three miles long and approximately one mile broad pond is spread over an area of 120 square miles. It was made by Maharawal Gharsi; the king of Jaisalmer in 1391 Vikrami or 1335 A.D. The other kings used to get ponds built but Gharsi had built it himself. Daily he would step down from his castle and oversee the excavation and plinth work etc. That was a period of tumult for the Jaisalmer Empire. Bhaati dynasty was passing through a lot of intra disputes, conspiracies

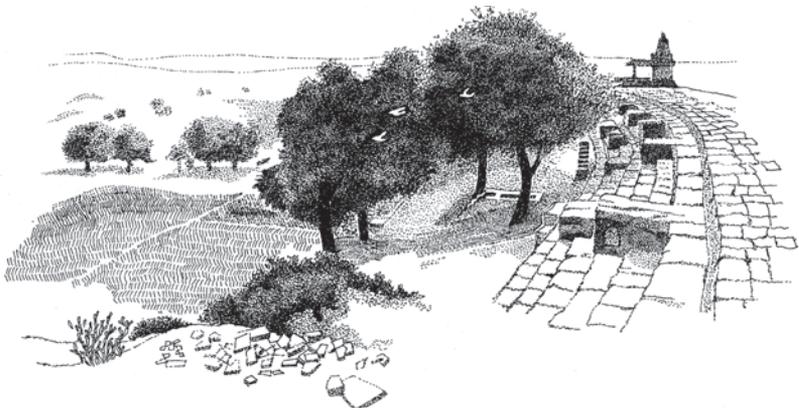
and struggle to grab the throne. The *mama* (maternal uncle) was assaulting his *bhanja* (sister's son) through ambush while the real brother was being sent on exile or poison was being added to the goblet of someone else.

Beside intra royal family strife, the state as well as the city Jaisalmer was vulnerable to the invasion of foreign invaders any time. And often the gallant soldiers would get martyred in the battlefield and their women would immolate themselves at the pyres of their men.

It was during this tumultuous period that Gharsi himself with the help of Rathaur troops had seized Jaisalmer. In the chronicles of history, the Gharsi period is full of antonymous duos like victory-defeat, luxury-penury, ignominious death-martyrdom etc.

This pond i.e. Gharsi *sar* was under construction even then. For working on this years' long project, Gharsi managed extensive resources and limitless patience. *Paal* was being made and Maharaval was overseeing it. Because of the internal conspiracy brewing in the royal family someone attacked him on the *paal*. Self immolation of the queen on the pyre of the king was very much in vogue at that time. But Rani Vimla violated this norm and translated the dream of the king in to practice.

This dream of sand has two colors blue and yellow. The blue color is that of water and the yellow belongs to the *ghats* built on the hemisphere of the pond temples, minarets and *baradari*. But this dream looks imbued twice daily in only one color. The rising and setting sun added melted gold to it through its crimson.



The people too had contributed gold towards Gharsisar according to their mite. The pond was that of the king but the people kept maintaining and adorning it. The

Temple *ghat* and water-palace (*jalmahal*) kept gaining expansion. Anybody who liked something to do for the pond did it with a sense of self abnegation. Through pairing of the king and the commoner, Gharsisar had become a lyric.

At a period of times, schools were also set upon the *ghat*. The students from the city and near around would come to stay here and get knowledge from the gurus. On one side of the paal there are small kitchens and rooms also. Whosoever had something to get done from the royal court, would come to stay here. The temples of Neelkanth and Girdhari were made. A yajnashala and Jamalshah Pir's chauki were also made. All on the same ghat. The heart of even those settled somewhere in search of livelihood would continue to dwell in Gharsisar. Seth Govind Dass of this very region, who had settled in Madhya Pradesh, had built a grand temple on *pathsaal* here.

Water was supplied to the whole city from here only. Water was drawn from here throughout the day but there was a good get-together of water-drawing women here in the morning and evening. A ghazal by Ummed Singh ji written in 1919 on Gharsisar gives a very vivid description of such scenes. On the occasion of Kajli Teej falling in Bhadon month the city dwellers en masse, attired in their best, would gather at Gharsisar. All the colors of nature seemed to have been sprinkled in this blue and yellow pond.

People's love for Gharsisar was not unilateral. They would visit Gharsisar and Gharsisar would also visit them and occupy their hearts. Teelon, a courtesan living far away in Sindh had taken some decisions perhaps in such a moment.

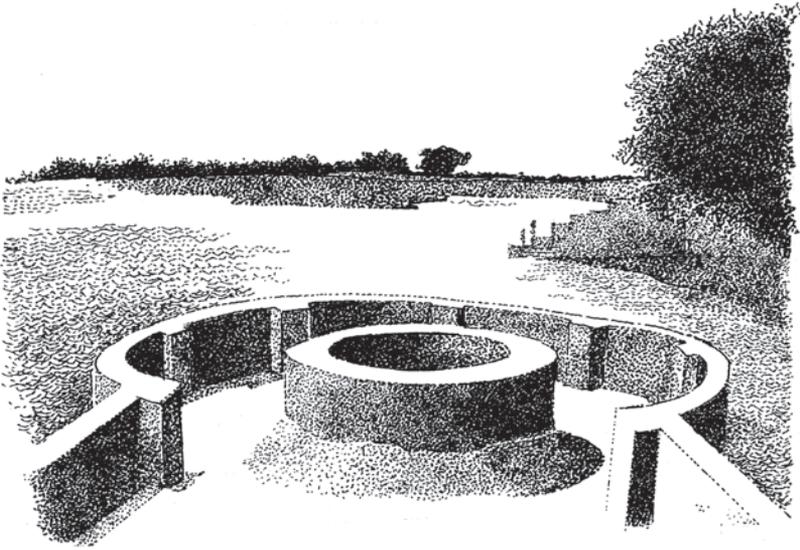
There was temple, *ghat*, everything on the pond. There was nothing short in its grandeur but still Teelon felt the need of a beautiful golden gateway for this golden pond. She decided to make a gateway at Gharsisar pond. A huge gateway with very artistic engravings on the stone was still under construction when some people poisoned the king's ears saying, "Your Lordship! Will you enter Gharsisar through the gateways built by a prostitute?"

It triggered controversy. The work of gateway construction went on, however. One day the king decided to demolish the gateway. Teelon came to know about it and overnight she got a temple built on the top floor of the gate. Maharaval revised his decision. Ever since that day, the people of the city have been entering the pond premises through this very gateway and they remember it in the name of Teelon only.

Exactly opposite to Teelon's gateway is a round rampart like minaret. The existence of mango groves outside the ponds is a common scene but here it is in the pond itself where people used to come for merry-making. Similarly, there is a big round parapet in the east. It housed the troops guarding the pond. Surrounded with the domestic and foreign enemies, this state made foolproof arrangements for the security of the pond as well.

Howmuchsoever shortage of water desert might be suffering from; the *aagaur* of Gharsisar was so big as to fill the pond to its brinks by preserving each and every drop of water available there. Then the security of the pond would shift from the army personnel into the hands of *neshta* and would thrust the surplus water capable enough to break the huge pond away from it. But this 'excuse' too was very strange. The people, who knew how to fill the pond by harvesting every single drop of water, treated the surplus water not just as water but as capital of water. The water released by *neshta* would be deposited further in another pond. If the *neshta* flowed uninterrupted then the *neshta* of the other pond would also get activated. Then it would fill still another pond. This process albeit incredible, would continue up to nine ponds viz. Nautaal, Govindsar, Joshisar, Gulabsar, Bhatiasar, Soodasar, Mohtasar, Rattansar and Kisanghat. In case the water was still surplus, then it would be filled in many *beris* i.e. small wells-like reservoirs. The words like each and every drop of water realized their meaning in their actual sense in seven mile long area from Gharsisar to Kisanghat.

But those who reign over Jaisalmer today have forgotten the meaning of even Gharsisar. Then how can they be expected to remember the names of nine ponds linked to each other through *neshta*. In the *aagaur* of Gharsisar, there is an airport now. Thus



the water of this part of *aagaur* now flows somewhere else instead of moving towards the pond. Even near around the *neshta* and the nine ponds on its route, there is a haphazard growth of urban houses, new housing societies etc. So much so, that the office of Indira Canal Authority which deals with water in its own way and the colonies of its employees is also here.

The schools, kitchens, verandahs and temple are also crumbling in the absence of proper maintenance. Today the city doesn't play Lhas game in which the king and his subjects decided the pond together. The stone-pillar fixed on the bank of the pond too has tilted a little. The minarets of the armed guards too have fallen now.

But still Gharsisar has not vanished altogether. Its builders had given it so much strength as to brave the ravages of time. Those who maintained their ponds amidst the sand storms in a fine way, least dreamed about the gale of neglect. But the Gharsisar and its lovers are putting up with this gale also with a stoic patience. Though the soldiers guarding the pond are no more today, the people guard it heart and soul.

The temple bells tinkle with the first ray of the sun. The people keep visiting the *ghats* all day long. Some people keep sitting here silently watching Gharsisar for hours while some are found singing

songs and playing on Ravan Hattha a kind of stringed instrument *sarangi*.

Women come today also on the *ghats*. The water is carried on camel-carts as well and many times a day, tanker- vehicles are also seen here. A diesel-pump is used to lift water from Gharsisar for filling the tankers.

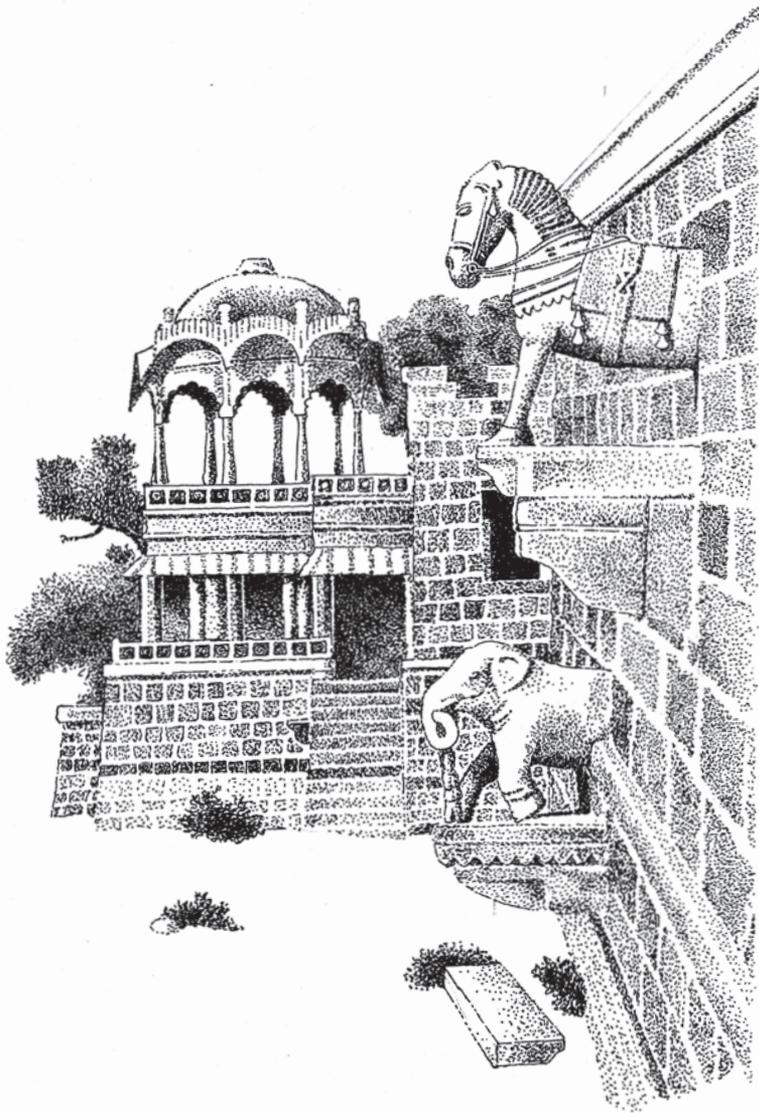
Gharsisar is supplying water even today. And that is why the sun dissolves its crimson in its water at the time of rising and setting.

Gharsisar had become a standard. Thereafter, it would have become very difficult to build any other pond. But still ponds kept being made every fifty or hundred years in Jaisalmer, all linked to each other like a chain of pearls.

Jaitsar was made about 175 years after Gharsisar. It was in fact a dam-like pond but later due to its big garden it came to be remembered as 'Bada Bagh'. This stone bundh has stopped the entire flow of water from the northern hills. On one side is Jaitsar while on the other the bada bagh irrigated by its water. The dam-wall divides the two. But this looks more like a wide enough road than a wall which crossing over the valley reaches up to the hill in front of it. The irrigation drain built beneath the wall is called Ram Naal.

Ram Naal canal is like a ladder towards the bundh. The level of water may be high or low in Jaitsar, the ladder like structure keeps draining down the water towards Bada Bagh. Having reached Bada Bagh, Ram Naal dissipates really like the name of Lord Rama in to particles. There is a well also on the first bank of the canal. If the water evaporates and the canal dries up, then the well filled with the seeped water is used. On the other hand as water of *aagar* across the other side of the *bundh* dries up, wheat is sown in it. Then on both sides of the *bundh* only the greenery is visible.

Green garden is really very big- with dense mango groves and a good variety of trees surrounding it. *Arjun* tree, normally available in the heavy rainfall regions and there too, on the banks of the river, is also found here. In Bada Bagh, the sun-rays remain suspended in the foliage. They are filtered down to the earth when the leaves stir with air. On the other side of the *bundh* is the cremation



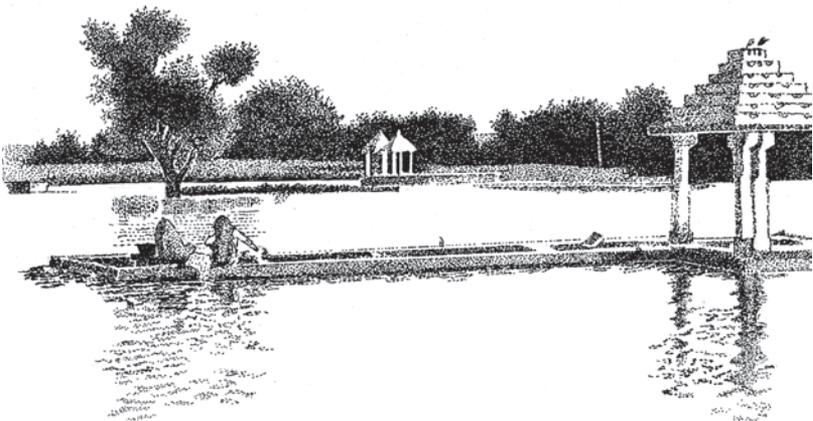
ground of the royal family. A number of beautiful umbrellas are made here in memory of the departed souls.

Amar Sagar was built 325 years after Gharsisar mainly because of need to stop the rain water falling in any other direction. But the builders of Amar Sagar perhaps wanted to show that the desire to have useful and beautiful ponds is perennial. Amar Sagar is a glaring example of how a wonderful pond can be made by joining

the pieces of stones. One arm of the pond has been made by a high and straight vertical wall. Beautiful steps on the wall, passing through the windows and minarets climb down in to the pond. On the broad part of this very wall are made stone images of elephants and horses. These beautiful images indicate the water level of the pond. Amar Sagar's *aagaur* is not so big as to receive water for the whole year. With the advent of summer the pond would start drying up. It meant that the people of Jaisalmer should forget this beautiful pond when it was most needed.

The artisans of Jaisalmer performed such feats here which can add some new chapters to the science of architecture. Here seven beautiful *beris* were built in the bed of the pond. *Beri* is a sort of pool called *pagbaav* also. The word '*pagbaav*' is made from the original '*pagvaah*', '*pag*' is foot and '*vah*' means pool. Thus *pagbaav* means the pool of water where one can walk on foot in water.

The water in the pond dries up but with its seepage the level of ground water goes up. The *beris* remain filled with this very clean filtered water. The *beris* are designed in such a way that Amar Sagar does not lose its beauty even after losing its water. All the *beris* have beautiful stone platforms, pillars, umbrellas and artistic steps to climb down. The fair is held in summer, Baisakh rainy season and even in 'Bhadon'. In the dry Amar Sagar, these umbrella-adorned *beries* look no less than a part of some palace. And when the pond is full, it gives a view of big umbrella-wearing vessels floating on the water surface.



Jaisalmer has been such a state of the desert which has reigned supreme in the world of trade. Then there came the period of recession but there was no recession in the work of building ponds in Jaisalmer and its surroundings. One after the other ponds kept being built viz. Gajaroop Sagar, Mool Sagar, GangaSagar, Gulab Taalab and Isar Lal ji Ka Taalab. This chain did not break till the arrival of the British. The strength of this chain was not left just for the kings, Ravals and Maharavals. The constituents of society which in the modern sense are called economically weaker sections, also maintained the chain of ponds.

Megha was a shepherd. It was 500 years back. He would set out with his cattle early in the morning. There was a vast expanse of desert sprawling over miles. Megha would carry with him an earthen *surahi*, a long-necked pitcher full of water sufficient enough for the whole day to quench his thirst and come back in the evening. One day somehow he hit upon an idea. He dug a small pit, emptied the *surahi* full of water into it and covered the depression with the broad leaves of *akk*, a plant of sandy region. He kept wandering here and there as per routine and couldn't go to that place for a couple of days. He went there on the third day and with hands quivering with curiosity he removed the covering of *akk* leaves from the pit. There was no water in the pit but he received a whiff of cool air from there. "Steam!" he exclaimed with a sense of wonderment and thought that if moisture could survive in spite of so much heat, there was certainly a possibility of making a pond there.

Megha set upon building the pond single-handedly. Now, he would daily bring along a spade and trough also with him. All day long he would dig the earth and put it on the *paal*. The cows would keep grazing near around on their own. He did not have the physical strength of Bhima but he definitely did have Bhima's resoluteness. For two years, he kept doing his work all alone. Now the big siege of the *paal* would be seen from a noticeable distance. The villagers also came to know about it.

Now the village urchins and other people also started accompanying him and joined him in the mega task. Twelve years had elapsed since its beginning but still the work on it was

constantly going on. In the meantime Megha passed away. But his wife did not immolate herself on his pyre. Now instead of Megha, she started carrying out the work left incomplete by her husband. It got completed in 6 months.

Since the pond had its genesis in *bhaap* i.e steam, this place was also called '*bhaap*' and with the passage of time, the word changed in to '*baap*.' The herdsman Megha was remembered by the grateful society as Meghoji and on the *paal* of the pond itself a beautiful umbrella was built in his name while a *bawali* i.e. step well was also made in memory of his wife.

Baap is a small town on Bikaner Jaisalmer route with a bus-stand having only 6-7 shops vending tea and snacks. Pond's *paal*, treble the height of a bus, is visible by the side of the bus-stand. In May June, this side of the *paal* emits heat wave while Meghoji's pond on the other side of it sends out cool air. In rainy season, the water here expands up to four miles.

No doubt, Meghraj, the god of rain may feel shy of coming here but there has been no dearth of people like Meghoji in the desert. The society which has become so capable with regard to water, does not take airs to flaunt its dexterity. It just bows its head in all humility and gives the whole credit to God.

It is said that after the Mahabharat war, Lord Krishna accompanied with Arjuna was going to Dwarika. His chariot was passing through the desert. Near today's Jaisalmer, he found Uttung Rishi engrossed in meditation on Trikoot Parvat. Lord Krishna paid obeisance and asked him to seek some blessing. Lexically the word '*Uttung*' means 'high'. The Rishi was highly placed in the real sense of the term. He demanded nothing for himself and prayed to the Lord saying. "If there is any virtue to my credit, bless this area. There should never be any scarcity of water here.

The desert society took this blessing as a verdict and defied the illusion of mirage with their skill.

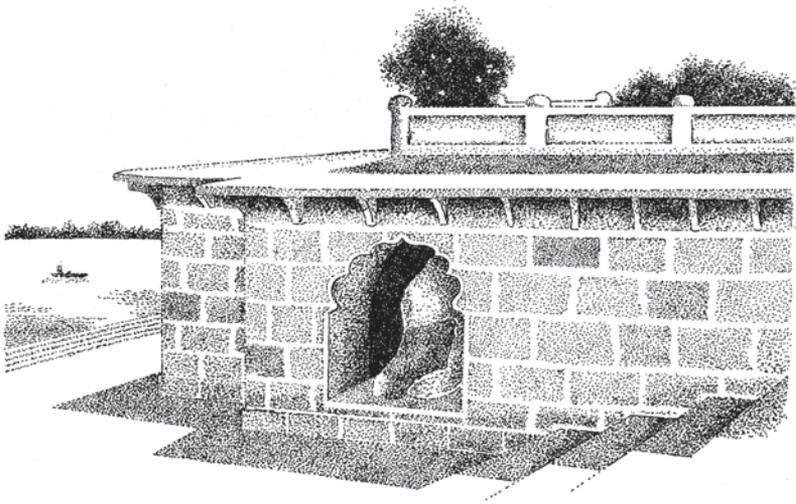


## Pond - The Innate Bond

What is life-giving for the society cannot be said to be lifeless. Life was perceived in the ponds or water bodies in general and the society raised its fabric of life around them. The more we love something more names we evolve for it. In different parts of the country in different languages and regional dialects, we have numerous names for the word pond. In the dictionaries of regional languages, their grammars, in the list of synonyms we find a host of names given to pond. Hamir Naam Mala, a grammar of Dingal language not only enumerates the synonyms of pond but describing its fundamental nature describes it as the innate bond of man also.

Man naturally develops an innate bonding with whatever he instinctively loves. Be it an occasion of weal or woe, the pond will be built. In Barmer, if due to limited means, a family is not in a position to finance pond as a whole, then these limited means were used for other things i.e. minor repairs or putting earth on the *paal* of an already existent pond. Which family is immune to death? Every family would associate its grief with the comfort of society through pond.

When the society as a whole was afflicted with sorrow due to some calamity like famine, even then a pond would be made. It provided the people immediate relief and the arrangement of water like this gave them fortitude to bear some impending crisis. In Bihar, during a famine that hit Madhubani area in 6th century, the village of the entire region had jointly made 63 ponds. Right from making such a gigantic plan to its execution there must have emerged a need for big organization. Plenteous means must have been managed by mobilizing new people new social and political institutions. Just think of the mind boggling project.



Sometimes a pond was built as a prize and sometimes it was given as a reward. Whosoever built a pond in the boundaries of Gond kings, was exempted from the revenue of land lying below it. This practice was prevalent particularly in Sambalpur region.

Pond building has been a part of penal code also. In Bundelkhand, the caste panchayats would often penalize one of its members, if found guilty of some unpardonable offence, by ordering him to build a pond. This tradition is still found in Rajasthan. In Gopalpura, a small hamlet of district Alwar, the violator of some panchayat decision is made to deposit a specific amount by way of penalty in the Gram Kosh i.e. common fund. Two small ponds have been made from that fund just recently.

There has been a tradition of spending the buried treasure if someone finds it, not for personal gains but for altruistic pursuits. And altruism normally meant building of ponds or repairing them. It is said that Jagatraj son of Bundelkhand ruler Chhattarsal, came to know about a hidden treasure on the basis of an informer's clue. Following the clue, Jagatraj got the treasure. It enraged the king who asked his son, "Why did you dig out the dead, buried Chandel treasure?" Now that it had been unearthed, it must be put to the best utilization. So the father ordered the son to get all the ponds made by Chandels repaired and make new ponds also. The treasure was enormous. The old ponds

were repaired and the construction of new ones also started. Genealogical record shows that from 276 to 1162 Vikrami year, 22 big ponds were built in the name of 22 generations. They exist in Bundelkhand even today.

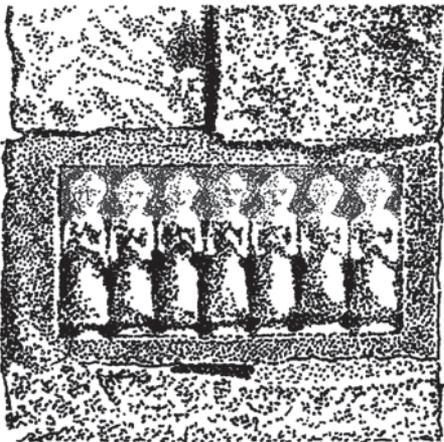
Everybody does not find the hidden treasure. But the society has had its own concepts to see everybody associated with the pond. Amavas (moonless night) and Poornima (full moon night) were held good for doing things of common interest. There has been a tradition of withdrawing from the personal chores and engaging oneself in the public works during these two days. This time was utilized for repair and maintenance of the local area pond. Labor is also capital in the society and along with personal it was invested in the public interest also.

Beside labor, the capital was arranged separately also. It was used when the pond water dipped low after the winter.

Then comes the summer and this is the best time for paying attention to some major repairs in the pond. Of twelve Poornimas in the year, eleven were reserved for labor. But there used to be a tradition of collecting food grain or money for the pond on the Poornima of Poos month. In Chhattisgarh, Chher-festival is celebrated on that day. The people in groups come out on this day and visit every doorstep while singing. They collect food grain from the householders as the paddy crop has already reached home. Everybody contributes according to his capacity. The food grain

thus collected is deposited in the Gram Kosh. It is out of this very fund that the repair or any other new works are done on the ponds or other public places.

Everybody did contribute his labor or capital towards the public ponds, but the public touch was considered necessary for the altogether private

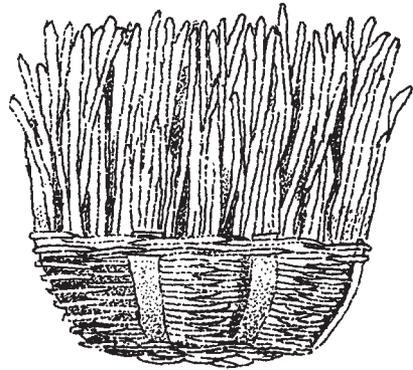


ponds also. The practice of bringing soil from all public places and putting in to the pond on its completion is prevalent even today. In Chhattisgarh, immediately after the construction of ponds was completed, soil brought from the horse stable, elephant-stable, market-place, temple, cremation-ground, brothel, wrestling arenas, schools etc. was put in to it.

Perhaps, the much educated people have become cut off from their society but during those days, the occasion of leaving the portals of education centers would create a context for making ponds. This tradition continued for long in Madhubani and Darbhanga area.

The ponds have life. The festival of infusing life in a pond was celebrated with great fervor. The same day it was christened. At some places one finds the complete detail about the pond inscribed on a pillar or a copper plate.

At some places, there was a custom of conducting the marriage of ponds with full ceremonial grandeur. This tradition is still there in Chhattisgarh. The pond cannot be used before wedding. Nobody will draw water from the pond nor will cross it over. The people of the whole village gather on the *paal* on this occasion. Soil



from the nearby temples is brought. Water of Ganges i.e. Gangajal is also brought and mixing it with water from other 5-7 wells or ponds, the wedding is solemnized. Sometimes, the pond-builders arrange dowry also according to their capacity.

Pillar is fixed on the pond in the memory of the wedding festivities also. Much later, when the pond is cleaned or desilted again, there is a custom of installing a pillar to remember the event.

Now-a-days, population or say demographic calculation is the prime criterion to define a big city whereas earlier it was the number of ponds which determined the size of a village or city.

In Chhattisgarhi dialect there is a presumption that a big village should have 126 ponds in reality. It was in B.C. era. In the same region, even after eight hundred or one thousand years, we can count one hundred or somewhere total 126 at Rattanpur (tenth to twelfth century) Kharaudi (seventh to twelfth century) Aarang and Kubara of Raipur and Deepadih of Sarguja district.

There was only one secret of the longevity of these ponds i.e. sense of belonging among their beneficiaries. Vis-à-vis such a passionate bonding, the words like maintenance pale in to insignificance. The songs like '*Bhujlia ke aathon ang pani mein doob saken, itna pani taal mein rakhna*' (Keep this much quantity of water in the pond as may conceal all the eight organs of ground water) reflect the folk damsels' craving for the fullness of the pond. On the other hand, there has always existed a society which created an environment to fulfill the folk women's desire through doing their share of duty. The pond was sustained by *gharmail* i.e. the joint effort of all the households.

The meeting point of all is no less than a pilgrimage. Those who cannot leave their home and hearth for pilgrimage can derive the same satisfaction by building ponds in their respective places. The pond builder is a pious soul, an enlightened being. He who protects the pond is equally great. Thus pond is a miniature pilgrimage. The people gather here in the form of fairs. Such a fair-loving society makes pond an integral part of its heart, its vision.

Ponds have always been a part of human fascination. So much so, that pond has been an indelible part of the body as well. A number of forest dwellers get pond or step well (*baawadi*) engraved on their persons. The signs of engraving normally include animals, birds, flowers etc. but the tattoos of Sita Baawadi and common *baawadi* are also popular among the people of *sahariya* community. The *sahariyas* adore Shabri as their ancestor. It has special association with Sita, the heroine of epic Ramayana. That is why the *sahariyas* are very fond of getting Sita Baawadi tattooed on their calves i.e. lower parts of legs.

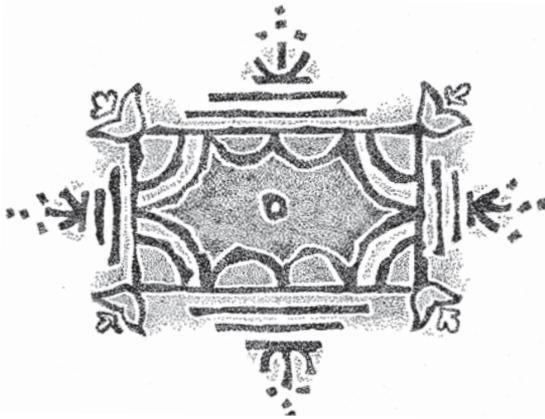
Sita Baawadi is mainly rectangular in shape. There are waves in it. In its center is a point which is symbolic of life. Outside the rectangle are the steps and on all the four corners are flowers.

The flowers signify the fragrance of life. It is very difficult to depict so many things in a single but simple sketch. But the mind of the engravers and the engraved have so much been imbued with love for the *baawadi* that eight ten lines, eight ten points portray the whole scene effortlessly on the body. This tradition exists also in the *kuraon* community of southern Asskaat district of Tamil Nadu.

One who is heart and soul with the pond, does not view it as a pit of water only. For him it is a throbbing tradition a family with a number of kins. He is well aware of who is to be remembered at what time so that the pond lives on.

Who is to be approached if it does not rain in time? Indra is the rain god. But it is difficult to knock at his door straightway. And it's not proper also. His daughter is Kaajal. If mother Kaajal is propitiated, she may invite her father's attention to this side in a proper way. If sowing is done and there is no rainfall for a fortnight then mother Kaajal is worshipped. The whole village gathers singing the hymns of the mother on the pond Kankadbani situated in the thick of the forest on the outskirts of the village. Then looking towards the south, the villagers beg water from the goddess as it has to come from the south only.

Before worshipping Kaajal-the deity, the direction of air is also tested at some places. It is done on Aashaadh Poornima.



The people gather at the ponds on this day and judging the direction of the air, rainfall is prophesied. Rain comes according to their calculation and if not, then again the deity has to be informed.

The filling of pond up to the brink also gave way to the festivities. What can be more joyous for the society than the feeling that *apra* has started. An image of elephant installed on the biggest pond of Bhuj (Kutch) is symptomatic of the *apra* flowing. When water touched this image, the news spread all over the city. The people of the city would gather on the *ghats* of the pond. The area suffering from water shortage would convert this incident into a festival. The king of Bhuj would come on the *ghat* and worship the pond in the presence of the whole city. He would return with the blessings of the pond filled with water. The filling of the pond up to the brims is not just an incident. It's bliss, a great festival. It took the king and his subjects to the *ghat*.

The gods also visit the *ghat* during these days. On the occasion of Jal Jhoolan festival the portable idols would be brought to the pond and rocked well-bedecked in the swing. Gods also enjoy the Sawan swings on the *ghat* of the pond.

No pond is beleaguered. It is a member of the full blossomed aquatic family. It has water of all and its water is a part of all water bodies. Those who believed like this had in reality made such a pond. Bindu Sagar near Jagannath Puri temple has the water of all water bodies of the country including that of rivers and oceans. The devotees thronging to Puri from far off places in different directions bring along some quantity of water from their respective areas and add it to Bindusagar.

In this hour of crisis to the country's unity, Bindusagar can aptly be called, the pond of national integrity. Bindu Sagar is a symbol of united India.

Of what kind will be the time to come? It has been very difficult to say this. But one measure of it was the pond also. After Navratras, the millet grains are immersed. In Rajasthan people would gather at the ponds on this occasion and *bhopa* i.e. the temple priest prophesied the time to come by seeing the level of

water after the immersion. Rainy season crosses by then. Whatever water was to be collected in the pond, has been collected. Now the future conditions depend on the present situation.

Now that tradition has gone. If the future were to be predicted from the water level, the *bhopas* standing at various ponds would perhaps have said that bad times are imminent.



## The Ponds are Still Relevant

The bad times had come. Had there been *bhopas* i.e. soothsayers, they would definitely have predicted hard times for ponds. The healthy traditions and beliefs which worked as a spirit behind building the ponds, were withering.

‘Gap’ is a small word but the problems of society increase manifold when it comes between society and the state. And when this gap or distance does not remain restricted to just one pond and extends up to seven seas, the words start begging for description.

The British had come to India from across the seven seas along with their experience. There the society was class-based having master-slave relations. There only the state decided what was in the interest of society. Here the social set up was caste-based. The kings were indispensable but the relations between the ruler and the ruled were altogether different here from those in England. Here society itself determined its interest and fulfilled it with its own force, its own skillful management. The state’s contribution was that of a helper only.

Water management and anxiety about it formed a part of our collective consciousness. It was just a drop in the vast ocean of our dutifulness. The ocean and drop were integrally related to each other. The ocean has no existence without drop. Coming from across the seven seas, the Britishers could neither discern the ocean of Indian society’s duty-consciousness, not its drops. On the basis of their own experience and orientation they tried to trace such documentary evidence in the state records but the state here never maintained any such records. Therefore, they concluded that only they have to make all the arrangements. There is nothing here worth its name.

Roaming about in various parts of the country, the English collected sufficient amount of information. But this whole exercise

was nothing but a result of their curiosity. It lacked the insight to perceive the ocean of dutifulness and its drops. Therefore whatever policies were formulated after collection of a plethora of information, they only separated the ocean and the drop from each other.

The golden age had passed of course but still the era of degradation had not set in. There is a mention of work going on at not only small but even the big ponds in Gazetteer made by the British from the observations they collected while travelling here and there in the country.

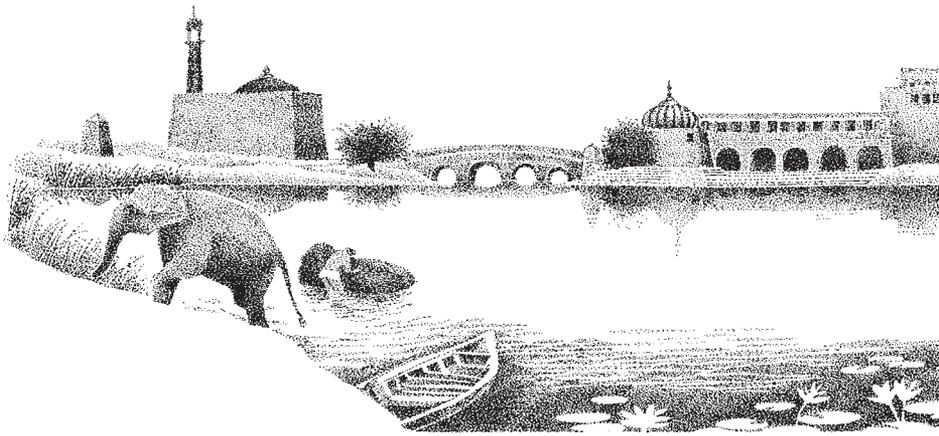
In Durg and Rajnandgaon regions of Madhya Pradesh even till 1907 many big ponds were being built. Of these Tandula pond had just got ready after eleven years' continuous work. The length of canals and drains drawn out of it was 513 miles.

How could the new system of disintegrating the society occupy any place in the minds of those who did all this for the sustenance of society? They were taken as challenges by the English who dubbed the self-esteeming tribes like *sansis* and *bhils* as thugs and criminals. Now that everything was to be done by the English, the earlier structure was doomed to collapse. Its rejection was not any well-contemplated and shrewd conspiracy. It was simply a product of this new vision which unfortunately caught the fancy of even those who were opposing the British wholeheartedly and fighting for the freedom of the country.

The dexterous hands of the earlier times were now changed into unskilled workers. A large number of people who were known to be very talented were now treated as illiterate, uncultured and untrained. This unabashedness of post independence governments and institutions persists even today.

How that skilled society was deprived of their water management acumen can be seen in the then Mysore state.

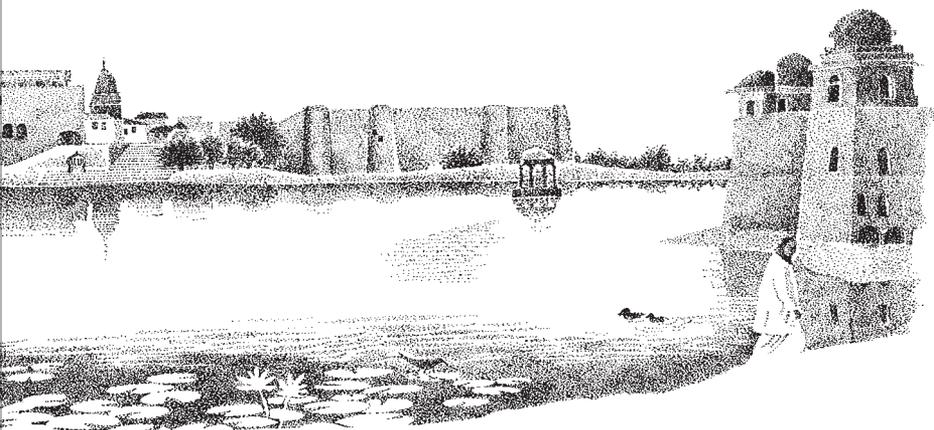
In 1700, the Mysore state was looked after by Deewan Purnaiyya. At that time there were 39000 ponds in the state. It was said that if only one drop of water fell on a hill half of it this side and the other half on that side of the hill then on both sides there were ponds to preserve it. Apart from society the state also spent lacs on the maintenance of ponds every year.



The empire changed. The British came. First of all they stopped this extravagance and in 1731 the state fund earmarked for the maintenance of ponds was halved. For the next 32 years, the society kept covering the miserliness of the state with its generosity. Since the ponds belonged to people so even despite curtailment in the state aid and also cessation at times, the society kept maintaining them. The years old memories do not fade out so easily. But then 32 years later PWD department was made for the first time in 1763 with the result that all the ponds were grabbed from the people and handed over to it.

The new regime had divested the pond lovers of their pristine repute, then their means were taken away and now their belongingness too was snatched. In the absence of honor, facilities and rights, the society had started feeling helpless. In such a situation how could they be expected to discharge their duties?

The tale of the plight of 39000 ponds of Mysore is very long. When PWD failed to deliver the goods, the Irrigation Department came in to existence. Now ponds were given to this department. When it also failed, then again their charge was given to PWD. In the meanwhile, the English kept raising revenue collection from the ponds and downsizing the maintenance amount simultaneously. They started asking contribution towards this purpose which gradually turned coercive.



Meanwhile, Delhi had become another capital with regard to the plight of ponds. Prior to the arrival of the English it had 350 ponds. They were also evaluated in the terms of profit and loss and non-profit making ponds were thrown out of the state care.

This was the time when taps were fitted in Delhi. A mild voice of protest against this development was heard somewhere near 1900 in the *gaaris* (A form of folk songs sung by the ladies of bride's side to ridicule the bridegroom and his kins) sung on the occasion of marriage. When the marriage party would sit in a row, the women would sing, "*Firangi nal mat lagvai diyo*" (O, English man, don't give us water taps.) But the taps kept multiplying and the ponds built here and there, wells *baawadis* etc. were replaced with 'water works' for supply of water.

At first, it was in big cities only but then in small towns and cities also, the taps started appearing everywhere. That water does not come just by laying pipes and fitting taps. It became very clear not at that time but people came to realize it gradually. After 1970, this scheme had started turning into a nightmare. By then the ponds of several cities had become dry due to neglect and had turned into land for raising new localities bazaars stadia etc.

But water doesn't forget its route. New localities made on the graves of ponds were flooded during rainy season and once the rains are over these cities start crying due to the crisis of water scarcity.

The cities which have some funds or power are doing somehow by depriving some others of water but for others the situation is worsening day by day. The collectors of some districts block the supply of pond water for irrigation and reserve it solely for cities.

The cities need water but not ponds that give it. Then the tube well is the only source of water. But for that beside diesel and power the groundwater is also a must under that city. The sad experience of cities like Madras only shows that constantly dipping ground water level cannot be stopped only with money and power. Some cities have adopted very expensive and impracticable methods of shifting water from some far off river. But such municipalities are reeling under crores of power bills also.

An identical example of Indore can serve as an eye-opener. Here water of distant Narmada was brought. The first phase of the plan fell short and gave way to the demand for the second phase and the agitation started for the third time as well. Beside Congress, Bhartiya Janata party and Leftist activists, Anokhilal, the renowned wrestler of the city, too, has observed Satyagraha standing on one foot for 35 days together. Not in very remote past this city had a pond named Bilawali in which the navy divers were made to



dive deep to trace a plane of flying club but they had failed. Today Bilawali has turned in to a big dry ground from where the aero planes of the flying club can be flown.

The tale of Devas, a city near Indore is rather more wondrous. During the last 30 years all the big and small ponds were stuffed with earth and houses and factories were built on them. But then it came to be known that they are not left with any source of water. There were news regarding the exodus of people from the city. Water was to be managed for the city, but from where? Construction work went on for ten days on Devas railway station instead of ponds and wells.

On 25 April 1990, a train carrying 50 tankers of water came from Indore. The water-carrying train was welcomed in the presence of Local Bodies Minister on the beat of trumpets. The minister inaugurated this scheme by drinking a glass of water from 'Narmada' on the railway station. In the times of crisis, even earlier, water was supplied to some cities of Gujrat by train. But in Devas, now water carrying train comes everyday in the morning and then by lifting water with pumps into the highly perched water tanks leaves for its onward supply to the city.

The rail fare amounts to 40000 rupees daily. And this is in addition to the cost incurred on lifting the water. If the cost of water obtained from Indore is also added to it, the entire scheme will make water as costly as power. The Madhya Pradesh government has however been seeking exemption of rail fare from the central government which has been showing generosity towards the state as it also brings water for Delhi from far off Ganga. In case Dr Manmohan Singh's "liberalist" policy makes him demand the cost of rail fare and power also, will it take much time for Devas, the abode of gods, to become a hell?

There is no dearth of stupidities in respect of water. Just look at Sagar city of Madhya Pradesh. About 600 years back the city was named after a big pond Sagar built by Lakha Banjara. Initially the city had developed on the banks of this very pond. Now a days, there are five very reputed institutions including the district and divisional headquarters, police training center, HQs of Mahaar Regiment of Indian Army, Municipal Committee and Hari Singh

Gaur University. A wanderer came and went back after building such a big pond but these affluent institutions of modern society could not even maintain it. Today, eleven theses have been written on Sagar. Degrees have been given away but the well-educated society has not been able to protect a pond built by an illiterate wanderer.

Despite this neglect spree a few ponds are still there. Eight to ten ponds all over the country are still full of water distributing the *prasad* of god Varuna not only to the worthy but unworthy as well. Their strong structure is one of the reasons, but not the only one. In that case, the strong forts would not have turned into ruins. The society though frustrated at several fronts still cherishes the memory of its ponds. This strength of memory is far stronger than that of the stones.

Even today, *chher chhera* folksongs are sung in Chhattisgarh and the food grain obtained there from is used for necessary repairs to the ponds. Still the Kajliya songs pray for immersion of their all the eight parts in Bundelkhand. In Haryana on the occasion of tonsure, the parents of the child scrape earth from the pond and dedicate it on the *paal*. Nobody knows how many cities, how many villages depend and thrive on these very ponds. Many of the municipalities are growing due to them even today and the irrigation departments are able to supply water for irrigation on the basis of these only. In many villages like Dah of Bija in Alwar district, still these pond heroes are busy digging new ponds and they guard them throughout the night during the first showers of rain. Meanwhile, the sun adds abundant gold to Gharsisar everyday at the time of rising and setting.

This sagacious advice reverberates in some ears even today:  
“Keep doing good deeds.”





