

Water Symbols and Architecture in Champaner-Pavagadh, Gujarat, India

Amita Sinha
Professor of Landscape Architecture
University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign

Summary

The paper describes displacements of historic communities, abandonment of forts, and reclamation of sacred sites in the case study of the cultural landscape of Champaner-Pavagadh in Gujarat, India. The place dereliction resulted in a loss of traditional knowledge of water management, crucial to the survival of communities. Water symbols and architecture of its Hindu and Islamic building periods are interpreted to rediscover the lost 'water-intelligence'. The paper argues that water is the unifying element in reading the bifurcated site—Hindu pilgrim site on Pavagadh Hill and Islamic Champaner city at its foot--and advocates conservation of historic waterworks so that they can be a frame for sensory experience of visitors.

Case Study

Champaner-Pavagadh, a UNESCO World Heritage Site in Gujarat, is an interesting and unusual case study in how religion, culture, terrain, and climate interact in creating water systems that sustained large communities for 800 years between the 8th and 16th centuries. Champaner was the capital of Gujarat and as such its rich architectural legacy forms an important chapter in the architectural and urban history of India. As the last of settlements at the site, with the previous ones on Pavagadh Hill, its extant fortifications and water management systems are a marvel of engineering of the medieval era. The first Hindu settlement on the hill dates back to 8th c. and by 1484 CE it had been captured by the Muslim Sultan Mehmud Beghada who built his new city Champaner at its foot. The city was ransacked by the Mughal Emperor Humayun in 1535 CE and was abandoned and forgotten, 'lost in the jungle' until it was excavated in 1969-75.¹ Although the Hindu and Jain temples on the sacred Pavagadh Hill were destroyed by Islamic invasions, the hill reclaimed its status as a pilgrim destination when the goddess Kalika Temple was rebuilt on its summit in the 18th c.

The hill was the cradle of Hindu and Islamic civilizations that rose and fell in nearly eight centuries of continuous occupation. The Rajputs were defeated and driven away from their hill forts when the Sultan built his palace fort at the foothill but within half a century, Champaner was put to flames and its residents fled. For the next three hundred years the landscape lay derelict and was only reclaimed as a pilgrim site when the temple on the summit of Pavagadh Hill was rebuilt. The Great Goddess as embodied in the Hill has been a spiritual constant for the believer in face of repeated and traumatic displacements. Pavagadh has been a sanctuary—for those seeking refuge from invasions during the tumultuous medieval period and for the faithful who climb it today to affirm their belief in the goddess's protective powers. Although small resident communities are living on plateaus of the Hill and in the inner fort in Champaner today, the site never regained its significance as the capital of Gujarat. The displacements have resulted in the loss of water-intelligence, i.e. knowledge base and skills in building water structures that had sustained the historic communities.

Water architecture in Champaner-Pavagadh developed within cultural contexts in which religious symbolism played a profound role. In the Indic world view nature is sentient and water, among the five natural elements (*panch tattva*), is the primary constituent of all matter. Water purifies by washing away physical dirt and moral sins. It precedes creation and reabsorbs it and is thus associated with both evolution and dissolution in creation myths. Bathing is regeneration of body and spirit; emergence upon taking a dip in the holy waters is symbolic of taking on a new and purer form. Water is central to Hindu worship rituals and at Pavagadh Hill, embodiment of the goddess Kalika, is symbolic of her nurturing

¹ Goetz, Herman, "Pavagadh-Champaner," *Journal of the Gujarat Research Society* XI, no. 2 (1949): 1-67.

aspects.² The arrival of Islam and building of Champaner at the foothill added further meanings to water. Islam shares with Hinduism (and with other religions) the concept of water as a purifying element. Ablution is a necessary part of the Islamic prayer ritual and every mosque courtyard has tanks for *waju* (cleansing ritual). The flowing waters of Qu'ranic paradise are the essence of the paradisiacal garden, celebrated in pools, channels, and fountains. The sensual pleasures afforded by water are the dominant aspect in design of water architecture in Islamic culture and shaped the urban landscape of Champaner. Water in this worldview was not a medium for a transcendent divine entity, rather it was to be enjoyed for its phenomenal properties—to cool, nourish life, and to assume myriad playful forms. The ornate water architecture of Champaner city at the foothill, inhabited by Muslims, celebrated water not for its symbolic value but for its sensual and utilitarian aspects.

In 'water-intelligent' settlement planning at Champaner-Pavagadh, historic water catchment and conveyance systems ensured availability of water throughout the year even though there are no perennial streams and monsoons are the only source of water in the semi- arid region.³ Water structures—ponds, tanks, and wells —collected and conveyed water on two watersheds on north-east and north-west sides of the Pavagadh Hill and supplied it for daily uses—mundane and spiritual. Water bodies were the nuclei of settlements built by Hindu rulers on the sacred Pavagadh Hill but not in Champaner city built at its foot that relied mostly on individual household wells (Figure 1). The rich building traditions of Gujarat, irrespective of religious affiliations, were reflected in the water architecture of ponds, tanks, and step wells. The meanings attributed in water in the Indo-Islamic culture of Champaner-Pavagadh shaped cultural practices and built forms that accommodated them. Vernacular water structures consist of *talao*, a macro-catchment basin with earthen embankments or built steps (*ghats*); wells edged with square/circular platforms from where water could be drawn by a rope pulley; stone or brick cisterns; and canals, under- or above ground, lined with clay, brick, or concrete. The historic *jalashays* demonstrate sophisticated design intent and high levels of craftsmanship. They include *kunds*--square/polygonal tanks with ornamental steps; and *vavs* or stepwells--deep underground wells reached by steps. The opportunities afforded by natural terraced slopes of Pavagadh Hill and high ground water table in plains below, combined with cultural meanings attributed to water, led to efficient water systems and ornate water architecture. The rich typology of water structures for storing water above or below ground reveals the evolution of the syncretic design grammar of water architecture in Western India and is rarely seen elsewhere in the region.

Champaner-Pavagadh is read as a bifurcated site—Islamic Champaner of historic monuments and Hindu and Jain Pavagadh of sacred sites and temples—the former an archaeological park and the latter a pilgrim destination, each serving a different group of visitors.⁴ This reading belies the many ties between the two linked by fort walls, syncretic architectural style, and above all by water systems. Water is the connecting element in a landscape perceived as divided and fragmented along religious lines. Collective wisdom in water intelligence and craftsmanship in water architecture cannot be exclusively defined along sectarian lines. Water flowing down the hill shaped the cultural landscape of both Pavagadh and Champaner tying them together in an indivisible whole for purposes of resource management.

Conclusion

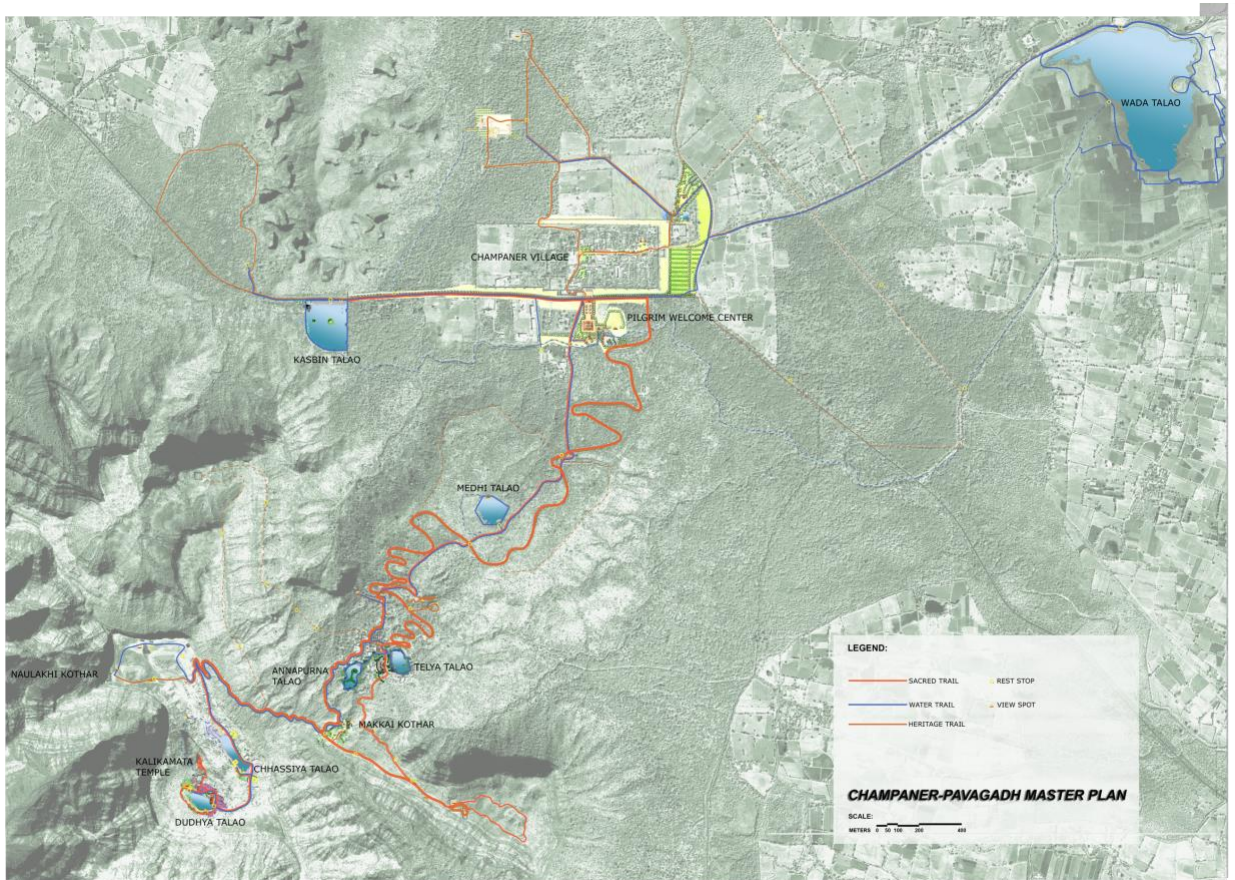
Today the water structures are defunct and neglected even though they constitute heritage as valuable as monuments. Sustainable management of water, a precious resource, is essential for conserving the cultural landscape that embodies both tangible (water architecture and catchment-conveyance systems) and intangible (water intelligence and sacred symbolism) heritage. I conclude with outlining a new

² Sinha, Amita, "Cultural Landscape of Pavagadh: The Abode of Mother Goddess, Kalika," *Journal of Cultural Geography*, USA, 22, no. 1 (2006): 89-103.

³ Modi, Sumesh, "Water-Intelligent City: Champaner-Pavagadh," in *Landscapes of Water: History, Innovation and Sustainable Design*, ed. by Umberto Fratino (Proceedings of the International Conference Monopoli 26-29 September 2002), 103-10.

⁴ Sinha, Amita and Yuthika Sharma, "Urban Design as a Frame for Site Readings of Heritage Landscapes: A Case Study of Champaner-Pavagadh, Gujarat, India," *Journal of Urban Design*, U.K., 14, no. 2 (2009): 203-221.

approach to sustainable heritage landscape conservation within which water systems are restored and made functional, to serve the needs of local residents and pilgrims, and to enhance the legibility of this complex and layered landscape. Our proposals for conservations of waterworks draw upon cultural meanings of water specific to Hindu and Indo-Islamic traditions and phenomenology of water in universal human experience. Water is proposed to be the frame for revealing the vital role it played in shaping the historic settlement patterns. In its sense of immediacy, ability to invite touch, and its capacity to induce reflection, it becomes salient in encountering and remembering living sacred sites and spectacular historic monuments. In this way conservation practice goes beyond restoration of physical artifacts and becomes sensory design in the true sense.⁵



⁵ Malnar, Joy Monice and Frank Vodvarka. *Sensory Design*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).