

Design Resource

## Adalaj Stepwell - Ahmedabad, Gujarat

Architectural Legacy

by

Prof. Bibhudutta Baral and Guna D.  
NID Campus, Bengaluru

Source:

<https://dsource.in/resource/adalaj-stepwell-ahmedabad-gujarat>



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## Introduction

Wells or ponds in which the water is reached by descending a set of steps are Stepwells. Usually, stepwells are covered and protected. They are multi-storied having architectural significance. They are most common in western India. Stepwells are the best examples of water storage and irrigation tanks developed in India to deal with seasonal fluctuations in water availability. During periods of drought, the stepwell ensures the availability of water. These well-built, sturdy structures had social, cultural, and religious significance. Along with providing water, stepwells served a purpose of leisure. This was because the base of the well provided relief from the daytime heat. Women were collecting the water frequently, so they were more associated with these wells. They prayed and offered gifts to the goddess of the well for her blessings. The place also served as a place for social gatherings and religious ceremonies. Stepwells are built with two parts, a vertical shaft from which water is drawn and the surrounding persuaded underground passageways, chambers, and steps which provide access to the well. The galleries and chambers surrounding them became incredible, quiet retreats during the hot summers as they are carved with intricate details.

The first rock-cut stepwells in India date from 200-400 AD. One of the earliest existing examples of stepwells was built in the 11th century in Gujarat, the Mata Bhavani's Stepwell. A long flight of steps leads to the water below a sequence of multi-story open pavilions positioned along the east/west axis. Stepwell is a prominent example of art where the columns, brackets, and beams are adorned with detailing. Water has an important part in rituals from the time of Vedas. The steps to reach the water level in artificially construed tanks can be found in the sites of Indus Valley Civilization. The Mughal rulers did not disrupt the culture that was practiced in these stepwells and encouraged the building of stepwells.



View of the stepwell from the top.

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## Legend

A stunning example of Indo-Islamic architecture in Gujarat is Adalaj Stepwell or Adalaj ni Vav. One of the finest stepwells of Gujarat was built in 1555. It is located in the Adalaj village, 18 km away from Ahmedabad city. What makes this stepwell the most beautiful amongst others is its series of platforms and galleries built on the side of the stepwell. It looks like a tale of unrequited passion and events revolving around it.

The story behind the making of this legendary stepwell is so interesting. A Hindu ruler named Rana Veer Singh of the Vaghela dynasty reigned over this territory which was known as Dandai Desh, in the 15th century. People of his country were suffering from water droughts. Hence, King Rana Singh decided to construct well. Before achieving his goal, his kingdom was attacked by Mahmud Begada, the Muslim ruler of a neighbouring kingdom. The Rana king was killed during the war. His wife, Rani Roopba, was so beautiful that Mahmud falls in love with her beauty. He proposed her for marriage, Rani in deep grief at the death of her husband, agreed on a condition that he would first complete the building of the stepwell. King Mahmud agreed to the proposal and built the well in record time. When the construction was completed, he reminded Rani of her promise to marry him. Roopba decided to end her life on achieving her objective of completing the stepwell started by her husband. Leaving behind a mark of devotion to her husband, Rani circumambulated the stepwell with prayers and jumped into the well. King Begada allowed the well to persist without spoiling. To date, every visitor who comes here prays for the spirits of Rani Roopba as they believe that her spirit still resides here.

There are two versions available narrating this incidence. One version is mentioned in the 200 years old scriptures of Swaminarayan; before her death, Rani requested religious saints to take a bath in this stepwell. So that the water in the stepwell gets purified by these saints, thereby delivering her from her sins. Another one is associated with the tombs found near the well. The six graves build near the well are dedicated to six masons who built the well. King Mahmud was so impressed by the architectural excellence of the stepwell; hence he asked the masons if they could make another well? The masons agreed, and the king sentenced them to death. He did not want a replica to be built.



Instruction and History of the Adalaj stepwell.



Pillars on the west entrance of Adalaj stepwell.

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Entrance to the Adalaj stepwell.

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Carving on the walls.



Tombs of Masons.

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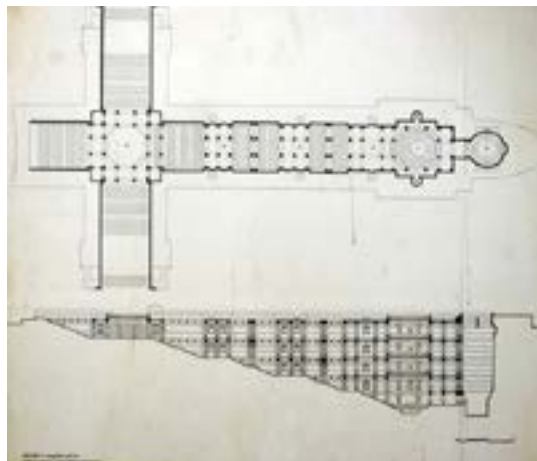
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## Architecture

Adalaj stepwell is five stories deep, built-in sandstone in the Solanki architectural style. A stepwell is built on an intricately carved large number of pillars with an octagonal plan at the top. Each floor is so spacious that the people can hold gatherings. The light and air can enter the octagonal well as it has an opening in the ceilings above the landing. It is dug so deep that one can access groundwater at that level, accounting for seasonal fluctuations in water level due to rainfall over the years. As the direct sunlight does not touch landings except at noon, the atmosphere inside the well is six degrees cooler than the outside. A unique feature of this stepwell is that from the first story level, three staircases lead to the bottom water level of the well.

A stepwell is called a Vav in the Gujarati language. The vav is a remarkable example of Indo-Islamic architecture and design. Mythological scenes carve the walls along with everyday scenes of women churning buttermilk, dancers accompanied by musicians, women adorning themselves, and a king sitting on a stool. The upper floors are carved by elephants which are 3 inches in size, each of different designs. The notable feature of the great monument is Navagraha at the end of the well. It is believed that Navagraha protects the historical site from evil spirits. It has three entrance stairs. A classical blend of Islamic floral, geometric designs, Hindu, and Jain icons and symbols make the stepwell remarkable.

The stepwell is open on all the days, and to enjoy the exciting play of light on the interiors of the stepwell. It is advisable to plan one's visit so that the spectator is underground in the stepwell when the sun is up. The weather during October and March is quite pleasant in Ahmedabad and conducive for visiting the stepwell.



Plan and Section of Adalaj Stepwell (Image Source)

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Corridor view of Adalaj ni vav.



Corridor entrance.



Interior and exterior borders curved on the stepwell walls.

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Intricately carved pillars.

Bright lights are pipping Adalaj stepwell.

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View from the bottom of the well.

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Different views on the way to the bottom of the well.



Outside views.



Intricate carvings on the walls.



Detailed carvings on pillars.



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Intricate carving on the eastern entrance.



Octagonal view of the Adalaj stepwell.



One of the balconies in the Adalaj stepwell.

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## Contact Details

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