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Importance of Water Bodies in Indian Culture and Religious Practices: Study of Architecture of Traditional Water Bodies in Region of Uttar Pradesh

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Abstract: ***This paper explores the cultural and religious significance of traditional water bodies in India, with a focused architectural study on those found in Uttar Pradesh. It examines how water bodies like stepwells, tanks, kunds, and ghats have historically served as pivotal elements in social, religious, and ecological systems. Through case studies and architectural analysis, the research underscores their role in sustaining religious rituals, community life, and water management in the region.***

Keywords: Water bodies, Uttar Pradesh, Indian culture, religious practices, architecture, stepwells, ghats, kunds, heritage conservation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Water has always held a sacred place in Indian culture, symbolizing purification, life, and renewal. In Uttar Pradesh, a region steeped in mythology and religious traditions, water bodies have played a significant role in shaping cultural identities and practices. This paper investigates how these traditional structures embody spiritual symbolism, ecological functionality, and aesthetic design.

A. Historical and Cultural Significance:

In Hinduism, water is an essential element of ritual purity and religious observance. Uttar Pradesh, being home to sacred cities like Varanasi, Mathura, and Ayodhya, features numerous water bodies that are integral to religious festivities and pilgrimages. These water bodies are often linked with deities, epics, and local legends, reinforcing their importance in collective memory and daily worship.

B. Typology and Architectural Features:

1) *Stepwells (Baolis/Bawadis):* Engineered to provide water year-round, these structures exhibit a fusion of utilitarian and ornamental architecture. Examples include the Agra Baoli and Fatehpur Sikri Baolis.
2) *Kunds:* Sacred ponds or reservoirs, such as the Sita Kund and Surya Kund, which are associated with mythological narratives.
3) *Ghats:* Riverfront steps used for bathing and rituals, notably along the Ganga in Varanasi, where the ghats are essential to cremation and religious ceremonies.
4) *Tanks and Lakes:* These served both ritualistic and irrigation purposes, often constructed near temples to support both spiritual and agricultural needs.

C. Case Studies:

1) *Naimisharanya:*

Naimisharanya is one of the most ancient and sacred spiritual center where sages performed penance and where sacred texts were composed and recited.

2) *Soronji Shukar Kshetra*

A holy pilgrimage site associated with Varaha (boar) incarnation of Lord Vishnu.

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3) Sarsota Kund

A sacred water reservoir or kund.

4) Manikarnika Ghat, Varanasi:

One of the oldest and most sacred ghats, central to Hindu funeral rites.

5) Ram ki Paidi, Ayodhya:

A modern yet culturally significant ghat used for ceremonial baths during festivals.

6) Sankat Mochan Kund, Varanasi:

A temple tank associated with Lord Hanuman, reflecting the blending of natural and built environments.

Case studies:

a) Naimisharanya:



Figure 1. View of Naimisharanya

Naimisharanya is situated in Lucknow district. The cultural impact or value of Naimisharanya is very high which shows by the gathering of people from Hindu religion across the world. Naimisharanya is a place where all the Vedas and Upanishad were written. It helps a very strong belief that the Chakrakund of Naimisharanya is a place where all type of sins can be washed away. Naimisharnaya kund has a shape of circular kund surrounded by an octagonal shape. The central part of the kund called Chakrakund is interrelated and isolated place for the rituals like Murti Visarjan and all type of rituals and practices which took a very deep root in Hindu religion.

There are the proper arrangement in kund planning to cater the rituals like Mundan Sanskar, Hawan etc. Basically, Chakrakund has a history of about 900 years, in which there are some structures which exists from last 500-600 years. There are some structures in which some verandas are in front of small temple which caters for the users and provide shelter for them at the time when ritual Sanskar were going on. But today the scenario is little bit change, most of the temples are encroached by the local people and the shelters become homes which creates a big problem for the tourist or the users, for catering them. There are some temporary shelters comes over the kund. But the religious belief is still very strong as per day about 1500-2000 people come over there.

There is a festival in the month of March in which there is a fair and very high gathering took place in those three days. About 2-2.5 lakhs people gather there to offer their prayers for their devotees. Large commercial space taking there space in all around the kund, which influence the settlement pattern of social fabric over there. The drawback of commercialisation is the influence of new structures on the old historical and sacred buildings.

People gathering plays a very high role in depletion of the structures as the lack of awareness. They used the structures in a very bad manner which directly hit the structure appearance. As Naimisharnya has no natural body over there so at the ancient time the water comes into the Chakrakund by the aquifers but today's scenario is change the water table of a particular place is going down by which the crisis of water in aquifers become in existence. By virtue of these the Chakrakund today is filled by bore wells and pumps. So it is very necessary to take strong steps against these phenomenon as the time comes to stand together to save our heritage wealth.

b) Case Study Of Soronji Shukar Kshetra



Figure 2. View of soronji shukar kshetra

Soronji Shukar Kshetra is situated near Kashganj district U.P. Here is a kund which is famous for its supernatural powers as it is practically tested that the water of this kund have the capacity to melt the human bones within 78 hours. By virtue of which this place becomes a very important place for a particular ritual like Asthi Visarjan and Mundan Sansakar after crimination ritual (Dasham Sanskar).

This kund spread over an area of approx. (80,000 sq.mt.), which have a Parikrama path around the kund and many temples over there. This kund is connected through a small canal with Ganga river at Sirohi village and bounded by a local Nadi which prevent the overflowing of river Ganga into the kund.

The shape becomes differ from last 100-150 years. The kund temples are very highly rich in structure systems as most of the temples are in the kund but from last 150-200 years they stand straight and depicting the story of this highly sacred kund. This kund also provides the spaces for rituals. The influence ofthis kund can be understood by the fact that 50-60kg bones per day put into the kund. But due to the power of water of kund from last 35-40 years although there is no cleaning of kund but you can't get a single bone into the water. Soronji kund is also related to the Hindu religion mythological story of Hiranyaksha and his killing by God Varaah (Shukar) by this story this place is also called the Shukar Kshetra.

c) Sarsota Kund

Sarsota kund is situated at Shashwan in Badaun district U.P. which is very famous for its historical value. This kund have the history of about 5000-6000 years, which is highly connected with the story of Bhagwaan Parshuram and the war between Sahastrabaahu king of Shashwan and Bhagwaan Parshuram.

This kund have aquifers as this is situated near Ganga river, So the aquifers works properly till 1940-1950 but today's aquifers don't have any water as water table goes down.

There are three temples and one kund over there which helps a fair on rakshabandhan festival which caters all the people from the local rural areas and give them a platform of trading of their handicrafts. The aquifer water goes to a lake which is called Jhand, the water of this Jhand was used for irrigation purpose.

It also enhances the jungle of kewdas which is world famous for its fragrance. But because of the aquifers become dry, the kewara forest also deplects completely. Now it is a time to take care of this type of historical movement which are the evidence of our great history and religious prosperity.

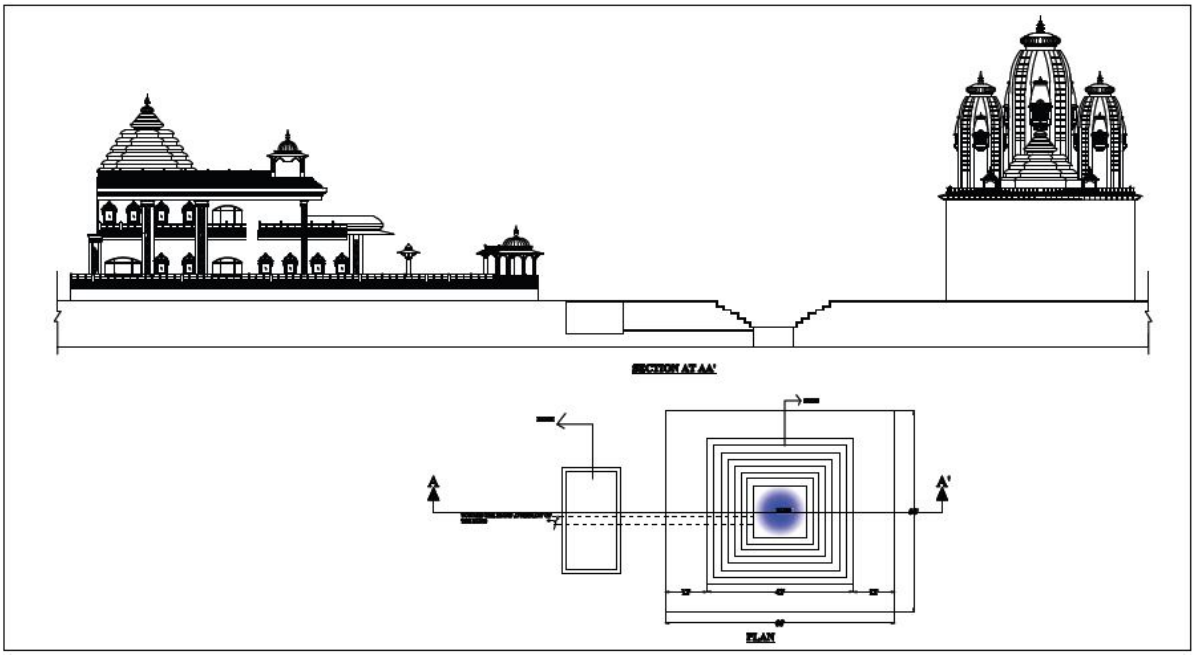


Figure 3. Plan and elevation Sarsota Kund

II. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The case studies shows that these kund have impact on the society and share a large amount of attention and serve the people a lot and also provide an umbrella for the flourishing the religion and provide a harmony to the society and tell the story of their survival from past to the new time era and narrate the stories of flowering and ending of several dynasties and have the warm memories of every piece of time. And tell the history of disaster and war and a lot with the silence. This also give the pleasant proud to be the part of the great history, tell their contribution to the society.But the present condition of the structure is not satisfactory they became in very danger zone some of them are at edge and some are soaking and some are about to die due to the negligence and lack of care. The people also get into this due to lack of awareness, they are polluting the water by cloth washing and Murti Vishrjan and putting biomass in the water.

Due to the commercialisation, some of structures are losing their historical values and originality due to lack of knowledge, people are demolishing the beauty of the structure.

Urbanization has also having a very big impact on these type of structures. Today the tall structure comes nearby these type of water bodies and destroy the ambience of the structures. Due to public gathering and lack of proper arrangement the surrounding and water are getting polluted and unhygienic. These are the reason by which the religious water body architecture losing their values and impact.

Some of water bodies are in very good condition as per structure but due the pollution the water of the kund polluted.

Now this is time to take care of these structure for the future generation these kunds don't have only religious value but also carry the history on settlement and serve as water resource and contribute a lot in water recharging.

With the conclusion the traditional water bodies of Uttar Pradesh are vital cultural artifacts that offer insight into India's rich spiritual and ecological heritage. Their architectural elegance and functional resilience highlight the sophistication of ancient water management and religious practices. Protecting and restoring these structures is crucial for preserving cultural continuity and promoting sustainable development.

III. RECOMMENDATION

1) For structures-

- The structure should renovate under the supervision of professionals.

- Structures should use in a very conscious manner.
- Structure should be take care properly.
- Government should take initiative to improve the conditions of gathering time period of fair and festivals.
- There should be proper arrangement of management team for structures.

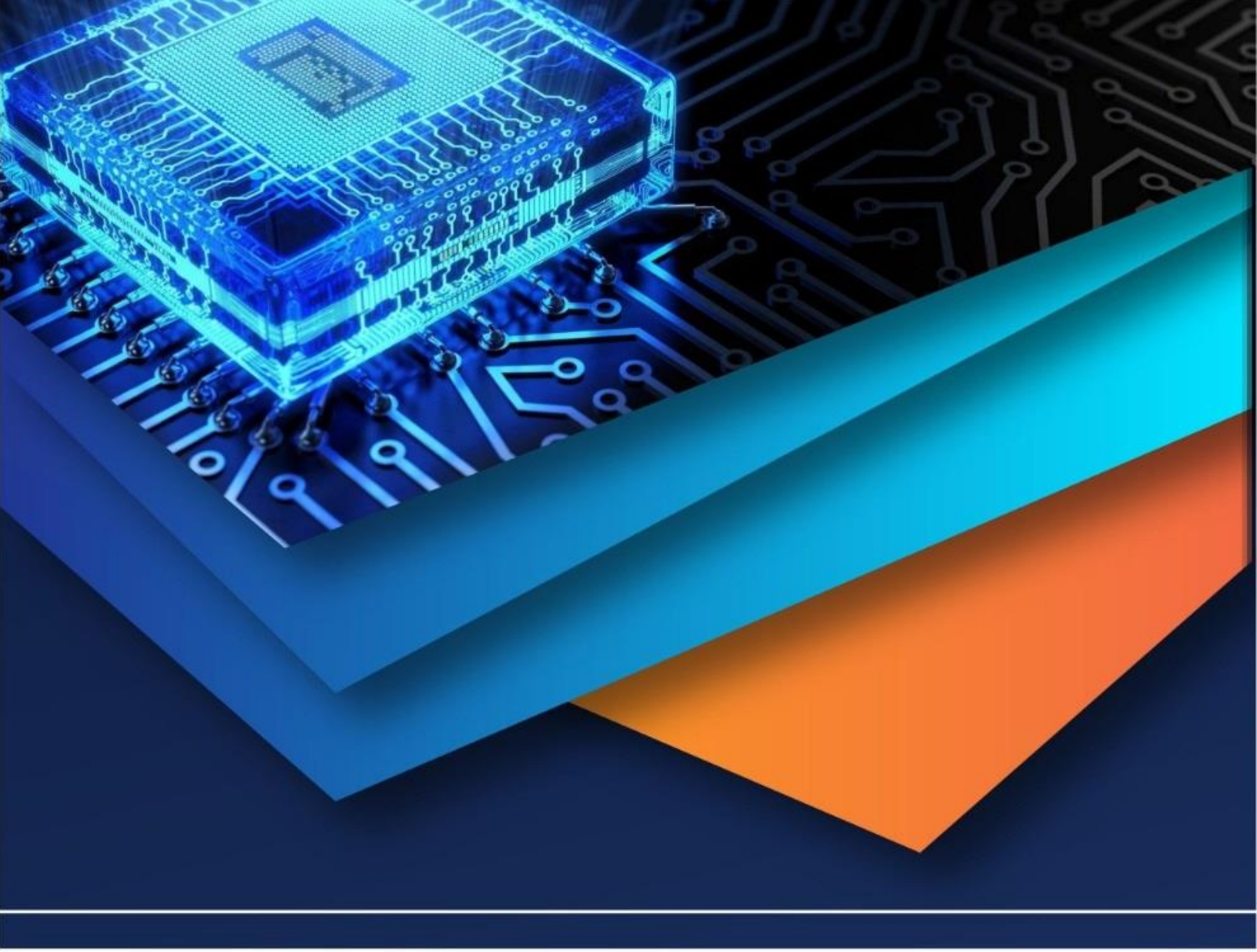
2) For kunds –

- Kunds should be cleaned timely &should have separate provision for the rituals and other uses.
- It should have proper arrangement for water supply as the natural resource is not working today &the proper arrangement of the water testing timely.
- People should have educated enough to understand the values of kunds.
- Public participation is necessary in maintaining the ambience and quality of the structures.
- These are the major steps which should be taking care and improving the conditions of water side architecture.

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