

Living Waterscapes: Hydraulic Heritage and Rural Resilience in Sambhar

Dr. Shabir Ahmad Punzoo¹, Dr. Ishrat Mushtaq²

¹Assistant Professor, Department of History, BGSB University, Rajouri, J and K GDC

²Lecturer (Contractual) Higher Education, Handwara, Kashmir

Abstract

This study examines the traditional rural water-bodies of Sambhar Rajasthan through field investigations in Naliyasar, Shakwada, and Shankarpura, supplemented by archival and revenue records. It explores tanks, wells, and *baolis* as multifunctional infrastructures supporting drinking water, irrigation, livestock, and community practices. The evidence demonstrates that these water systems reflected locally adapted forms of hydraulic management shaped by environmental conditions, ecological knowledge, and collective traditions. By integrating archival, material, and oral evidence, the study highlights the significance of sambhar's rural water landscape in Rajasthan's environmental history and underscores the need for its systematic documentation and preservation.

Keywords: Sambhar; rural water-bodies; traditional water management; hydraulic heritage; environmental history.

Discussion and Results

The study draws upon field surveys conducted in three selected villages of *Pargana¹ Sambhar²*—Naliyasar, Chakrada and Shankarpura. These field investigations are complemented by *Arhsatta³* records of *Pargana Phagi* covering several years, along with other revenue records preserved in the Rajasthan State Archives, Bikaner. The combined archival and field-based evidence provides a basis for examining the historical development, spatial organisation and functional significance of rural water-bodies in the Sambhar region.⁴

Naliyasar is an ancient settlement located approximately 6 km from Sambhar in Rajasthan.⁵ Archaeological investigations have revealed six occupational layers, together with structural remains and artefacts, including coins, pottery, terracotta and shell objects.⁶ The adjoining lake is extensive but highly saline and has historically been associated primarily with salt production.⁷ Its saline character renders the lake water unsuitable for agricultural irrigation, illustrating the ecological constraints that shaped patterns of water use and economic activity in the Sambhar region.

Figure 1: Naliasar Salt Lake

Source: Based on Physical Survey

Chakwada

Chakwada possesses an extensive traditional water complex centred on the *Magholao Talab*, accompanied by the Chakrawada well and several subsidiary hydraulic structures. Local accounts indicate the presence of shallow wells within the tank bed, which were utilised during periods of water scarcity or after the seasonal drying of the *talab*. Field observations further suggest that its water supported local irrigation and livestock requirements. An old temple and a *gaughat* on the embankment, together with a *baori*⁸ within the tank complex, indicate the multifunctional social and religious character of the site.⁹ The *baori*, operated through the traditional *charas*¹⁰ system, served both drinking and irrigation purposes.

The tank exhibits a clearly defined hydraulic configuration, with its catchment located to the west and the principal retaining embankment to the east. Measuring over 1.5 km in length, approximately 600 metres in width and more than 40 feet in depth, the *Magholao Talab* represents a substantial example of traditional water infrastructure.¹¹ Local tradition associates its construction with the establishment of the village, believed by residents to date to approximately six centuries ago. While this chronology requires corroboration through independent archival or archaeological evidence, the oral tradition remains significant for understanding the community's historical relationship with the water-body.

Figure 2: Chakawada Well

Source: Physical Survey

Figure 3: Temple on the Embankment of Tank



Source: Physical Survey

Shankarpura

Shankarpura, a small settlement in Sambhar tehsil, preserves an important traditional water structure known as Ramnada Kund, situated along the Phagi–Dadu road.¹² The *baoli* is spatially divided into two sections: a paved section traditionally used for drinking water and an unpaved section associated primarily with livestock use. Local accounts indicate that the structure was historically intended for domestic consumption rather than agricultural irrigation.¹³ Field observations further reveal the continued use of an attached well, from which local women draw water, demonstrating the enduring functional significance of the site within the village's everyday water practices.

Figure 4: Ramnada Kund (Baoli)



Source: Physical Survey

Conclusion

The evidence from rural Sambhar demonstrates that water-bodies constituted critical socio-environmental infrastructures rather than merely sources of water. Tanks, wells and baolis sustained habitation, livelihoods and community practices while facilitating adaptation to an arid environment. Their multifunctionality reflects locally evolved forms of water management grounded in ecological knowledge and collective practice. A combined reading of archival records, material evidence and oral traditions therefore reveals the water landscape as an important dimension of Rajasthan's rural and environmental history. The preservation and systematic documentation of these structures are consequently vital to recovering the region's hydraulic heritage and understanding historically embedded strategies of water resilience.

Notes and References

¹ *Pargana* was a sub-division of a *Sarkar*: a tract of region consisting of many *tappas* or villages.

² Sambhar is a town and municipality in the Jaipur district of Rajasthan, India. It is encircled by the Sambhar Salt Lake. For details, see Punzoo Shabir Ahmad, '*Kharwals and Salt Manufacturing: A study of Sambhar Salt Lake*', in Atishay Kalit, Vol. 10, Pt.B, Sr. 18, Lotus (July-December) 2023, ISSN: 2277-419X, pp. 466-471.

³ *Arsatta* are historic ledger-style financial and land revenue records preserved in Rajasthan State Archives, Bikaner. These documents are in Dhundhari dialect written on loose sheets called *toji* or *farads*.

⁴ See *Arsatta* of Pargana Phagi, Rajasthan State Archives, Bikaner.

⁵ Physical survey of the site. Physical Survey of rural water bodies of Sambhar was done by the author with the experts in 2021.

⁶ See Jibraeil, *Water Management System in the Desert Region of Rajasthan (Thirteenth-Eighteenth Centuries)*, Ane Books, New Delhi, 2020; Jibraeil, *Jal Jeevan Aur Samaj*, Ane Books, New Delhi, 2018.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ *Baori* signifies the stepped well.

⁹ Physical survey of the site.

¹⁰ *Charas* was a traditional leather-bag water-lifting device used to draw water from wells, associated with arid and semi-arid regions of Rajputana.

¹¹ Physical survey of the site.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid; interview was also conducted with the local knowledgeable persons.