

UNDERGROUND SHRINE

QUEEN'S STEP-WELL at PATAN



JAIKISHANDAS SADANI



B. J. Institute of Learning & Research

Ahmadabad-380 009

Sheth Shri Surottam Hutheesing Prakashan Fund Granthmala

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**Underground Shrine :
Step-Well at Patan**
by
Shri Jaikishandas Sadani

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Publisher's Note

The B. J. Institute received a special donation of Rs. 25,000/- from the Arun Mills Charity Trust through the late Shri Surottam Hutheesingh in 1965 and recently in 1996 further donation of Rs.25,000/- was received from Smt. Sarojini P. Hutheesingh Foundation Trust. The interest of the amount is being utilised in inviting different scholars to deliver lectures on various aspects of Indian Culture. Eminent scholars like Dr. R. C. Majumdar, Dr. D. C. Sircar, Shri D. R. Mankand, Dr. V. Raghavan, Dr. B. J. Sandesara, Dr. P. L. Gupta, Shri C. Śivarammurti, Dr. K. Krishnamoorti, Dr. H. D. Sankalia, Prof. K. D. Bajpai and Dr. Bansidhar Bhatt have delivered lectures under this series. All these lectures have been published in a book-form.

For the 12th series of lectures, we invited Shri Jaikishandas Sadani, a distinguished scholar of Indian art, literature and culture, to deliver the lectures on Queen's Step-well at Patan.

The series containing discussions on (i) The Step-well and the Viṣṇu sculptures, (ii) The Śaiva and the Śākta sculptures and (iii) The celestial Beauties, comprised in three lectures, was delivered at B. J. Institute under the chairmanship of Dr. Hariprasad G. Shastri on 14th, 15th and 16th September, 1995 respectively.

The author has significantly projected outstanding iconographic and artistic features of various deities like Viṣṇu, Brahmā, Śiva, Śakti and other gods and goddesses such as Gaṇeśa, Agni, Kubera, Varuṇa, dancing Bhairava, Lakṣmī, Gaurī, Sarasvatī etc. He has highlighted the depiction of the eternal woman of grace and beauty, in which he vividly described Mātṛ and Putṛ Vātsalya Mūrtis, Devāṅganās, Darpaṇa-Sundarī, *Sadyasnātā* Nāyikā, Śuka-Kanyā, Nāga Kanyās, Yoginīs and ascetics!

The author has given the references from the early Sanskrit literature and canonical works, which enhance the research value of the work. Illustrations of beautiful and artistic sculptures of the step-well also enhance the value of the publication.

It gives me great pleasure in publishing this research work and I am sure, it will receive full appreciation from the scholars of Indology as well as of history, culture and archaeology of India.

18th April, 1998
Ahmadabad

Bharati Shelat
Director

Prologue

It was in September, 1995 that Shri Jaikishandas Sadani delivered three lectures on the various sculptures of the Queen's step-well at Patan in North Gujarat, under the auspices of Bharatiya Samskriti Series at Sheth B. J. Institute of Learning and Research, Ahmadabad. I had the honour to preside over the lectures delivered by Shri Sadani with slides exhibiting various sculptures at the ancient magnificent step-well.

Though Shri Sadani looks after the family business of textiles at Ahmadabad and Calcutta, he has persistently pursued his academic love for literature, philosophy and arts. He has edited some valuable books on Indian paintings, Indian sculptures and performing arts (Music, Dance and Drama). He is actively associated with Bharatiya Samskriti Samśad, Calcutta. He has also contributed a number of important papers on philosophy, literature, arts and culture of India and participated in several seminars on the subjects of his choice. At present Shri Sadani is engaged in editing various volumes of the encyclopedia of Indian Culture.

In Gujarat he is ardently interested in the splendid sculptures of the Queen's Step-well at Patan, the reputed ancient metropolis of Gujarat. It was the capital of the Cāpotkaṭa and the Caulukya dynasties as well as the early Sultans of Gujarat. It was renowned for its magnificent monuments like the Queen's Step-well and the Sahasraliṅga Lake. Its glory declined since 1411 A.D., when the capital of Gujarat got transferred to Ahmedabad. In course of time Patan was reduced to be the headquarter of taluka in Mehsana District and its ancient glorious monuments got buried underground. However, it preserved its reputation for the marvellous textiles known as Paṭoḷā.

During the 20th century the Archaeology Department of the erstwhile Baroda State unearthed the ruins of the Sahasraliṅga Lake and the Archaeological Survey of India recovered the buried splendid Step-well. Recently Patan has been the head quarters of the North Gujarat University and attained the status of headquarters of a District. The ancient magnificent Step-well which remained buried underground for several centuries is recently recovered through archaeological excavations, which have unearthed its seven storeys embellished with splendid sculptures carved by the master artists of the 11th century.

This Step-well was built by Queen Udayamati, wife of King Bhīmadeva I (1022-1064 A.D.). She contributed this monument during the reign of her husband, as Merutunḡācārya alludes to it in the account of Bhīmadeva I. Unconscious of the fallacy of anachronism, the author described it as excelling even the Sahasraliṅga Lake, which was subsequently built by her grandson Jayasimhadeva. Shri Sadani aptly introduces the Queen's Step-well as an underground shrine, since the magnificent sculptures on the panels and niches in its walls contain figures of various gods

and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon along with purāṇic myths and literary lores. The artists depict the temporal and the spiritual as well as the emotional and the reflective through deities, maidens, saints and animals. In the aesthetic panorama of life depicted in this monument, 'the artists have brought down the divine on the Earth and raised man to meet the divinity on the Earth.'

The author classifies the deities under the heads of Viṣṇu, Brahmā, Śiva, Śakti and so on. The image of Śeṣaśāyī Viṣṇu, presented here in three panels, is naturally associated with reservoirs. Among the 24 forms of four-armed Viṣṇu, 15 are recognised here. The author draws our attention to the conspicuous absence of the first two incarnations among the ten major incarnations of Viṣṇu. Here Balarāma figures in place of Kṛṣṇa as an incarnation. Brahmā is presented in two images. Śiva figures in a standing as well as a sitting posture, generally along with his consort Umā. Śiva is also depicted in his Kalyāṇasundara form. In this step-well composite images occur in the forms of Hari-Hara and Hari-Hara-Pitāmaha-Arka. Gaurī is here depicted in 12 forms. Here the Mātṛkās are presented in eight forms in place of the usual seven ones. Among other gods and goddesses figure Gaṇeśa, Sūrya, Indra, Agni, Kubera, Varuṇa, Bhairava, Hanumān, Sarasvatī and Sūryāṇī as well as the consorts of the other various gods. The author described the images of these divinities in his first two lectures.

The third lecture was devoted to celestial and human beauties including the varied types of Nāyikās and Nāgakanyās. The author also makes a passing reference to various narratives from the Great Epics.

In the concluding section the author has aptly shown how the different Rasas are expressed in the various images depicted here. The author who possesses an aesthetic approach to arts, aptly concludes his book with an aesthetic remark : 'As we behold the beauty of Queen's Step-well, we are transported to a realm where eternal beauty floats on the cosmic waters of the well. This grand monument is the sweetest song of Queen Udayamati culminating in cadence of prayers'.

I congratulate Shri Sadani for depicting the various splendid sculptures of the Queen's Step-well at Patan so vividly and so interestingly. Elucidated through a number of illustrations his depiction supplies a valuable monograph on the splendid sculptures carved on the various parts of the superb ancient monument preserved in the ruins of the metropolis of the Caulukya Period.

25th March, 1998
Ahmadabad

Hariprasad G. Shastri
Retd. Director,
B. J. Institute of
Learning & Research,
Ahmadabad-9

Foreword

The noble and charitable deeds in India were known as Iṣṭāpūrta and this convention is met with since hoary past. The excavation of a well, tank, canal, construction of water hut, shrine, temple, gate, assembly hall or the consecration of an image and commissioning of a refectory were some of the charitable deeds which have been documented in the inscriptions even in the pre-Christian period. The Queen's Step-well at Patana, Gujarat built by the Caulukyan Queen Udayamati in the 11th century is one of such noble accomplishments. When commenced and completed it aimed at providing fresh water to the public but when this utility was outlived for one reason or the other, it continued to attract the devotees and visitors for its spiritual fervour and artistic grandeur for centuries.

An architectural component or an icon assumes the shape of art if it is chiselled by a skilled and experienced carver but if a piece is handled by a master artist who is blessed, attains the stage of beautiful creation (*lalita kalā*). If such work is appreciated and interpreted by a man of literature the monument becomes immortal.

Such is the case with the Queen's Step-well, the exalting beauty of which has been lucidly explained by Shri Jaikishandas Sadani who is gifted with a poetic heart beside being a connoisseur of art and literature of high merit. The marvels of the monument have been well lit with the floodlight of his remarkable expressions.

The chance discovery of the Step-well with its magnificent repertoire of sculptural delineation was the recurrence of the lifting of the beautiful earth goddess by Varāha from the sea as viewed by the great poet Kālidāsa in the *Raghuvansam* (13.8). This may be the reason that the series of incarnations begins from Varāha and the earlier two i.e., Matsya and Kūrma have been left out for swimming as conceived by Shri Sadani.

Several rare and outstanding iconographic and artistic features of the Step-well have been significantly projected by the writer. The representation of the four armed Buddha wearing a *Vaijayantīmālā* suggests that he was given a true divine status of Viṣṇu in the *avatāra paṭṭikās*. He has further highlighted the fact that despite the depiction of beautiful damsels and *Nāgakanyās* the corporal element remains subdued by the divine emotions. This is the summum-bonum of the artistic realm in India (*na rūpam pāpavrttaye*). In earlier well known monuments like Khajuraho and Konark this concept is rather losing the spirit. The description of peacock with the semi-nude *Nāgakanyā* has been well explained as the controller of cupid. It is, therefore, quite befitting that the commander-in-chief of the divine army, Kārttikeya (also known as Skanda, Subrahmanya, etc.) prefers to have his mount as peacock which is the enemy of Nāga representing Kāma.

Synthesis is the hallmark of this monument. Although dedicated to Viṣṇu it vibrates the sentiments of religious harmony. Almost all deities with their family members have been depicted with honour. Aquatic nature (Matsya and Kūrma) may suggest that the earth appears with the grace of Lord who lifts it from the depth of the ocean and then commences the divine play (Leela) of creation, protection and annihilation.

The author has given numerous references from the early literature and the canonical treatise while identifying the vast plethora of deities as illustrated on the architectural members of the Step-well. He has further compared them with the examples as available in the museums and art galleries. This has amply enhanced the research value of the work.

It was a great pleasure to go through the typescript of this book and also to view the beautiful rendering of art through transparencies. I am sure, the dissertation will be welcomed by the scholars and art lovers alike. The author deserves our rich compliments and deep appreciation for giving an excellent treatment to the wonderful art treasures of the Queen's Step-well.

Rāma Navamī,
March 28, 1996

R. C. Sharma
Director, Bharat Kala Bhavan,
Varanasi

Preface

Queen's Step-well at Patan, the ancient capital of Gujarat, is a magnificent creation of superb beauty and grace. In it are enshrined the sculptures depicting almost every aspect of Indian culture. The artists have handled the puranic themes and literary heritage with profound depth and understanding in the language of sculptures.

I visited this remarkable step-well and was thrilled to behold its aesthetic charm and artistic excellence. I discussed about the beautiful images which deck the walls of the step-well with Dr. P. C. Parikh, the then director of B. J. Institute of Learning and Research. He was also highly appreciative of the step-well and proposed to me to give three lectures on the sculptural beauty of Queen's Step-well. I likewise delivered the three lectures in the institute on 14th, 15th and 16th Sept., 1995 under their series on "Indian culture". The book covers the content of the lectures alongwith more details of the other sculptures as well which makes it more fuller and comprehensive. It highlights over 80 sculptures from nearly 500 images. The representative images give a fair idea of the artistic merit and spiritual depiction in Queen Udayamati's Step-well. Its matchless grandeur is only to be seen to be believed. We are simply enthralled as we behold the images and are lost in the spiritual delight of ecstatic bliss.

I am thankful to Dr. P. C. Parikh for inviting me to give three lectures and advise their publication.

I am grateful to the eminent archaeologist and museologist Dr. R. C. Sharma for writing an erudite foreword and Dr. Hariprasad Shastri for his scholarly prologue. My thanks are due to Dr. Bharati Shelat, Director of the Institute for kindly going through the text meticulously and writing the publisher's note. Dr. R. T. Savalia has been very cooperative in kindly providing necessary arrangement and looking after the publication. American Institute of Indian Studies, Varanasi has kindly given the required photographs from their Archives to enable making the book quite illustrative. I offer my grateful thanks to all.

With this small note I place the book before the connoisseurs of Art and Architecture, tourist of our country and abroad and general readership as well. I hope this humble effort will aptly communicate the joy of the sculptural beauty of Queen Udayamati's Step-well.

Its aesthetic delight will shine all the brighter as years roll on, undimmed by the ravishes of weather and time.

Jaikishandas Sadani

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UNDERGROUND SHRINE

I. AN INTRODUCTION

Gujarat is rich in its unique cultural heritage. The grand tradition of art, architecture, sculpture and literature has been handed down from generation to generation with amazing continuity. Yet some periods of its history are outstanding epochs in which intense cultural growth and prosperity find their splendid expression.

The period of the Caulukya or the Solanki dynasty (A.D. 942 - A.D. 1304) with immense cultural contribution has been noted as a very important period in the history of Gujarat. Similar to the Gupta period of Indian history the Chaulukya period has been hailed as the 'Glorious Period' of the history of Gujarat. Along with the attainment of rapid progress and prosperity the cultural growth also has been remarkable and extensive. The Caulukya rulers not only wielded supreme political power and efficient administration but were benevolent kings who had great love for arts and literature. During their rule there was significant advancement in this field and we see beautiful temples of rich architecture, imbedded with the splendour of sculptures of rare beauty. The rulers were essentially worshipers of Śiva but had great regard for Vaishnavism, Jainism and other schools of thoughts. This is evidently borne out in the inscriptions of this period.

Mūlarāja I (942-997 A.D.) was the founder of the Caulukya dynasty. He built the temple of 'Mūleśvarasvāmī' at Patan, the then capital of Gujarat. He also built the temple of "Mūlanārāyaṇa" dedicated to Viṣṇu at Śrīsthala or Siddhapur. Before he would embark upon any important campaign he would perform worship of Mahālakṣmī, the consort of Lord Viṣṇu. Bhīmadeva I, the great grand son of King Mūlarāja I, ruled Gujarat from 1022-1064 A.D. He was a very outstanding ruler imbued with profound religious sensibility. He was a Shaivite in the beginning but later on worshipped Viṣṇu and Mahālakṣmī as well. He had great love for building temples and lakes in their vicinity. He rebuilt the great temple of Somnath after it was ransacked and raised to ground by Mahmūd Ghazani. He built the famous Sun Temple of Modhera with beautiful sculptures along with an impressive reservoir nearby.

Bhīmadeva I also built the temple of Bhīmeśvara and Bhīruāṇī at Patan. He ruled Gujarat for 42 years. King Bhīmadeva was a profound devotee of Śiva and Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī as well. He worshipped her beseeching for a son as an heir to his kingdom. He was blessed with a son Karṇadeva. Like his illustrious father he continued the cultural tradition and was a great contributory for building outstanding temples. Karṇadeva was a Shaivite in the beginning but later on he also worshipped Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī. The copper plates found at Navasari bear the inscription "Om Namo Bhagavate Vāsudevāya"- I bow to divine Vāsudeva- the incarnation of Viṣṇu- Lord Kṛṣṇa. The same plate also has an invocation to Varāha or the Boar avatāra of Viṣṇu. The copper plate was issued by Karṇadeva himself in Vikrama Samvat 1131 i. e. 1074 A. D. The leaning of Caulukya Kings towards Vaishnavism started by King Mūlārāja was taken up both by Bhīmadeva I and his son Karṇadeva with equal zeal and dedication. The Chaulukya rulers were essentially Shaivites so they naturally built more Śiva temples but their love for Vaishnavism inspired them to build Viṣṇu-Lakṣmī temples as well. This speaks highly of their non-sectarian, universal outlook. They built temples dedicated to Brahmā, Viṣṇu, Śiva, Śakti, Sūrya, and Gaṇeśa-Vināyaka. Worship of Mahālakṣmī was very popular during Deepāvalī.

King Bhīmadeva's Queen Udayamati, was very generous and ardently religious. Like her husband and son Karṇadeva, she herself was a great connoisseur of art and culture and she encouraged her son to build temples, sarovaras and vāpīs-step-wells. It is stone which is the timeless symbol that lasts the longest in perpetuating the cultural history. It makes the past vividly present for the following generations. No sooner we see the beautiful art creations of the period we are left spell bound, absorbed in prayer. The whole past becomes a living present, thus enabling the unimpeded flow of culture and tradition.

Building of step-wells for storing water, so that it could be utilised in summer, during the period of water scarcity was very common. Thousands of vāpīs or water reservoirs were built in western India particularly in Gujarat and Rajasthan. Viṣṇu Dharmottara Purāṇa lays down that "one who digs well for the public, has, as a consequence half his sins absolved when the water begins to flow forth; one who dedicates a pond or vāpī is for ever happy and free from thirst. He attains the world of Varuṇa (Chaps. 91-92)". Thus it was a current practice throughout Gujarat and Rajasthan to build step-wells, wells and lakes or sarovaras to perpetuate the memory of their beloved ones or their forefathers, for public welfare as well. The step-wells of Gujarat and Rajasthan were beautiful monuments of highly specialised structure. Pavilions were built in several storeys. The steps naturally connected one storey

with another, in the step-well. There are butteresses; carved pillars, pavilions, sculpted panels bearing sculptures on the walls of the well. All these heighten the beauty of each storey.

During the reign of King Bhīmadeva I, his beloved Queen Udayamati envisioned building a step-well. Merutūṅgācārya in his book "*Prabandha Cintāmaṇi*" written in 14th century tells us :

श्रीउदयमतिनाम्न्या तद्राज्ञ्या (नरवाहनखंगारसुतया) श्रीपत्तने सहस्रलिंगसरोवरदप्यतिशायिनी नव्या वापी कारिता । (3/81, pg. 54)

"Queen Udayamati, the daughter of Naravāhana Khāṅgāra, built this novel step-well at Patan or Śrīpattana, which surpasses the glory of the Sahasralinga Sarovara" This Sarovara or Lake was built by Queen Udayamati's as grandson Jayasimha Siddharāja during his rule (1093-1143 A.D.). It is one of the largest tanks with a thousand Śiva shrines at Patan.

Kirit Mankodi tells us that this step-well was built by Queen Udayamati as a memorial for perpetuating the memory of her husband King Bhīmadeva. But Prof. Hariprasad Shastri does not hold this view. Basing his view on the aforesaid quotation from "*Prabandha Cintāmaṇi*", he says, 'since Rājñī Udayamati built the step-well' it could only be during the reign of king Bhīmdeva. Had it been a memorial, the writer Merutūṅgācārya would have written Rājamātā Udayamati and not his queen (Rājñī) Udayamati. From this we surmise that this step-well was built during the reign of King Bhīmadeva by the enlightened Queen.

The step-well built (in 1068 A.D.) under the auspices of Queen Udayamati was known as "Rājñī-nī-vāva". It was built at Patan 135 kilometres from Ahmedabad. It is a magnificent creation by the master artists of those days. This monument amply expresses the love of art and culture of the Caulukya Dynasty along with their benevolent and efficient rule, which single them out from other rulers.

'Rājñī kī Vāpī' is, therefore, a very fitting creation of immortal cultural values. This reservoir is 65 metres long, 20 metres broad and 25 metres deep. It is the largest monument of its kind. More than 800 panels having large sculptures were planned to decorate the walls of this seven-stories deep step-well. This, 'Udayamati's step-well remained buried under sand for centuries. But it was discovered in 1946 when the 7th storey became visible. The archaeological Survey of India, thereafter, took up the task of desilting the step-well and conservating it wherever necessary. Their efforts resulted in discovering this unique artistic creation of medieval India. The Queen's step-well is seven storeys deep, the like of which is hardly found

anywhere in the world. It presents a real panorama of life with all its weals and woes, transcending in a spiritual life of redemption through such magnificent sculptures on the panels and niches on the walls. Miss J. Jain, Neubaunes says, "The workmanship of the sculptures display a deep feeling for movement and naturalism." The sculptures in the panels and niches of Queen's step-well present over 500 sculpted Purāṇic episodes and literary lores prevalent in those days. They present a concrete symphony of beauty, full of grace, dignity and charm, which leaves the visitor spellbound. They reveal as it were, the epic poetry inscribed in visual form with delicate emotions of devotion and active dynamic action. They animate the hardness of stone. These sculptures set before us the vast drama of creation through myths, allegories, symbols and the popular lores presented by the superb insight of the ancient masters, leaving for posterity a most enviable and rich heritage of sublime art.

The sculptures of Queen's step-well deal with great ingenuity the religious fervour, thought and emotions expressed in Purāṇic Lores in a very original and evocative manner. Yet the artists gave expressions to the images within the parametres laid down by the canonical treatises on Indian Art, like *Agni Purāṇa*, *Matsya Purāṇa*, *Aparājita Prēcchā*, *Rūpamaṇḍana*, *Śilpa Ratna* and others. It is precisely by these texts that we can understand the meaningful connotation of each icon.

The artists, as we all know, have a very sensitive feel for life and depict its multifarious activities with deep insight and aesthetic ethos. The temporal and the spiritual, the emotional and the reflective, the individual and the social, the indulgent house holders and the austere saints, the demons and gods, the maidens and goddesses, the birds, animals and reptiles, nine planets *Nava-Grahas* with their astronomical bearings, all embellish the walls of the step-well. These panels, as it were, sing the song of life, which touches the very core of human sensibility and ingenuity, such that the whole surrounding atmosphere is surcharged with the all pulsating vibrancy of life. Such is the serene spiritual candour that one is lifted to realms which point to human emancipation, freed from the shackles that bind man to worldly joys and sorrows.

The genius of the artists of the Queen's step-well is expressed in the beautiful icons, pointing to the fulfilment of man's life as he journeys on this beautiful earth. The aims of life envisioned by the thinkers of yore, the dharma, artha, kāma and mokṣa are well expressed in the series of sculptures. Dharma is the value based system regulating human life with religious and ethical sense for, Dharma is the law of our own being. It harmonizes progressive attainments of worldly prosperity and

the ever surging desires by disciplined ethics and moral values, leading to emancipation or liberation from their tangling webs of attachment and delusion, into a sense of freedom or Mokṣa, thus fulfilling the purpose of our earthly existence, the summum bonum of life. All these are amply expressed in the sculptures on the panels, niches and plates of the step-well.

The Indian pantheon of the Divine Trinity, Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Maheśa, the several incarnations of Viṣṇu, the long range of gods and goddesses, and the whole panorama of life both celestial and terrestrial are sculpted with exquisite charm and beauty. This makes Queen Udayamati's Step-well a supreme Temple, not built on the ground level, but underground. Such is its serene spiritual grace that as we behold it we are transported to a land of ecstasy and bliss. It is indeed the crest jewel "Mukūṭa-Maṇi" of the architecture and sculpture of Gujarat.



2. VIṢṢU : VARIOUS FORMS

Viṣṣu is the supreme Lord who sustains the whole creation, after all he is the source of the entire creation. Brahmā, the creator himself is born from a lotus emerging from viṣṣu's naval, which we shall see in the three Śeṣaśāyī images sculpted in the step-well. Queen Udayamati, who was gifted with great artistic sensibility, dedicated the step-well to Him.

The theme of Viṣṣu reclining on the several hooded Eternal Snake or Ananta Nāga or Śeṣa, the indivisible one floats on the cosmic waters is very popular in Indian Iconography, ancient lores or purāṇas, and the Indian literature of all languages. Such is the fascination of this wonderful image, that it went beyond Indian shores. We find Coleridge and Shelley profoundly moved by it.

I should much wish

Like the Indian Viṣṣu to float along an infinite ocean
Cradled on the flower of the lotus and wake once
In million years for a minute
And go to sleep again. (Coleridge).
Therefore from nature's inner shrine
Where gods and fiends in worship bend
Majestic spirit, be it Thine
The flame to seize the veil to rend
When vast snake Eternity
In charmed sleep doth even lie.

(Shelley : Daemon of the World, pg. 21)

The vast "snake Eternity" is the *anantanāga*. The rending of the veil is the removal of the veil or curtain of Māyā which is attained by worshipping in the inner shrine. What could be more suitable a place than the Queen's step-well to install these beautiful images !

The images of Viṣṣu reclining on the *anantanāga* has been described by three names, Jalaśāyī, Śeṣaśāyī, Anantaśāyī. In Gujarat Jalaśāyī and Śeṣaśāyī reclining on the coiled glossy cushioned bed of the Śeṣa-Nāga floating on ocean-waters is very common. The image of Jalaśāyī-Viṣṣu is very popular in Kuṇḍas or reservoirs, and

on the walls of the wells and step-wells. Thus a direct link of Śeṣaśāyī or Jalāśāyī Viṣṇu is established with Viṣṇu. Hence its importance in Queen's step-well is such that as many as three panels have been sculpted one over the other, facing east wherein each image is facing the respective window of each storey.

Viṣṇu is shown as reclining on the cosmic waters holding conch in his left hand, right hand is broken, probably it held the lotus. The other right hand supports the head with the mace lying nearby. Brahmā is shown as seated on the lotus connected by the stalk emerging from Viṣṇu's naval. The whole body of the Śeṣa Nāga is lying like a couch. The hoods of the serpent do not hover like a canopy over the reclining head of Viṣṇu as is commonly seen but they roll in like a pillow to give support to Viṣṇu's head. Lakṣmī the divine consort, is sitting near His feet ever serving the supreme. She is the creative faculty of the Lord or Mahā Māyā, the ever active principle that pulsates in the entire creation. She is also called Bhūdevī or the earth goddess where the poets have described the wavy ocean as her dress. The great Lord Viṣṇu is the supreme artist "*Kālanidhi*". This is so beautifully narrated by Śrī Vallabhācārya.

नमामि हृदये शेषे लीलाक्षीरब्धिशायिनम् ।

लक्ष्मीसहस्रलीलाभिः सेव्यमानं कलानिधिम् ॥

Just behind the image are carved the demons and gods engaged in a fierce battle. There are five warriors on each side. Above this rectangle panel is another paṭṭikā showing the 9 planets popularly called the Navagraha Paṭṭikā. Over this panel is a serene image of Lord Viṣṇu sitting absorbed in a deep meditation. He is Yogeśvara seated in the Padmāsana pose or sitting in lotus pose. This reminds us of the hallowed image of Lord Badarīnātha where Viṣṇu is meditating for the welfare of his creation. This is a unique conception of God who is highly concerned for His creation and mankind at large.

This panel of Śeṣaśāyī Viṣṇu is repeated thrice keeping in view the astronomical position. When the light of the Sun enters through the respective windows facing these images it lights the panels directly. Michel Pastel tells us, "The step-well is almost due East since it is oriented 87.23° on the compass (without magnet correction). The Sun on or about the equinox must light up Viṣṇu, across the forest of pillars at a precise time, perhaps three times, since it is super imposed in three niches. It is to Him that the shrine is dedicated. He is originally the Solar Deity."

Though Jalāśāyī Viṣṇu's images are common in the Jalāśayas or water reservoirs, in Nepal a large image of Viṣṇu is supine reclining on the water itself. But we have several other reclining images of Viṣṇu worshipped in the temples or shrines

of S. India such as the Padamanābham temple at Trivendrum and Śrī Rāṅganātha temple at Śrī Rāṅgam. These imposing images are worshipped by thousands of devotees daily.

Viṣṇu is the highly revered God of the Indian pantheon. He is the presiding deity on the Queen's step-well as it is dedicated to him. He is shown as standing in a frontal upright posture. It is one of the most magnificently carved image. The face has a majestic aura. It is surrounded by a luminous halo similar to the rays of the Sun. The crown or Kiriṭa on his head is tall and bejewelled. He has four hands, holding an upright lotus with rosary Varadamālā of benevolence, an impressive tall mace, conch and *cakra*(discus). All the royal ornaments embellish his stately figure. A long flower garland dangles upto his knees. There are four attendants standing near his feet, two on either side. They are ever ready in his service.

Viṣṇu has been originally conceived by the Pāñca-Rātra School as having four aspects or Caturvyūha. They are Vāsudeva (redeemer), Aniruddha (creator), Pradyumna (sustainer) and Saṅkarṣaṇa (annihilator). These aspects are later on developed into 24 forms of Viṣṇu, and are duly represented in the sculptures of the step-well. Their identity is recognised by the manner they hold the conch, discus, mace and lotus. Out of these 15 images can be recognised and the remaining images may have occupied the empty niches; probably they are now lost. Moreover, there are many repetitions also. But the images of Kṛṣṇa and Upendra are significantly absent in the galaxy of beautiful Viṣṇu images depicted on the walls of this Vāpī. Rūpamaṇḍana (3.9.20) also described the 24 forms of Viṣṇu along with their conch, discus, mace and lotus and their positions in detail. This classification has been the basis on which these several states of Viṣṇu are chiselled. These images make the step-well a veritable temple of Viṣṇu along with other gods and goddesses.

Se. Nos.	Lower Rt. hand	Upper Rt.hand	Upper Left hand	Lower Left hand
1. Keśava	Lotus	Conch	Discus	Mace
2. Nārāyaṇa	Conch	Lotus	Mace	Dicus
3. Mādhava	Mace	Discus	Conch	Lotus
4. Govinda	Discus	Mace	Lotus	Conch
5. Viṣṇu	Mace	Lotus	Conch	Discus
6. Madhusūdana	Discus	Conch	Lotus	Mace

7. Trivikrama	Lotus	Mace	Discus	Conch
8. Vāmana	Conch	Discus	Mace	Lotus
9. Śrīdhara	Lotus	Discus	Mace	Conch
10. Hṛṣikeśa	Mace	Discus	Lotus	Conch
11. Padmanābha	Conch	Lotus	Discus	Mace
12. Dāmodara	Lotus	Conch	Mace	Discus
13. Saṅkarṣaṇa	Mace	Conch	Lotus	Discus
14. Vāsudeva	Mace	Conch	Discus	Lotus
15. Pradyumna	Discus	Conch	Mace	Lotus
16. Aniruddha	Discus	Lotus	Conch	Lotus
17. Puruṣottama	Discus	Mace	Conch	Lotus
18. Adhokṣaja	Lotus	Mace	Conch	Discus
19. Narasiṃha	Discus	Lotus	Mace	Conch
20. Acyuta	Mace	Lotus	Discus	Conch
21. Janārdana	Lotus	Discus	Conch	Mace
22. Upendra	Conch	Mace	Discus	Lotus
23. Hari	Conch	Discus	Lotus	Mace
24. Kṛṣṇa	Conch	Mace	Lotus	Discus

These various forms of Viṣṇu are worshipped into various temples throughout the country and more so in Gujarat where Vaiṣṇavism holds a prominent sway.

Mahā Lakṣmī is the consort of Viṣṇu. She is shown seated on a lotus pedestal in the lotus pose or *padmāsana*. She has eight hands. Two hands hold rosary in the **abhaya** fearless **mudrā** giving blessings of fearlessness. In another hand is a round object which is a seedy fruit or **bījapūraka**. It is ready for sowing. Some eroded hands appear to be holding lotuses but they are not distinct and cannot be easily recognised. It would have been difficult to recognise the goddess but for the **bījapūraka** in the hands which confirms that the image is of Lakṣmī. She is adorned with a beautiful necklace and garland. She wears a Karaṇḍaka like crown. In the surrounding frame are the images of Gaṇeśa and Kubera with their consorts who bestow prosperity and well being. This is a beautiful panel which is very artistically

sculpted. The whole image has the grandeur and dignity befitting the supreme Goddess, the consort of Viṣṇu. She is the ever active kinetic principle of the creative faculty or *Māyā* of Viṣṇu. In Viṣṇu Purāṇa she has been described as the great earth *Bhūdevī*. We all are her children. Her benevolent emotions are well-brought in this image enshrined in Queen's step-well.

Viṣṇu mounting on Garuḍa is a very popular theme in Indian iconography. This is also represented in the step-well. It is an attractive image wherein Viṣṇu is depicted with 16 hands but many hands are broken. The few that remain intact are wielding mace, sword, a shield and one hand is giving blessings **varada**. The left hand has an open palm. This is built in consonance with the ancient texts. The 16 hands of Viṣṇu are also suggested in the *Rūpamaṇḍana*. This form of Viṣṇu is also called **Trilokamohana** which is described as having four faces. The image in the step-well has only one face. The image of Trailokya Mohana with four faces and sixteen hands was found in Sander and is well preserved in Price of Wales Museum, Bombay.



3. VIṢṆU : AVATĀRAS

The divine Trinity of the Indian pantheon are Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva. When the creative urge in Lord Viṣṇu is aroused he meditates on recreation of the universe and instantly a lotus flower blossoms forth from his naval on which is seated four-faced Brahmā who becomes the creator of the great cosmos. Thus the naval of Lord Viṣṇu is the source of all creation. All created beings after enacting their role in this vast universe, they finally submerge in Śiva. So goes on the cycle of birth, preservation and immersion. Viṣṇu and Śiva hold a very important role in the eternal drama of creation, sustenance and annihilation that goes on in this universe. This is precisely why Viṣṇu and Śiva are worshipped right from the Vedic period till today. Devotion to Viṣṇu and Śiva has inspired spiritual fervour in the Indians from very ancient times.

Viṣṇu pervades the entire literary tradition of India which is well expressed in the Vedas, purāṇas, itihāsa and aesthetics. Aitareya Brāhmaṇa tells us that Viṣṇu is the prime god of Yajña and all the other gods are subsidiary.

अग्निर्वै देवानामवमो विष्णुः परमः ।

तदन्तरेण सर्वाः अन्याः देवताः ॥ (ऐ. ब्रा., १.१)

Yajurveda offers prayers to Viṣṇu for giving warmth to the Yajñas, while R̥gveda looks upon Viṣṇu as the eye of the universe and is the highest Lord : तद् विष्णोः परमं पदम्. The Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa, the Mahābhārata, the Bhāgavata and other literary works are resplendent with obeisance to Viṣṇu. He indeed is the Supreme God who incarnates on this earth again and again for the welfare of all living beings. This is amply expressed in literature, paintings and sculptural images on the walls of the temples throughout the country. Viṣṇu-images along with his several incarnations, and puranic lores have a predominant place in Queen's step-well.

Queen Udayamati herself was a devotee of Viṣṇu. Her step-well is dedicated to Him. Yet she was a devotee of universal outlook and she planned to make the step-well, an underground shrine having a complete symphony of Indian culture in which the entire pantheon of gods and goddesses, Śiva and Śakti, Viṣṇu and Lakṣmī, Gaṇeśa and Riddhi, Siddhi, Brahmā and Brahmāṇī, Saints and Tapasvīs, Nāgakanyās

and maidens are all very beautifully sculpted. The Avatāra of Viṣṇu and his several incarnate aspects and incarnations enrich the step-well.

When we behold the beautiful sculptures of Viṣṇu that enshrine the various panels, quiet prominent and of large- size, we are surprised that the first two incarnations of **matsya**-the fish and **kūrma**, the tortoise find no place in the step-well, though the Purāṇas, like the Matsya and the Kūrma Purāṇa are dedicated to them in ancient Indian literature. Besides this references are also found in Agni Purāṇa, Rūpamaṇḍana, Śilparatna, Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa and other important texts like Caturvarga Cintāmaṇi which says” मत्स्यरूपो जनार्दनः (१०.५.३२७). Viṣṇu is in the form of a Fish, while Viṣṇu Dharmottara says :

कूर्मः कामस्तद्रूपधारिणः (III. ८५-८९)

We wonder whether these two amphibian avatāras are left out to swim in the cosmic water of the step-well.

The series of the avatāras of Viṣṇu commences in the step-well with the Varāha or the Boar incarnation followed by other incarnations which are so beautifully sculpted in the panels of the Queen's step-well.

Varāha : is the porcine avatāra. It is an incarnation with a powerful Boar's head and human body. It is a large statue wherein Lord Viṣṇu goes in the depth of the ocean to save goddess earth who had been carried away by the demon Hiranyākṣa. Lord Varāha lifts the earth and draws her out from the bottom of the ocean. Under the foot of the avatāra is a lotus leaf that grows in water. Just below it is an entwined snake-couple with human heads. Water snakes are natural residents of the water tanks or reservoirs. The right hand of the Lord Varāha rests near his body. His rear right hand holds a cakra or discus. The left fore arm holds a conch while the rear left arm has a mighty mace or gadā. On the arm holding the conch is seated the mother earth. Out of gratitude and affection she is stroking and fondling His snout. The statue of Varāha has been decked by beautiful ornaments round his neck, armlets around his arm and bracelets around his wrists. This statue is surrounded by a frame having 8 miniature carved panels. They embody several incarnations of Viṣṇu, Narasimha, Vāmana, Paraśurāma, Rāma, Buddha and Kalkī. The other two panels are very indistinct and the ninth miniature on the top is the image of the divine in a yogic posture with lotuses in hand. Varāha is one of the oldest avatāras whose reference occurs in the R̥gveda.

विश्वेत् ता विष्णुयभरदुरुक्रमस्त्वेषितः ।

शतं महिषान् क्षीरपाकमोदनं वरहमिन्द्र एमुषम् ॥

(ऋग्., VIII, 77.10)

Narasimha incarnation of Viṣṇu is half-man and half-lion. It is the fourth incarnation. He is depicted in a duel with the demon-king Hiranyakaśipu. He is the tyrant-father of Viṣṇu's devotee Prahlāda. In order to save him from the cruelties of his father, Narasimha comes out of stone-pillar and slays the demon-king with his claws. Lord Narasimha is shown having sixteen hands. His two hands carry mace and conch and the other two hands tear away the demon-king held on his lap. The rest of the hands are broken. The head of the God is also indistinct due to erosion but the lion's mane is still seen clearly. Prahlāda, the devotee, on whose behest He emerged from the pillar is kneeling in supplication near the feet of the Narasimha. The pillar, however, is seen in the foreground. The frame surrounding the image has miniature figures but they are all indistinct and cannot be recognised. The reference of Narasimha is found in the Bhāgavata (2.7), Matsya Purāṇa (260.31.35), Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa (111.78.2-12), Abhilaṣitārtha Cintāmaṇi (111.1.742-750). Agni Purāṇa gives a graphic description which is well portrayed in this image of Queen's step-well.

नरसिंहो निवृत्तास्यो वामोरुधृतदानवः ।

तद् वक्षो दारयन्माली स्फुरच्चक्रगदाधरः ॥ (अग्नि पु., 49.4)

This is very popular incarnation and is alluded to in other purāṇas also as in Padma Purāṇa (23.8), Vāyu Purāṇa (38.66), Hita Harivaṃsa (3.41-44) and Rūpamaṇḍana (III.25). Śilparatna (5.117-121) describes him as having eight hands.

Vāmana is the fifth incarnation of Lord Viṣṇu. He is represented as a chubby dwarf, a student coming from the brahmacarya āśrama or a celibate. He is clad in a kaupīn or short loin-cloth, a chaddar or scarf. Ornaments adorn his body. He has ear-rings kaṇavalaya, śrīvatsa-the jewel on his chest. He is depicted with two hands. In one hand he holds a varadamālā and in the other an umbrella. He has close-set curly hair. He stands in graceful tribhaṅga (leaning in three bends). He is the first incarnation in a human form. In the Bhāgavata he is called the 15th incarnation of Viṣṇu (Bhāg., 1.3.19). In the Purāṇa he is said to have measured the earth, the sky and the space in three strides. Hence Viṣṇu is also often called one having three feet. His three feet actually cover the entire cosmos. Rgveda tells us that the three steps of Viṣṇu encompass the whole universe.

इदं विष्णुर्विश्वक्रमे त्रेधानियधेपदम् ।

समूढमस्य पांसुरे ॥ (ऋग्., 1.22.17)

The small figures stand near his feet, one holding a conch and the other the cakṛa-discus. The two leaves carved around the either side of his head display the idyllic setting of the back-ground. The frame surrounding the entire figure has

miniature figures of other incarnations of Viṣṇu, the Varāha, Nṛsimha and others. The image of Vāmana in the Queen's step-well is very attractive and impressive as well. It is unscathed by ravages of weather and time.

Paraśurāma is the sixth avatāra of Viṣṇu. He is shown standing gracefully in a slightly bent posture. He has four hands holding an axe, a bow, an arrow and a citron fruit. This is in keeping with the citation of Agni Purāṇa (45.5). This panel is surrounded by a frame of miniature sculptures four on either side and one at the top. The eight miniatures on the sides bear the several incarnations of Viṣṇu. The ninth on the top has an important duty but due to erosion it cannot be recognised. It has four attendants two on either side one of whom carries an axe. The centre figure of Paraśurāma is chiselled with a firm disposition depicting a stern face, as he had eradicated the Kshatriya community of Haihaya dynasty twentyone times. Paraśurāma is an important avatāra in the Rāmāyaṇa as he is enraged with Rāma during his *svayamvara* for breaking the Bow of Śiva. But no sooner he recognises him as the avatāra to follow, he renounces the world and returns for *tapaścaryā*. Paraśurāma was also the teacher of Bhīṣma, Droṇa and Karṇa, all of whom learnt the art of the use of weapons from him. His image is also described in Viṣṇu Dharmottara (III.85-61) and Rūpamaṇḍana (III.26). This is a beautiful sculpture of Queen's step-well. It is more or less intact barring a little erosion here and there. The character of the avatāra is depicted with depth and profound understanding.

Rāma is the seventh incarnation of Viṣṇu and is worshipped throughout the country and abroad as the Supreme Godhead Para-Brahma. Thousands of temples in the country and in South Asia as well are dedicated to him wherein He is worshipped daily. In Queen's step-well also there is a remarkable sculpture of Rāma. It is intact and has suffered no erosion. Most of the sculpted images of Rāma have two hands but in step-well, there is a superb conception in which he is depicted with four hands having bow and arrow in the front pair of hands and sword and shield in the rear pair of hands. This is keeping with the canonical text of Agni Purāṇa (49.6), however with a little difference, instead of shield he holds a conch.

रमश्चापि शरी खड्गी शंखी वा द्विभुजः स्मृतः । (अग्निपुराण, 49.696)

“Rāma holds bow and arrow and in the extra pair of hands wields sword and conch”.

In Hayaśīrṣa Pañcarātra as cited by De Mallmenn, the weapons in the extra pair of hands are cakra-discus and śaṅkha- conch (Kirit Mankodi). The frame is surrounded by eight miniature figures which have the incarnation of Viṣṇu, Nṛsimha,

Vāmana, Paraśurāma, Rāma, Balarāma, Kalkī etc. The pedestal reads : Rāma is the great upholder of Dharma.

धर्मो हि परमो लोके धर्म सत्ये प्रतिष्ठितम् । (वाल्मी. रामा., अयो., 21-41)

Rāma holds an all pervasive sway on Indian literature and arts. Hundreds of temples enshrine his divine images, and books are resplendent with his divine lores. The lores of Rāma's life from Rāmāyaṇa are engraved on the running panels of Queen's step-well. While Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa is read by Sanskrit scholars, Tulasīkṛta Rāmāyaṇa written in *avadhī* dialect is read and sung by masses at large.

Balarāma is the eighth incarnation of Viṣṇu. His standing image is slightly stooping, balancing his graceful posture on his left foot. This gives great poise and dignity to the image. He is standing on a pedestal of lotus-shape. He has four hands signifying that he is an incarnation of Viṣṇu. In his hands he carries a bow, a pestle, a lotus and a citron for scattering seeds in the field. He is canopied by a three hooded serpent with a 'maṇi' or ruby on its central head. Balarāma is associated with the snake, at times he is called 'Śeṣāvatāra' or anśāvatāra, the partial incarnation of the Ananta Nāga or the Eternal Snake. In the panel he is shown with four attendants - two of them are holding plough and the citron while the other two are worshipping him. The side frame has eight miniature sculptures with four on either side. They depict the eight avatāras of Viṣṇu in which one again is Balarāma. The ninth image on the top shows god seated in yoga or meditation. This sculpture is well preserved and is in perfect condition. The image is beautifully adorned with all the ornaments such as crown, necklace, garland, earrings, armlets, bracelets, waist-band, anklets etc. All these enhance the beauty of the image. Agni Purāṇa (XL., 6-7), Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa (III, 85.72b-73a) and Rūpamaṇḍana (III., 27) ascribe Him to Caturvyūha of Kṛṣṇa, states Balarāma as representing his Saṅkarṣaṇa aspect or the annihilator aspect. The famous Kṛṣṇa bhakta Jayadeva in his Daśāvatāra Stotra describes Balarāma as the eighth avatāra of Viṣṇu. But Matsya Purāṇa considers Kṛṣṇa as the 8th avatāra instead of Balarāma :

मत्स्यः कूर्मो वराहश्च नरसिंहोऽथ वामनः ।

रामो रामश्च कृष्णश्च बुद्धः कल्कीति च क्रमात् ॥ (मत्स्य पु., 285.6)

Buddha's image is well preserved with no erosion whatsoever. Buddha is depicted with a slim body in a standing posture with a slightly graceful bend. This is so befitting, an austere ascetic. He has a short-loin cloth or *kaupīn* as put on by saṃyāsins and a cloth slung around his shoulders. In order to establish him

as an incarnation of Viṣṇu he is depicted with four hands. This itself is a unique interpretation as in the Buddhist shrines he is shown as having only two hands. As usual he has close curly hair with a halo behind his head to assert his divinity. Moreover, the luminous orb behind confirms his being an enlightened one. He has a garland of beads around his neck and something like the sacred thread is also engraved. A long garland *vaijayanīmālā* is carved which dangles right upto his knees or just above his ankles. His ear lobes are long and reach almost upto the shoulders. This is regarded as a sign of greatness. The ears have ascetic rings or ear pendants. The four hands have *varaḍākṣamālā*, a hand granting blessings, a rosary of large beads and a lotus, while the fourth hand holds the end of cloth called the *saṅghātī* put on by ascetics. Two attendants are standing on the left side and one on the right. They are holding some object which cannot be recognised. On the frames are 8 miniature sculptures four on either side. They depict the eight incarnations of Viṣṇu of which Nṛsiṃha, Paraśurāma, Rāma and Kalkī are clear while the other figures are indistinct. This is a very attractive statue of Buddha, unique in conception and superb in execution. This is how our artists harmonised through their art what thinkers and literateurs accomplished through literature. References to Buddha have been made by Agni Purāṇa (49.8), Rūpamaṇḍana (10.27) and Caturvarga Cintāmaṇī (1.119), but none of them describe him having four hands.

While paying tribute to Buddha Ādi Śaṅkarācārya composed following verse :

धराबद्धपदासनस्थाङ्घ्रियष्टिः

नियम्यानिलं न्यस्तनासाग्रदृष्टिः ।

य आस्ते कले योगीनां चक्रवर्ती

स बुद्धः प्रबुद्धोऽस्तु मच्चित्तवर्ती ॥

(S., Radhakrishnan, Brahmasūtra, Intro., pg. 38)

Kalkī is the tenth incarnation of Viṣṇu which is yet to be. In Bhagavadgītā Kṛṣṇa as incarnation of Viṣṇu declares that when Dharma is dissipated and immorality ascends in society and there is a moral crisis all around, He incarnates in human form to save society from the crisis by doing away with the wicked and re-establishing Dharma. The Kalkī avatāra will come into being when society suffers from the collapse of moral values and calls in for a saviour for redemption. This incarnation will be Kalkī avatāra. This is a very forcefull panel in the Queen's step-well. Here Viṣṇu is shown mounting a very elegant yet sturdy horse. He has all the dignity of a benevolent ruler and the valour of an ardent warrior. We are reminded of Bhavabhūti

who described dualism in the majestic nature as tender like a flower and adamant like a thunderbolt. This character of the divine is very truthfully chiselled in this superb image of Viṣṇu as Kalkī avatāra. Lord is described having 4 hands holding a powerful sword, the mace, the discus or *cakra* but in the fourth hand he holds an enigmatic bowl in which a maiden is pouring water. This horse is controlled by the reins which are wrapped round the hand that is holding the bowl. On his head is a tall crown *kirita* very suited for a sovereign or a *cakravartī* ruler. A large ear ring adorns his ear. The sparkling ornaments engraved are the necklace and long garland around the neck. Armlets and bracelets, adorn his arms and wrists. A dagger is tied around his waist. He has put on the warrior boots. A person behind him carries a royal umbrella and another person waves a *chowri* or wisp. His one foot is trampling the enemy, the fore foot of the horse tramples another adversary. One adversary, however, is seen bowing down or surrendering himself. He is depicted on the extreme corner near the rear foot of the horse. The miniature sculptures on the side frame and on the top, though a little indistinct are of the goddesses holding lotus-flowers thus heralding victory of the Lord Hari.

This is a large independent sculpture with a unique composition. The motif of a woman offering water to the Lord for quenching thirst is so very appropriate when Lord is passing by a step-well, a water reservoir. Mankodi sees in this maiden, Queen Udayamati rendering service to Lord Viṣṇu in Kalkī avatāra when he passes by this most spiritual step-well. Kalkī avatāra is described in Agni Purāṇa as under :

Mounted on horse holding sword, conch, discus and mace; while Rūpamaṇḍana describes him as mounting the horse with drawn sword.

We are also reminded of our modern philosopher S. Radhakrishnan who named his book dealing with future of civilization as 'Kalkī'. You can see these beautiful divine images no sooner you enter Queen's step-well on the left and the right side fully lighted by the bright sunlight in the morning.

As we behold the grand images of Daśa Avatāras perfectly chiselled by the artists of Queen's step-well we become aware of their love, dedication and devotion to Lord Viṣṇu. Their profound understanding and feelings are aptly expressed in these masterpieces.



4. BRAHMĀ

Brahmā is the creator in the Trinity of the Indian pantheon of God : Viṣṇu, Brahmā and Maheśa. In the Veda Brahmā is known as Dhātā and Vidhātā. Chāndogya Upaniṣad tells us Brahmā imparted knowledge to Prajāpati and he gave it to Manu. Manu bestowed it to his eldest son Aruṇānandana Uddālaka.

Matsya Purāṇa and Mahābhārata describe Brahmā as a creator. When Viṣṇu was in deep meditation desire for creation flashed into his mind. Instantly from his naval sprang up a stalk on which bloomed a fully blossomed Lotus on which was seated Brahmā. From him has emerged the entire creation. (Mah. Śā., 335.18). Thus the naval of Viṣṇu is the source of the creator Brahmā and Brahmā is the source of entire creation. Brahmā has four faces which look into all the directions simultaneously. The four faces are the source of entire Vedic and literary knowledge. The Eastern face revealed the R̥gveda, the Western Sāmaveda, the Northern Atharvaveda and the Southern face revealed the Yajurveda. Besides Vedas each of the faces reveals the different aspects of various literary disciplines. Moreover, from every part of his body emerged the various living beings and the entire creation as well. Rather he himself has become the infinite creation.

Matsya Purāṇa tells us that Brahmā is the first creator of "Vāstu Śāstra". It is an important treatise on the art of Architecture (Matsya Purāṇa, 252-2). The images of Brahmā and his consort are very well presented in the sculptures enshrined in the Queen's step-well.

Brahmā is generally described as a robust figure with four faces having beard and moustache. But in the step-well his figure is presented with a little innovation and change. In one of the images the central face is shown without beard, while in another impressive image of Brahmā the central face has long cute beard and twisted moustaches. The other three faces do not have beard or moustache. A sun like halo surrounds his face revealing his divinity. He has four hands holding varadamālā, ladle, book and pitcher.

In another image he is shown sitting in a Lalitāsana pose. Brahmāṇi, his consort, is sitting on his lap. He has four hands holding a lotus, ladle and a book. The fourth

hand circles the waist of his beloved Brahmāṇī. She is also known as Sāvitrī and Gāyatrī. Brahmāṇī has four hands but they are now in a broken state. A three hooded snake canopies her head. Her matted hair is arranged in a jaṭā. Brahmā wears all the majestic ornaments. So also Brahmāṇī is depicted wearing a full range of ornaments. A swan-*hansa* which symbolises wisdom and intelligence is seated near the feet. This mythical bird can segregate water and milk and it partakes only milk and leaves the water. It represents discrimination and takes the essential and leaves the non-essential. On either side of the image are the devotees. One of them is seated while the other is kneeling. The image is surrounded by a frame which has miniature sculptures carved on it.

Most of the images therein are eroded and cannot be recognised. The faint, outline is visible which suggests that two images are in dancing poses the rest are seated. Brahmā is an important God in the divine Trinity, but being born out of the naval of Viṣṇu, he is dependant on Viṣṇu. Not many temples are assigned to him. The most outstanding temple of Brahmā is seen at Pushkar in Rajasthan.



5. SIVA

Śiva is the great benefactor of entire mankind in the vast cosmic creation. He is the mahākālā who keeps rotating the cycle of birth, sustenance and annihilation. From him commences the creation and in him it returns. He is the supreme Godhead among the gods. In the prehistoric figurines the God is surrounded by the animals. The oldest image is found in the Mohenjodaro excavations. The famous sturdy Bull with an imposing hump has the most attractive beauty. He is the 'Vṛṣabha' the vehicle or vāhana of Lord Śiva. Later on the bull symbolised Dharma. His four feet are : austerity, purity, compassion and truth. Śiva is the outstanding Godhead among the Vedic Gods. In Vedas both his dreadful and the benevolent aspects have been described. Behind his dreadful veil the Ṛṣi sees his compassionate heart granting soothing grace. The Ṛṣi seeks protection from the powerful forces of nature and his blessings for the well being of mankind.

मा त्वा उद्र चुकुधामा नमोमिमां दुष्टुती वृषभ मा सहूती ।
उन्नो वीरं अर्पय भेषजेमिभिर्षक्तमं त्वा भिषजां शृणोमि ।

(ऋग्., 2-33.4)

Moreover, Ṛṣi Vāgrimbhīnī in his Vāc Sūtra offers nine ṛcās or verses in which he realises that the vāc-speech element is the source of Śaiva āgamas.

अहं रुद्रेभिर्वसुभिश्चराम्यहमादित्यैरुत विश्वदेवैः ।
अहं मित्रावरुणोमा विभर्म्यहमिन्द्राग्नी अहमश्विनो भा ।

(ऋग्., 10.125.1)

In Yajurveda along with Rudra the name 'Śiva' has also been stated. Thus the almighty Rudra becomes the all compassionate Śiva. In the 16th Chapter, several names of Rudra are enumerated in which Śiva and Rudra become one.

नमः शम्भवाय च मयोभवाय च नमः शङ्कराय च ।
मयस्कराय च नमः शिवाय च शिवतराय च ॥ (यजु., 16.41)
या ते उद्र शिवा तनूः शिवा विश्वाहा भेषजी । (यजु., 16.49)
नीलग्रीवाः शितिकण्ठा दिवं उद्रा उपश्रिताः । (यजु., 16.56)

Svetāśvatara Upaniṣad has described him as the Supreme God and the lord of this entire creation; while creation is Māyā or His nature. Māyā is thus his creative energy which manifests itself as the great cosmos.

मायां तु प्रकृतिं विद्यात् मायिनं तु महेश्वरम् ।

तस्यावयवभूतैः तु व्याप्तं सर्वमिदं जगत् ॥

(श्वे. उप., 4.10)

In Kauṣītakī Upaniṣad, Rudra becomes Mahādeva, Maheśvara and Īśāna. The unity of these four aspects of Śiva becomes the base for all the later literature and reflections in the Purāṇic lores to follow. They become the source from which Indian sculptures have drawn their inspiration and have given us the most remarkable images full of aesthetic expression and philosophic content. In the plastic or visual art it permeates spiritual well being for entire posterity. Most magnificent sculptures of Lord Śiva in their varying moods and poses are enshrined in the Queen's step-well. An over all view of the sculptures in the several panels will acquaint us with the grandeur of this priceless heritage of Art. The canonical treatises of Śilpa Vidhāna or iconography have laid down several rules in depicting the various aspects of Śiva.

Śiva is thus the all pervading Brahman. The all canopying semi circular shape of the sky is his head, its dark blue colour is his hair, the beautiful jewel-like glowing moon shines in this vast vacant infinite blue is indeed his lustrous crown. or kirīṭa. It is also the intensified soma rasa or the nectar of Bliss : ānandāmṛta. It is precisely for this that Śiva is also called a "Vyomakeśī" (With sky as hair) and Candraśekhara (moon as crown). He is the supreme knowledge. His three eyes are the three Vedas. "नमामि वेदत्रयं लोचनं ते" I bow to Him having three eyes as Vedas. The Sun, Moon and Fire (Sūrya, Candra and Agni) are also described as his three eyes. Another analogy signifying His three eyes are indited as Icchā, Jñāna and Kriyā or desire, knowledge and action : 'इच्छाज्ञानक्रियां चैव त्रिनेत्रं ज्ञानसागरम्' । The three eyes are indeed the ocean of supreme wisdom. The trident or trishūla in Śiva's hand also has been referred to at times as desire, knowledge and action.

The several aspects of Śiva along with his beloved consort are magnificently sculpted on the panels of Queen's step-well that we are amazed to behold the grandeur and beauty of such evocative icons. Suddenly we find ourselves transported to the land of the gods permeating spiritual fevour all around. We bow down to divine Śiva in supplication with heart felt devotion as we behold Śiva revealing so many of his divine manifestations in these marvellous sculptures.

Śiva is shown in His standing posture, with his beloved Umā and also sitting

in *lalitāsana* pose. There is a panel depicting Śiva's marriage or the Kalyāṇa Sundaram pose as it is called in South India. These are combined images of Śiva. Śiva as Ardhanārīśvara (Half man and half woman), Śiva as Viṣṇu and Śiva : (Harihara), Śiva as Viṣṇu, Śiva, Brahmā and Sūrya (Hari Hara, Pitāmaha, Arka) and the Raudra or the frightening form of Śiva as Bhairava. Some of these important images are high-lighted among the several panels depicting Śiva and his consort.

Śiva in standing posture beams with innate delight on his face, granting benediction to all beings. He is Śiva as Mahādeva. Śiva has four hands holding a three hooded Cobra, in one hand and pitcher in the other. The third hand holds the varadamālā, the fourth hand is broken. It probably holds the trident or trisūla. The figure is highly ornamented. He wears a vyāghracarma-tiger-skin with a ornamented waist-band. He has put on armlets and jewelled bracelets. The crown is of matted hair *jaṭā*, a garland is shown dangling slightly below his knees. Two attendants are standing on either side of the image. The surrounding frame has four miniature sculptures on either side. There are three standing gods and one seated image on each side. There is a *torāṇa* or decorated arch having images of several devotees. This is by and large well preserved panel having a forceful image of standing Śiva, very characteristic of his being a Mahādeva. There is also another standing image of Śiva as Īśāna one who controls and rules the entire cosmos.

Śiva with his consort Umā in a standing posture is a very edifying image. It is a pose of mutual feeling of warmth and love. Śiva is shown balancing one leg, so also is Umā. She looks on admiring his benign face. In one hand Śiva holds the trident in the second the varadamālā, in the third the snake and the fourth hand he puts around the shoulder of his beloved. Umā in turn holds mirror which she shows to her beloved lord Śiva. Her second hand is from behind probably around Śiva's waist. Both are so absorbed in each other that their integral unity portrays the unity of Brahman and Māyā of Vedānta. Is not Umā herself the mirror or the creatrix in which she herself is the reflection of Śiva as the entire cosmos with endless creation !

Umā-Mahesvara sitting in *lalitāsana* posture is a very impressive image. Umā is sitting on the lap of Śiva. She is very graceful and her beaming face radiates expression of profound love and warmth. Śiva is depicted with four hands. In one hand he holds a trident trisūla, in the second a three hooded snake, in the third a lotus symbolising non-attachment and also beauty and charm permeating its fragrance all around, the fourth hand is lovingly entwined around Umā's waist. The face of Umā has suffered slight erosion but the grace and beauty with which it is sculpted is quite natural and emotive. The *jaṭā*, the crown of matted hair of Śiva is highly

ornamented so also is His figure adorned with precious ornaments. Seated near His feet is the elegant, sturdy Nandi or the Bull, the *vāhana* of Maheśvara. It is the symbol of Dharma. On either corners are two devotees seated with folded hands in complete supplication. Behind the face is the orb, having lusture of the sun's rays. Umā is seated with great poise. She has put on rich ornaments, behoving a great queen. The surrounding frame has miniature deities, but they have become very indistinct due to erosion rendered by climatic conditions. But the image of seated Gaṇeśa can be recognised in this frame.

Marriage of Śiva is a very popular theme depicted with great ardour in major Śiva Temples. In Ellora we have a big panel where Śiva is holding Pārvatī's palm in his hand in marriage-the *pāṇi-grahaṇa*. Viṣṇu is performing the *Kanyādāna* ceremony while Brahmā as a priest conducts the Yajña and ordains the marriage ceremony. In the Madurai Temple of Meenākṣi the same theme is sculpted in black stone with superb grace and beauty. The bashful reflection on the face of Pārvatī has all the natural charm and loveliness. This remarkable composition is famous as Kalyāṇa Sundaram image. In the Queen's step-well also this composition is sculpted with similar grace but the atmospheric erosion has wiped away all the details. Only the composition is visible in the graceful rhythmic lines which delineate beauty of the entire panel. The details of this composition are worn out and can not be recognised. The sculpted lines of grace still remain to tell us of the grandeur of this marriage ceremony of the divine couple.

Samyukta Images : Composite Images :

There are a series of composite or samyukta images of Śiva where two forms are fused in one. At times three and four forms are also integrated. Thus maintaining the Vedantic unity in the duality, trinity or the quaternity of the Divine pantheon of God.

Hari-Hara is the image in which Śiva and Viṣṇu are fused together in one. The *mūrtividhāna* of this image is elaborated in Agni Purāṇa (49-25). In Rūpāvatāra (6,32-41), Rūpamaṇḍana, Viṣṇudharmottara, Śilpa Ratna and other important treatises, in the Hari-Hara pratimā the right side is Śiva and left side Viṣṇu.

On the right side of the head we have the matted hair or Jaṭā of Śiva while on the left is the kirīṭa, tall crown of Viṣṇu. References of Hari-Hara concept are found in the Vedic writings but ancient images are not found so far. The description of this unified form of Hari-Hara pratimā, is the same in the different treatises, yet a little difference is seen in the āyudhas or weapons they carry. In the Hari-Hara pratimā the right side is Śiva in blue colour. The pratimā has four hands. The two hands of Śiva are holding triśūla and varadamālā while the left hands of Viṣṇu are

holding a cakra- discus and a lotus. Several Hari-Hara images are found in Gujarat and South India. They are sculpted mostly in the eighth and twelfth century A.D.

In Queen's step-well the image of Hari-Hara has four hands. One hand of Śiva is giving benediction while other is broken. The two hands of Viṣṇu; one holds a mace while the other is broken. On the head of Śiva on the right is the crown of matted hair *jaṭā* and the left is the *kirīṭa* a tall crown of Viṣṇu. The attendant on Siva's side carries a triśūla and on Viṣṇu's side in the left carries the conch. The panel frame surrounding this image, on the left has various incarnations of Viṣṇu. While on the right side of Śiva have several carved images which cannot be recognised due to erosion.

In South India the image, famous as Venkaṭeśa is a remarkable pratimā of Hari-Hara. The Indian Museum, Calcutta has three impressive sculptures of Hari-Hara.

A beautiful bi-metallic statue of Hari-Hara is found in old Fort, Bikaner (Rajasthan) in which Viṣṇu is depicted in Bronze and Śiva in Brass. The image is cast as per the rules laid down in the texts. The union of these two forms into one is a very authentic harmony of establishing dual forms which ultimately mingle into one divine Brahman.

Hari-Hara-Pitāmaha-Arka : This is a depiction of the Divine Trinity Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Maheśa along with the fourth aspect of the all illuminating Sun has been added.

The reference to the concept of three gods-unity has its sources as far back as the Vedas which assert the Trinity is of Agni (Fire), Vāyu (Air) and Sūrya (Sun). There is a reference to Trimūrti of the divine also found in the famous drama Mṛcchakaṭikam of Śūdraka.

In the Trinity of Hari-Hara-Pitāmaha-Mūrti, Sūrya has an important role. In a mantra or invocation to Āditya - the sun, it is said in the heart of Sūrya dwells Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Maheśa. Not many references are seen of the image in the ancient texts, yet we do have references in the Rūpāvatāra (7,45.45) and Aparājita Prachā (5.212). In some of the images where four faces of Śiva are depicted, the fourth is under-stood to be that of Sūrya.

In Queen's step-well we have an impressive image of Hari-Hara-Pitāmaha-Arka. Here the god wears Kirīṭa-the tall crown, armour or *kavaca* over his chest and his feet are adorned with top boots. His two companions Daṇḍī and Piṅgala are presented by the side. The image has eight hands out of which only four are preserved. The two hands of Sūrya have lotuses, two hands of Śiva has trident (triśūla) and the serpent. Out of two hands of Viṣṇu, the one holding the lotus is preserved.

The *vāhana* of each of the deity is present by his side. Near Brahmā is seated the swan, Nandi - the Bull sits near Śiva's attendants. The sprightly horse is near the Sun's image while Garuḍa is seen sitting near Viṣṇu. The surrounding frame has twelve images of the Sun. They are the Dvādaśa Ādityas. Sun is thus the predominant deity in this quaternity.

Ardhanārīśvara : The image of Ardhanārīśvara is very popular in many outstanding Śiva temples. It is Śiva and Śakti combined in one form. It is an artistic representation of the unity of the male and female form in Śiva and Pārvatī respectively. It is described in the Purāṇic lores found in Śiva Purāṇa, Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa and Br̥hat Saṁhitā. From the point of sculpture the details of making this image are given in Viṣṇu Dharmottara (3.55.2-4). Abhilaṣitārtha Cintāmaṇi (3.1.772) has given a very detailed description of the sculptural beauty of Ardhanārīśvara. Śiplaratnākara also dwells upon the image of Ardhanārīśvara. A very impressive image is found in Elephanta caves. In Queen's step-well we have a well preserved statue of Ardhanārīśvara. It is in front view standing posture. On the right side is Śiva and the left is Pārvatī. The ornaments put on by male adorn the right side body and the left side has all female royal ornaments viz. the earring, necklaces, bracelets, waist band etc. The image has four hands. The right side two hands are of Śiva holding varadamālā and trident or trisūla while the two left hands of Śakti hold a pitcher and a mirror. The Śiva side head has matted hair or jaṭā while the left has the *mukuta* or the crown of the goddess. On Śiva's side there is one male and one female attendant and on Śakti's side there are two female attendants. In the outer frame the one on Śiva's side is eroded and the miniature images can not be recognised but the plates of the side of Śakti are still intact. In them there are three plates of standing female figures and in one plate there is a sitting goddess.

This statue in particular, inspired a great psychological insight in C. J. Jung who concluded that there is man in every woman and woman in every man. From this he inducted his psychological concept of *anima* and *animus*.

A beautiful wooden image of Ardhanārīśvara was found in Patan. It is well preserved in the Prince of Wales Museum, Bombay.

Ardhanārīśvara pratimās are also found in Mahabalipuram, Kanjivaram, Kumbhakonam, Mathura, Brihadīśvar Tanjavayur.

Describing Ardhanārīśvara, Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa says :

अर्धदेवस्य नारी तु कर्तव्या शुभलक्षणा
अर्धं तु पुरुषः कार्यस्सर्वलक्षणभूषितः ।
ईश्वरार्धे जयजूटं कर्तव्यं चन्द्रभूषितं
उमार्धे तिलकं कुर्यात् सीमन्तमलकं तथा ॥ (55.9)

Bhairava : We have seen that Maheśvara is the benevolent aspect of Śiva. But Bhairava is His dreadful aspect which annihilates the wickedness lurking around. Tantra Loka alludes to three aspects of Śiva. They are the Bheda, Bheda-bheda and the Abheda. The first is the benign Śiva, second the agitated Rudra and the third is the frightening Bhairava. The dancing Bhairava, the fearful one, is depicted in the step-well with all His dynamism. The benevolent, the fearful one are all fused together in the Abheda Bhairava. Though this form is dreaded by the evil-doers, it is all benevolent for the devotees.

The sculpture of Bhairava is well preserved in the step-well. This aspect of Śiva has been sculpted with all the imagination of the highest form of terror. Bhairava Mūrti Vidhāna is elaborated in detail in Viṣṇudharmottara (3.59) and Agni Purāṇa (52-9-10) and also in Tattva Nidhi (p. 73). It is a supreme depiction of benevolence midst devastation. It is the light of life, portrayed midst the dark dance of death. Bhairava is a twenty armed God with a short loin cloth around his waist, and dangling cloth between his legs. A girdle of bells surrounds his waist as well. The bells are joined with the girdle and they ring on his thighs as he dances. Matted hair cling to his head. He wears a well inset necklace and a jewelled garland. Armlets and bracelets adorn his arms and wrists. In his twenty hands he carries various weapons and things. He weilds a dagger, a thunder bolt, a club (Mudgara), kettle drum (damaru), a sword, a cobra snake and he holds an object between his thumb and the finger, which is not very clear. In the other set of ten hands we can again see some object between the thumb and the finger, a tail of cobra, open palm for striking, a shield, an indistinct object, a noose or pāśa, a goad, a skull bowl with fish, and a severed human head of a demon. His wild dogs are preying upon the corpse and also a jumping fox is licking the severed head in Bhairava's hand. In the distant corner we see the ghoul feeding upon the severed arm of the corpse. In the surrounding frame we have Gaṇeśa and the seven female figures. One of them is seated while the others are in dancing poses. They may be the seven mātṛikās or as some reckon them to be the seven yoginīs since Bhairava is known to be their leader. The ravages of time and weather have not touched this panel and the characteristics of Bhairava are well brought out by the artist's chisel. Moreover, four rasas are depicted in this image very elaborately. They are raudra (anger), bhayānaka (dreadful), bibhatsa (gruesome) and karuṇa (compassion). This shows the artist's mastery over the literary aesthetics, while chiselling the images with great artistic skill.

6. ŚAKTI

Śakti is as old as Śiva in the Indian Divine pantheon. She is the venerable consort of Śiva. She is one or *abhinna* with Śiva. Śakti and Śiva are one. She is the very nature or Prakṛti of Śiva. She is the Mahā Māyā the creatrix of the entire cosmos. She is the manifestation of the unmanifested aspect of Śiva. They are so merged in one another that they become one integral whole, like word and meaning as Kālidāsa chooses to describe.

Right from the most ancient times from the period of Mohenjodaro and Harappa, along with the images of Śiva the images of Śakti or the mother goddess have also been found. India has always paid the highest obeisance to god the Mother along with god the Father. Their oneness is aptly expressed in the *Ardhanārīśvara* images referred earlier. The symbolic expression of which can also be observed in the Śiva Līṅga worship. The images of Śakti are depicted with her vāhana the lion. Reference to prayers or the *stutis* to the Divine mother Śakti is made in R̥gveda. In the *Vāk sūkta* the devotion to Śakti has been extolled by the daughter of Sambharin R̥ṣi. The famous Lakṣmī Sūkta in the R̥gveda is also dedicated to the goddess Śakti. The concept of Śakti is further developed in the Āraṇyakas or the Upaniṣads. In Kena Upaniṣad it is the Hemavati Umā or Śakti who gives the sermon on Brahman or Brahmajñāna to Indra, Agni and Vāyu and through them to entire mankind. In Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad of Yajurveda, Śakti has been described as Māyā or Prakṛti of the Māyin Maheśvara. In the Purāṇas and in the literature that followed there are abundant lores dedicated to Śakti and her various aspects.

In Śrīmad Bhāgavata (10.56) when Kṛṣṇa does not return to Dwārakā, his father Vasudeva and brother Balarāma offer prayers to goddess Durgā for his safe return. In tantra, Śakti is very important and hundreds of mantras are offered to her. The devotees who perform *tāntrika sādhanā* are called Śāktas. The impact of Śakti is predominantly expressed in Indian sculpture throughout the ages till day. Equally important is Her influence on painting, folk painting and folk sculpture as well. Ample suggestions are given in the making of pratimā or images of the Goddess in Agni Purāṇa, Rūpamaṇḍana (5.35-37), Rūpāvatāra (8.112-113)

and Saptasāti. Devī Bhāgavata tells us there are 108 Śakti pīṭhas or centres of Śakti in our country.

Queen's step-well abounds in Devī pratimās. They are sculpted very artistically. Such is the acumen of the artists for great intrinsic details, that images have been chiselled with complete spiritual bearing and aesthetic perfection. These beautiful images enshrined in the step-well, are all imbued with such divine grace and poise that one feels a devotional fervour of love and reverence for the divine mother. There are several panels in which these ecstatic images are installed. We refer to some of the representative ones.

Gaurī : She is the daughter of Himavanta or the Himālaya and is also famous as Pārvatī who was later on married to Śiva. The following 12 images of Gaurī are depicted in the step-well as follows.

1. Umā	Rosary	Lotus	Mirror	Kamaṇḍalu
2. Pārvatī	Rosary	Śiva	Gaṇeśa	Kamaṇḍalu
3. Gaurī	Rosary	Abhaya	Lotus	Kamaṇḍalu
4. Lalitā	Rosary	Vīṇā	Vīṇā	Kamaṇḍalu
5. Śrīyā	Abhaya	Rosary	Lotus	Blessing
6. Kṛṣṇā	Añjali	Rosary	Kamaṇḍalu	Añjali
7. Maheśvarī	Lotus	Mirror	-	-
8. Rambhā	Rosary	Adamant	Ankuśa	Kamaṇḍalu
9. Sāvitrī	Rosary	Manuscript	Lotus	Kamaṇḍalu
10. Triṣaṇḍa	Rosary	Adamant	Śakti	Kamaṇḍalu
11. Totalā	Śūla	Rosary	Sceptre	Whisk
12. Tripurā	Abhaya	Ankuśa	Snake	Blessing

(Maheśvarī is also known as Haimavatī)

In the Rūpāvatāra 8-3-14 it is stated that each goddess has four hands and is recognised by the objects held in the hands.

The Rūpavidhāna of Gaurī has been enunciated in Agni Purāṇa (52.14), Śilpa Ratna (24-60,2401), Rūpa Maṇḍana (5.1-7), Rūpāvatāra (8.3.14) and many other treatises as stated by K. V. Dave in 'Gujaratnu Mūrti Vidhāna', (pp. 172-173).

Mātrkās or the divine Mothers : There are several panels of 7 or 8 Mātrkās very popularly sculpted or in reliefs found throughout Gujarat and Rajasthan. There are several lores of Mātrkās in Matsya Purāṇa, Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa, Varāha Purāṇa, Brahma Vaivarta Purāṇa and other treatises. Abhilaṣitārtha Cintāmaṇī tells us about the 7 Mātrkās. But Rūpāvatāra adds Bhairavī and we have 8 Mātrkās. They are beautifully sculpted in panels in the Queen's step-well. They are as follows :

1. Brāhmī
2. Maheśvarī
3. Kumārī
4. Vaiṣṇavī
5. Vārāhī
6. Indrāṇī
7. Cāmuṇḍā
8. Bhairavī

These images are executed with great skill representing the *bhāva* or emotions according to the descriptions given in the Purāṇic lores and works on Mūrti Vidhāna.

We are reminded of very elaborate and big statues of seven Mātṛkās in the Kailāsanātha cave of the Ellora.

Such is the wide acceptance of the Sapta Mātṛkās that all important treatises refer to them and enunciate Pratimā lakṣaṇas in varied forms. The Sapta Mātṛkās' worship is very popular in Rajasthan and Gujarat and well adopted in the folk tradition also.

Pārvatī in penance is one of the most unique sculptures in Queen's step-well. It is also known as Kaupīn Dhārīṇī Umā. The Word Umā has a dual meaning in Sanskrit. One Purāṇic lore says when Pārvatī's mother dissuaded her from doing extreme penance for obtaining Śiva as her husband, she remained firm and denied her mother's request saying 'U-Mā meaning "NO PLEASE". Moreover, Umā also has the South Indian connotation of Ammā meaning the 'Mother'. Both the renderings are correctly conveyed by the word Umā. In this image Umā is depicted as standing on one leg. She is engaged in severe penance. Her graceful slim figure is imbued with a resolute determination as is clear from her countenance. A short loin cloth encircles her girdle as an austere *tapasvinī* or a *saṃnyāsini*. Her necklace and sparse ornaments are of rudrākṣa beads while the ear lobes do not have any earrings. Her hair are bound on the top like that of an ascetic. In her four hands she holds a rosary of big beads, meant for telling beads in *japa* or repeating the sacred Mantras. In the second hand is *Kuśa* blades of grass; in third the pitcher while the fourth hand is granting blessings. Four maid-attendants two on either side wait on near the feet carrying the objects of worship. The eight miniature images surrounding the frame have four images of Goddesses on either side: some dancing, some standing and some seated. The mount, lion of the Goddess is carved below the lotus pedestal on which she is standing.

Pārvatī as Gaurī is a beautiful sculpture of great dignity and grace. The goddess has four hands. One hand carries the Śivaliṅga image, the other opposite hand carries the image of Gaṇeśa. The lower hand carries a Varadamālā and the opposite hand has a kalāśa or a pitcher. This posture is not the one in which Pārvatī is performing penance amidst five fires. This is a benevolent frontal posture. Her head is surrounded by an orb of rays that casts a divine lusture on her face. Beautiful ornaments adorn her figure. The jewel embedded crown kirīṭa, studded ear-rings, necklace, garland, decorated girdle, armlets, bracelets, breast-band and anklets all go in for enhancing the majestic disposition of the goddess.

On either side of the image are two maidens, standing in worship. On the surrounding frame there are four figures on either side. The two upper figures, in the sitting postures of goddesses which cannot be recognised. On the upper top of the frame is the seated Gaṇeśa. Reference to Gaurī is made in all important art treatises. Rūpamaṇḍana (5,1-7), Agni Purāṇa (52.14), Śilpa Ratna (24-60) and (24-61) allude to Pārvatī as Gaurī.

Pārvatī is one of the most beautiful goddesses. The artists of the step-well have sculpted over 15 images of the goddess in various moods, as a divine mother, in all her majesty. As Gaurī she is shown in meditation and in penance.

This panel depicts Pārvatī in a very impressive standing posture in her graceful *tribhāṅga* or balancing on a leg in three beautiful gentle bends of the body. She has four hands which hold *varadākṣa mālā*, ladle, a bunch of kuśa grass and a *kalāśa* or pitcher. A crown adorns her head. All the studded royal ornaments enhance her majestic grandeur. Behind her head is an encircling halo that asserts her divinity. The surrounding frame has figures of goddesses. Near her feet on either side are two maidens in her service. This is well chiselled image which has suffered no erosion or any damage.

Kṣemaṅkarī Durgā is the benevolent goddess in Śānta Bhāva or perfect poise. She can be said to be Vātsalya Mūrti. She is the divine mother having immense love for children. She bestows what the devotee needs and protects what he already possesses. In Queen's step-well we have two beautiful images of Kṣemaṅkarī Durgā. One is in the standing posture with her attending maids. The other is in the sitting posture with the child seated on her lap. The standing image of the goddess is in a good condition. It is a beautiful figure highly ornamented with lovely ear-rings, necklace, jewels-studded garland, armlets, bracelets, gridle, *kaṭimekhalā* or waist-band and anklets. Her hair are in the form of *jaṭā* tied on the top-knot embedded with ornaments. In her four hands she holds a trident-*triśūla*, a *varadākṣamālā*, an

adamant with a bell *vajraghaṇṭā*, the fourth hand is broken. At her feet on either side is a lion. They are virtually facing each other. They are shown with quite a fierce look. Behind the lions are the two maids one on either side, attending the goddess. In the surrounding frame eight miniture mother- goddesses are carved but it is not possible to recognise the objects, they hold in their hands. But all the eight images seem to be holding lotuses.

The second image of Kṣemaṅkarī Durgā in the step-well is that of beloved mother. There are three images in the step-well, Goddess is seated on a lotus throne in *lalitāsana*. On either side is a fierce lion with raised paws. The goddess has her tied coiffure in the form of *jaṭā* with jewelled crest-ornaments. In the ears she has ear-rings in the shape of the conch. The necklace and *maṅgala sūtra*, long garland, armlets and bracelets, the waist-band and the anklets etc. all adorn her figure. The goddess has four hands. In the lower right hand she holds the Śiva-Liṅga, in the upper right hand trident, in the upper left hand a trident with a bell and the lower left hand is on the child who is sitting on her folded left leg. It is, however, holding some sweet. The child is touching the breast of the mother, whose effusive love for the child is well expressed in the image. The child has a thin ornament around the neck and small anklets around the ankles. This is one of the very emotional image of the mother goddess. The like of which is not found elsewhere, though the images of Kṣemaṅkarī Durgā are very common throughout Rajasthan and Gujarat. The Mūrtividhāna of this image is stated in Rūpamaṇḍana (5.36), Aparājitapṛcchā (222-27), while purāṇas only have the name of the goddess but the śilpa aspect is not narrated. The āyudhas or objects in the hands of the goddess differ from book to book. The *adamant* with the bell which she holds in her hand is said to have tantric connotation. She is famous as one of the twelve Gaurīs.

Mahiṣāsūramardini is a panel depicting the goddess in a warring mood. She is in a violent encounter with the ferocious powerful demon Mahiṣāsura with whom she had to fight for nine days and nights before he could be slain planting her left leg on the ground and the other right leg on the Mahiṣāsura in the form of buffalo, she inflicts the fatal blow on the demon with her spear and other weapons in the ten right hands. The standing posture of the goddess is in *ālīdhāsana*. This is one of the unique images found in the step-well and is well preserved as it has not suffered the weather erosion.

The goddess wears a crown or trimukūṭa. She has three eyes. In the ears she wears ear-rings of sun shape, a jewelled necklace, a long garland, a breast-band, māṅgalasūtra, bracelet, armlets several bangles, waist-band, anklets, designed sarees and uttariya the upper garment. The goddess has twenty hands and is fully armed with weapons. They are ten right hands holding trident, thunder bolt, an arrow, a mace, a goad, a spear, a lotus with stalk, gives a sign of fearlessness *abhaya-mudrā*, kettledrum *damaru* and a sword, while the ten left hands hold shield, scull with fish, war horn, three-headed snake, dagger in hand, noose, bow, holding hair of the demon and trident.

The buffalo succumbs under the strong attack of the goddess while the lion attacks it from behind. Buffalo's head is severed and tongue is seen lolling out. A fully armed demon in the human form emerges out of its slain body, wielding sword and shield and engages himself in a deadly duel with the goddess in which he is also ultimately slain. The eight miniature images surrounding the frame, four on each side depict various forms of the goddess, engraved therein. This is a well preserved panel emanating such lively vigour of strength and compassion on the beaming countenance of the deity. The goddess in Queen's step-well has twenty hands while in Bengal she has ten hands. Dr. D. C. Sircar opines that these ten hands correspond to the ten incarnations of the Lord. Agni Purāṇa (50.1-5), Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa (51.1-10) and Devī Bhāgavata (50.68-70) give us the pratimā lakṣaṇa of the goddess.

Cāmuṇḍā is the frightening image of the goddess. She is slim, emotional, having sunken abdomen sagging shrivelled up breasts, protruding teeth. A nude man is lying prostrate at her feet. She wears an animal skin 'Mṛgachāla' around her loins, as girdle. She wears several ornaments all made of bones. Her mukūṭa or crown has a human skull in the centre. She has ten hands holding trident, dagger, damaru, serpent's tail, serpent's head and bell. Her upraised hand touching the lips is in the mudra or pose wherein she is shown licking her little finger. One hand is broken. The garland of snake is around her neck. Her ribs are seen prominently. The sunken stomach has a scorpion crawling on it. She has short loin cloth which is tied by a loose bone string. A garland of skulls hangs over the left leg and goes up to the right leg. The goblin near the feet is gnawing at the severed limb. The goblin on the other side is borken. The surrounding frame has four goddesses on either side. There are eight māṭrkās. The image of the goddess on the top is very indistinct. This is a very beautifully carved image and has tantric bearings. It conveys the emotions of bhayānaka and bibhatsa rasa of terror and disgust. Viṣṇu Dharmottara,

Agni Purāṇa (50-52), Aparājitapṛcchā (223/15), Śilpa Ratna (24/82) and other important treatises give the pratimā lakṣaṇa of this frightening goddess permeating bhayānaka rasa and bibhatsa rasa.’.

चामुण्डां चण्डहासां प्रकटितदशनां भीमवक्त्रां त्रिनेत्रां
नीलांभोजप्रभाभां प्रमुदितवपुषां नरमुण्डालिमालाम् ।
खड्गं शूलं कपालं नरशिरघटितं खेटकं धारयन्तीं
प्रेतारूढां प्रमत्तां च मधुमदमुदितां भावयेच्च मुण्डरूपाम् ॥



7. GODS AND GODDESSES

Lores of gods and goddesses are very important in the unfolding of Indian culture. They convey to us the intellectual, social, ethical and spiritual values, that distinguished Indian culture in the committee of World Cultures. The gods are imbued with human and super human qualities. They convey to us the exalted spiritual attainment of mankind and at the same time some of the foibles and errors which gods and men commit. In the Vedic age the natural powers which men saw all around took human form and became associated with man for giving him succour and showering blessings on him. The Vedas have several *Rcās* or verses of beautiful poetry written in their praise and seek their benedictions for worldly gains and spiritual enlightenment.

We have already dwelt upon the beautiful images of the Trinity of the Supreme Godhead Viṣṇu, Śiva and Brahmā with their divine consorts or creative manifestations. Their superb images embellish the walls of Queen's step-well which make it an exquisite Underground-Shrine.

The Vedic and Purāṇic literature about them is very fascinating. The lores of other gods and goddesses some possessed of high spiritual powers and others as ideal men, are rewarded in heaven for their meritorious deeds. Their images enhance the spiritual fervour. We allude some of the important images of gods and goddesses presented in the step-well.

Gaṇeśa is the most privileged god in the Indian Pantheon. He is "Om̐kāra Swarūpa." It is precisely for this reason that Vedic mantras commence with Om̐kāra. R̥gveda alludes to Gaṇeśa as Gaṇapati (2,23,1), He is the most popular god and is the son of Śiva. His image is found in every Śiva Temple and there are several independent temples of Gaṇeśa also.

There is a very impressive standing image of Gaṇeśa in Queen's step-well. Though he has a robust and bulky figure, he is depicted as balancing on the left foot. This adds to the charm of the typical composition. He has four hands holding a broken tusk, a battle axe, a lotus and a cask of sweets. He is shown as wearing sparse ornaments. A dwarfish man is standing near his feet on the right side. On the left side, near his feet, is a standing mouse eating sweets. In the surrounding frame

are eight miniature images four on each side. Thus along with the central image there are five images of Gaṇeśa, popularly known as '*Pañca Gaṇesa*'. The Śakti of the main Gaṇeśa is missing probably it must have been on the top toraṇa or arch of the central Gaṇeśa.

Gaṇeśa with his consort is a very impressive panel in which he is seated in circular *simhāsana* or the throne. In his four hands he holds an axe, his broken tusk, a lotus and the fourth hand is encircled around the waist of his beloved consort. He has beautiful ornaments on his body and the interesting ornament on his belly. Moreover, other ornaments, the necklace, the long garland, armlets, bracelets and anklets adorn his being. His face is surrounded by an orb of rays to denote his divinity. From behind a snake comes crawling over his stomach.

His consort is seated on his lap. It is carved in a very graceful pose. In her left hand she holds a lotus of love while her right hand is shown fondling Gaṇeśa's trunk, the part of which is broken. In the front of the deity is a casket full of laddus or sweets. His vāhana, the carrier mouse is feeding on the sweets. The vertical part on the right side has figures of Gaṇeśa and a man. The central arch also has figures of Gaṇeśa and the man may be his devotee.

There is another very important image of Gaṇeśa with his two consorts Riddhi and Siddhi seated on his thighs. This is very beautifully chiselled.

Viṣṇu as Sūrya : Sūrya is one of the names of Viṣṇu. In R̥gveda similar Ṛcās are dedicated to him. Therefore, there is no difference between the two. They are interchangeable. It is precisely for this that Viṣṇu is said to be the Eye of the universe.

Hence Queen's step-well has paid obeisance to Viṣṇu as Sūrya. There is a robust statue of Sun in an upright standing posture. He has the dignity and majesty which sheds radiance all around. Standing on a lotus pedestal he holds two large lotuses in both his hands which rise above his shoulders. Apart from royal ornaments, he wears breast-plate as an armour and a tall crown or Kiriṭa. His long ear lobes are adorned by ear-rings. An orb surrounding his face radiates divinity. He has two protective high boots. All this suggests his being the protector and nourisher of mankind. It is precisely for this that Īśa Upaniṣad call him "Pūṣan". Lotuses have a very intimate relationship with the Sun. They bloom with sunlight, at dawn and wilt after sunset. Moreover, the lotuses are epitome of beauty, fragrance and love and at the same time they are the symbols of non-attachment in as much as they are born in water, live in water and are yet untouched by water. Thus they signify

a supreme serenity in life. It is for this reason that in his two hands the Sun holds lotuses, which rise above his shoulders. The arch above the head has a ring of garland bearers. The image of the seated deity on the top is indistinct due to erosion. At his feet are two attendants, one of them is holding pen and an inkpot while the other is ready in service at his beck and call. Moreover, Sūrya-the Sun, lights the three images of Śeṣaśāyī Viṣṇu in the step well on the equinox-days.

Indra is one of the most outstanding gods of the Vedas. He is the Lord of the gods. He is one of the dikpālas who looks after the East. R̥gveda has so many ṛcās extolling his virtues, of courage and heroism. Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa has the unified image of Indra, Agni and Sūrya. Later on in purāṇas Indra becomes Brahmā, Agni becomes Rudra and Sūrya becomes Viṣṇu. In the Queen's step-well, we have a royal image of Indra standing in the eastern side of the well. He has a gentle bend of the body. His four hands carry a varadamālā, a goad, an adamant (thunderbolt) and a pitcher. He has the kirīṭa crown and several regal ornaments adorn his figure. In another panel he is depicted with his consort Indrāṇī. His mount elephant famous as Airāvata is sitting near his feet. The image has its bearing with the art treatises such as Agni Purāṇa (52.14), Abhilaṣitārtha Cintāmaṇi (3.1.772-775), Rūpamaṇḍana (2.31), Śilparatna (25.1) and others. Being a very important Vedic god, several ṛcās of R̥gveda (8.37.3, 8.36.4, 8.79.5) tell the tales of heroism of Indra, the god's ruler.

Agni is an important Vedic god and over 200 ṛcās or verses are dedicated to him. His refulgence is reflected in the sky in Sūrya and Uṣā and in the clouds as lightning. He is the intermediary between the gods and men in as much as all the oblations offered by men to gods are carried to gods by him. This is stated in the R̥gveda (2.12.3, 10.7.2). He is one among the 5 Mahābhūtas that are the constituents of Prakṛti or nature. He protects the south-east direction. Hence this direction is called Āgneya. He is depicted in the step-well with an impressive robust figure having long beard, and matted hair. He has four hands holding a lotus with the stem, and the pitcher of water in his left hand. One of the right hands is broken and the object held in the other right hand is faded and cannot be recognised. Near his feet is his mount, a ram. Viṣṇudharmottara (3.50.1-4), Śilparatna (25.1), Rūpamaṇḍana (2.31) all describe the pratimā lakṣaṇa with slight variations. Abhilaṣitārtha Cintāmaṇi and Matsya purāṇa describe his golden figure with a long beard but they describe him with two hands holding a rosary mālā and water pitcher kamaṇḍalu. Agni has a very exalted position in the R̥gveda (2.12.3; 10.7.2).

Kubera is the Puranic god and is famous as the treasurer of the gods and is the lord of the Yakṣās. Worship of Kubera as Yakṣa was a very popular practice in

ancient days. During the days of Pāṇini, Yakṣa was worshipped (Pāṇini, Sū., 2.2.34). In Jain tradition Yakṣas are followers of the tīrthāṅkaras, hence their worship was in vogue. The images of Lord Kubera are found in Jaina temples also. The treatises of Śilpa ratna, Agni Purāṇa (52.21), Abhilaṣitārtha Cintāmaṇi (3.1.790-91), Viṣṇu Dharmottara (3.53.1-6) etc. describe Kubera with slight variations in respect to the objects he holds in the hands and also regarding the mount on which he is seated. In Queen's step-well he is depicted in a robust stout figure with a bulging belly. He has four hands. In the main right hand he has a goad, and in the main left hand a noose-pāśa. In his rear left hand he has a money purse. The object in the fourth hand is not distinct and cannot be identified. His mount elephant is sitting near his feet. In Agni Purāṇa, however, the mount is stated to be a goat and in Rūpamaṇḍana the mount is a man. So also differences are there in the objects in Kubera's hand. Kubera having noose or pāśa is described in Hemādri(1-2).

In another panel in the step-well he is shown sitting with his consort Bhadrā. Beautiful images of Kubera are there in the Mathura Museum and the Indian Museum of Calcutta. In ancient temples of Gujarat, images of Kubera are very common.

Varuṇa : is a very famous vedic god. He is extolled in the prayers along with Indra. He is one among the *pañca Mahābhūtas* being the Lord of Water and Air. He is thus the bequeather of life or *prāṇa* to all living beings. He rules the western direction and is the god of the ocean, water and the clouds (Ṛgveda, 51-63). There is a standing image of Varuṇa in the step-well. He has four hands holding a varadamālā, a goad, a noose and a pitcher or kamaṇḍalu. But in the Puranic texts goad is not mentioned in his hand. Being a Dikpāla the protector of the western direction his images are very common in Gujarat temples, though an independent temple dedicated to Varuṇa is not there. The art treatises have ample descriptions of Varuṇa with variations in the objects held in the hand as alluded in Agni Purāṇa (52), Matsya Purāṇa (261), Viṣṇu Dharmottara Purāṇa (3.52.2-4), Rūpa Maṇḍana (2.35) and others. His mount is said to be makara or the crocodile. His image apart from those in the the temples is also commonly found in water reservoirs.

Vasus are the preservers of waters in the well. They assimilate the water of the well with that of the Ganges. In Aitareya Brāhmaṇa (2.15) and in Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa (4.5.7) we have references to the eight Vasus. Ṛgveda tells us that Vasu, Rudra and Ādityas dwell in earth, sky, and heaven (Ṛg., 7.36.14). In Queen's step-well there are several panels depicting different Vasus. They have a bovine face and in their two hands they hold in one a water pitcher, while the object in the second hand is not very distinct. In the purāṇas the eight Vasus are stated as Anala, Anila, Āpa,

Dharā, Dhruva, Pratyūṣa, Prabhāṣa and Soma. In the Viṣṇu Purāṇa and Matsya Purāṇa we have the long lists of their family. Their mothers, their wives and their children are all alluded to in details. The images of Vasuṣ are amply enshrined in the reservoirs.

Agastya is a venerable sage who is born of a pitcher. He is also a popular sage of the Vedas. In R̥gveda several ṛcās and mantras are said to have been composed by him (R̥g., 1.165.13-15, 166-169 etc.). In Queen's step-well he is shown as seated in *padmāsana* or lotus posture on a large decorated pitcher *kumbha*. His ascetic nature is revealed in his matted hair, long beard and loin cloth loosely covered with the upper garment *uttarīya*. He is shown with four hands. The two rear hands hold lotuses while the other two are broken. The two small elephants on top of the panel are performing the *abhiṣeka* or pouring water for ablution while Kirit Mankodi identifies this image to be that of Agastya, P. C. Parikh recognises this to be the image of Dhanavantari. He was the great sage and an important 'ratna' jewel that emerged out of the ocean with the pitcher full of nectar at the time of *Samudra Manthana*, as described in the Purāṇas.

Nava Graha Paṭṭikā is a panel depicting the nine planets with Sūrya the sun occupying the central place. The canonical works give detailed description of each planet as god. Some have two hands and some have four. They have different weapons in hands. Some planets have their *vāhanas* or the mounts enunciated in the texts. These deities are represented in the individual images of grahas but in the panels or Paṭṭikās of Nava Graha or nine planets all these details are omitted. These panels are popularly engraved in virtually all the important temples in Gujarat. Yet in hands of Sūrya are lotuses. The two hands of moon also carry lotuses, the other planets have the rosary or at times water-pot *kamaṇḍalu*. The Nava Graha Paṭṭikās establish our cosmic relationship with the planets that swirl about in the infinite firmament. The nine planets are Sūrya (Sun), Candra (Moon), Maṅgala (Mars), Budha (Mercury), Bṛhaspati (Jupiter), Śukra (Venus), Śani (Saturn), Rāhu (Neptune) and Ketu. These Paṭṭikās are carved with a view to pacify the planets for granting benediction and welfare to all the living beings. The tradition of Nava graha paṭṭikās is common both in the temples of North India and South India.

Dancing Bhairava is the dreadful form of Śiva when he is engaged in the frightening dance of destruction. This is one of those sculptural pieces which are well preserved in the step-well as it has not suffered the erosion caused by weather. He has twenty hands. His eight right hands hold a dagger, a hand in striking gesture, a thunder bolt, a baton, kettle drum-"damaru", a noose-pāśa, a snake, some object between the thumb and the finger. Ten left hands have some object between

finger tips, holding snake by tail, open palm, a shield, a goad, a scull, bowl with fish and a severed human head. The wild dogs are his mount or *vāhana*. They maul at a corpse and one of them springs up to lick the head that Bhairava is holding in his hand. The goblins near the feet are devouring the severed arms of the corpse. The surrounding frame has an image of Gaṇeśa and the miniature female figures are those of the Yoginīs. Bhairava himself is the leader of the Gaṇās and Yoginīs. This composition is similar to the figure of Bhairava, but it is more dynamic and full of terror. Agni Purāṇa (52.4-10) and Viṣṇu Dharmottara Purāṇa (3.59) have descriptions of Bhairava.

Hanumān is standing in a heroic posture in the Queen's step-well. He is the devotee of Rāma and there are thousands of temples dedicated to him both independently and along with the image of Rāma wherein he sits near his feet. In Queen's step-well the image is that of a warrior Hanumān. His left foot is firmly placed on the ground while his right foot is crushing the demon wielding a sword but he lies listless on the ground.

Hanumān is depicted with four hands. His right hand is resting on his left knee while the other right hand is out to attack the enemy. One of his raised left hand seems to be holding an uprooted tree. The other left hand has a raised tarjanī the pointing index finger or fore finger is straight. The thumb and the third finger are joined to it to make a loop. This gesture is repeated in several images. It denotes a threat to enemies. The long raised tail of the deity curling around his back is shown behind his head. The figure of Hanumān is very meagrely ornamented, a crown, a necklace, armlets and anklets. He has put on a short loin cloth or *kaupīna* like that of a recluse. His depiction with four hands endows him with the divine propensities denoting affinity with Śiva.

Sarasvatī is the important goddess in the Puranic literature of India. There are several lores about the Goddess. But she is the consort of Brahmā, the creator and is primarily associated with knowledge and learning. She is the Goddess of speech or word. She is the Sātvika aspect of the Divine Goddess. She is also known as Vāgdevī. She is associated with water and as she is the sacred river which remains unseen in the saṅgama- confluence of Gangā, Yamunā and Sarasvatī. Moreover, she is the patron of lakes, tanks and step-wells. Devī Bhāgavata tells us that Lord Kṛṣṇa was among the first to worship her (9-456). There is a beautiful standing image of the Goddess in the panel on the third floor facing the East in the Queen's step-well. She has matted hair with a jewel engraved on it. The orb surrounding her face is in the form of lotus leaves reflects her divine halo in which beauty and non-attachment are gently integrated. She has a smiling face permeating joy all around. She wears ear-rings and several

other ornaments. They are necklace, maṅgala sūtra, long garland, jewel studded armlets and bracelets, breast-band, decorative waist-band, the sārī's end hangs folded till the knees, and a long flower garland or vanamālā.

She has four hands. The upper right hand has the akṣamālā, lower right is in the blessing gesture. The upper left hand has the vīṇā-the lute and the lower left hand has the kamaṇḍalu or the pitcher. On the surrounding frame there is Gaṇeśa with the image of seven Mātṛkās or mother goddesses. On the right side the miniature images are of Kumārī sitting in *lalitāsana*, and the standing figures of Vaiṣṇavī, Vārāhī and Indrāṇī in the *tribhanga* (three-bend) posture. On the left panel on the top is Gaṇeśa, the sitting image is of Cāmuṇḍā and the standing images are of Brāhmī and Māheśvarī in the *tribhanga* pose. Near the feet of the main image are two attendants standing on either side. They are holding garlands in hand. The art treatises Agni Purāṇa (49-20), Rūpamaṇḍana (5.62) and Viṣṇu Dharmottra (3.64.1-4) and other books, all describe in detail the *mūrtividhāna* of the Goddess Sarasvatī.

River Goddesses have an important place in the step-well. Their images are spangled in between the panels. The goddess is shown with four hands holding a Varadamālā, rosary, a lotus and a pitcher.

The image of one of the goddesses is canopied with a three-hooded serpent. The usual ornaments adorn her graceful figure. Snakes and river goddess have an intimate relationship, as water snakes are always found wriggling in the waters. They, therefore, naturally find their true representation in the step-well which is essentially a water reservoir.

Sūryāṇī the consort of Sūrya or the Sun is an independent standing image is a frontal pose. The Goddess has matted hair in the form of a crown or *mukuta*. Behind her face is a luminous orb in the shape of a lotus leaf. In her ears she wears *kuṇḍala* ear-rings in the shape of a conch. She has a necklace, round her neck, a long studded garland, bracelets and armlets. A flower garland hangs right below the knees. She wears a waist-band and a thin textured sārī, the folds of which hang between her thighs. In her feet she has her anklets. She has four hands. In her upper right hand she holds a lotus with the stalk *nāla*, in the lower one she holds a *varadākṣa mālā*, a rosary. The upper left hand is broken while the lower left hand holds a water pot or kamaṇḍalu. In either side of the panel near the feet of the goddess are two-two attendants, on the top of the image is a semi-circle arch with engravings which are not quite recognisable. It is a very impressive image revealing grace, dignity and luminosity befitting a consort of one, whose refulgence lights the whole universe.

Gods and their Consorts

Gods and their consorts illumine several panels in the Queen's step-well. Beautiful images of Viṣṇu with Lakṣmī, Śiva with Pārvatī or Umā Maheśvara as it is popularly known and Brahmā with Brahmāṇī are the conjugal images of the trinity of the Supreme Godhead. Besides these, the images of Vedic and Puranic gods are all represented with their spouses. Their faces are beaming with effusive love and affection as they behold each other with tender love and grace. This duality of forms has the supreme philosophic context of Prakṛti and Puruṣa. The creator and his creation is a loving union. Though appearing different, they are one inseparable whole. Psychologically they present the unity of the male and female principle which resides in the psyche of every man and woman i.e. man in woman and woman in man as we earlier alluded to in the concept of Śakti and Śiva as Ardhanārīśvara and Lakṣmī and Viṣṇu in the unity as Kamalā-Viṣṇu. All these conjugal images are chiselled according to the lores of the puranic texts and also according to the *mūrtividhāna* in canonical treatises. Thus they give full expression to the spiritual and symbolic meaningfulness of the several deities as gods and goddesses. Apart from the spiritual ethos they also convey the fullness of life emphasizing the household family life of man and god. The life that is world affirmative and planned according to the discipline of four āśramas conceived by Rṣis.

- (1) The Brahmacharya : celibacy is to be observed by the student in the Gurukula or residential house of the Guru till he is 25 years.
- (2) Gr̥hastha : Family life and economic growth, progress and prosperity till 50 years, leading a dynamic life.
- (3) Vānaprastha : Slowly entering into the field of social life and services for welfare of the fellow beings and retiring from personal into social advancement and dedicated philanthropic life.
- (4) Samnyāsa is the complete retirement from family life and entering into the Spiritual Sādhana and dedicating rest of the life for spiritual preaching and practice.

In this way the four aspects of life are harmoniously blended in Hindu way of life. The practice is not only recommended for men and women but gods and goddesses as well. In the supreme Godhead both Divine Father and Divine Mother are united.

There are some of the very outstanding conjugal images of gods and their consorts.

Name of God	Consort	Vāhana
Brahmā	Brahmāṇī	Haṁsa-Swan
Viṣṇu	Mahā Lakṣmī	Garuḍa
Śiva	Śakti	Bull-Vṛṣabha
Maheśa	Umā	Nandi-Bull
Nārāyaṇa	Lakṣmī	Garuḍa
Gaṇeśa	Riddhi and Siddhi	Mouse
Agni	Svadhā	Ram
Sūrya	Sūryāṇī	Horses
Kāma	Rati and Prīti	Parrot
Indra	Indrāṇī	Elephant <i>Airāvata</i> with Seven Trunks
Kubera	Bhadra	Elephant

These images enhance the beauty of the well and blend the physical with the methaphysical into spiritual sublimity. Moreover, gods and sages prominent in the purāṇas are all sculpted with great devotion and dedication by the step-well artists.



8. THE ETERNAL WOMAN OF GRACE AND BEAUTY

From the celestial world of the Divine, the artists of Queen's step-well glide into the world of human beings but this has been done with such imagination of grace, beauty and harmony that one is thrilled with their creativity, compositional dexterity and excellence. In between the panels depicting gods and goddesses and humans are the panels of saints and ascetics in meditation and austerity, women in worship and devotion or else engaged in household chores of daily life and women with their children. They are all full of grace which is so captivating and inspiring as well. One wonders at the broad vision and insight of artists' peering eyes that reveal every important aspect of life of the ancient and early medieval period with supreme synthesis leading to oneness.

Mātr-Vātsalya Mūrtis : It is a supreme theme which has charmed the attention of man from the most prehistoric times to the medieval and the modern day. It is precisely the human mother who transcends into the divine mother. She not only tames, trains and nurtures man into culture, but all the cultures and civilisations are nurtured in her benevolent laps. In our country motherhood and fatherhood of god comingle into one integral divinity which is so aptly expressed in all our art creations.

Putra Vātsalya Nāyikā : She is holding the child in her arms, diverting its attention from other things and showing him the moon. It is so reminiscent of the famous poet Suradāsa who wrote such lyrical poems 500 years latter on this subject of maternal love where baby Kṛṣṇa insists on mother Yaśodā to give him the moon and mother looks on at him completely charmed.

"Mother give me the moon for playing."

Mother holding the child plucking Mango from a tree : The baby sees the mango hanging from the branch while mother holds the child high enough for enabling it to pluck the mango. We see the eagerness of the child and compassion of the mother entwined in effusive love.

Mother and Children : Mother enjoying the sight of her playing children while she keeps the youngest clinging to her waist. One child is restless and is

calling the child on the mother's waist to come down. The small child is eagerly looking at the calling child. They are all set in a mango grove (*āmrakuñja*) as bunches of mangoes are shown hanging in the back ground. This is a very beautiful composition of *vātsalya*. The mother has put on sparse ornaments. The *bhāva* or expression of the mother and the children, depicted on their faces, is very evocative of tender emotional feelings.

Nāyikās or Devāṅganās : Over 200 panels are dedicated to these Nāyikās which heighten the beauty of the step-well. It is a superb picturisation in which godhead, gods and humans all mingle in each other to express Truth, Goodness and Beauty. In these images of maidens to use Jaishankar Prasads' words :

“सुन्दर साकार बना था ।”

“Beauty has transformed into visual form.” The music and rythm of life is as it were frozen on the stone walls of the step-well to express its eternal joy. Is not Eternity best expressed in stone ? Stone is the timeless symbol which lasts the longest.

Darpaṇa Sundarī : It is a beautiful figure of a nāyikā wearing her earring. She is fully dressed donning beautiful ornaments. The necklace with inset jewels, a maṅgala sūtra and a long studded garland which is also bending with slight twist of the body, balance with a slight bend on the right foot. Moreover, mekhalā or a waist-band studded with jewels and rows of ornamented designs cling to it. The sārī is neatly folded and hangs between the thighs. Bracelets are worn around her wrists while anklets adorn her feet. It is a very elegant and graceful tall figure. The pointed nose and smiling face express the inner delight of the nāyikā. Her tender fingers are so artistically sculpted that you are reminded of the graceful fingers of Ajanta paintings. This is a unique figure that is completely preserved with no damage by weather at all. She is seen standing between two decorated pillars. A female attendant is standing near her feet carrying a basket on her head.

In another panel is the same theme of *darpaṇa sundarī* is expressed with another innovation. In this image the maiden is depicted as lining her eyes, with collyrium, while in another hand she holds the mirror. The whole panel shows a very graceful figure of a maiden lost in the self-admiration of her own beauty and enthralled with it.

Nāyikā writing letter to her beloved is so well expressed in a standing figure which again has the back-ground of a mango grove with three-three mangoes hanging over the head of the nāyikā. She stands lost in abstraction with paper in one hand and the other hand holding a pen which she is dipping in the ink-pot. It is being

carried by a boy in a very eager interesting pose as he is looking towards her. The maiden, however, is looking blank rather absent minded, lost in the reverie of her beloved, knowing not how to convey her feelings of sadness and her agony of *viraha*-separation from him. She has put on usual ornaments. She stands in *tribhanga*. Her bent body is balancing on the right foot. She is standing between two pillars very neatly carved. It is indeed an eye catching panel of a love-lorn woman a *virahini*.

Nāyikā teased by a monkey is a very artistic panel. A naughty monkey leaps at her and is tugging and pulling at her clothes. She is very annoyed and is threatening it with her upraised hand and open palm. Her second arm, however, keeps the pulled *sārī* in order before it slides down or gets torn. She is beautifully dressed and adorned. She has decorated her hair in an exquisite hair-style wherein the hair-knot is resting on her shoulder. She has put on bracelets round her wrists and an elaborate armlet around her arms. Studded necklace and long garland hanging over her breasts. Waist-band has hanging bells girdling around her hips. It has slid down a little due to the monkey-pulling at the dress. A dwarfish attendant is also alarmed. The *nāyikā* is shown standing between two pillars with beautifully carved designs on the top of a leafy canopy above the head of the maiden. This shows an arboreal setting in the background.

Sadya-snātā Nāyikā : is the name given to a panel in which is carved a very beautiful image of a maiden just returning after bathing. She has put on a *sārī* clinging to her body. There are no ornaments except a necklace of beads around her neck. She is shown squeezing her long hair from which drops of water are falling on the ground. A swan sitting on a small pedestal is drinking these falling-drops, taking the droplets to be pearls. The swan is famous for having pearls as its food. The slim and graceful figure of the maiden is set between two nicely carved pillars in a leafy grove. This figure is found in perfect condition. The weather has not inflicted any erosion of disfiguring the image. In the back-ground is a tree with mangoes dangling over the head. Over the pillars are highly decorative clustered-leaves. All enhance the beauty of the composition. It is also described as maiden squeezing her hair.

Śuka-Kanyā or the maiden with a parrot is a very attractive panel. The slim, tall and graceful figure is slightly bent, balancing the body on the right leg. The figure is moderately ornamented, a necklace, long garland, bracelets, armlets, waist-band and anklets. Her right hand is raised holding the branch of a mango tree. On the left hand is seated a very cute parrot looking at the maiden with great earnestness. The maiden is also fondly looking at her pet bird, the long tailed parrot. Her upper garment or the mantle or the *uttariya* is hanging from her shoulders, with very neat

folds. It is shown in the back ground. As usual the figure is placed in between two beautiful carved round pillars with dangling clusters of mangoes and decorated mango leaves on the top. The whole image has suffered no erosion. The warm feelings of maiden for her pet is well expressed in this image. It faithfully depicts the vātsalya of the maiden for the pet bird.

Nāyikā admonishing a bearded man who is infatuated by her beauty and charm. The maiden is well dressed and adorned with all the ornaments. Her hair are well groomed with a rounded coiffure over which is shown the studded ear-ring. The nāyikā is holding the beard of the man making advances towards her, as he looks at her completely spellbound. Her left hand with open palm is restraining him while he is holding her leg. What is interesting to note is that the enchanted man has lost his height and stature and has become dwarfish. The restraining palm, the admonishing looks, the tugging at the beard and the charmed man all create a scene of emotional tenor whereby the artist is as it were giving a message that the infatuated man loses his stature. It has erotic tones, instead of invoking *śṛṅgāra rasa* it evokes *hāsya rasa* wherein the bearded love-lorn man becomes an amusing person evoking laughter.

Nāyikās in worship and devotion is depicted in several panels. They are shown in between the panels of divine images. Thus creating the serenity which shows maidens moving towards the gods and goddesses for offering prayers. We have the maiden holding the chowṛī or the fly-whisk which she waves in honour of the divinity.

Another panel depicts a maiden going to the temple, carrying a bell in one hand and a censer in the other hand. It spreads aromatic smoke for sanctifying the atmosphere.

Again in one panel we have a maiden going to the temple for evening worship, holding a lamp in one hand and the fly-whisk in the other.

In another panel is a maiden going to the temple holding a garland of flowers for offering to the deity. There are many more panels with devotional fervour. As one looks on these beautiful and elegant figures in various moods of worship and self-abnegation, the whole atmosphere of *śṛṅgāra* or romance of several other panels is transformed in a devotional mood of prayers, worship and self surrender to the divine. Endless description of these lovely images could be extolled, as over 200 images of Nāyikās have been chiselled by the great artists of the Queen's step-well. All these images give full expression of the dedication and devotion of the masters.

When we behold so many images of devout women, we wonder whether the artist wishes to convey to us that women are the true custodians of Dharma. In their fondled laps the culture and civilisation are cradled and nurtured, for fulfilment of life's objective. All these Nāyikās sculpted on the walls of the Queen's step-well present before us one Eternal Woman of grace and beauty in endless variations of exquisite charm.

Nāyikās in several moods are depicted in so many panels that embellish the walls of the Queen's step-well. In one panel an ornamented maiden is shown stretching her graceful slim body popularly called "**Ālāsa Kanyā**" taking *angādāi*, while an admiring bearded man standing near the feet of the maiden is swaying the fly-whisk or **chowrie**.

In another panel we see a maiden who has put on all the ornaments and is enamoured and lost in the admiration of her own beauty is pointing to her breasts.

In another panel we have the figure of a maiden who curiously looks at the camel sitting near her feet while a female attendant standing nearby holds a pitcher of water.

In one panel the maiden is shown to be frightened and irritated and starts removing her clothes to ward off the scorpion that starts crawling on her body. It shows the haste with which she is casting away the scorpion before it strikes its sting. Yet she is shy of revealing her beauty, looks down.

There is another pose depicting the maiden as unrobing before going for the bath and covering her face with the palm of her hand due to bashfulness. There is yet another pose in which she returns from the bath and is shown as putting on her dress.

One panel depicts a well dressed maiden after putting on all the ornaments is applying a herbal stick of red colour on her lips. This shows the love of ancient women for dress, ornaments and cosmetics. We come across one panel in which one young maiden is putting on the line of vermillion in the parting of the hair the age old custom which shows that the woman is married and prays for the long life of her husband.

Yet in another panel woman is shown playing with the falls or **Kanduka-kriḍā**.

Dancing Apsarā is another graceful dancing pose in which the dancing maiden is fully dressed and has put on all ornaments and in the course of dancing she

slightly bends to point to her toes. This reveals the profound knowledge of the art of dancing by ancient sculptors.

In one panel dedicated to music we see a maiden playing on flute. The whole pose is so graceful that we see her fully absorbed in the scintillating tunes of her celestial music. The sculptor has so faithfully represented the emotion or *bhāva* of the musician.

Thus in panel after panel we are spell bound to behold how the abstract beauty is transformed into most sublime graceful and enchanted concrete forms on the walls of the sacred well. All these poses and compositions present the grace and beauty of human body charmingly chiselled by the great artists of profound insight and vision.

Nāga-Kanyās, Yoginīs and Tantra

Nāga-Kanyas, Yoginīs and Tantric influences are aptly dealt with by the artists with equal zeal and insight. There are so many panels that depict in various poses, the tantric ethos.

Just two representative panels are indited to show the depth with which the masters have given vent to their creative genius. Tantric depictions are often treated with erotic expressions, but the artists of the step-well have not over-stepped that moral constraints in their compositions which would vitiate the devotional and spiritual serenity of this underground shrine. This balance of the corporal and the spiritual has been sadly missed by the artists of Konark and Khajurao though their creations in themselves are of great artistic merit.

Nāgakanyā with a fish-bowl is an extra ordinary composition which has drawn the attention of connoisseurs of art. It has its own subtle message to give. Probably through this image the artist wished to convey how the *Kāma* aspect of the four *puruṣārthas* (*Dharma, Artha, Kāma* and *Mokṣa*) is to be judiciously handled. Lord Kṛṣṇa tells us in *Gītā* that He himself is *Kāma* within the constraints of *Dharma* or moral righteousness. This is aptly expressed in this fascinating panel.

A nude Nāgakanyā is holding a fish-bowl in her right hand. Her slim and graceful body is slightly bent and balanced on the left leg. A snake is coiling around her left thigh to reach the fish bowl, encircling from behind the back. Her left hand is raised restraining the serpent from further advances. Her figure is elegant and has very few ornaments - a necklace of beads round the neck, an armlet and bracelet and anklet round the ankles, earring in her ears. The rest of the body is bare, carved very realistically giving all anatomical details and contours. The image

stands between two round decorated pillars. On top of the image is a pedestal on which three owls are sitting. A peacock seated below is looking towards the coiling snake. This peculiar composition is a reconciliation of the paradoxes of life which often baffle mankind.

The three owls on the top of the *nāga-kanyā* panel convey that this composition depicts the scene at night, the period when the owls are awake and active. The bowl with fish or *matsya* is a tantric depiction. Fish is one of the constituents of the five *makāras*. Arthur Avlon interprets *matsya* by explaining the *samāsa* or the compound as *mat* meaning the ego. The serpent is the symbol of *Kāma* or the *libido* in the Freudian terminology. It shows the tendency of the passions to beguile the ego towards licentiousness. The *Nāgakanyā* raises the palm of the right hand to caution the snake. "thus far and no further" rather restraining its further advances. The peacock in between the legs of the *Nāgakanyā* further affronts the snake from transgressing its limits. Peacock is the natural enemy of snake. Peacock is often taken as a symbol of non-attachment and not moved by passions. Apart from laymen, this panel cautions the tantrics also to restrain the limits of their *sādhana* with a spirit of non-attachment or else it would become perverse and land the aspirants or *sādhakas* in disgrace.

Nāga-Kanyās are chiselled in several panels of the Queen's step-well. They are all nude and a snake is coiling around. These have tantric representation. In the gross stage, the snake represents the gross wild passions that surge in the heart of man, seeking transient carnal delights. But in the sublime form the snake is the repository of great spiritual power or *kuṇḍalinī* the coiled snake residing in the pelvis of man and when awakened by spiritual *sādhana* it passes through the spinal cord and reaches the Apex of the brain which is like a thousand petalled lotus *saḥasrāra* the abode of infinite bliss of Śiva. Thus *Kuṇḍalinī* is the Śakti when aroused by *sādhana* it unites the aspirant with Śiva the epitome of the Divine Godhead who grants him endless bliss '*akhaṇḍa-ānanda*. This is experienced by saints absorbed in deep meditation.

The *Nāgakanyā*, however, represents the initial stage of tantras which is more corporal. In one panel a snake has coiled around the leg and arm of the nude *Nāgakanyā*, while she is threatening by her other free hand preventing it to advance any further.

In another panel the snake has coiled around the thigh of the *Nāgakanyā* and is trying to reach the fish bowl in her hand while she is admonishing it with her free hand commanding it to start uncoiling at once and not defile her yogic or tantric *sādhana*.

One panel depicts a *nāyikā* fully adorned with precious ornaments, threatening a snake that is coiling round her leg. There are several panels portraying various poses conveying tantric thoughts for the aspirants of *tantra*.

Yoginīs are the devotees of Bhairava-rudra and Bhairavī, the dreaded aspect of Śiva and Śakti. This is essentially described in the Tantric *Sādhana*. There are several panels devoted to Yoginīs.

In one of the panels we see a **Dancing Yoginī** absorbed in herself. She is nude and in her left hand she holds a staff on the top which is a human skull or *Khatvāṅga* while her right hand is in a dancing pose holding a fish-bowl over head. She wears a necklace and a garland swaying over her breasts. Yet she is in a graceful pose with her bent right leg on the ground, while her left leg is raised. Below it, a goblin is engaged in devouring a severed limb of a corpse. She is shown in dancing pose between two rotund decorative pillars. Her hair are matted *jaṭā-juta* and the round earrings are like that of an ascetic. Her nose is pointed and her half closed eyes seem to be concentrated on its tip. From her shoulder hangs a noose. It circles around her implanted leg. This is a well preserved panel as there are no erosion marks disfiguring the image.

There is another image of Yoginī wearing bone ornaments. She holds a skull-bowl with fish while a dog-the *vāhana* of Bhairava is seen leaping at it. Three birds are shown as perching on the edge above.

Yoginīs in their several other poses are depicted on the walls of the well emphasising the tantric rituals of *sādhana*.

Tapasvīs, Tapasvinīs and Ascetics occupy many panels of the step-well. In this grand picturisation there are beautiful evocative sculptures depicting the worldly and the spiritual aspects of life. There are images of devotees performing penance. There are ascetics standing with folded hands. Tapasvīs standing with both the hands raised above the head, ascetics standing on one leg while hands are held above the head. Ṛṣis absorbed in deep meditation or again the recluse sitting or standing midst five fires lit in four directions and blazing sun above head called the *pañcāgni tapaścaryā*. Besides these panels are ascetics in various forms of penance and meditation. Moreover, as stated earlier there are several panels depicting Umā or Pārvaṭī as *tapasvinī* penancing midst *pañcāgni* standing on one foot in the attire of an ascetic. All these ascetic panels are in the midst of panels of gods and goddesses, *nāyikās* and *nāgakanyās*, *yogīs* and *yoginīs* signifying in the world the spirit of non-attachment or *anāsakti* midst the vast turmoil of attractions pervading all around. The multifarious aspects of life are given full expression in this unique step-well by the master artists of those days.

Narrative lores from the Indian classical folk lores, Purāṇas and Sāhitya literature, are engraved in horizontal rows in between the place above and below the panels, depicting the bigger size images of gods, goddesses and others.

The narratives from **Rāmāyaṇa**, depict life of Rāma, the battle of Lankā between Rāma and Rāvaṇa, the battle scenes of monkeys fighting for Rāma, the duel between monkeys and Rāvaṇa's soldiers etc.

The several popular stories of **Mahābhārata** are well engraved in the horizontal rows of the step-well. Besides these, there are rows of elephants in various playful poses, camels, deer, swans and birds, leaves and lotus flowers. These carvings animate the hard stone walls of the well and create an exquisite harmony of gods and goddesses, men and women, birds and animals, goblins and kinnars, flowers and fruits, forests and groves. All these enliven the beauty of the step-well. The rows of narratives look like embroidery of lovely tender designs engraved on the hard stone walls of the step-well.

Vanasthālī or Forest of Pillars decorates the seven storeys of the Queen's step-well. There are 212 pillars, four pavilions and branching structure. They are so dense that at the first sight they appear as a dense forest or woodland of pillars. It is an experience to behold these pillars so well carved in most beautiful patterns. The rhythmic floral designs are engraved with such innovative skill that one is astounded to behold such lyrical expression of artistic sensibility. Apart from arbo-real designs they embody popular episodes of monkey and the crocodile, where the monkey gets rid of the crocodile by telling it that he had left his heart on the tree, or the story of the Elephant and the alligator which is taken from the Bhāgavata, known as the episode of *Gajendra Mokṣa*. We have the scene of Śakuntalā's son *Bharata* counting the teeth of a lion. Besides these there are engravings of quarrelling monkeys, pair of birds in cajoling love, the pair of dancers, the playful kinnars or fairies the hybrid *vyālas*, a united form of a lion and an elephant, lion faces, goblins with rounded eyes and decorated caryatids. The whole planning of these pillars is simply fascinating and brings to the fore the great insight, imagination and skill with which these creations of artistry adorn the Queen's step-well.



9. TEMPLE OF IMMORTAL BLISS

Temple of Immortal Bliss is what the Queen's step-well is. It is the most outstanding creation built by the great masters of Indian Sculpture. We have several temples of great artistic representations throughout the country which hand down to us "our cultural heritage" most benevolently. But there is no underground shrine in the form of a step-well which can match the matchless beauty of this great water reservoir built by the dedicated Queen Udayamatī.

Queen's step-well is not a dream like memorial of beauty, but it is a concrete depiction of the salient features of Indian Culture in a pictorial manner which is most lively. Great Bharata of Nāṭyaśāstra had conceived that all the currents of arts had their confluence in the drama and gave us his monumental treatise the Nāṭya Śāstra. He gives detailed suggestions as to how these arts are integrated in literature, music, dance, histrionics, sculptures etc. into aesthetic organism. The artists of the step-well were fully aware of this. The images in the step-well touch almost all important facets of life and give significant meaning to the artistic expression handed down to us in literature, purāṇa, kathās, folk lores, dance, music etc. They only enhance spiritual understanding. The soul of these masterly creations is the aesthetically experienced emotion or *Rasa*. They are visual creations of physiological and psychological expressions of human emotions. The artists of the Vāpī crystalise the multifarious ideas by combining all the human emotions into an aesthetic activity culminating in an experience of joy or *Rasa*. Through the medium of these fascinating sculptures the artists arouse these emotions through various sentiments and the Bhāvas. Bharat has categorised eight *Rasas* to which were added Śānta and Vātsalya. They give transcendental experience of *Rasa*.

1. Śṛṅgāra : Love - (a) Saṁyoga (meeting) : All Gods and Goddesses with their consorts.
(b) Viprayoga (Seperation) : Nāyikā writing a letter.
2. Hāsyā : Laughter : Nāyikā and the bearded man.
3. Karuṇā : Sorrow, compassion sympathy.
4. Raudra : Anger : Śiva Bhairava and Narasimha Avatāra
5. Vīra : Bravery : Rāma, Hanumāna

6. Bhayānaka : Terrible : Cāmuṇḍā, Bhairava, Yoginīs
7. Bibhatsa : Disgusting : Cāmuṇḍā, Bhairava, Yoginīs
8. Adbhuta : Wonderful : Child counting teeth of Lion, Sadya-snātā Nāyikā
9. Śānta : Peace : Sages in Meditation, penance tapas charyā
10. Vālsalya : Mother's Love : Mātr Vālsalya images; Śuka- kanyā

A closer study of the sculptures will reveal that these Rasas are expressed in the various images and above all express our spiritual understanding nay the perinial philosophy of our life.

As we stand in humble supplication musing on the step-well, the sculptures of the step-well reveal to our mental eye the temporal beauty melting away into spiritual enlightenment. Maidens in worship and devotion, gods and goddesses, saints and ascetics in *sādhana* all engrossed in self-surrender at the feet of the divine Lord. He who contains the entire cosmos and the drama of creation, sustenance and annihilation is enacted by the living beings in the eternal flow of life. Queen's step-well gives the grand, sacred message of spiritual fulfilment, liberation or *mokṣa* the ultimate summum bonum of human life, a path by which we can return to our divine master from whom we are stranded in the hurry and scurry of worldly life.

Udayamati's step-well is soul elevating aesthetic panorama of life in which the artists have brought down the divine on the Earth and raised man to meet the divinity on the Earth. Here art seems to mediate between the experience of the world and the experience of the transcendental.

This supreme artistic creation is yet to catch the eyes of the connoisseur of art as it is discovered but recently and opened for public view. As time rolls on, it will have its venerable, exalted position in the sculptural arts of our country.

As we behold the beauty of Queen's step-well, we are transported to a realm where eternal beauty floats on the cosmic waters of the well. This grand monument is the sweetest song of Queen Udayamati, culminating in cadence of prayer.



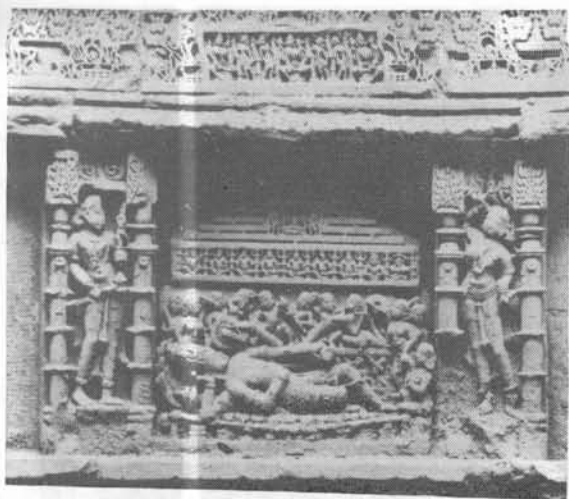


Fig. 1. Śeṣasayi Viṣṇu



Fig. 3. Varāha



Fig. 4. Vāmana



Fig. 2. Viṣṇu



Fig. 5. Paraśurāma



Fig. 6. Rāma



Fig. 7. Balarama



Fig. 8. Buddha



Fig. 9. Kalki



Fig. 10. Brahmā-Brahmāṇi



Fig. 11. Siva-Śakti



Fig. 12. Bhairava

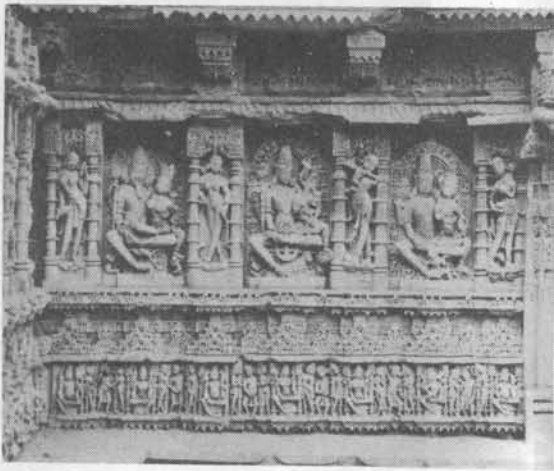


Fig. 13. Brahma-Sāvitṛī; Viṣṇu-Lakṣmī;
Umā-Maheśvara

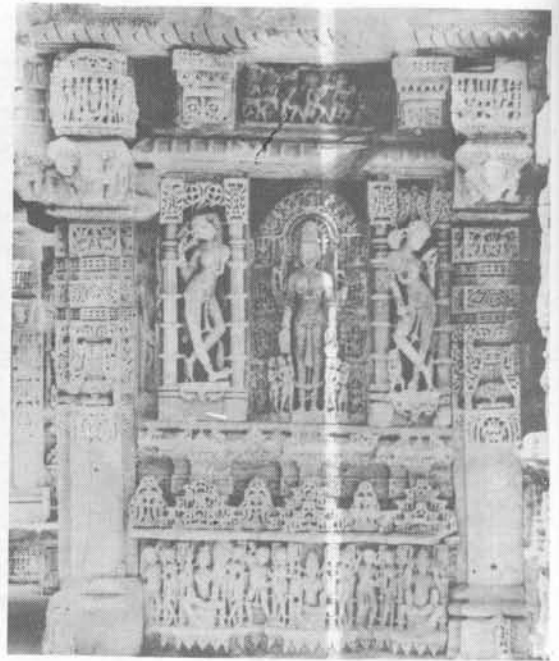


Fig. 14. Sarasvatī

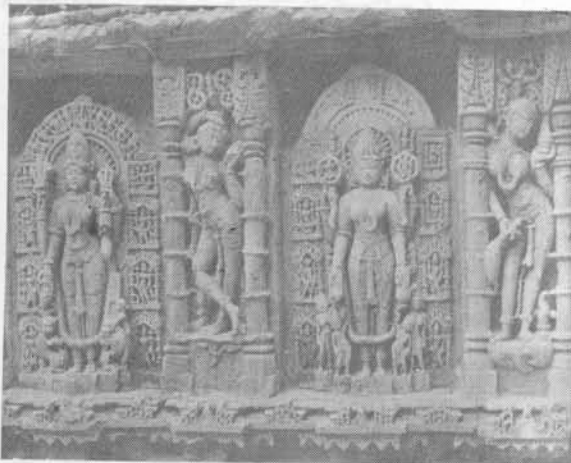


Fig. 15. Kṣemāṅkarī Durgā and Pārvatī



Fig. 16. Mahiṣāsurā Mardini



Fig. 17. Camunda



Fig. 18. Kaupin-Dhāriṇī Uma

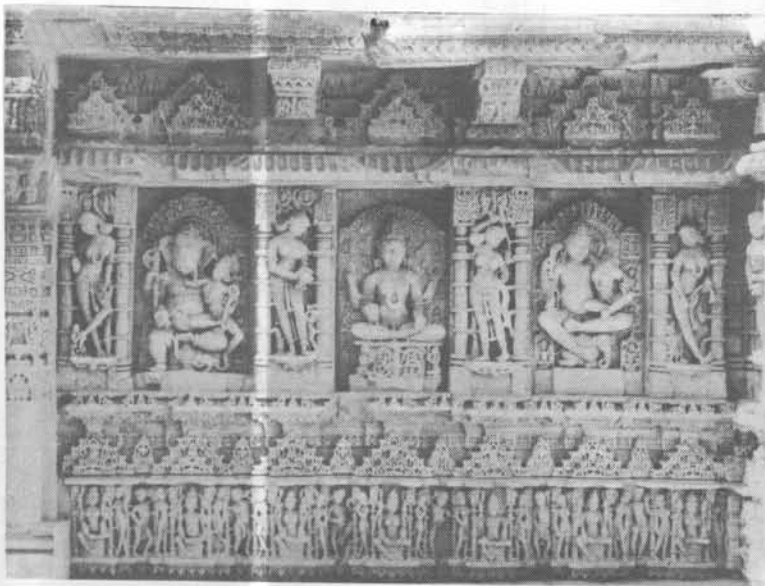


Fig. 19. Gaṇeśa with consort, Lakṣmī on lotus, Kubera



Fig. 20. Sūrya



Fig. 21. Vir Hanumāna



Fig. 22. Vasu



Fig. 23. Nāgakanya with fish-plate, peacock and owls



Fig. 24. Dhanvantari or Agastya



Fig. 25. Darpaṇasundarī



Fig. 26. Putra vatsalā Nāyikā



Fig. 27. Sadyasnatā Nāyikā
Squeezing Hair



Fig. 28. Śuka-Kanyā



Fig. 29. Nāyikā and the Bearded Dwarf

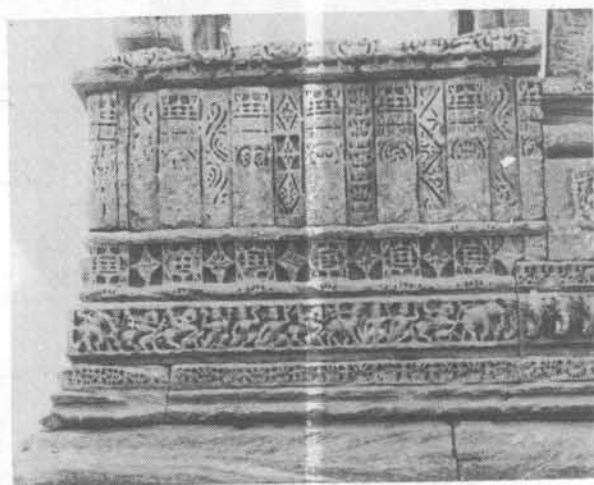


Fig. 30. Epic-Lores

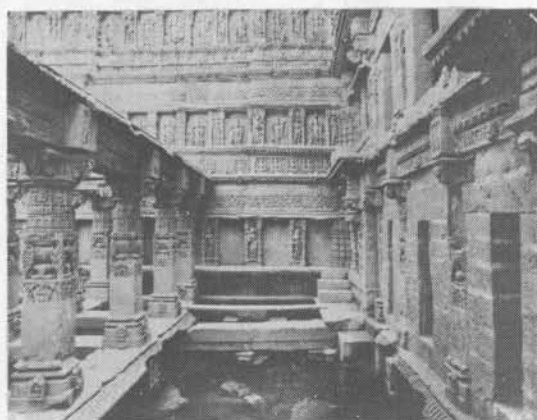


Fig. 31. Vanasthali of Decorated Pillars

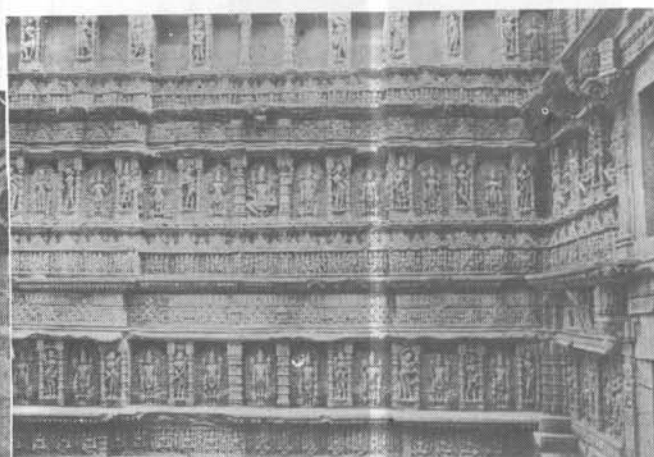


Fig. 32. Overall view



Mahārājñī Udayamati