Sacred Waters: Purity and Pollution
Stories from the Living Waters Museum Archives

Sara Ahmed, Founder, Living Waters Museum
Water as a Marker of Change

Political
Economic
Ecological / Environmental
Social
Cultural
Fluid dynamics

Photo credits: Pranadh Mampilamthoda
All relations between people and their environment are embedded in culture (UNESCO, 2003). Due to the elementary role of water for life, the ways to treat, handle and use water has forever been anchored in people’s cultural values and traditional practices.
Holy Water
Divine / Sacred Waters

- Water is pure (dirt as ‘matter out of place’, Mary Douglas)
- Water as a source of salvation (fasting)
- Water as a way to reach God (crossing the oceans)
- Water absolves sin (a ritual dip in holy rivers)
- Water supports life (from conception to childbirth to rituals of death)
- Water as an offering; a prayer; a symbol of fertility, mystic powers
- Water and healing (hot springs, medicinal properties)

*And yet access to water is determined by social relations of power*
Water and Social Organisation

- Traditional water sources – wells, ponds, springs, rivers, rain
- Step-wells in India / Central Asia
- Often funded by women as ‘good deeds’ / women’s agency in art
- Cool spaces for travelers, local community to meet, pray….
- Norms of collective action and community management ensured sustainability, equity
- But design of social space around water excluded many….
Digital interactive narrative on stepwells

Futuristic world through the eyes of a little girl, understanding water conflicts, rural-urban, surface/groundwater

Collective action, negotiation, behavioral change
‘Free’ Water: changing forms

*Parabs* (earthen pots), found along dusty roads; any passerby can take water from them irrespective of socio-economic background.
Bhistis sell water for a living in bye-lanes of old cities

Photo credits: Aslam Saiyad
Once upon a Pyaav

Documentary-animation film, made by VastuVidhaan Consultants

Mumbai’s public water fountains have disintegrated and been forgotten over the years. This virtual walk locates the last few remaining pyaavs in Mumbai and tells their stories.

https://confluence.mumbaiwaternarratives.in/water-build-heritage/exhibit02.php
Once upon a Pyaav
Postcards by Ar. Rahul Chemburkar

Sketches portraying the present and imagined conditions of pyaavs in Mumbai are reproduced in the form of postcards.

https://confluence.mumbaiwaternarratives.in/print/index.php
History of caste and water in Mumbai explained via graphics. Retelling of history to draw attention to the politics of caste in the current scenario

https://confluence.mumbaiwaternarratives.in/water-equity/exhibit02.php

Illustration credits: Siddhesh Gautam
We don't practice casteism!
Their utensils are separate because they're unhygienic!!

How dare you untouchables pollute our water!!

They don't let me use their toilet…
And my utensils are separate from theirs!
Pani Haq Samiti Calendar

Photostories and print calendar
by Pani Haq Samiti

Exhibits the milestones of voluntary water activist organisation Pani Haq Samiti in the form of a calendar, along with milestone days in the history of Mumbai’s access to water.
Gender and Water

“Do you know who brings water home for hundreds of rural families across India? Made of bronze, my long neck and wide collar help Jigna to hold me gracefully in the curve of her hip, as she walks back from the village well, careful not to spill water she has spent several hours collecting. On her head, she confidently balances another broad-based, brass pot, while sharing local news and singing along with her friends. I know its hard work for Jigna, particularly in the dry summer months, but she doesn’t complain even when she has to miss going to school on some days.”

- Ghada, a pot for fetching water
Women’s water work is never done!

- Gender division of labour – roots in patriarchy, capitalism, ideology
- Reproductive or domestic work – unpaid, care economy
- Time and energy spent in walking daily to fetch water across barren landscapes, wash clothes, utensils
- Head-loading heavy pots – health impacts, also poor water quality
- Girls: loss of childhood, learning
- Men do fetch water: drought, conflicts, transport – cycles, barrows
Women Water Work

Global digital exhibition to visualize women’s everyday roles in the domestic, productive and community spaces around water

Built through an open call for poems, images, videos, photographs

www.womenwaterwork.org