Living Waters Museum

THE DECCAN CHAPTER

A CONCEPT NOTE

Shivasamudra Falls on the Kaveri River in the Deccan Plateau

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PURPOSE AND DEFINITION

The idea behind developing a Deccan Chapter of water stories is to pilot a digital exhibition–with the potential for physical exhibits–that taps into the treasure trove of stories and artifacts related to water from the Deccan Plateau. As the next phase of the Living Waters Museum's "Water Chapters," such as Pune, Kolkata, and Goa, the stories from this exhibition seek to go beyond urban centers to encompass a geographical region with a unique composition and an even more distinctive history.

Designed to connect people from the region and around the world through a series of multi and mixed-media displays, the exhibition will be developed within a well-structured fluid heritage framework. This dynamic space will allow stakeholders to connect and contribute to the documentation of traditional practices, art, and research with the potential for scalability.

The exhibition aims to feature historiographies of water in its many forms and interpretations. Additionally, by collaborating with cultural organizations, experts, artists, researchers, and writers embedded in the study of this region, the goal is to develop a repository of water stories (including traditions, science, culture, etc.).

*"A *hybrid* exhibition and journey through the centuries on the convergence of water, life, and art in the Deccan Plateau."*

The Krishna River in Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh

The Deccan States. Archival Image Courtesy: Sarmaya Arts

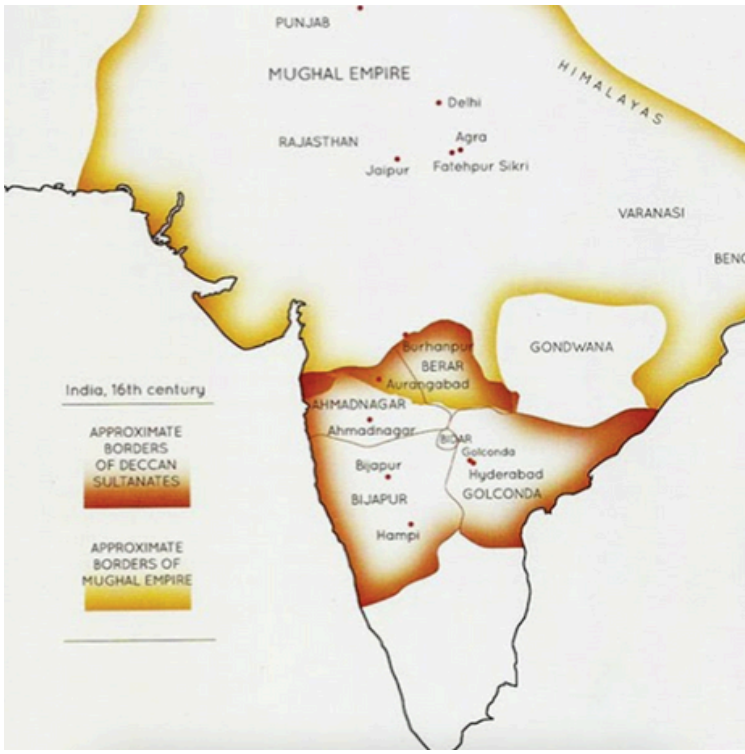
The Pennar River Canyon in Gandikota, Andhra Pradesh

Curatorially, the exhibition can be divided into three distinct categories that define the legacy of water in this region—Water Systems and the Architecture of Water, Pastoral Water Management, and Art and Archaeology.

The Deccan Plateau is that measure of land in South India which is bordered by the Vindhya and Satpura Ranges in the north, the borderlands of Tamil Nadu in the south, and the Western and Eastern Ghats on either side. At one time in history, the region boasted long coastlines, rich mines of diamonds and iron, and an abundance of crops that brought in cultures from far and near (Sastry, 1976). The Deccan, as we will refer to this region going forward, stretches across a significant majority of the Indian peninsula covering the states of Karnataka, Maharashtra, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, and parts of Tamil Nadu and Kerala. This exhibition will focus primarily on the first four states–the beating heart of some of India's most expansive dynasties.

Geologically, the region is a rocky terrain with the Deccan Traps (layers of igneous rocks laid down by basalt lava flows from the cretaceous period) in the northwest and is one of the largest watersheds in India with the perennial river systems of the Godavari, Krishna, and Kaveri and their many tributaries. Most of these rivers flow eastward (due to the gentle slope of the land) into the Bay of Bengal (Yang, 2013).

Today, it houses 11 UNESCO World Heritage sites and numerous other important monuments (World Monuments Fund, 2014). The region's immense legacy as a hub for trade, architecture, art, and agriculture is perhaps not as well-known or studied as it could be, not to mention its rich water history. From the Chalukyas in the sixth to eighth centuries, to the iron-age Maurya Empire, the Hoysalas and Kakatiyas of the 14th century, the Deccan Sultanates (of Ahmednagar, Birar, Bijapur, and Golconda) and the Vijayanagara empire, and more recent colonial powers like the Portuguese and the English, the Deccan is a testament to the ingenuity and creativity of all those who lived in and passed through it (Gribbles, 1896).



Map of the Deccan in the 16th Century. Image Courtesy:National Museum, New Delhi

THE ARCHITECTURE *of* WATER SYSTEMS

Naldurg Fort. Image Courtesy: Nicolas Morelle

Around the world, traditional water management systems thrive on collective responsibility for their maintenance and upkeep. When these systems break down, private and unregulated water extraction often takes its place, as seen in much of India today.

The traditional water systems of the Deccan are historical structures that have been in place for hundreds of years. The monsoon season brings more than three-fourths of India's total annual rainfall (Shahnavas, Sumesh, 2016) so communities have traditionally relied on this infrastructure, such as the Qanat, to store seasonal water for use during the dry months.

ANCIENT HYDRO TECHNOLOGIES

A Karez or Qanat is an underground aqueduct originating from ancient Persia. These technological marvels were modified centuries ago to perfectly fit with the topography of the Deccan (Govindankutty 2020). The organization or spatial distribution of Qanats allowed for cities to flourish away from natural water bodies. Cities like Bidar, Bijapur, Aurangabad, and Hukeri continue to thrive as a result of these systems.

Reactivating historic water systems and updating traditional practices can help address the challenges of the impending global water crisis. This approach can also transform our understanding of water by fostering a new ethic of care. Including the historic Deccani water systems in this exhibition can emphasize their potential to provide solutions for communities dealing with severe water issues.

Bukka 's Aqueduct, Hampi. Image Courtesy: Hampi.in

"When these systems break down, private and unregulated water extraction often takes its place, as seen in much of India today."

Vijayanagara Stepwell. Image Courtest: Deccan Heritage Foundation

Gangasagar Talao. Image Courtesy: JOIREM

Water architecture is often overlooked in heritage studies of the Deccan, receiving far less attention than the conservation of other monuments. Most data regarding the archaeological and historical use of landforms is found in district gazetteers, which tend to lack contextualization. Although surveys of settlement history in the Deccan have provided insights into demographic, economic, and political processes, they offer limited attention to water-related phenomena.

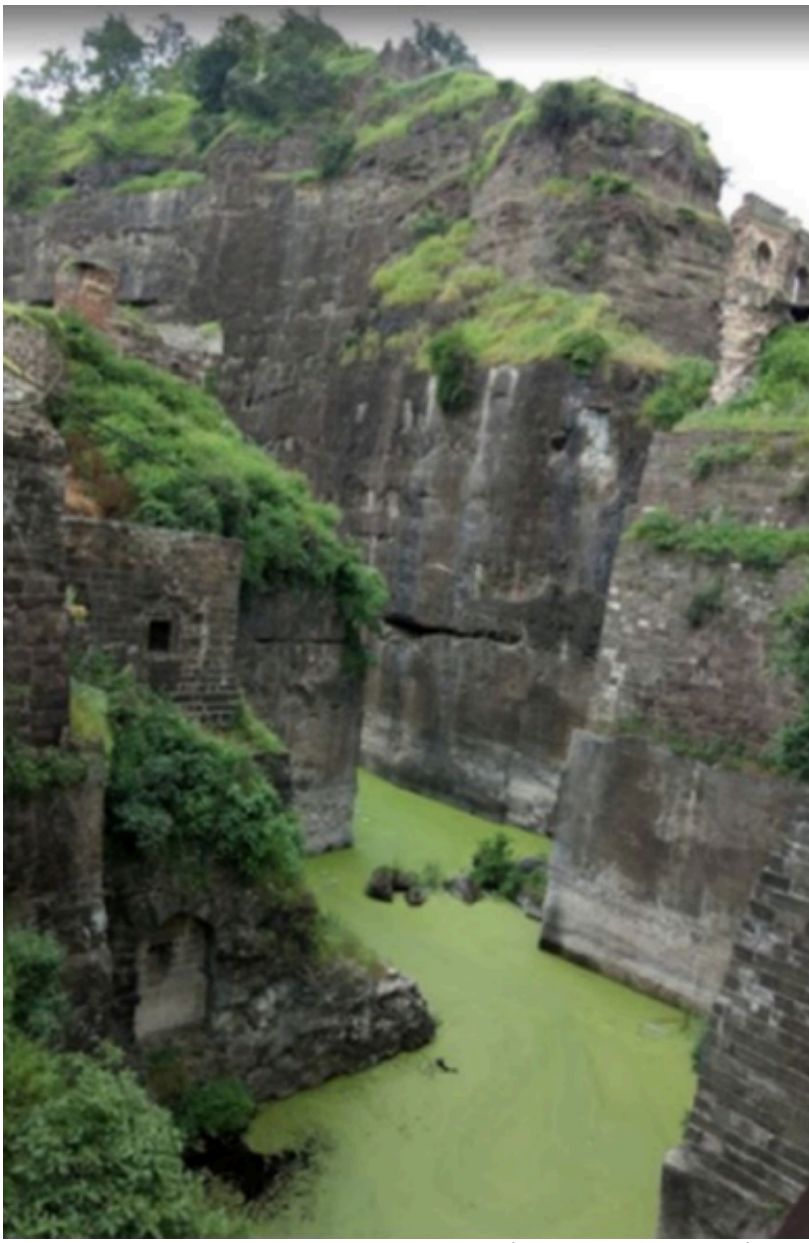
Following the findings of the French and Indian archaeological research missions in Deccani forts which aimed to examine the significance of the sultanate frontier forts such as Daulatabad and Naldurg, it is important to focus on the technological advancements of the sixteenth century (Morelle, 2022). This period saw the introduction of Iranian hydraulic techniques that were developed in Iran and Central Asia since ancient times. The presence of traditional systems such as rock-cut cisterns, open-dug wells, and tanks alongside canals and reservoirs, illustrates the Yadava period's reliance on rainwater storage for tens of thousands of people.

The Chalukyas of Badami and Kalyani were known for constructing canals, tanks, and reservoirs that allowed for access to water during seasons of drought, a frequent phenomenon in the region. Thotlakonda and Phanigiri, sites of ancient Buddhist monasteries called Viharas, house intricate water storage features (Sen, 2021). There is also archaeological evidence of the presence of above-ground aqueducts built during the Vijayanagara Empire, when efficient hydraulic systems meant that water could be transported across vast distances.

"The symbolic significance of water—both religious and political—is crucial for understanding its use within this culture."

The symbolic significance of water—both religious and political—is crucial for understanding its use within this culture. Effective water management was a critical element in the agricultural strategies and investments of both the Deccan sultanates and the Kingdom of Vijayanagara. As a result, water was closely linked to the power of the Sultans, reinforcing their legacy, prestige, and religious pronouncements.

Rock-cut Cisterns, Kanheri. Image Courtesy: Deccan Heritage Foundation



Daulatabad Fort, Aurangabad Image Courtesy: JOIREM

The Grand Anicut or Kallanai Dam in Tamil Nadu.
Image Courtesy: Wikimedia Commons

PASTORAL COMMUNITIES *& water*

Pastoralism is a production strategy in which individuals raise herd animals to sustain their livelihoods, particularly in areas characterized by arid and semi-arid lands (ASALs). This practice heavily depends on the availability of essential resources such as water, pastures, and labor, with water being the most critical factor. Due to limited rainfall in large swaths of the Deccan Plateau, crop farming often proves to be unviable leading communities to adopt pastoralism or nomadic pastoralism as a more reliable livelihood option.

The Deccan features extensive uncultivated grasslands that are not lush open pastures extending endlessly. This area consists of vast scrub plains that have endured the challenges of persistent droughts, floods, wars, and famine as well as periods of abundance. The earliest historical research on agro-pastoralism in the Deccan dates to the Neolithic and Iron Age periods, with evidence of these communities existing for over 12000 years.

Kuruba Pastoralists. Image Courtesy: The Hindu

Traditional shepherding communities, many of which are nomadic tribes, including the Dhangars, Kurumas, Gollas, and Kurubas, have been herding sheep in this region for generations (Murthy, Sontheimer, 1980). The sheep not only provide food, fiber, and manure for humans but also serve as a food source for various wild predators (WASSAN 2020). This landscape, along with its communities, habitats, and species, represents a significant part of India's ecology, considering that about 40% of the country is semi-arid. Despite being referenced in conservation literature and early ecological anthropology, and its connection to keystone species like the blackbuck and bustard, the grasslands and surrounding wetlands have been largely neglected in conservation studies. This system of Deccan pastoralism is designed to capitalize on the abundance of water and resources during favorable seasons while accepting that losses will occur during drier periods.

A Traditional Oti Bharni Ritual Performed by Married Pastoral Women Image Courtesy: Punyache Paani Exhibition

This strategy of predicting rainfall is critical to ensuring the survival of cattle and highlights a balanced approach to resource management and resilience in challenging environmental conditions (Rodrigues, 2017). Methods for sustainably using land and resources, and efficient mobility, are some of the strategies pastoralists employ that enable climate adaptability. However, it is important to point out that these communities grow more marginalized and face increasing uncertainties. As such, the periods of migration and distances traveled have grown, affecting their livelihoods and socio-economic growth.

A Pastoral Woman in the Deccan. Image Courtesy: Anthra

It is crucial, therefore, to look at pastoralism in this region as a complex socio-cultural system with technical prowess (in the methods displayed by the tribal communities for accessing water) as well as a nexus for ecological watershed development and biodiversity. With 2026 also being the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists, as well as the International Year of Women Farmers, water narratives from this area of exploration may also have the opportunity to showcase their work on a more global scale.

A Migratory Pastoral Family in the Deccan.
Image Courtesy: Anthra

Cherial Painting of Women Fishing for Crabs. Image Courtesy: Telangana Tourism, Google Arts and Cultures

ARTS, CRAFTS * *and* ARTISANS

Art has unequivocally served as a powerful expression of human experience and the essence of civilizational progression. The reverence for and deep appreciation of the physical environment has often been fundamentally tied to art.

From the late fifteenth to the late seventeenth century, Europeans set out to explore the world and were drawn to its heartland, the Deccan Plateau, where they encountered a vibrant world shaped by other cultures that had already integrated with India, particularly those from the Middle East and Africa.

Symbolism in Traditional Kotpad Textiles.
Image Courtesy: Google Arts and Cultures

“Understanding water as a signifier and influence on artistic expression.”

This section of the exhibition seeks to forge a connection between the symbolic representations of nature in art and architecture, with a particular focus on water, and its profound impact on society. Through an exploration of various artistic interpretations, we will delve into how water not only sustains life but also serves as a powerful metaphor in cultural narratives, reflecting humanity's relationship with the environment. The idea is to produce a series of artworks based on existing symbols that highlight water's essential role in shaping communities, storytelling, traditions, and individual identities, inviting thoughtful reflection on its significance in our lives.

For instance, many Buddhist monastic sites throughout the region prominently display sculptures or images of nagas—serpent-like beings closely associated with water, especially rainfall. Often depicted as a guardian of the land, these symbols are also connected to various water systems, including ponds, tanks, and rivers. Interestingly, there may be evidence that some of this imagery depicts the various methods of hydraulic engineering that were developed well ahead of imported systems. Other motifs like conch shells, swans, fish, lotuses, and even mythological creatures like merpeople are often found in miniatures, frescoes, murals, and sculptures across the region (Singh, 2014). These also point to the presence of water as a signifier and influence on artistic expression.

Palanquin Finials with Flourishes of Lotuses.
Image Courtesy: Metropolitan Museum of Art

CONCEPT *and* SCOPE

By collecting and creating stories on a range of topics under the aforementioned categories, the repository will provide knowledge, insights, and research to young people, academics, artists, and those interested in the Deccan. The fundamental goal at the heart of the Living Waters Museum is the dissemination of knowledge on water to those most at risk. Our goal with this exhibition is not to inundate an already crowded field with more books and policy briefs, but to incorporate alternative development practices and creative thinking approaches to involve a larger, more diverse audience by using storytelling, history, and cultural knowledge as touchstones.

This exhibition will focus on learning and reimagining water from a multidisciplinary and inclusive lens. The objective is to incorporate practices that will help scale up public outreach and engagement to include underrepresented and marginalized communities, particularly women, youth, and children.

At the heart of this exhibition is the history and culture of a region that demands to be discovered and paid its due focus. Over the next few months/year, the LWM team will reach out to potential collaborators and organizations to participate in designing and visualizing this digital exhibition. With the potential for workshops, roundtable discussions, physical exhibits, and a round of fellowships for artists and researchers, we aim to build a multimedia platform to highlight the rich history of water in the Deccan Plateau.

Deccan Water Stories envisages three features through its development and execution: Historiographies of Water, Cultural Mapping, and Dialogue Exchange.

Raja Deen Dayal's Moosi River
Image Courtesy: J. Paul Getty Museum

ROADMAP*

The Idgah Baoli in Hyderabad.
Image Courtesy: Civilsocietyonline.com

01

IDENTIFYING POTENTIAL PARTNERS

Across nonprofits, educational institutions, museums, galleries, art collectives, etc.

02

STRATEGIC PLAN OF ACTION

Using the curatorial categories to create an outline with partners.

03

CALL FOR FELLOWS AND CONTRIBUTORS

Inviting artist contributors and putting out a call for research fellows.

04

SELECTION PROCESS

Selecting fellows and creating mentorship pathways with institutional/organizational partners

05

PHYSICAL EXHIBIT MAP

Liaising with galleries, schools, and nontraditional venues to stage a traveling exhibit of this chapter.

06

WORKSHOPS-1 AND 2

Engagement workshops (and possible field visits) to facilitate a collaborative museum making process

07

FINAL STORIES AND ARTWORK

Reviewing the final stories and artwork, and organizing the material for physical and digital spaces.

08

WORKSHOPS-3 AND WEB DESIGN

Finalizing the website with the design team, focus testing, and a round of workshops on outreach.

09

DISPLAY AND LAUNCH

This includes published papers, webinars and talks, etc.

POTENTIAL COLLABORATORS

We are seeking institutional and knowledge partners for The Deccan Chapter of the Living Waters Museum, targeting organizations passionate about water, heritage, community, and art. We invite educational institutions, nonprofits, art collectives, and cultural organizations already engaged in these fields to collaborate with us on this meaningful exhibition. Collaborators on this exhibition can engage in various ways to enrich the experience for everyone involved. They can act as fiscal contributors, providing essential funding to support the project. Additionally, they may serve as mentors, offering guidance and expertise to emerging artists and participants. Collaborators can also host workshops and knowledge-sharing activities, fostering a collaborative environment that encourages creativity and innovation among all involved. These diverse contributions are crucial in creating a one-of-a-kind exhibition experience. Join us as we create this powerful platform for sharing ideas, fostering connections, and celebrating the vital role of water in our lives and cultures.

Past Activities with LWM's Collaborators and Community Stakeholders in the Sundarbans.
Images Courtesy: Sukrit Sen

Temples along the Krishna River in Wai, Maharashtra

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