

The living wells of Bijapur

Sumangala

The bavadis were the main source of water during the rule of the Adil Shahi kings in Bijapur. With their unique architecture, attractive carvings and grandeur, these enchanting bavadis were brimming with water till about three centuries ago. But these heritage structures have been vandalised and fallen into disuse.

The Adil Shahis of Bijapur, well known for their able administration and love for music, were also recognised for the excellent water supply schemes that they implemented. There is much historical evidence to show that they possessed deep knowledge about water harvesting. Infact they did not look upon water as a mere daily necessity, but also as a luxury commodity to indulge in water sports. The water was collected in the hills outside Bijapur and supplied to the inner parts of the city through tunnels to bavadis. Historians confirm that the density of population in Bijapur was so high during the reign of Ibrahim Adil Shah II and Mohammed Adil Shah II that the city probably consumed double the quantity of water it needed.

Bavadis are another term for a well. There are a number of *bavadis* here such as *Taj bavadi*, *Chand bavadi*, *Ibrahimpur bavadi*, *Nagar bavadi*, *Mas Bavadi*, *Alikhan bavadi*, *Langar bavadi*, *Ajgar bavadi*, *Daulat Koti bavadi*, *Basri bavadi*, *Sandal bavadi*, *Mukhari Masjid bavadi*, and *Sonar bavadi* etc. In fact, the list is very, very long. Of these, the *Taj bavadi* and the *Chand bavadi* are the biggest and attract tourists due to their artistic excellence. While *Taj bavadi*, with its size and grandeur, occupies the first place, *Chand bavadi* and *Ibrahim bavadi* occupy the second and the third places respectively. People of the city still use the 30 *bavadis* that exist today.

A well generally conjures a picture of a round structure with circular steps. But there is a world of difference between an ordinary well and a *bavadi*. The essential difference is in the style of construction. A *bavadi* is generally square-shaped and a passage runs along the entrance with halting rooms at its left, right and in the front. In the smaller *bavadis*, there is no passage and no halting rooms, though some have steps on the side. The parapet walls opposite the entrance are decorated with carved arches. In spite of these common features, each *bavadi* differs from the other and is architecturally significant.

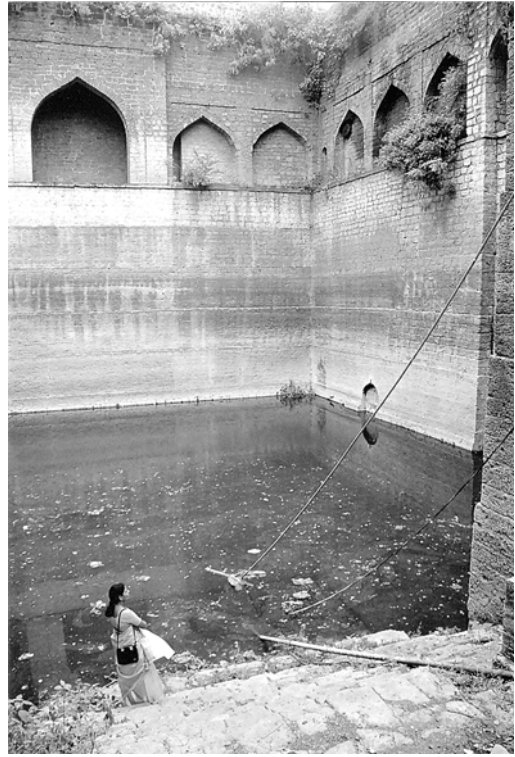
Chand bavadi

Built by Ali Adil Shah in memory of his queen Chand Bibi in 1549, the *Chand bavadi* is at a distance of about 400 feet from the Shahapura Gateway of Bijapur city.

It measures 144 feet from the east to the west and 156 feet from the north to the south. The stone steps around the square bavadi taper down and the main door of the bigger arch adjoins the walls of the bavadi. A large arch forms the entrance and smaller arches face the *bavadi*. A four feet pathway runs parallel to the inner wall of the *bavadi*. This was probably a model for the *Taj Bavadi*, which was built subsequently.

Taj *bavadi*

Ibrahim Adil Shah, who ascended the throne after Adil Shah I, built the *Taj bavadi* in 1620 A.D in memory of his wife Taj Sultana. Termed as the biggest and the grandest of all, this *bavadi* lies to the east of the Mecca Gateway (behind the present bus stand) and has a 35-foot high magnificent entrance arch. It is 120 feet long, 100 feet wide and 53 feet deep. There are octagonal domes on either side of the main gate with a parapet wall facing the entrance. The steps that commence from both the sides of the spacious halting rooms adjoin this wall and descend till the water level. There is a six-foot wide passage on three sides of the inner wall with resting places to the east, west and south built for the convenience of the travellers. One can have a full view of the *bavadi* from the gallery, which has arches engraved with motifs.



Ibrahim *bavadi*

Ibrahim bavadi occupies the third place in terms of its size, beauty and magnificence. Situated across the Ibrahimpur railway gate, this *bavadi* is hidden behind a small compound and belies the fact that such a grand structure exists within. Almost at the entrance, there are steps to go down, and a three-foot wide passage starts midway down the steps, leading to small halting places on the left and right. The city corporation has recently fitted a pump set in the right side halting room and entry is prohibited. The entire *bavadi* can only be viewed from the left side and presents a pleasing picture with its depth, spaciousness, and the arch wall at the front. It is an architectural marvel.

Apart from the *bavadis* mentioned above, there is no authentic information as to when and who built the other *bavadis*.

The situation today

Of the three *bavadis*, *Chand bavadi* is totally dry, filled with debris and is virtually used as a public dumping place. It has thus unfortunately breathed its last. At the *Taj bavadi*, people wash their vessels and clothes, as a result of which its water has turned mossy. Both the passages leading to the rear-halting place are dirty due to open defecation. Though some years ago, the City Corporation had cleaned the *bavadi* through dredging, it has again become dirty due to the indifference of the public. If suitable measures are taken to maintain the *Taj bavadi* by cleaning the surroundings, as well as the gallery, and by prohibiting washing of vessels etc., it also can be developed into a tourist attraction as well as a source of water.

In the opinion of Khazi Patel who lives next to the *Chand bavadi*, the deplorable condition of the *bavadi* is because it has not been cleaned in recent years, and thus has collected moss and lichen. Since there is hardly any water available, people use the *bavadi* as a garbage dump.

Shankar Nayak who works for the Archaeological Survey and is in charge of *Taj bavadi*, states that the City Corporation dredged it about 7-8 years ago. He adds that people sit on its steps and use the water for washing clothes and vessels, thereby polluting the *bavadi*. He is of the opinion that unless people surrounding these monuments cherish them as heritage sites and realise that a healthy *bavadi* can solve all their water problems, all efforts to revive the *bavadi* will be futile.

The smaller *bavadis*

Other than the three most prominent *bavadis*, there are several other smaller and less famous *bavadis*. Some of these are privately owned. These are located within the city as well as at a short distance from the centre, at the outskirts.

Both the *Langar bavadi* and the *Ajgar bavadi* are situated in a field to the right of Ibrahim Rouza. Though small in size, the *Langar bavadi* has an attractive arch at the entrance of the well with steps leading down to the water. *Ajgar bavadi* is privately owned and in spite of being the larger of the two, it has no significant architectural value. However, the water in both these *bavadis* is in a good condition, and hence, is used for drinking as well as for agricultural purposes.

The people use the *Alikhan bavadi* that is enroute to Ibrahim Rouza as a garbage bin. It has a mosque next door and if the authorities of the mosque were to get it cleaned, it would be useful for those who came to worship at the mosque. Next to the *Alikhan bavadi* is a borewell. Latif, a rickshaw puller, who has lived here all his life, is of the opinion that the borewell is responsible for the depletion of the water level in the *bavadi*.

The water in the *Nagar bavadi*, to the right of the Bade Kaman (the big arch), is potable and can be used for household purposes and irrigating the neighbouring fields.



There are 8-10 *bavadis* in the Jumma Masjid area. The *Bagdadi bavadi*, adjacent to a mosque, is also filled with rubbish. The *Jhansa bavadi* in Dr. Munir Bhangi's compound is fairly big, has ample water, and according to the servant, the water does not dry up even in summer.

Not a drop of water can be seen in the *Nalabandha bavadi* and the *Daulat Koti bavadi*, which are used as garbage bins. Water in the *bavadi* behind Jumma Masjid is mossy and the place is used as a urinal. Though the condition of the *Peti bavadi* is similar, the city corporation has made arrangements to pump the water and has provided washing facilities next to the tank. *Basri bavadi* is the largest among all the *bavadis* surrounding Jumma Masjid. Meherunissa, who lives in the locality, states that barring the summer when the water level goes down, it is used throughout the year.

In addition to this, there are several *bavadis* in the market at the centre of the city. Of these, the water in the *Sandal Masjid bavadi*, *Mantri bavadi* and the *Mukhari Masjid bavadi* is quite good. Devotees coming to the Hanuman temple opposite the *Mukhari Masjid bavadi* throw coconut shells, flowers and other articles of puja in the passage of the *Mukhari Masjid bavadi*. The place is dirty and needs maintenance. The *Barida bavadi* is empty and so is the *bavadi* next to it on S S Road. As there are about four borewells adjacent to the *bavadis*, the water level has probably depleted.

The *Mas bavadi* behind the Gol Gumbaz is square and has a fairly large arch. As the water here is of a good quality, it is used for the gardens of the Gol Gumbaz. The *Hasimpir bavadi* on the Station Road, the two *bavadis* inside the Remand Home and the *Mubarak Khan bavadi* near the Mubarak Khan Mahal present yet another dismal state of these storewells of water.

Captain Syke who visited Bijapur in 1815 documented all the bavadis he had seen and reported that there were 200 bavadis with steps and 300 draw-wells inside the Bijapur fort. This was after a century had passed since rule of the Adil Shahis.

The *Sandal bavadi*, *Mante bavadi* and the *Ramabai bavadi* are near the bus depot in the Nawa Bag area. The first one resembles the other square *bavadis*. Its water has turned mossy though it continues to be used for household purposes. The groundwater level in this *bavadi* has receded, once again due to the presence of a borewell next to the mosque. The second one is like a large pit, while the water of the third one is used only for washing clothes etc. All these *bavadis* are square and have arches on their walls.

The *Sonar bavadi* and the *Gunda bavadi* in the Minakshi Chowk area are circular. As all the used materials of the Kalika temple are thrown into the *Gunda bavadi*, the water level is not even visible.

The architecturally significant *bavadis* are the *Taj bavadi*, *Chand bavadi* and *Ibrahimpur bavadi*. The *Langar bavadi*, *Ajgar bavadi*, *Mukhari Masjid bavadi*, *Mas bavadi* and *Ibrahimpur bavadi* are slightly away from residential areas and thus the water in them is good. As aquatic life and plants can be found in these *bavadis*, they are in a true sense, living wells. *Sonar bavadi* contains good water despite being surrounded by houses. *Basri bavadi* is located in very dirty surroundings, yet has ample water with aquatic life.

Talabs with a difference

Another kind of water body commonly seen in Bijapur are *talabs*. *Talab* means a tank or lake, which are different from the *bavadis*.

Begum talab is an example of the technological excellence achieved during the Adil Shahi era in ensuring water supply to the city of Bijapur. This tank, which is two miles to the south of Bijapur was built by Mohammed Adil Shah in 1651 under the supervision of Afzal Khan. Prior to its construction, his grandfather, Ali Adil Shah I had implemented the Toravi water supply scheme. When this could not meet the demands of the city for water, Mohammed Adil Shah built the aforesaid tank by making provision for the flow from the nearby Saravad and Khwajapeer streams to flow into the tank.

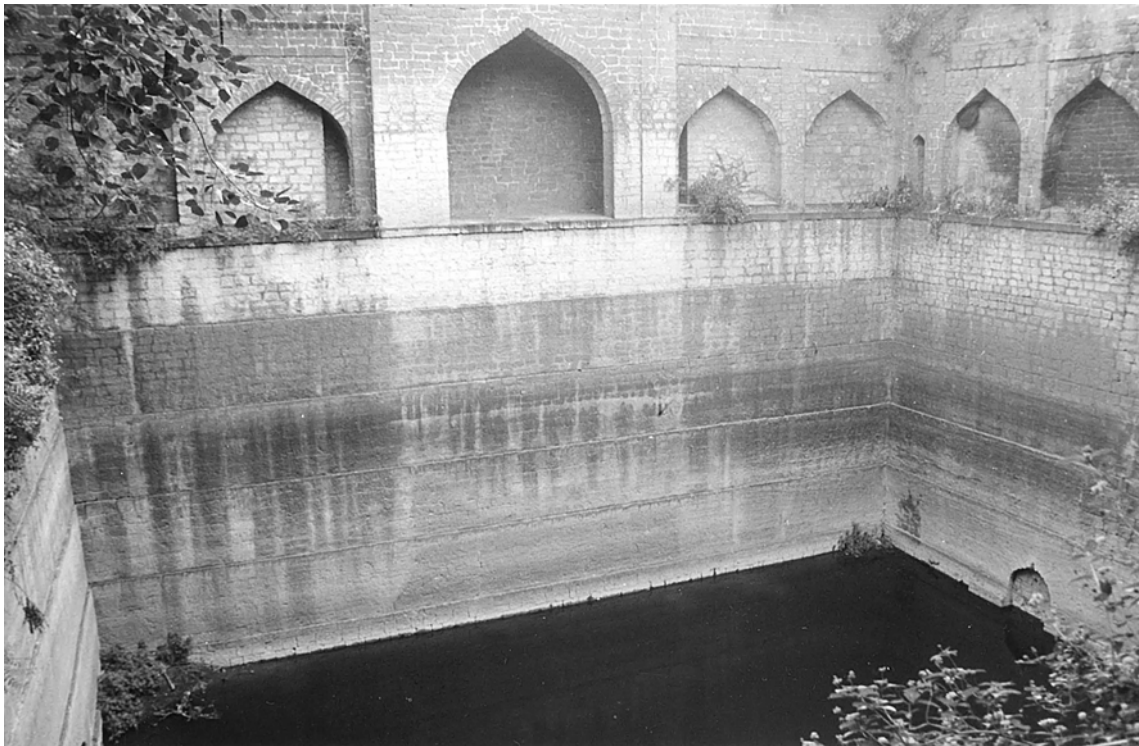
On the right hand corner of the *talab* is a small stone window offering a glimpse of an underground room, which is presently full of mud. Historical facts dating back 350 years lie buried beneath this pile of mud. During the rule of the Adil Shahis, water collected in the tanks was supplied to the city through this underground room by using clay pipes. Once it entered the fort area, it was stored in tall four-cornered water towers called *gunj*. The intention behind the erection of these towers was to ensure that dirt and slush in the pipes would remain at the bottom of the

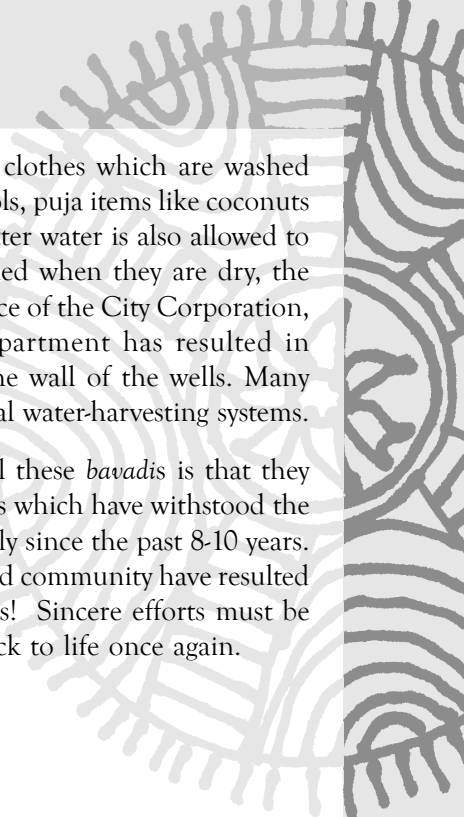
tower thereby allowing clear and free flow of water to the top. These water towers vary in height ranging from 25-40 feet. The *gunj* in the vicinity of PDJ School near Bagalkot Cross was linked to an underground canal. A few years ago, a tap was fitted to this tower. As water is still available from the tower, it can be inferred that the underground canal is still in good condition.

The *Begum talab* maintained by the Department of Minor Irrigation dries up in summer. It has a total capacity of 25-35 million cusecs and when completely full, its outflow is 1657 cusecs. Dredging work had been undertaken about seven years ago. Vijay Halkudi, chief engineer says that the cost would be an estimated Rs1.5 - 5 crores depending upon the method of dredging, if it is to be repeated. As the tank is away from the city, sewage water does not mingle with it. In addition, there is no fear of effluents as Bijapur has no industries. Thus barring the growth of Ipomoea weeds, this talab is in a fairly good condition.

Changing times

Recent years have witnessed a drastic change in the water situation and depletion of water levels. While the locals are full of praise for the rulers and philanthropists, who built the wells, the same pride is lacking for the authorities who are incharge of the maintenance and protection of these wonderful water resources. The apathy of the people who use the *bavadis* is also shocking.





The main reason for water pollution is the vessels and clothes which are washed nearby. Alongwith this, is the immersion of Ganapathi idols, puja items like coconuts and flower garlands that are thrown into the *bavadis*. Gutter water is also allowed to flow into the *bavadi*. Instead of getting the *bavadis* cleaned when they are dry, the sites are used as dumping places. In addition, the negligence of the City Corporation, the Archaeological Department and the Tourism Department has resulted in encroachments and construction of buildings next to the wall of the wells. Many such factors have spelt the death knell for these traditional water-harvesting systems.

According to the local people, a significant feature of all these *bavadis* is that they had sufficient levels of water even in summer. The *bavadis* which have withstood the test of time for over three centuries have fallen to ruin only since the past 8-10 years. The negligence and carelessness of both the authorities and community have resulted in reducing these enchanting, living wells to garbage bins! Sincere efforts must be taken to revert to this situation and bring the *bavadis* back to life once again.