



Living Waters Museum: A Digital Platform for Sustainable and Inclusive Futures

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How can knowledge of traditional water practices in India help build more sustainable futures? Launched in 2017, the Living Waters Museum addresses the rich and diverse traditions of water heritage and practices in India. It is building a digital repository of visual knowledge that celebrates the past, inspires the present and is a source of learning to prepare for the future. Through the use of storytelling, digital media and the creative arts, the team behind the Living Waters Museum works in collaboration with young water professionals, conservation architects, urban planners and artists to raise awareness of our water challenges and the need to foster more inclusive and sustainable water futures. As a digital and virtual museum, the Living Waters Museum uses its digital platform to promote capacity building, outreach to youth, and equality in water access. It works toward sustainable development in a number of ways, particularly SDG 5 on gender equality (Living Waters Museum 2019) and SDG 6 on clean water. We are using our content to develop interdisciplinary, innovative and engaging water classrooms for children and youth (SDG 4 on quality education) and to build partnerships (SDG 17).



KEY THEMES



< Fig. 1 Drinking water fountain at Mughal Masjid, Dongri, Mumbai. (Source: Shaikh Mohammed Esa, 2021, <https://confluence.livingwatersmuseum.org/water-build-heritage/exhibit03.php>).

During the worst periods of the Covid-19 pandemic, virtual platforms were often a substitute for in-person engagement. The Living Waters Museum illustrates why it would be a mistake to think of online efforts as less important than those housed in buildings. Virtuality can be helpful in encouraging activities that consider sustainable water practices in relation to very specific local conditions in a variety of places. As a virtual museum, the Living Waters Museum does not have a physical location, but the work it curates encourages attention to specific local conditions and practices. Since March 2021, the museum has been based as a “special initiative” at the Indian Institute of Science Education and Research (IISER) at Pune in western India and it has ongoing “chapters” in Kolkata, Mumbai, Ahmedabad and Jodhpur. These chapters have evolved around digital exhibitions about urban waterscapes, with the first one launched in Mumbai in March 2021, to mark World Water Day and the one-year anniversary of the first COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in India of March 2020. The exhibition Confluence (Living Waters Museum 2021), brought together more than 30 professionals – from conservation architects and urban planners to artists, photographers, marine life enthusiasts, students and social activists – to trace Mumbai’s water heritage and its changing relationship with livelihoods, culture, faith, the ocean and public health. The bilingual interactive digital exhibition was launched with a week of panels, music, curated digital walks and short films to an engaged audience from India and around the world.

Buoyed by this success, the Living Waters Museum started working on Pune’s water narratives (Living Waters Museum 2022) in late 2021, collaborating with local NGOs, artists and PhD students at IISER’s Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, to explore Pune’s water stories – from rivers to dams and floods and from

the massive underground aqueduct system to public water fountains. Similar efforts are underway in Jodhpur, Rajasthan, where the museum team is collaborating with the Mehrangarh Museum Trust and local partners and artists to trace Jodhpur’s water history, from the ancient water systems, including Persian wheels, in the Mehrangarh Fort to stepwells in the old city that are being renovated and restored through public-private partnerships. And in Kolkata, the team is again collaborating with a diverse group of partners to develop a digital exhibition on the city’s rich cultural heritage of water, from its famed Eastern Wetlands to the Hooghly River, from the architecture of the ghats (steps) along the riverfront, to the drainage system and the myriad of people and their cultural practices associated with the waters of Kolkata.

In all the initiatives we have undertaken, building capacity within youth has been one of our primary goals. Two initiatives with particular emphasis in this area are the projects Climate Wall (Ahmed 2022) and Water Classrooms (TESF India 2022). In association with the US Consulate General in Kolkata, the Climate Wall project, through the Living Waters Museum, reinforces the commitment of the US and India to encourage climate advocacy through the creative arts. It aims to engage young students of Kolkata and the Sundarbans, which is a biodiversity hotspot recognized by the Ramsar Convention (wetlands protection) and UNESCO, in understanding their surrounding environment and its challenges and in developing both physical and virtual climate walls. The physical climate wall project allows young leaders in the Sundarbans to learn about the different species of mangroves and develop a strategy to collect seeds, segregate them, grow them in nurseries until they have roots long enough to withstand the tidal forces, and finally plant them in riverbeds. The virtual wall project gives young



^ Fig. 2 "Oti Bharane" – a ritual offering by women to the river goddess Bhivai, a rustic deity, Pune (Source: Vijaya Srinivasan, Minal Sagare and Niranjan Garde, 2022, <https://punyachepaani.livingwatersmuseum.org/story/tracing-the-lost-waters/>).



^ Fig. 3 The young climate warriors of the Sundarbans (Source: Sukrit Sen, 2022).



^ Fig. 4 Participants in the Water Classrooms playing the Privilege Game (Source: Chhavi Mathur, 2022).



^ Fig. 5 The (Bhitis) Water Carriers of Mumbai (Source: Aslam Saiyad, 2021).

leaders in the Sundarbans and Kolkata an opportunity to look at various creative arts, such as painting, dance, poetry and music, as mediums to raise climate awareness and to include those members of local communities who have been left out by traditional, top-down methods of awareness-raising.

The Water Classrooms is a project supported by the Global Challenges UK program on Transforming Education for Sustainable Futures (TESF) through the Indian Institute of Human Settlements, Bengaluru (IIHS). Building on our collaborative partnership for *Punyache Paani* (Living Waters Museum 2022), we have been developing pedagogy on water issues with an inclusive, ethical and interdisciplinary lens, using visually engaging and interactive content for secondary school students (standards 6th to 8th, ages 11 to 14). The project tests the efficacy of these tools and approaches and seeks to build the analytical capacities and competencies of students and teachers to close the knowledge-action gap toward sustainable futures. Project outputs will include teaching resources for educators and a policy brief that can contribute to the ongoing discourse on education for sustainable development in India and globally. An exhibition of learning is also being planned to creatively communicate the journey of our students and capture their perspectives through diverse media.

When the Living Waters Museum was launched in 2017, there was no blueprint for a water museum in India and no one had any idea what a virtual museum would look like. The pandemic changed that in some ways, with everyone wanting to go digital. We, however, have always maintained that while our portal defines us, we are much more than just a “website.” We have always been hybrid, engaging children and youth not only in our content development but

equally on water heritage walks, talks, panel discussions, art competitions, music, theater, storytelling and dance. During the pandemic, our concern about the mental health of youth and children in India compelled us to launch several online initiatives such as *Paani ki Kahani* (Living Waters Museum 2020), inviting short videos of water music, songs or performance pieces. We strengthened our partnership approach through our focus on urban waterscapes, linking water heritage to public health challenges as we traced the history of Mumbai’s water systems, cultures and livelihoods through the first year of the pandemic toward our first digital exhibition, *Confluence* (Living Waters Museum 2021). And finally, we launched the Water Seekers Fellowships in 2020 with the Social and Political Research Foundation (SPRF 2020), New Delhi, to give young people an opportunity to engage with water policy issues as well as develop visual narratives on specific fellowship themes. This year, WWF-India joined us, and we expanded the number of fellowships we could offer to look at the diversity of “flowing rivers” in India and the many challenges they face, particularly from riverfront development projects. We are also using our digital content in teaching about water with an interdisciplinary and inclusive lens focusing on issues of water governance, equity and gender in the context of learning from our fluid past. And we are looking at expanding our partnerships globally, beginning with our collaboration with the Global Network of Water Museums on a digital exhibition about water memories, *I Remember Water*, which was launched in early 2022 (GNWM 2022). We are now working with the Water Club at MIT, students at MIT and local partners to create a visual narrative of the Charles River in Boston (2023).

Indeed, there is much to learn from the soft power of a digital museum, which can facilitate contextual partnerships to co-create public

knowledge about all aspects of our rich and diverse water heritage.

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