

Bhovi - traditional well diggers in Bengaluru

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After 15 years, Shankar finds himself peering down a 60-ft well shaft at the dhobi ghat in Bengaluru's Malleswaram neighbourhood. Here, a lakh or so clothes are washed every day. The well is believed to be over 100 years old and its walls are overrun with shrubs. The water is covered with a thick green layer of the aquatic fern, azolla. Shankar and nine men of his team, all belonging to the Bhovi or Mannu Vaddar community of traditional well-diggers, will spend the entire day desilting, cleaning and reviving the giant well. "Because of the drought, the dhobi ghat has been buying water from private tankers and drawing from borewells that are fast running dry. So, the washermen's association approached us to revive the well," says Shankar.

He and his colleagues, Shankar recalls, had made the trip to the dhobi ghat from his village in the city's outskirts to clean the same well 15 years ago. "We used to clean the well during the day and sleep next to it at night."

[Going down](#)

As we watch, the well-diggers start cutting the shrubs at the mouth of the well. They then open the iron mesh that covers it and three men — Munikrishna, Srinivas and Pedanna — carefully descend into the depths with the help of thick ropes. What follows is an awe-inspiring drill of coordination, camaraderie and skill. First, the water must be pumped out. Then, bucket after bucket is lowered into the well and silt, muck and broken branches are pulled out. Then the azolla is cleared with a cane basket that acts as a sieve.

The water must now be made potable by adding alum, lime and potassium permanganate. "I learnt how to revive wells from my parents and grandparents. I was 15," says Ramakrishna, one of the nine-member team.

Until piped Cauvery water came to the city in 1972, open wells were the main source of drinking water. Borewells came in the early 1980s, and the culture of open wells all but vanished, says S. Vishwanath, advisor, Biome Environmental Trust, which conducts research on water and sanitation.

Harvesting rainwater

Today, 40% of Bengaluru is dependent on groundwater. As per the regulations of the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike and the water supply and sewerage board, all new and old buildings of a given size must harvest rainwater or face penalties. So, recharge wells, that collect rainwater and pump it into the ground, are becoming popular.

For instance, Indian Institute of Management

Bangalore

has over 60 recharge wells. And it is the Bhovi community that is helping dig, clean and maintain all these wells across Bengaluru.

As

Karnataka

faces its second consecutive year of drought — the government has declared 156 of the 176 talukas or 88% of the State drought hit — the well-diggers have been brought back to the centrestage of water management.

A group

of well-diggers peers into a recharge pit in the suburbs of Bengaluru. Photo

Sudhakara Jain

Bhovipalya village on the outskirts of Bengaluru is where Shankar and his colleagues live. In fact, every one of the 110 families in this village is from the Bhovi community. Here I meet Laxmi Amma, Shankar's mother. As a little girl, she tells me, she often accompanied her parents when they went to dig wells.

"Traditionally, both men and women used to dig wells, but women don't do it any more," she says.

The history of the Bhovi or Vaddar community is not clear. Some claim Vaddars came from Odisha while others say their ancestors came from Andhra Pradesh, as their primary language is Telugu. The tradition of well-digging exists in Maharashtra and Gujarat too.

Vaddars are broadly divided into three groups: Mannu Vaddars work with soil; Kallu or Dagad Vaddars work with stone; while Ooru Vaddars grow ragi.

Bhovis belong to the Scheduled Castes and often face social ostracism. Pavitra, the daughter of a well-digger in Bhovipalya, is studying B.Com in a Bengaluru college. But she says: "If my friends get to know my parents are well-diggers they will stop talking to me. In any case, no one eats lunch with me," she says, holding back tears.

It is only education that will bring dignity to the community, believes Ramaswami, Ramakrishna's father, who has dug more wells than he can count. "I am illiterate and remember how my parents had to beg and struggle to feed me. I educated my son, who is doing better than me. My grandchildren study in an English medium school and have a brighter future."

Meanwhile, the well at Malleswaram's dhobi ghat is pristine now, and the city's clothes can be washed clean once more.

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