

Interlude. Renewing Water

There are deep histories of habitation in and around Jogeshwari. The area is named after the Jogeshwari caves built in the fifth century. Archaeologist Anita Rane-Kothare (2012) explains that many of the caves found in the northern suburbs of Mumbai were part of a network of rest areas, built for Buddhist pilgrims traveling between different monasteries en route to Bassein (now called Vasai). Today, settlers continue to use the caves for worship, particularly around the Mahashivratri festival. A couple of kilometers from the Jogeshwari caves, the Kanheri caves are today hidden deep in Borivali National Park. Over the last three decades, the Kanheri and Jogeshwari caves have been increasingly surrounded by the city and its inhabitants (Zérah and Landy 2013). The Kanheri caves were once an important Buddhist site, and were occupied continuously between the first and seventh centuries AD. Over four thousand monks lived in the caves through the year. Constructed on and out of solid basalt rock, the Kanheri caves, like the Jogeshwari caves, are located on ground that is particularly good for storing and drawing water. As the city water department finds itself at its limits in provisioning water to the city, activists within and outside the government have been pointing to the “indigenous systems” of water harvesting in the Kanheri caves to propose older paradigms of water infrastructure anew (see Morrison 2015):

The Kanheri cave has 109 cells cut into the flank of the hill. Each cell has a plinth that served as a bed for monks. Outside each cell, there are reservoirs and several lines of channels fed rainwater into these channels and several tanks—each can retain from 15,000 to 50,000 litres of water—carved into the rock inside the cave. Kubal explained . . . that in ancient times, water was an integral part of the lifestyle of people and rainwater was not wasted. “But with urbanization, the practice of storing water came to an end. We have lost track of maintaining the water system. And the traditional knowledge of rainwater harvesting is missing today,” he said. (“2000-Year-Old-Model May Be Answer to City’s Water Woes,” *Economic Times*, September 8, 2007)

As manifest in the news article, activists are alarmed by the precarious condition of water resources in cities and in the country, and have been insisting on recuperating the viability and ubiquity of premodern infrastructures. In their pioneering book *Dying Wisdom*, the Center for Science and Environment based in Delhi has suggested that traditional water harvesting systems are efficient and less risky modes of provisioning water in areas where the management of these infrastructures is more decentralized (Agarwal and Narain 1997). There is much to be said for these approaches. Even so, they make city water engineers very nervous. Engineers working in the hydraulic engineering department are unsure of how they might govern and control water that emerges from a more decentralized production system. They worry this water would be harder to regulate, treat, purify, and manage. Indeed, Mumbai's forgotten wells are sometimes forgotten because the city can neither keep track of them, nor is it as easy for engineers to manage them.