

# SARA AHMED, WHO FOUNDED THE DIGITAL LIVING WATER MUSEUM, IS NOW LAUNCHING SEVERAL SUCH VIRTUAL PLATFORMS

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Women carrying pots of water home in Rajasthan. | Photo Credit: Getty Images

A woman's relationship with water has always been complex. "Today we speak about [gender and water](#), but I don't really think the situation has fundamentally changed in the last few decades. Words like 'gender', 'equity' and 'inclusion' are still very much on the margins of our discourse on water," says Sara Ahmed, founder of the Living Water Museum, a virtual repository on water heritage in India, which she launched in 2017.

There are many examples of men fetching water, especially during periods of water scarcity, but have we ever seen them head-loading water like women, asks Ahmed. The questions of gender and caste inevitably arise when it comes to access to water. "While there are women who have to spend hours fetching water, there are also upper-caste communities that don't allow women to step out of the house to collect water or to join discussions on their local water problems."

Ahmed, who was in Chennai recently for a two-day festival of water, *Thaneer! Thaneer!*, at DakshinaChitra Museum, says that providing better access to water for domestic use reduces the time and energy women spend collecting it, which in turn can become income-generating opportunities.

Sara Ahmed | Photo Credit: Special Arrangement

At the festival, Sukrit Sen, art and outreach coordinator of the museum, engaged school students on water conservation and their water footprint, interspersing his interaction with music from water pots. "If I had known the value of water as a child, I wouldn't have wasted so much in toilets and washbasins. So, I try to make children understand what would happen if one day our water disappeared," says Sen.

The Living Waters Museum seeks to 'engage youth in visualising water heritage and reimagining sustainable, inclusive and equitable water futures' through storytelling, interactive technology

and the creative and performing arts ([www.livingwatersmuseum.org](http://www.livingwatersmuseum.org)). The museum is also a founding member of the Global Network of Water Museums endorsed by UNESCO's Intergovernmental Hydrology Programme.

There is much planned for the year ahead. The Living Waters of Kolkata, a digital exhibition will be launched in 2023 along the lines of work on urban waterscapes in Mumbai and Pune. Ahmed will soon launch a digital exhibition, Jal Jharoka, or window on water, developed in collaboration with the Mehrangarh Museum Trust, Jodhpur; artists, designers and researchers will look at water heritage from the days of the royalty around the Mehrangarh Fort to everyday water practices in the old city.

A Himalayan Water Repository through Woodstock School, Mussoorie explore the local water history, community and livelihoods as well as highlight water memories. The project will run over one year from January 2023 and will be linked to the school's curriculum.

Visitors at the Thaneer! Thaneer! festival of water at DakshinaChitra Heritage Museum. | Photo Credit: RAGHUNATHAN S.R.

The global network of water museums has grown from some 30 members in 2017 to about 75-80 now. There are physical water museums in China, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Bangladesh, Spain, Italy, Ecuador, Portugal and Mexico.

Ahmed points out that India, despite its rich water heritage and culture, doesn't have a physical water museum yet (there is an upcoming one in [Kilpauk, Chennai](#)). "Physical museums come up around some historical water infrastructures so they convey history and stories, and more. They are tangible and you can see, touch. I do think India needs a physical museum with the kind of rich and diverse water heritage it has."

That said, the virtual museum is fascinating. It seeks to bring in the perspectives of creative and performing arts around water. "I realised that we were not engaging with the community and with those whose work intersects with water, for example conservation architects restoring stepwells. I saw that there are a lot of conversations around water happening in design spaces and architectural spaces, but this small creative community is not visible in mainstream dialogues around water. The museum is an attempt to bridge culture, design, sustainability, creativity and justice, through stories."

Ahmed also points out that while climate change is an important issue to be addressed, dialogues on other pressing issues around the environment and water need to happen more. "The recent story of the little boy who was beaten to death in a school in Rajasthan for collecting water from an upper-caste teacher's pot; this is not about climate change. We need to work on issues of everyday vulnerabilities that people in India face because of their gender or identity."

Through the Living Waters Museum, Ahmed also hopes to share solutions. "When it comes to water conservation, there are many simple questions like how to set up water harvesting, how to reuse water in toilets, etc. We want to begin to share this information locally. So far, we are only documenting and creating digital archives of our water history. But after a while, people also want to know what they can do. A digital museum can help make water technology options more accessible."

*The writer is an independent Chennai-based journalist.*

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