

Making lotuses bloom in arid-zone



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MAHOB/JHANSI: Ancient-medieval water wisdom had spurred people then to cultivate water-intensive crops in several pockets in the water-challenged Bundelkhand region. Sugarcane, paddy, paan and fruit orchards flourished in the region and agriculture prospered.

So much so that the region was not only self-sufficient in meeting its 'gur' and sugar needs but exported the best paan (betel leaf) to the entire Moghul sultanate areas, including the present day Pakistan and Afghanistan. Moghul courts used only Mahoba's paan leaf. The leaf is famous and much sought after even today.

"There is a place in Jhansi called Gursarai. It derived its name from 'gur' because the place during the times of Chandel rule (over a 1,000 years ago) turned into the biggest wholesale market for this sugarcane product. Sugarcane cultivation flourished in Jhansi, Raath (Hamirpur), Kalpi (Jalaun), Tikamgarh and some more areas in the region. The region not only met its need of sugarcane products but also exported them. Now, sugarcane cultivation has almost vanished from the region



■ A 'Paan Bareja' next to Madansagar pond in Mahoba.

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due to water scarcity," says Prof Shiv Pujan Pathak, a retired head of the department of history, Jhansi college, and a Bundelkhand history author.

All the water-intensive agriculture and horticulture flourished around the numerous rain-water harvesting structures—dams and ponds—built by the Chandela and Bundela rulers.

"You would notice that in the post-independence time, the horticulture department opened its offices near the dams and ponds built in ancient-medieval times and horticulture continues to be promoted in these areas," says Manoj Dwivedi of Kriti Shodha Sansthan, Mahoba.

Dwivedi's observation appears true when one visits Madansagar in Mahoba or Barwasagar in Jhansi. Horticulture departments' nurseries are right adjacent to these water-harvesting structures and the area has many orchards—of guava, lemon, mango et al—in the vicinity.

'Paan' farmers often fear that the famous Mahoba paan may

face a worse fate than the sugarcane. It may become extinct if something was not done to conserve the ancient water harvesting structures around which the 'barejas' exist. 'Barejas' are a kind of green houses made of thatch. This provides just the right kind of heat and high moisture for plants to grow. Water to maintain moisture came from the water bodies.

"Chandela kings nurtured a 'paan' variety here and the same variety continues till today. Sowing nodes from an existing crop leads to the next crop. And this is how over a 1,000 year old paan variety's continuity has been maintained till today," says Baidnath Chaurashia, who has his Paan Bareja right next to the Madansagar pond in Mahoba.

Paan is so water-intensive that it needs irrigation four to five times a day. And still the delicate plant flourished and survived in the arid zone. All because of those rainwater harvesting structures.

(Next: Water folklore)