Making lotuses bloom in arid zone

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

So much so that the region was not only self-sufficient in meeting its 'pam' and sugarcane but exported the sweet past (bett laab) to the entire Moghul sub-continent area, including the present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan. Moghul courts used only Mahoba's 'pam' wine. The leaf is famous and much sought after even today.

"There is a place in Jhansi called Garwa. It derived its name from 'pam' because the place during the time of Chandela rule (over a 1000 years ago) turned into the biggest wholesale market for this sugarcane product. Sugarcane cultivation flourished in Jhunan (Hamirpur), Kalpi (Jalauram), Thangar and some other areas in the region. The region not only produced sugarcane products but also exported them. Now, sugarcane cultivation has almost vanished from the region due to water scarcity," says Prof. Shiv Pratap Paliwal, 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 extensive water harvesting structures—dams and ponds—built by the Chandela and Bundela rulers.

"You would notice that in the post-independent times, 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 Pradhan of Pratibha Singh, Mahoba.

Delhi's observation appears on the eastern side of Mahoba or Bawasgarh in Jhansi. Agriculture department's nurseries are right adjacent to these water harvesting structures and the area has many orchards—of guava, lemon, mangoes, and in the vicinity. "Pam" farmers often fear that if the famous Mahoba pam may face serious famine than the sugarcane. It may become extinct if something was not done to conserve the ancient water harvesting structures around which the "pam" culture exists. "Pam" is a kind of green house made of thatch. This provides the right humidity and high moisture for plants to grow. Water is maintained underneath the water locks.

"Chandela kings nurtured a 'pam' variety here and the same variety continues till today. Flowing nodals from an existing crop leads to the next crop. And this is how over a 1000-year-old pam culture continues to be maintained till today," says Baldev Chauhan, who has hit Pam 'pam' right next to the Midamangar pond in Mahoba.

Pam is so wise because that it needs irrigation four to five times a day. And still the delicate plant flourishes and survives in the arid zone. All because of these rainwater harvesting structures. (Next: Water solutions)