



Chapter 8

Bundelkhand: The hand that built Khajuraho temples

A thousand years ago, the Chandela Rajputs ruled this central part of India. It was Bundelkhand's most glorious era, when they built the temples at Khajuraho, forts and palaces – and massive talabs (tanks, some of which are as big as lakes). But over the past 1,000 years, Bundelkhand has been in steady decline and now is one of India's most 'backward' regions, if backwardness is to be measured by the yardsticks of industrialization.

It is also one of India's most dramatic regions. Enormous expanses of forests, interspersed with fields and talabs that spread for hundreds of hectares. The soil is fertile, yielding up to two crops a year. The forests, logged to death during the British colonial rule, are slowly growing back. The talabs are in different stages of (dis)repair.

Bundelkhand lies between the Indo-Gangetic plain to the north, the Vindhya range of hills to the south, and the rivers Yamuna to the east and the Betwa to the west. The land slopes gently from south to north, and most of the rivers flow in this direction to join the Yamuna at various points. The rivers of Bundelkhand, notably the Betwa and the Ken, restore some semblance of life to the Yamuna, that emerges from Agra in the north as a filthy drain.

Bundelkhand gets its name from the Bundelkhand Rajputs who rule this region for two centuries from about 1600 AD. It was probably one kingdom during the rule of Maharaja Chhatrasal, from 1691 to 1731 AD, who challenged the Mughals. Before and after, it was fragmented, and the object of constant attack. It now comprises 13 districts spread over the states of Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. Bundelkhand is also the badlands of India – the famous dacoits, Phoolan Devi and Malkhan Singh lent it their notoriety and now, kidnappings, rapes and murders are routine.

Attara is a non-descript dusty town on the eastern fringe of Bundelkhand, about 150 KM west of Allahabad. Go another stop on the train from Delhi and you reach Chitrakut, where Rama is supposed to have spent his exile years, after killing the demons. It's not 'Ram-rajya' anymore, but more Rakshas-rajya'. The Attara station has a single, long platform of which only the central area has a roof. The rest is shaded by massive peepul trees and the ground below is white with bird-shit.

I emerge from the station and Suresh Raikwad, my friend and guide for the Bundelkhand sojourn, greets me. He's a short, moon-faced man in his late 20s, always smiling and dressed in a simple shirt and trousers. Suresh is from a nearby village called Tendura, where he has an office, but spends most of his time in Attara and another nearby town called Baandha. The exit of the station is fairly decrepit and crowded. There is a large courtyard outside with ankle-deep dust, in which an assortment of vehicles await passengers – jeeps, autorickshaws and cycle rickshaws – to suit all pockets and distances.

"Namaste, Nityaji. How was your journey?" he smiles as me.

"Fine. I got up early and was anxious to get off at the right station," I say. I didn't want to go onto Chitrakut and battle the demons there.

"Let's go to the guest house and freshen up," says Suresh.



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The Lakshmi guest house is just that – a rambling building with a dorm on the ground floor and rooms on the first and second floors. There is no method in the madness – climb the stairs to one room, another few to another, and so on. I get a room with a bathroom. The walls of the bathroom look ready to cave in on me so I use it very sparingly. The mattresses are hard and covered with printed sheets, so it's impossible to make out if they are clean. There is a TV in one corner, resting on an ancient cooler. This room has windows so I can look out on the guest house's dusty yard. The paint is new, though, as is the bed. On the ground floor, just below my room, is another that the local police use for drinking, gambling and whoring.

“Sharmaji, please give us breakfast,” Suresh calls to the hotel's owner. “We'll have parathas and daal.”

And to me, he says, “This place is famous for its daal.”

Suresh has borrowed a bike for running around the place. We leave for Tendura after breakfast. Atarra town is a dust-bowl. All the lanes are lined with shops – eating places, clothes outlets, hardware stores, vegetable vendors and most of all, vehicle repair garages. Atarra used to be a major mandi (grain centre) once but has since lost its pre-eminence as others have come up. It's a small town of traders.

The roads don't exist for the most part. They have long since eroded down to their stone foundation and vehicles pitch and yaw over these in first or second gear. There is the inevitable round-about in the centre of town with a hideously painted statue of Dr B R Ambedkar, arm outstretched, in the middle of it. We bounce over railway tracks and leave town. In fact, the town lies to one side of the railway tracks – on the other is an expanse of marshy land from where Atarra's large, vicious mosquitoes come.

The road to Tendura is no better. Small pieces of tarmac interspersed with gaping potholes. The bike is an ideal machine for this and Suresh zig-zags from one stretch of tarmac to the next. I manage to get a look around. The Rabi crop has been planted and the fields are green. It's mostly mustard and gram (channa). Some of the larger farmers grow wheat. The Kharif crop is paddy, jowar, coarse cereals and pulses; paddy is sown as a monoculture while the others are sown together in the same plots because of widely different water needs.

There are two kinds of soil – one is very clayey, locally called kabar, and retains water. The other is called mar and is easier to work. Small channels with water run along the road, infested with water hyacinth, another unwanted British import.

The road disappears and Tendura appears, rambling off to the left of the road; its fields stretch to the left. Each plot is marked by hedges that also act as wind-breaks and strengthen the low walls around the fields called bunds.

The village is a rambling collection of houses built anyhow with spaces around them that merge to form roads. None of the roads were ever anything other than dirt tracks that, in the rains, become an impassable expanse of slush. Nearly all the houses are brick-and-cement though the older ones have stone walls, plastered with lime and covered with the usual cowdung-straw-soil mixture. It's a large village of around 5,000 people, sub-divided into three localities. Farming is the main occupation though a few of the youth, educated and 'above' farming work in Atarra or Bandha. Some drive jeeps. It seems education alienates people from their lands because, once educated, people no longer want to farm.



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The Raikwad's are a fishing community. They used to make their living catching and selling fish from the region's tanks and rivers. Only a few still do so, concentrated in villages around the larger talabs in Bundelkhand. Suresh's family took to farming several generations ago and are well-established in the village.

"Here is my house," he says, stopping under a spreading acacia tree in an open space between two buildings. It's a low-ceilinged, two-storeyed building with a platform outside the front door where people congregate in the evenings. A buffalo sits on a bed of straw, chewing nonchalantly.

There is a well a little down the road, its four masonry towers pointing forlornly skywards. It used to be the only source for drinking water in the village, fed by seepage from the three village tanks.

"Since handpumps were installed in the village some decades ago, it's become the local garbage dump," says Tribhuvan Singh, a red-haired 20-something who works with Suresh. The inside walls have all but collapsed and garbage floats on the water. In a few years, it will be history.

I duck under the low front door of Suresh's house and walk through the passage beyond with head lowered to avoid hitting the thick wooden beams holding up the first floor. It's a simple construction – thick walls with beams set in them. Stone slabs placed on the beams to form the floor of the first floor. The ground floor is for animals, even though it's broomed and clean. The first floor is for human beings. I emerge from the animals' room into the inner courtyard that is paved with flagstones. It's completely enclosed, with double-storeyed rooms on three sides and a wall on the fourth. Suresh's office is to the left and stairs without a railing lead up to it.

His courtyard houses the bathing area and toilet. There is a place for firewood – no cooking gas here – and cowdung cakes. Clotheslines criss-cross the courtyard borne down with the morning's washing. Suresh's father, a white-haired mustachioed man emerges from one of the rooms on the ground floor.

"Don't waste your time going up to his office. Come with me," he says.

Before I can protest, he ducks under the doorway and is out. I follow. He takes me to a talab on the outskirts of the village, about 200 M from the house. Naya talab, as it's called, is the largest in Tendura. It's not new, as its name implies. It's got a 400 year-old legend behind it. A few months previously I had visited Tendura – Naya talab was covered with water hyacinth and its water stank. Now, it's clean and the water, clean enough to bathe and wash food in before cooking. An ancient peepul tree spreads its roots on the bund at a corner; its roots seem to claw the earth like the fingers of an old emaciated hand. They are great to sit on and contemplate the stillness of the pond in the mid-day heat – till I jump and shout in pain. A few fire ants have found their way up my leg and bitten my ass. Embarrassing moments follow as I struggle to get the fucking creatures off my ass. The sting is painful and takes a long time to subside. Not even the idyll of the place is enough to take my mind off the pain in my ass.

Suresh had led the villagers in a week-long campaign to clean the talab – about 50 people extracted the hyacinth, dried and burnt it. They deepened the pond and used the excavated mud to repair and raise the embankments. They pretty much set it back a few decades, when people used to look after their talabs and the talabs in turn ensured that villages seldom faced a shortage of water.

In the fields across the tank, I see two sarus cranes. Tall and graceful, they are looking for small fish and frogs in the fields. Their red heads bob just above the hedges bordering the fields. I stalk



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them, hoping for a decent photo but they are evasive and eventually fly away. It is good luck here to see the cranes.

A village elder waddles up to me. He is Chedi Lal Prajapati, a former sarpanch and now advisor to everybody on all causes. He was one of Suresh's brigade in the charge against water hyacinth. Chedi Lal gestures to me to sit on the embankment in the shade of a barrh tree, spreading its branches across the pond. The breeze coming off the pond is cool. A woman washes a cane basket full of yellow daal in a corner of the talab. She sees me and pulls her sari over her face.

Chedi Lal says, "The water is every good for cooking daal because its rain water. The groundwater here is brackish in places."

He narrates the legend of Naya talab. "Many years ago, some say 400 years, a man passed this way with several bags full of money. He left a few with the villagers who lived here then and disappeared. When he didn't return for many months, the villagers decided to use the money to build this talab."

I walk around the village with Chedi Lal. He circles the talab and on the far side, I find that people have built houses on the banks of the talab. The talab does not have the mandatory temple but a small shrine under the barrh tree, where we sat.

"This would never have happened in the old days," says Chedi Lal. "In the last few years, things have changed in our village. Because of these changes, these people feel bold enough to make houses on the banks of the talab. Earlier, they would be ostracized if they did this."

We're joined by Ram Snehi Verma, another man of Chedi Lal's vintage. Walking round Naya talab, we reach a small bridge – two wooden planks across a gully – and then another smaller pond called Vijayi talab. This is choked with hyacinth and a few houses protrude onto it. The hyacinth from here occasionally washed over into Naya talab and has to be cleared. A child washes his ass in the water after shitting a little distance away; the rains will carry his production into the water.

Ram Snehi follows my glance. "We used to have very strict rules about shitting and pissing around talabs. You can see they aren't followed any more. It was forbidden to use the embankments as toilets. People would fill their pots and go to the fields to shit. If they were caught shitting on the embankments, they were fined or even thrown out of the village."

Chedi Lal takes up the story. "Every year, before the rains come in June, there is a village mela (fair) around the talab. All the families who used the talab's water assemble to cook and have a good time. This reinforces our bond with the talab. During the mela, one member from each family helps to excavate the pond and strengthen the embankments.

"After the rains, in September, we have another festival. The village deity is put on a float and towed around the pond, which is full of water after the rains. There is fun and feasting for a week. We thank the gods for their bounty."

Village life, then, is intimately wound up with the life of its talabs.

Going further around the village, we come upon the Baba talab, named after a sadhu. The story goes that Sadhu Baba used to live here, and had a small pond to himself. A cholera epidemic struck the village and its people went to Sadhu Baba for advice. He told them to deepen and widen the pond and the epidemic would go away. One person from every household chipped in and sure enough, once the work was complete, the epidemic vanished.



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“It’s very deep – nobody knows how deep. There are large fish here too, but we do not eat them. It is said that people who eat them, die like fish out of water,” says Chedi Lal.

There are as many legends as there are talabs. There are as many talabs as there are villages in Bundelkhand. There are an average of 14 wells to each village, some in the villages and others in the fields. There is a plethora of rivers, drains and gullies that water and drain Bundelkhand. It gets an average of 1,000 MM of rain a year. Bundelkhand should be rich – in water, agriculture and natural resources.

Just how rich it is comes home to me in the next few days. There are no industries in Bundelkhand – some says it’s too remote; others blame the high crime rate. Precisely because of this, the water is clean in almost all parts and safe to drink from wells, handpumps and even some rivers without treatment. Farmers use very little pesticide or fertilizer so toxic run-off from fields is low. Most talabs, even those whose beds are cultivated, are reasonably uncontaminated. I become a guinea pig of sorts, trying out water from tanks whose bottoms I can see – no, I am straight. And you are reading this book, right?

Farming is largely traditional and land-holdings are small across Bundelkhand. Professor Bhartendu Prakash, who runs the Vigyan Shiksha Kendra in a village near Atarra called Tindwari, has studied the farming patterns in the region and its water resources. He is a short, white haired man with a white bandana on his head. His eyes smile all the time. He lives in the family mansion, a sprawling single storeyed house on the outskirts of Tindwari. A chemical engineer by training from IIT Kanpur, he has been experimenting with organic farming since 1965 and training farmers in the region to do so as well.

He’s published a book, ‘Problems and Potential of Bundelkhand with Special Reference to Water Resource Base’. In this, he says, “Because of the uncertainty of water availability, people depend mostly on dryland farming.”

In practice, this means that people maximize the use of rainwater in the absence of assured irrigation. They build bunds on their fields, the height varying from a few feet to a few metres, depending on the size of the field. They repair these every year, just before the monsoons. They use the kabar soil for the bunds because it holds water better than mar and makes stronger bunds. It rains heavily in July and August and the fields fill up water. This serves two purposes. One is to kill off weeds that cannot survive prolonged inundation. The other is to saturate the soil with water and recharge the groundwater tables.

Come October, farmers let out water from the fields in a very controlled way, field by field, so as not wash away the top soil or damage the fields. The bunds are broken in places so that the water drains away slowly. They plough and plant towards the end of the rains as the soil, otherwise hard and difficult to work, has softened. If they delay, the soil hardens and becomes impossible to work. As the fields empty of water, they plant their crops – paddy, coarse cereals and pulses. Paddy needs stagnant water, so this is grown while water is still standing in the fields. The others need less water, so are planted after the fields are drained.

“Traditionally, there was no Kharif crop, only a Rabi crop of wheat, gram or mustard, which used only the moisture in the soil. Later, people started growing rice and irrigating their fields with tanks or wells. In the last century, the British built a network of canals to encourage agriculture and generate more revenue. They were fine for a while but after independence, have slowly decayed. Now, they are every unreliable,” says Professor Prakash.



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Farmers are changing their cropping pattern. They are growing cash crops like soya. In the process, the bunding system is going the way of the region's economy. This will affect the water table, water quality and ultimately, the farmers because theirs is a subsistence economy where people grow enough for their own needs and a little more. Very few have large marketable surpluses.

The road from Atarra to Panna, a town 75 KM east-south-east famous for its diamond mines, barely exists. You could call it a road for the first 30 KM while in Uttar Pradesh; once we cross into Madhya Pradesh, the road becomes a dirt track. Our jeep pitches and yaws as it growls past picturesque villages dotted with talaabs. We briefly hit the civilized national highway that connects Baandha to Satna further south, but all-too-soon turn off onto a 'state highway'.

The natural richness of Bundelkhand comes alive, in contrast to the poor condition of the road. The villages are smaller, usually a few huts scattered around a larger house. Nearly all houses here are wood or bamboo structures, topped with thatch. Most are small, single room dwellings though the larger families have managed to add rooms so the huts look large. A corner of the front room serves as the kitchen and the far corner, as the bedroom. A two-room dwelling would have the bedroom in the rear. The villages are as unstructured as Tendura. Nearly all have a source of water – well, tank or stream – that let's them grow at least a crop a year. People are out tending their fields, bent double in the mid-day sun. It's not hot, being December, but the sun is bright and manual labour is tough in any weather.

Landholdings are small, with two-thirds of the people owning less than 2 hectares of land. This is just about enough for a family of five to survive on, provided the rain gods smile. The people here are poor by any standards, rural or urban, clinging on to their land. Their poverty contrasts with the wealth with which nature has endowed the region. The more fortunate or educated leave for the nearest town or larger village in the hope of finding something better.

From the plains of Atarra, the countryside gets rockier and hillier. We reach the ancient Bundelkhand capital of Kalinjar, now just a dusty town on the broken road, on the border between the two states. The Chandelas probably built the fortress atop the 1,000-foot high hill that dominates the town. After the Chandelas, no ruler held the fortress very long. The Afghan king Sher Shah Suri died here. Finally, the British managed to annex and hold Kalinjar.

My driver Ram Babu Sharma doubles as a guide. Pointing up the hill, he says, "There is an ambience about the place that lends itself to prayer. You must see the Neelkanth temple – it is beautiful."

The fortress is quite derelict, that I can see from the road. We press on, keen to get to our destination, the Gangau weir, before nightfall. I don't fancy being out there at night with dacoits and wild animals.

A little later, we pass Ajaigarh, another dusty fortress town. After that, the road starts a gentle climb. We rock from side to side as Ram Babu tries to find patches of tarmac. Eventually, he gives up and contents himself with driving on one side of the road. Two wheels are in a deep muddy rut that is smoother than the road and the other two wheels find the occasional patches of tarmac. Thus, sitting in a jeep inclined at 30 degrees to the vertical, we plod up the western end of the Vindyachal hills. In places, the Baandha canal runs along the road, carrying water to that town 100 KM to the north from the Gangau weir on the Ken river. Luckily for us, it hasn't rained or these 'roads' would be impassable. The dust swirls up behind us and settles on everything



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inside the jeep. Suresh in the back seat looks at home in these surroundings so I try to blend in too.

We enter the forests of Panna. These were the hunting grounds of the local raja of Panna, but he converted it into a reserve. It is now part of the Panna Tiger Reserve. The forests are all new-growth. Till the mid-18th century there were dense forests, according to district gazetteers. Then the British, who needed wood for their navy, railway network and industrial revolution, arrived and stripped the land of what they could find. The forests are dry deciduous, comprising of teak, saal, mahua, kahri, karaunda and bamboo, among other plants. Palash, or flame of the forest, is not in bloom so I don't get to see its startling reddish orange against the green of the trees.

One thing becomes clear very quickly. Where there are settlements, there are no forests. Where there are forests, there are no people. These are people who 'have lived for centuries in communion with nature' and 'depend on forests for their very livelihood'. I see little evidence that they look after the forests – there is more evidence that they decimate forests to meet their needs. True, the forest department and government policies are the reason these people feel they don't own forests anymore, and therefore need to plunder them. However, that does not justify their continued decimation of already scarce resources. It is like cutting the branch you're sitting on.

We climb a range of low hills, leaving the little villages and farms behind. The forests are denser here but again, new growth. These are the outskirts of the Panna National Park. The road is slightly better and we pick up a little speed. In the 60 KM so far, we have passed only a handful of vehicles. In the hills, we pass a couple of cyclists. From a few hundred feet up, the valley with the wooden huts, green farms and forests climbing up the hills looks picture-perfect. It's cool, despite the late afternoon sun's best attempts.

A clearing appears to the right and presents another pretty sight. There is an archway just off the road with the builder's name on top – an obscure seth from a bygone age. To the left is a small temple with a massive shivling inside; a banyan tree spreads its branches over it. Directly behind the archway is a square kund, lined with stones but not cemented, about 50 feet to a side. To the left of the kund is a well for drinking water; to the right is a tank that catches the overflow of the kund for animals. The underground water flows from the hill behind to the well, then to the kund and then into the animal-drinking area. There is a small building behind the kund.

Three armed policemen sit around the kund, making their evening meal. They are on duty in the middle of the forest in an operation to catch a dacoit who had kidnapped two men a couple of days before. It's reassuring to have the policemen around, disturbing to know we are in the lair of the bad guys. It wasn't for the bandits, the place would be serenity itself. This was obviously a sarai, or place for travelers to rest, as the crumbling walls around the kund and the well show. There were other buildings around where people could spend the night. All that's gone now, and just three policemen remain to guard an ancient monument.

Opposite the kund is a waterfall with a stone fence. It's blackened by years of water flowing over it. From there, the water runs into a ditch and thence into the river at the bottom of the valley. All this is seasonal – it's bone dry now. Even so, the high water level in the kund indicates an abundance of groundwater, even though there is little on the surface. We see no animals during the three hours we spend in the Panna National Park, even though it is supposed to have a healthy population of tigers, deer and larger mammals. I am disappointed and vow to return for a visit someday. The access from Khajuraho is better than this.



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Panna is the headquarters of the district. We come upon it suddenly, over a hill. It's a crowded small town, the distinction being that it was the centre of a princely state. We drive through town to the main talaab – Dharam talaab. This is pretty and large, covering around 40 hectares. Hills make up two sides, and the catchment, of the talaab. A wall, up which we climb to reach the talaab, makes up the third and fourth sides. Essentially, the wall impounds rainwater flowing down the hills and has created the talaab. It was built by the local raja who now lives in a splendidly decadent bungalow in town. The talaab's benefits go almost exclusively to the new royalty, the district collector, who inherited the British-built house on the hill overlooking the talab.

The collector's house is to the east, in a small grove of trees. To its south is an old and decrepit palace similar to the funeral houses of the Bundelas that I have seen at Orchha. On the west bank, along the wall the created the talaab, is a small ugly modern temple. East of this is a tumbledown palace that might have the Panna king's pleasure palace – he could chill on the banks of the talaab with his favourite consort. In the middle of the talab is a building where, I am sure, the queen and her attendants would go to bathe. There is the inevitable tale of an underground tunnel from there to the palace in town.

A few swan-shaped paddle boats float on the talab. On the wall, where we stand, lie the remains of a mundan – a hair-shaving ceremony that is done on special occasions or when you lose a close relative. The graying hair probably belonged to somebody who has lost a dear one late in life. There are two stones facing each other, one where the barber sat and the other where the shaved one sat. The somber scene contrasts with the revelers on the boats, who paddle close on seeing me taking pictures, and shout 'photo, photo'.

I drive up to speak to her highness about the local water systems, but she is indisposed. Her house has an awesome collection of plants and ancient trees; the forests here must have been like this before the white man came.

"How can one be indisposed in such a beautiful place?" I ask the guard. Suresh pulls me away.

"Let's find the raja," he suggests.

Sharma has meanwhile found out where true royalty abides and we are soon honking rickshaws and cows out of the way in Panna. The main palace is a school that even at 4 PM has children. We walk through the royal cowsheds, full of healthy buffaloes and cows contentedly chewing the cud. The raja's descendant's bungalow appears beyond this.

It's nice, and bespeaks of glorious times long gone. An old Mercedes shares a four-car garage with a Maruti Esteem. Hollowed tree trunks double as pots with large hedges in them. We go through the gate mindless of the 'Beware of Dog' sign on it. An old woman is watering the garden – she is the housekeeper and must have been a sight when younger. Age and care have worn her down.

"We want to meet raja sahib," I tell her, introducing ourselves.

"He isn't here. You can speak to him on the phone," she says, looking at me steadily, inscrutably.

She takes us inside the bungalow. The verandah is separated from the garden by a series of low archways and its wall is decorated by another series of deer heads, again crumbling with age. The phone is an old dial-type – she slowly dials the man's number.



Jalyatra: Exploring India's Traditional Water Management Systems

“What’s raja sahib’s name?” I ask.

“Lokendra Singh,” she replies. “He was the MP from here till the last elections.”

Seems his majesty is a lot of former things but a current nature-lover. A faded newspaper clipping on a pin board shows him being felicitated for making talabs. He made five of them between 1977 and 1979 – the Virshingpur, Bhatapur, Paddha, Mutwa and Katra talabs in town. The Dharam talab predates Lokendra Singh’s dynasty and is now looked after the public works department. Just shows what ‘royal’ patronage can achieve.

The road – it’s actually a road now with more tarmac than potholes because it connects Khajuraho to Panna – leads us past the village of Rajgarh, with it accompanying talabs, to our day’s destination. This is the Gangau weir, built in 1906 by the British to divert the Ken river waters into a canal system. They did this to encourage farmers to grow cotton for their mills in Lancashire. They also did this to control this basic resource – once the weir was built, the quantity of water in the river fell and only certain crops were possible, at the behest of our imperial rulers. Farmers had to pay for water, where once they got it free. There wasn’t enough in the river to satisfy their needs so they needed canal water to irrigate their fields. This situation remains persists till today.

The farmers I met en route, with fields along the canal, had one complaint.

“We never get water when we need it, only when the irrigation department feels like releasing it,” said Manush Ram, a farmer in a village near Ajaigarh. “We grow one crop a year, usually paddy or sugarcane. If the rains have been good, we manage a second crop.”

The cropping pattern in irrigated and non-irrigated areas seems to be the same. What is the point of irrigation then? It appears to be a backup for rain failure, but then, there will be less water in the river and consequently, less available for irrigation.

A board on the highway nearly opposite the turnoff to Khajuraho proclaims the Gangau weir. More ominously, it says, ‘Site for proposed Dodhan dam’. Then there is another weir mentioned, the Rangawa bund. Gangau and Rangawa are about a century old. Dodhan is yet to be built – its part of the Indian government’s hair-brained scheme to link the country’s rivers in order to solve the annual flood-drought problem. Through this fanciful and enormously expensive scheme, it hopes to transfer surplus water from one river to another via a network of canals. The first link is to come up in Bundelkhand between the Ken and the Betwa rivers, transferring water from the former to the latter. Only, the Ken is a smaller river and almost runs dry during the summer while the Betwa has plenty of water year round.

The road is narrow and hedges cover half of it, their thorns grazing the sides of the jeep and setting my teeth on edge. There is a barrier just before the Gangau weir and Sharma veers off to the right into the Panna forest – we were supposed to go straight to reach the dam. We return to the barrier and the man let’s us through after a brief look inside. The road after this point becomes a stony track – its all weather but narrow and bumpy. We ascend the plateau that lies on one side of the Gangau weir. The woods are lovely and deep and we have almost reached our destination, as evidenced by the distant sound of a water fall.

Cresting the hill, we see the weir. It’s unimpressive. I thought it would be a high dam but it’s actually a low, long wall built to divert water rather than hold it. It stretches in a broken line from one bank of the Ken to the other, topped by massive steel plates to regulate the flow of water. We drive down to a hut on the side of the weir and walk down to the top of the weir.



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A group of men is repairing a breach caused in 2004 when flash floods washed away a part of the weir. They pour concrete to rebuild the wall, and then they will have to put the steel plates back up. The man in-charge, the junior engineer, is a young graduate called Rajiv Kumar.

“We haven't got enough money to fix all the damage,” he says, pointing to another, lower wall downstream of the weir. “That also got damaged but we cannot fix it. We also cannot complete repairs on the main structure. This is a condemned structure as the irrigation department feels it has completed its service life.”

“What do you mean, condemned? It looks fine.” I say. The weir does look OK, minus the breach we are standing on.

“It's silted up,” he says. “The original life was supposed to be a 100 years.”

Sounds familiar. A weir built with our money by the British to serve their interests is declared extinct by our government to justify the construction of another monstrosity upstream. That Dodhan dam will inundate several villages and a part of the Panna National Park.

The Gangau weir is in UP, but controlled by the MP irrigation department. In 2002, there was a fight over release of water from the weir. Farmers from Baandha commandeered the weir and forced the people in-charge to release water to their fields, when they discovered that the MP irrigation department was diverting water to farmers in that state.

Rajiv yells to a man on the far side of the weir, “Send Bhajan Singh here.”

That's the chowkidar. He is an unlikely chowkidar, at four-and-a-half feet, wizened and white. The thin man wouldn't be able to fight off a pet dog, let alone a bunch of irate farmers. He walks slowly towards us along the top of the weir.

Rajiv says, “He retired some years ago but my predecessor kept him on because he has no family and nowhere to go. He stays in the house above the weir all alone.”

“Must be spooky,” I ask Bhajan.

He doesn't hear me. Instead, he narrates the incident. “I got my orders from the office to release water to MP so I opened the gate. The farmers came at night and tied me up inside the house. Then they changed the flow themselves and went away. They didn't harm me but warned me not to change the flow of water.

“The night the weir broke, it was raining very heavily. I came out here to check that everything was OK. When I was walking back, I heard a loud noise and felt the weir shake. I ran and right behind me, the water washed the wall away.”

Bhajan points to the place where we are standing. “I was there when I heard the noise and ran till that turn.”

The turn is about 70 M away and the wall looks safe enough there. About 30 M below, water gushes out of a series of small outlets at the foot of the weir. Seems all the excitement in Bhajan's life happens at night in the middle of the desolation – there is no habitation for miles around. The nearest village is Dodhan, where the new dam is to come up, about 5 KM away. The barrier is further still.

Our side of the weir is thinly forested and extremely rocky. There are farms upstream, along the banks of the Ken, and forests on the far side. At this point, the river looks substantial but



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downstream of the weir, its flow is less. The river is clean enough to drink from here, and people in Dodhan draw water for their needs directly from the river. It's a small, harijan village, most houses made of adobe and stone and thatched. The lanes are swept and clean and the front courtyards, where social life is conducted, are neat. Two pretty women sift wheat from chaff and promptly cover their faces when I approach. Another one carries her load of water back from the river – two pots on the head and a bucket in one hand. The water probably weighs more than she does. A girl of nine or 10 follows her, baby on hip. A few cows graze inside a thorny enclosure. The village temple is a small, white dome, where children play. The bell is polished and occasionally, someone rings it loudly, more in play than prayer.

The people here aren't interested in standing and fighting. It's their ancestral land but if they get compensation, they will go. The village headman, Satish, says so emphatically.

“If we get adequate compensation, we will leave. Otherwise, we will stand and oppose the project.”

It's surreal to imagine that this place could be under water in a few years. The forests, the farmland and the houses, under several feet of water for the next century.

None of the Chandela talabs were built to inundate farmland, far less houses. They were always built by blocking a rivulet or drain, where they would be no habitation anyway and farming was strictly seasonal and controlled. The submerged land belonged to nobody. Talabs were sited keeping villagers' needs and opinions in mind because they were to look after them. The ruler, or whoever paid to build the talab, ensured that the villagers contributed labour, for which they were paid, towards constructing the talab. The ruler laid down rules for sharing water, keeping the talab clean and the sort of agriculture permitted. He also decided how the talab's maintenance work and cost would be shared. These were inscribed on rocks that were built into the wall of the talab.

Typically, the process went like this. Villagers would approach their headman for a talab who would take it up with the local chief, either the king or his serf. Eventually, it would reach the king who would ask the chief engineer of the realm, or Vishwakarma, to survey and select the site. He would design the talab's walls in a way that would minimize submergence of farmland, in consultation with the villagers.

The king would pay for construction because many talabs were built as part of drought- or famine-relief. In this way, people would get an assured source of water for the future and money so they would not starve.

The Chandela talabs follow a typical style. The wall built to store water is made of stone and the black clayey soil of the region of is used to seal the cracks. This makes the wall fairly water-proof, though water seeps through a full talab's walls. Nobody minds this because it raises the underground water table and keeps fields around the talab moist.

The catchment area usually slopes towards the wall and used to be forested or hilly, so as to fill the talab quickly after rains. The talab's wall is faced with rock, not mud, where it faces the maximum impact of water, such as at the bottom of the rivulet. Some of the larger talabs have walls that are entirely faced with rock – this solid construction ensured that the wall would withstand even torrential rainfall. Most of the walls are extremely thick, between 20 and 40 feet, and look like a low hill than a talab wall, because they have become part of the landscape with



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large trees and other vegetation growing on them. These seem to strengthen, rather than weaken, the walls.

The stone facing of the walls serve a practical purpose. They are built in steps, albeit extremely steep and irregular, with platforms extending like Moses' hand onto the water. The daring can walk down to the water' edge to fish, wash clothes and bathe. All talabs have shallower steps near the point of exit for the water so that people can easily get to the water for their needs.

These stone steps often have inscriptions such as found in temples, and religious figures. Nearly all the talabs have at least one temple on their banks, and the larger ones have several. Traditionally, this meant that their water was pure but with migration and the population explosion, people increasingly use the talabs as open air toilets – they shit and wash their asses in the same water, temple or no temple. Maybe the stone faced gods don't mind anymore – they have seen it all during the past millennia.

The Chandelas were voracious builders – temples, fortresses, palaces, and talabs. The Madhya Pradesh irrigation department, under whose jurisdiction talabs fall, lists 1094 of them in just two districts of Chatarpur and Tikamgarh. These are the two districts with the most tanks. Khajuraho is also in Chatarpur, and is another, more famous, tribute to the Chandela's building prowess.

The Chandelas built them, and dynasties down the ages including the British maintained them. But our government has forgotten about the Chandeli talabs. It thinks they have outlived their utility. In just 10 years, talabs that have been around for a 1,000 have gone from a valuable asset to a liability. In August 1988, the MP irrigation department drew up a Rs. 1,000 million plan to rehabilitate these tanks. That meant repairing the walls, deepening them and ensuring that the catchment areas were cleared or encroachments. It also included rebuilding irrigation canals in the talabs' command areas.

R K Rawat, sub-engineer with the water resources department in Nowgong, a small town 23 KM from Chatarpur, says, "These tanks are all extinct. Their walls were made of stone and filled with clay that has washed away during the years. They cannot be repaired unless the walls are pulled down and rebuilt. It is simpler to build new structures."

That is really strange, coming from a man whose department just eight years ago prepared a project proposal to rehabilitate talabs. How have 1,000 year old entities gone from being viable to extinct so soon. Maybe the Ken-Betwa link project holds answers to the Water Resources department's change of heart.

The project proposal says, "For tanks under control of the Water Resources Department, the improvement cost is Rs. 25,000 per hectare of irrigation capacity of the tank. For tanks under control of other agencies like Panchayats, Blocks and Jila Panchayats, the cost of restoration has been considered as Rs. 48,000 per hectare of irrigation potential. For the rest of the tanks which are to be considered for nistar (human) and water conservation purposes, the cost per tank is Rs. 600,000 per tank."

It goes on. In Tikamgarh, it would cost just Rs. 31,077 per hectare to restore 300 Chandela tanks. This would improve their utility for irrigation, water conservation and groundwater recharge. It is considerably less than the cost of new irrigation projects, that the department puts at Rs. 80,000 per hectare.

Clearly, looking after what we already have is a cheaper option. It doesn't suit the powers-that-be because there is much less money to be made here. Consider the cost of the Ken-Betwa link,



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that is Rs. 4.5 billion (at 1994 prices) and you get the picture. Restoring tanks would be a decentralized activity with lots of people making small pots of money. Building the link would be a centralized endeavour with few people making big bucks.

Bhagwan Singh Parmar used to work with the Rajiv Gandhi Drinking Water Mission as the officer in-charge of the Chatarpur district. He says he quit because he was an upright officer and could not handle the constant pressure for bribes by seniors. Bhagwan Singh now has his own NGO with an interesting agenda – to see how much farmland a family should have in order to meet all its needs. He owns about 5 acres of land on which he grows food, herbs and vegetables. He is just off the highway outside Nowgong. Any talk with him on any subject veers round to his uprightness in less than 10 minutes.

He has a different take for the decline of talabs. “The rulers handed over care of the talabs to the local zamindar. It stayed like this for generations and as long as the dynasty survived, the talabs also did. Once their power waned, the zamindars appropriated the talabs and usually demolished them to take over the land, which was fertile. In those days nobody could challenge the zamindar. Many tanks were destroyed like this.”

If zamindars destroyed some talabs, the Chandelas must have built many more than survive around today. Bhagwan Singh takes me to the Jagat Sagar, an enormous talab outside Mau Ranipur, about 40 KM from Nowgong on the road to Jhansi. It a good road, because it connects to Khajuraho. The land is flat, so the talab's catchment is vast and open, with fields on the farthest southern fringe. It spreads over 103 hectares but hasn't got much water because of poor rains since 2004. The wall, running about 2 KM from east to west, built to create Jagat Sagar, has several temples and palaces along its length. At the western end are new, garish temples dedicated to Ram, Hanuman and Shiva. In the middle stands one to Shani, or Saturn. Behind the wall to the north is a sun temple – one of the few in India.

Bhagwan Singh narrates the legend of Jagat Sagar. “The king who renovated the talab was so proud of his work that he decided to make temples to all the gods. This created such a commotion that they descended to earth to dissuade him. The king contented himself with just these two temples – to Shani and Surya. The rest have been built later.”

Chatarpur is named after Maharaj Chatrasal, whose descendant Maharaj Jagat Raj ordered the talab deepened and widened. The talab is probably many centuries old, what with Jain inscriptions on its stone steps. The Jain monks who lived here then must have made themselves a small pond. The Chandelas enlarged it and later rulers kept adding to it. Going east on the talab's wall, I see temples to several deities, including a hall of 64 pillars. The history of the talab is there for see, in bits and pieces, along its length and embedded in its walls.

An old and somewhat demented baba stays there now, living off whatever people choose to leave him and firewood from the many trees in the place. He is a sight, with a flowing white beard and mane, and a g-string that would make Rakhi Sawant blush.

Just opposite this place are shallow steps with engravings that lead down to the water. A few women and children bathe and wash their clothes in the relatively clean water. On the top of the wall here, a small whitewashed temple with a very black shivling stands guard. Next to it is a large stone carved with apsaras in erotic poses. It is completely out of place, as if somebody has placed it there.



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Suresh says, “There are supposed to be many more stones like these in the water. Nobody knows how old these are or how they got there.”

They are probably the remains of an old Jain temple, parts of which were used to make the talab.

Beyond the temple, the stone facing of the talab, built in steps, leads steeply down to the water to the west and east. The entire wall, up to the palace, has this surface so that it can withstand the sudden rush of rainwater and all of it is intact. The wall itself is massive, about 40 feet thick, and looks more like a ridge – a centuries-old banyan tree is proof of its age. Just to build another of this size would cost hundreds of millions of rupees. Excavating it would cost a few hundreds of thousands.

We walk eastwards. Bhagwan Singh says, “This is a hanuman temple, about 2,000 years old.”

It certainly looks old, but his figure is incredulous. Beyond this are the remains of a palace.

“That is the maharani’s palace. She used to come here to bathe,” he says. A full building just for bathing. It made of thin bricks, heavily weathered by the centuries.

At the moment, a poor woman is using the facilities, such as they are, to bathe and wash her clothes. Her parrot green cotton sari, draped over the bushes that lead from the palace to the water’s edge, flutters in the breeze. Just beyond the remains of the palace stands a majestic banyan tree family – parents and children ‘walk’ in all directions just beyond the exit of the palace. A cool breeze comes off the talab, seducing me to sleep in the shade of the banyan tree.

Jagat Sagar can hold enough water to irrigate fields up to 10 KM away through its canals for three consecutive years without any rainfall. At the moment, it has only a few feet of water – a fisherman walks behind his boat, trailing a net, to catch what he can while another paddles some distance away. The talab is vital to the hydrology of the area as it maintains the water tables in the region. It keeps the wells and handpumps full. If it runs dry, the entire Mau region will face a water problem.

This talab is part of a larger system of talabs in the Mau Ranipur region. It collects water from its own catchment as well as the overflow from the Sahaniya and Gora talabs. Gora talab is about 8 KM west of Jagat Sagar. Between the Sahaniya talab and Jagat Sagar, on a hill, is a palace that belonged to Mastani, one of the mistresses of Baji Rao Peshwa. It was probably a later ruler who built the wall that created the Sahaniya talab because a palace – now a museum, abuts it. The palace is to the east of the talab and its main catchment, a forested hill, is to the north-west. Across the talab to the west are other palaces that Chatrasal supposedly built. One is an imposing multi-storeyed building atop a mound commanding a view of the entire countryside for miles around.

Entering it, I see a beautifully painted chamber with a raised platform. The place is a maze.

Bhagwan Singh says, “There is a labyrinth. If you go up one way, you cannot come down the same way.”

Sure enough, the upper floors – I cannot figure what number it is – have stairs and passages going every which way. The way to the dome is through a door that leads into an open space, then a sharp left and up some stairs. I decide to pass but the others venture up. There is enough inside to keep me occupied. Next to this building is a small domed structure painted startlingly white against the blue-green background, its dome embedded with coloured tiles: The place where King Chatrasal supposedly disappeared, or attained Samadhi.



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Outside the multi-storeyed palace, a group of labourers mix lime mortar in the old-fashioned way. A huge millstone stands in a circular depression in the ground, with a thick wooden rod through a hole in its middle. One end of the rod is tied to a post and the other to the back of a tractor. Lime bubbles in a tub nearby and is gingerly poured into the depression by a man without any protection. Others add gravel and stone in a ratio of 1:4:4. The tractor starts up and drives around in circles, grinding the mortar together. When done, they shovel it onto a wooden basket and cart it off to the palace, which they are fixing.

We drive to Gora talab, a short distance away. The road does the usual disappearing act as we approach a Raikwad-dominated village called Todna. They still pursue their traditional vocation as the talab holds plenty of water. Half-way through the village, a high concrete road appears, and disappears before the end of the village. A group of pretty women do their evening washing by one of the village handpumps. They quickly retreat as the jeep approaches, and return when we are past – most were topless. Todna is more organized than others I have seen with houses along straight lanes. The houses are better built even though they are not brick and mortar constructions.

Gora talab is the largest of the three. It has the usual Chandela stamp – stone-faced walls built between two hills to block a large rivulet. The wall is massive, at least 100 feet high. In the middle of the wall is a sluice gate, a later addition, that controls the exit of water into a 25 KM long canal system to irrigate many hundred hectares of land. The stone facing admittedly looks like steps, but only goats venture down in search of the odd plant and water. Near the gate, the stones are too steep for human beings to walk down – they are more negotiable further out.

From a vantage point to the north of gate, next to the inevitable temple, I get a panoramic view of the talab. On the far side, there are yellow fields of mustard, grown on the bed of the talab as the water level dips. Trees way beyond the fields indicate the far bank – they are almost too far to see. It is nearly 500 M across the water to the other side and the talab is about 2 ½ KM long from Todna village to the hills at the other end. The talab is only about a quarter full because the rains haven't been good since 2004.

“When this is full, you cannot see the far side,” says Suresh.

A platform halfway down the steps lets me stand over the water and gaze down into its blue depths. In a year of good rainfall, the water reaches the platform but now its about 3 M above the water. Here again, I see stones with religious figures carved into them – apsaras, serpents and bulls. The water is amazingly clear and I can see the plants growing on the bottom. A few youth fish, unsuccessfully.

“What do you do,” I ask one gangly youth.

He takes flight like a startled deer. Another replies.

“He is mental. Doesn't do anything.”

“Do you drink this water,” I ask.

“No, we have wells for drinking water.”

Their village is up the hill a little way and their fields over the embankment. I return to the top of the embankment and cross to the other side. Water gushes from an opening at the bottom, controlled by the sluice gate, into a cemented canal that runs straight as far as I can see.



Jalyatra: Exploring India's Traditional Water Management Systems

Right outside the gate, people have set up fishing nets. These are triangular, with one side under water and the other two propped up like a tent. The lower side is weighed with stones. The nets are arranged in V-formation behind each other so that no fish can swim through. They are all empty – Suresh says they may catch something by morning.

The canal is flanked by lush fields, green with newly-sown crops. There are orchards here as well. The Gora talab ensures that farmers in the command area do not want for water. The thump of tubewells irrigating the fields from groundwater, kept high by the talab, reverberates off the hill behind me.

The irrigation department is supposed to look after Gora talab while the Mau municipality has charge for Jagat Sagar and Sahaniya talab. Jagat Sagar is the best kept of the lot though the other two aren't badly off either. However, siltation remains a problem with all three, as indeed with all the talabs in Bundelkhand. This is because rainfall is torrential and rainwater carries a lot of topsoil away with it. This usually washes up into a talab and has to be dredged every few years, else they will silt up. The agencies that are supposed to maintain the talabs don't do so, pleading a shortage of funds.

We return to the museum on Sahaniya talab. It has a magnificent collection of sculptures gathered from the bed of the various ponds around. There are stone carvings of gods and goddesses dating to the Chandelas and some even further back. The more recent exhibits have to do with the guns, clothes and armour of Chatrasal.

Dr A. L. Pathak is the curator in-charge of this treasure trove at the Majaraja Chatrasal museum, Dhubela, Chatarpur. He has been there for years and loves 'his sculptures' as he calls these priceless items. The museum is basic and has a Rs. 2 entry fee. Sadly, I think, its so inaccessible and unmarked that even tourists en route Khajuraho, for whom this falls on the way, wont stop to see these incredible pieces of our heritage.

Sitting in the lawn, he says, "Most of the Chandeli talabs, as these are called, were made in the Khajuraho-Mahoba-Bandha region between 900 and 1,200 AD. The rulers kept a ratio of one talab for every village though local people built their own so the ratio was higher. Some of the talabs date even further back, and were probably built by the Jain monks who lived here so that they could meditate in peace. The Chandelas renovated and enlarged most of them."

This part of India was densely forested till a few centuries ago. It must have made an ideal getaway for monks and other seeking spiritual peace, and who didn't want to do all the way to the Himalayas.

Dr Pathak continues. "Now, they have mostly silted up. This has reduced their capacity to store water to the extent that they overflow after just two or three days of heavy rain. They dry up much faster as well."

The crying need is to desilt them. It's impossible to build new talabs because there isn't any land left and anyhow, making new ones will be very expensive. Even the water resources department's proposal says so.

Urmil is a small river that rises in the Bijawar hills and joins the Ken after about a 100 KM. It has been dammed about 20 KM from Nowgong on the road north-east to Mahoba. The dam is low built on a flat plain. It takes advantage of the slope of the land and encircles a large tracts of water with its two arms. Its like a lake, the far end shrouded in the haze that rises from the water. People mine sand and farm on the bed of the lake. The dam's gates are closed. The control room



Jalyatra: Exploring India's Traditional Water Management Systems

is locked. A sign on the side says “Urmil dam is Mahoba's largest source of water”. It's a new dam, completed in 1993 at a cost of about Rs. 360 million. Water flows from two canals, one on either side of the dam, to Mahoba town about 30 KM to the north-east.

Mahoba would not have needed this dam's water. It has a few talabs of its own – Khetri talab and Madan sagar. Mahoba was part of Chatrasal's kingdom and a part of the earlier Chandela empire as well. It is said to have been founded then and the remains of Khajuraho-style temple in the middle of Madan sagar testifies to this. It was well-endowed with water resources, till a few decades ago. The usual drama of neglect, decline and greed played out here. They neglected their ancient resources, that decayed. Rather than reviving these talabs, the government opted to build the Urmul dam and channel water from there because there was more money to be made. The situation is worse for people in Mahoba because farmers along the way extract water from the open canals that pass by their fields; the town's water supply suffers.

Khetri taal, as its called, it a dead pond. In its heyday, it would have covered an impressive 150 hectares. It now smells of sewage and water covers less than 20 hectares. It's an open air toilet, temples and idols notwithstanding. Khetri taal is silted up right to the top of its wall. The headless torso of a polished black granite figurine sits guard under a small peepul tree on the wall. There is the shrine to the taal under a Banyan tree but its not been potent enough to halt Khetri taal's decline.

The other one has fared better, but only just. Madan sagar is a serpentine body of water. It's impossible to tell where it starts and ends because there are houses all over it. It seems that settlements have come up on the talab's drying bed and divided it into small stretches of water. The largest one still meets part of Mahoba's water needs; the smaller ones breed mosquitoes under a thick carpet of water hyacinth. They are convenient toilets for the houses that have sprung up along their sides.

The most impressive of the talabs near Mahoba, and the best kept, is Vijay sagar. This bears the marks of Chandeli architecture. Vijay talab is in good shape because it's a bird sanctuary with a tourist complex inside. It's 4 KM outside Mahoba on the road to Baandha. The wall that created the talab stretches between two hills across a ravine. The water is clean and the talab covers about 250 hectares. A few migratory birds float on the water but otherwise, all is calm.

In the forest nearby is an old Chandela fort, re-affirming those ancient's affinity for water. A nursery with saplings of local trees completes the scene. A few families lounge around and couples find secluded places on Vijay sagar's wall to cuddle up.

I find a remarkable sketch on the toilet's wall. It's a diagram of the panchwati tree plan. The translation is roughly – ‘Peepul, Bel, Bargad, Amla and Ashok are the five trees of panchwati. They need to be grown in five directions (as indicated in the diagram). The Peepul should be planted to the west, the Bel to the north, Bargad to the east and Amla to the south. The Ashok should be to the south-west. All trees should be 10 M from the centre. In this manner, if a man plants Peepul, Pomegranate, Mango, Chameli and Bargad trees, he is assured of a place in heaven’.

This just underlines the status of trees, water and earth in our culture. A lot of this has sadly fallen by the way.

The Chandelas were the main talab builders, but not the only ones. Much later, in the 16th century, Bajji Rao Peshwa from Pune came to the aid of Chatrasal against the Mughals. They



Jalyatra: Exploring India's Traditional Water Management Systems

defeated the Mughals and Chatrasal gave Peshwa a large part of his kingdom as tribute. Baji Rao's eye fell on Mastani, the comely daughter of one of Chatrasal's servants and he took her for his mistress. In return, the Peshwa ordered the construction of tanks at Baandha, one of which still thrives today. It's variously called the Nawab tank or Shankar tank. It is deep and covers about 6 hectares. Nawab tank is fed by the Ken River and it's never dried up in its history. The surroundings have been designed for different purposes – one side towards the forest has a slope where horses can drink; next to that is a place for washing clothes; there are steps for bathing where some privacy is assured; and finally, there is the inevitable temple.

My driver Sharma entertains me on the drive back to Atarra from Baandha. The jeep's tape recorder runs fast, so the male singer sounds feminine. In the local Bundeli dialect, the pedestrian poetry sounds sweet. As we hurtle down the highway dodging rickshaws, the tape recorder belts out an ode from a rickshaw puller to a city girl – urban butterfly – taking a ride with him.

The water from most talabs Bundelkhand was used for human consumption, mainly bathing and washing. Wells provided drinking water. Agriculture was entirely rainfed because of the effort involved in lifting talab water to the fields. The talabs started to be used for irrigation only after Bundelkhand became part of the British Empire in the early 19th century. Water became a source of revenue and the Crown appropriated all water sources and its distribution. They did look after the talabs but community involvement in talab maintenance dwindled, till in the 1970s, it faded away altogether.

Suresh attributes this to the advent of the handpump. "Individual sources of water replaced communal ones such as talabs. Families or communities can own handpumps. Only communities own talabs. Handpumps have made it easier to extract water. They have taken people away from talabs. Even though talabs are vital to the handpumps' success, by maintaining the water table, people seldom make the connection and let the talabs go to seed."

The result is dry handpumps and wells. Then people sink tubewells to tap deeper aquifers. That works for a while till the water table falls and tubewells have to be re-bored. This has been happening across the region, as indeed across India. The Green Revolution is partly to blame because all the so-called high yielding varieties need large amounts of water, pesticides and fertilizers to deliver.

Revolutions have passed Bundelkhand by, maybe because of poverty and maybe because it is such a backwaters. After the last round of wars with the Mughals, the place has been passed over by successive governments.

Bundelkhand maybe a poor region, measured by modern standards. It is a crime-infested, dacoit-ridden region that development has overlooked. If it was not for Khajuraho, it would not exist in India's consciousness. Murders, rapes and kidnappings do not even make news here anymore. People attribute this 'jungle raj' to UP Chief minister Mulayam Singh's penchant for appointing Yadavs to every conceivable post – state civil service, the constabulary and in local governance. They thrive on crime, doing nothing to rid the place of it. The people are resigned to it.

There aren't any big dams to raise the green lobby's hackles. The national media goes as far as Allahabad but not into the badlands of western UP or eastern MP.

But Bundelkhand has lessons on local resource management for everybody. A case in point is the Urmil dam. Mahoba had its own rich and diverse sources of water – tanks and a seasonal river. These went to seed, under the greed of colonizers, migrants who needed accommodation and the



Jalyatra: Exploring India's Traditional Water Management Systems

familiar apathetic bureaucracy. The one tank that survives and still does its job, though rather poorly, is on the verge of disappearing under buildings. In their place, a modern dam on the Urmil river conveys a precarious supply of water to the town. Farmers downstream of the dam who used to irrigate crops from the river, now suck water from canals.

The result is that neither gets enough. Urmil is a small river and can barely meet the needs of people living along it, far less those of a town.

The answer would have been to desilt and rehabilitate Mahoba's tanks that together can supply enough water to the town even if the rains fail for a year or two. The groundwater situation is iffy but tanks store a known amount of water, that is available year round.

Then there is the question of cost. The Urmil dam cost Rs. 360 million. It would have cost a tenth of that to desilt and restore Mahoba's two tanks.

This folly is the result of bureaucratic and political greed. Government officials and politicians make money off large projects such as dams. Small projects such as rehabilitating tanks do not yield as much even though there are thousands of tanks in the region and reviving them could become a project worth thousands of millions of rupees.

Now, the government looks set magnify compound this stupidity by building the Ken-Betwa link canal. Instead of spending Rs. 1,000 million to renovate talabs, it will spend Rs. 4.5 billion or 4.5 times the amount in order to create additional irrigation that the region does not need. It will displace 8,500 people and submerge a part of the Panna Reserve Forest, as well as fertile fields. The project will transfer 'surplus' water from the Ken to the Betwa River.

There are several problems with this. There is no surplus water in the Ken. The project is based on the premise that people grow a single crop in the Ken's catchment. That is true because traditional agriculture here involved growing just the single rainfed crop; farmers grew a second one only if they had good rains or were near a source of water. If, as Bharti, a former Zila Panchayat member from Baandha, says, "Farmers here start growing a second crop, there will not be any surplus water in the Ken".

Standing on a bridge outside Baandha, over the Ken River, it is easy to see where the surplus lies. Donkeys cross the river in summer laden with stones. A man crossing the river at the same goes down into the water to his hips.

"Where is the surplus?" asks Bharti.

Some 230 KM to the west, the swollen Betwa slides past the silent funeral palaces of the Bundela rajputs near Orchha. The river is full of water, impossible to cross on foot. It is one of the major rivers of Bundelkhand. Where is the surplus, where the deficit, I wonder, standing on a sandy bank of the Betwa looking across at the Orchha palaces.

The project will not reduce floods or droughts. Both the rivers rise in the same range of hills and flow through the same part of the country. They both join the Yamuna at different points; the Betwa joins upstream of the Ken. When there are floods in one, there are floods in the other. So also with drought. What will happen after the link is built, explains Dr. Prakash, is that there will be perennial floods in the Yamuna between the mouths of the Betwa and the Ken and water shortages downstream. The Betwa will always have excess water and the Ken will be always short of it. The excess water will flood the plains between the rivers, and flow back up the Ken for a short distance. Downstream of the Ken on the Yamuna, villages will face water problems.



Jalyatra: Exploring India's Traditional Water Management Systems

That is not considering what people in Chatarpur, Mahoba, Baandha and other towns will face. The Ken is their lifeline. Diverting water from this already deficient river will deprive them of an already tenuous source of water. In addition, the land slopes from south to north. The canal connecting the two rivers will go from east to west, intersecting the land and cutting the natural flow of water.

Land to the south will be waterlogged and to the north will be short of water. The canal is to be a large affair, like a small river. It will disrupt the natural drainage of the entire region.

In short, the Ken-Betwa Link project will be a social and ecological disaster larger than the Narmada or Tehri dams.

The solution to Bundelkhand's water problems is simple. Renovate the talabs, clear their catchments and enhance their command areas. Remove the encroachments from around the talabs in cities and towns. Deepen them and strengthen their walls – without having to rebuild them – so they can hold more water. It is unlikely, the predictions of the Mr Pathak notwithstanding, that the walls will break if the tanks are dredged. As Dhan Foundation has done in Madurai, create water users associations that map onto the gram sabhas of yore. These associations should be handed charge of looking after their talabs.

Just for a few rupees more, Bundelkhand can change from a crime-infested backwaters into a region that truly reflects the glory of Khajuraho. It won't be empty talk of India's glorious heritage then, it will be talk backed by full talabs.