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Desert farmers on the path to economic self-reliance

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Rainwater being harvested in (masonry) check dams in Govindpura.

Eight villages in Rajasthan are quickly moving towards economic self-reliance through herbs production and turning into a role model for others, thanks to the government's integrated agriculture project which has rekindled a new hope in the western parts of the state.

The development could have gone unnoticed had the herbal medicinal giant Dabur not signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the farmers of Dheerasar and Dhonk villages in Barmer last year to purchase the entire lot of 'Shankhpushpi', a medicinal herb.

These two villages are among the eight being developed under the project.

The others are: Mansagar, Govindpura in Jodhpur district, Damodar, Didu, Deda, Sankariya villages in Jaisalmer district. Gramin Vikas Samiti director (NGO partner of the project) Shashi Tyagi said the cultivation of other medicinal herbs, like Arana, Vajradanti and Isabgole was also

being encouraged under the project which were sure to attract other pharmaceutical giants like Dabur.

In fact, Dabur had purchased 10 quintals of Shankhpushpi at ` 1,600 to ` 2,000 per kg from the two villages. This may encourage even more farmers to grow herbs, sources said.

The project under which these schemes operate has a long name “Dryland Systems: Integrated Agricultural Production Systems for the Poor and Vulnerable in Dry Areas.”

But, it effectively addresses the weaknesses attached to an arid land and turns it into a high yielding zone through water harvesting, cultivation of improved quality crops through scientific methods, high breed cattle and herbal plants and help farmers market their produce, senior programme coordinator Rajendra Kumar said.

The project was started on in April 2014 by the government with the help of the International Crop Research Institute for the Semi Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) of Hyderabad and the Central Arid Zone Research Institute (CAZRI) of Jodhpur.

The project has been funded by Consultative Group of International Agriculture Research (CGIAR).

Kumar said the project was helping more than 2000 farmers from the eight selected villages. It's USP is bringing into play an integrated agriculture model through the use of scientific methods.

He said the project was aimed at generating awareness among the farmers through comparative on-field workshops wherein they were asked to compare the traditional seeds and the scientifically developed improved variety ones. The focal area of is taking up short duration, dry resistance and low water consuming crops, he said.

According to Kumar, the integral part of the project is turning traditional land stretches into a productive wealth. There are two kinds of land stretches. The common pasture field is called 'gochar' and the sacred woodland around temple, 'oran'.

Orans have been a source of natural wealth like fodder, fuel, timber, berries, roots and herbs. They were regarded as a symbol of prosperity for the community that owned it. International Crop Research Institute for the Semi Arid Tropics scientist Shailendra Kumar said water was the greatest challenge in the desert area where it needed to be saved not only for daily consumption but also for irrigation.

“We tried our best to promote traditional water storage techniques of the villagers. One such water conservation system is called ‘Khadin’ — an ingenious construction designed to harvest surface runoff water for agriculture.

Principal scientist of Central Arid Zone Research Institute JC Tiwari said villagers need to be made aware of conservation of natural resources and of their managed utilization.

Consultative Group of International Agriculture Research, research programme director Anthony M Whitbread, said famine-like conditions could handled with a judicious blend of the latest research and conventional techniques as had been taken up by the villagers in western Rajasthan'.

Whitbread further said after a village was fully developed under the project, the responsibility to monitor, use and ensure use of the technique would be shifted to village development committee.