

IAS officer leads from the front to restore ponds using Chola methods in Puducherry

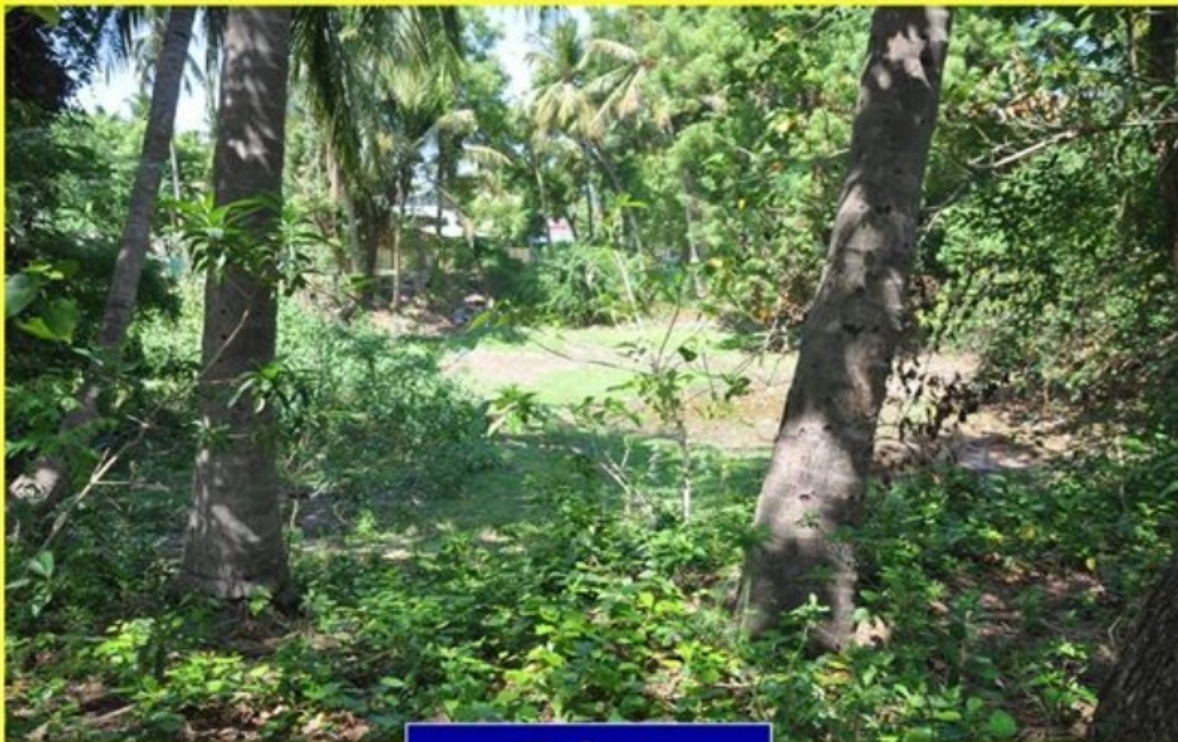
The restoration of 178 water bodies in Puducherry's Karaikal district using ancient Chola dynasty methods is a perfect example of finding traditional solutions to modern problems. And what is more inspiring is that the District Collector, Shri Vikranth Raja, a young IAS officer, was at the helm of the achievement, who employed the approach 'Nudging to Bring Behavioural Change'.

Karaikal district which saw acute water scarcity and rapidly plummeting groundwater levels in 2019 was transformed into a water-sufficient region just months after the District Collector launched 'Nam Neer' (Our Water) project based on the 9th century practices of the Chola dynasty for rain water harvesting and water management. He brought back into practice the extensive ancient knowledge of managing Cauvery's water which not only prevented floods but also took its waters to agricultural fields through a carefully crafted network of channels and bunds.

Indispensable for any water conservation project, Shri Raja was assisted by all stakeholders including local people, educational institutions, religious leaders, financial institutions, civil society, corporates etc. To mobilize government officials first, Shri Raja used a concept – Employee Social Responsibility – to tap the polluted, damaged and dried-up ponds. In the initial phase, Shri Raja and his team interacted with the religious leaders as a significant number of dried ponds were found attached to temples or falling under their jurisdiction. The temple authorities were then asked to use temple funds to clean the ponds which led to revival of around 30 water bodies as part of temple social responsibility. These initiatives then moved other departments like Forest, Public Works into action as well who worked in the direction of beautification of several ponds in their jurisdictions. To further beautify areas surrounding water bodies, 25,000 saplings were planted by various stakeholders. The problem of encroachment of water bodies was also dealt with. Shri Raja and his team also focused on spreading awareness among people to volunteer in whichever way they can to make 'Nam Neer' a success. Shri Raja is now the Secretary to the Chief Minister of Puducherry and made a presentation during District Magistrates' webinar series as part of 'Catch the Rain' campaign.

Furthermore, under MGNREGA scheme, every village was asked to revive one pond which resulted in restoration of about 85 ponds. The campaign also received support from business houses through CSR for restoration of about 20 ponds and desilting a big stretch of canals facilitating the flow of Cauvery waters to farms. All these efforts ensured water availability in the district which was not very long ago was grappling with acute water crises and groundwater levels showed considerable

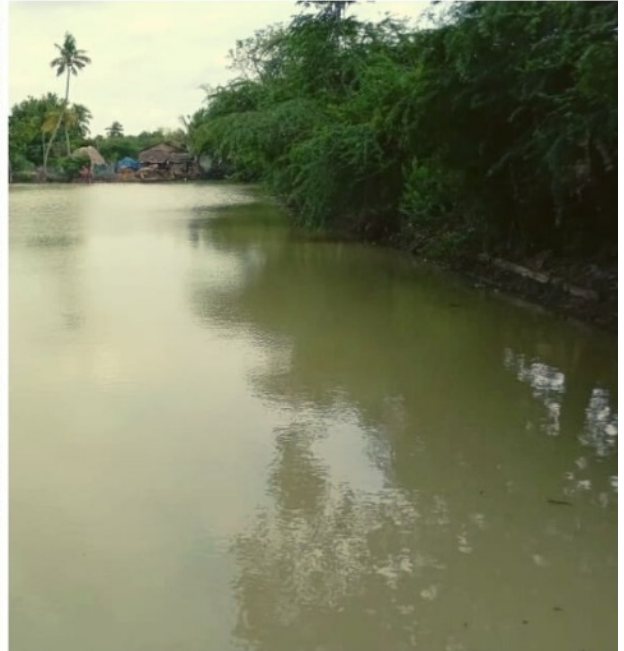
improvements within few months of the project. The revived ponds have been allotted to women self-help groups for aquaculture – children are often seen swimming in the rejuvenated water bodies. The sense of ownership and willingness to bring about a change characterize this excellent piece of work in the direction of water conservation and management.



Before



After



Learning from the Chola Dynasty!



Inputs and pictures taken from thebetterindia.com