

Waters of life

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Tarun Bharat Sangh of Alwar is well-known for its work on reviving traditions of waterharvesting. But few know about the economic advantages of the water harvesting structures it has built and promoted in villages. For every Rs 100 invested in small earthen check-dams known as johads, the economic production in villages has risen by Rs 400. And all this prosperity has come through the use of only three per cent of the total rainwater. Five rivers now flow perennially, a result of the 20 per cent additional groundwater recharge. Richard Mahapatra documents the reasons behind this success



The dam at Hamipura in distric (Credit: sunita narian / cse)There was a time when forests were dense here. Today, travelling by train through district Alwar of Rajasthan, you will not see too many of them. They disappeared under the railway tracks, in the form of sleepers. In the 1930s, under the influence of the British, the then maharaja of Alwar took away community ownership of forests and sold them out to contractors to obtain timber for the railroad.

Railways did not improve the living conditions of the people in any significant way. On the other hand, as the rhythms of their rural lives were inveterately woven into the ecology, after they lost control over their common lands -- and then the forest itself -- a long nightmare began. Degraded lands, drought and poverty. The govnrment was indifferent. Migration was the only chance for survival. But the story was to take a dramatic turn for the better.

On the evening of October 2, 1985, five young men got off a bus at Kishori village in Thanagazi block of the district. They were from the Tarun Bharat Sangh (tbs, Young India Association), a voluntary organisation set up in 1975 to provide relief to the victims of a major fire in the campus of the Jaipur University. Among them was Rajendra Singh, the secretary of tbs. His one-line agenda was to fight 'injustice against people' and 'to clean the society of all evils'. But the young men did not know how. "It was like landing in the battlefield without knowing who to fight," Singh remembers his first day in Kishori.

Although they were not aware of it, the young men had come to the right place at the right time. The traditional wisdom of the area sought the greenhorns out. Mangu Lal Patel, an old man from the nearby village of Gopalpura, told them: "Do not talk too much; dig tanks and build johads. You will get the results." It was an eye-opener. Before they lost rights over their common lands and forests, the people of the region had a rich tradition of building johads, small earthen check-dams which capture and conserve rainwater, improving percolation and groundwater recharge. The tradition was still alive in the collective subconscious. "My ego, the result of formal education in urban India, simply crumbled. I realised that only these villagers could show the way," Rajendra recalls. "Gandhiji's Gram Swaraj became clear to me through the words of Mangu."

TBS set up its ashram in Bheekampura and started promoting johads. Authorities were dead against the organisation as it by-passed all bureaucratic channels and dealt with the people, directly. In the face of tremendous odds, tbs expanded its reach. It started getting the assistance of several reputed funding agencies.

At present, tbs has 3,000 water harvesting structures in 650 villages of Alwar district to its credit. No engineer was called for consultation. tbs was guided by traditional wisdom. Now, prosperity is returning, as naked as the poverty

of yore, but with an unmistakable touch of glory. Its greatest symbols are five rivers of the region, which have started flowing perennially after decades of drought, a direct result of conserving water in johads.

More water means better crops for the people, better conditions of soil, health, ducation and a rich community life, as people do not have to migrate for employment. For every Rs 100 invested in making johads, the economic production in the villages has risen by as much as Rs 400 per capita per annum.

Hope has never been so resplendent in this area of modern India, particularly after such a long trail of devastation.

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