

## You are the government

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If you want to improve this country, take my advice. Get rid of the government and take governance into your own hands. Sounds very radical but this is indeed the only paradigm which appears to be working.

Less than a month ago, a public meeting was held in a village in Alwar district. Some bureaucrats and judges were advising the villagers that they must listen to government officials because a river must belong to the government, which has the responsibility to sort out any differences that are likely to come up between upstream and downstream communities. I had argued back that this was a ludicrous idea. To expect a corrupt and arrogant bureaucracy to deal decently and fairly with poor people is a mindless proposition. Rajendra Singh of Tarun Bharat Sangh, who had organised the meeting, was also at a loss for words as he had expected very different advice from the eminent personalities present there (see Editor's Page; 'A million mutinies'; dte; January 15, 1999).

All over the world, where conflicts exist over river basins between different countries, the riparian countries form a river commission to sort out their differences. There are today nearly one thousand international rivers in the world. Taking a cue from this, I told the villagers that they should form their own River Parliament. After all it was their water harvesting efforts which had revived the river from a dead channel. I also said I would be very happy to join them in their battle.

Within a few weeks, Tarun Bharat Sangh got the leaders of all the villages along the Arvari river, who have recharged the groundwater in the river basin through their water harvesting structures, to meet and actually set up a River Parliament. And a long set of rules and regulations have been hammered out in a two-day meeting. This should not be surprising because there is no reason why a dynamic civil society should have to sit on red tape to take action, if it has got an interesting idea.

The issue of river management is indeed becoming serious in the Arvari basin. Now that the basin is again rich in groundwater, the Rajasthan government has reportedly set its eyes on the area to establish an industrial estate. This can easily introduce water-exploitative and highly polluting activities in the basin and, given the character of our governance, nobody will care to seek the consent of the villagers who have brought about the transformation. But now the villagers with their own River Parliament can seriously consider any such proposal and oppose it jointly if they disagree with it.

The meeting did not just discuss external threats. Like a good legislative body, it also discussed internal threats. Now that water is back, land prices are going up and many villagers are installing tubewells. Once again, the issue of regulation has become important. It was the joint effort of all the villagers which had revived the river but the benefits could easily be captured by a few. Government inspectors cannot and will not control the installation of tubewells, especially in a manner that will be fair to all. So the only solution lies in villagers regulating the installation and use of tubewells themselves.

What has happened with this tiny Arvari today should happen with every major and medium river in the country. Nobody in the government cares when Haryana pollutes the Yamuna and puts the people of Delhi at risk. Similarly, nobody cares when Delhi further pollutes the Yamuna and puts the people of Uttar Pradesh at risk. A start can be made to make rivers everyone's property and heritage by setting up unofficial River Parliaments which work together to fight for a clean river.

A few days later while visiting Chennai, I found self-governance an answer also to a glaring urban problem. Every Indian city is today full of filth and waste. And becoming worse by the day. Municipal workers are amongst the most indolent employees one can find. But Exnora, a ngo in Chennai, has found a simple answer to the problem: Get the people to manage their own waste disposal work. Exnora encourages people from the lower middle-income (about Rs 3,000-4,000 monthly household income) residential areas to form street associations, collect Rs. 10 a month from each household, pay for their own 'street beautifier' and, thus, ensure that they do not have to live in filth and squalor. Exnora started over ten years ago. Today it is working in over a thousand streets. "None of us want to live in dirt," said one street association office bearer. "It is in these very streets that our children play. And now we have a system that works."

Forming the street association has brought several other benefits, too. People now know everyone in the street. So if anyone has any work in the government, they immediately look for the right neighbour. Some street associations have published their own street residents' directories.

Therefore become the government yourself. I assure you the country's governance will greatly improve. And, remember, this, in fact, it was our tradition. We had great cities and villages long before the British brought us their 'modern state' but we lapped up their 'whitewashing' as the panacea for all ills. I am convinced that the 21st century will be more like the 15th, better managed and wealthier, and with much less trappings of the Western state.

- Anil Agarwal

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