

## Vindicated

**Issue Date:**

2001-8-31

The Magsaysay award for Rajendra Singh has meant volte-face by critics of community-based water harvesting

For the villagers of Lava ka Baas in Alwar district of Rajasthan, the Ramon Magsaysay award for Rajendra Singh, secretary of the Alwar-based Tarun Bharat Sangh could not have come at a more opportune time. After their face off with the irrigation department, who questioned the safety and the legality of the *johad* that the villagers had constructed on a nalla that feeds into the Ruparel river, the award has silenced, at least for the time being, critics of community-based water harvesting.

The award goes to Singh for his outstanding contribution in mobilising the villagers across Rajasthan and India to harvest the rain to meet their own water demands. An award justly deserved, it has served several purposes in addition to throwing up several issues. It recognises Singh's efforts in community leadership. The villagers now stand vindicated in their stand for harvesting rain. And above all, no one will, at least for the time being, dare destroy the *johad* in Lava ka Baas.

In an absolute volte face Rajasthan irrigation minister Kamala Beniwal has congratulated Rajendra and urged him to 'let bygones be bygones and to forgive and forget'. Not only that, she has gone one step ahead and urged Rajendra to continue the good work and build many more structures. It is amazing what international recognition can do. The fact that President K R Narayanan, went to Hamirpura to award the villagers of Bhaonta-Kolyala with the *Down to Earth* -Joseph C John award for their outstanding contribution to water conservation, that he has stressed the need of community-based water management in his independence eve address to the country apparently fell on deaf ears.

The impact of community water harvesting is there for all to see. To deal successfully with food security and rural poverty, water is a key input, and if enough water has to be made available, communities must be involved. There is simply no other way. But the point here is, is the government willing? Or will it continue to lay claim over a resource as fundamental, as valuable and as decentralised as the raindrop?

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**Source URL:** <http://www.downtoearth.org.in/node/16792>