

President's choice

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K R Narayanan's keen interest in environment leaves a lasting mark on Rashtrapati Bhavan apart from the quiet dignity with which he graced the high office, outgoing President K R Narayanan would be remembered for his 'green touch' to the Rashtrapati Bhavan. He has been an environmental president, who went out of his way to support this vital sector. Take for instance, rain water harvesting. Inspired by the work done by the Centre for Science and Environment and the impact he saw for himself in a remote village in Rajasthan, President Narayanan directed that rainwater harvesting be installed in the sprawling president's estate. And the results are already evident with groundwater level in and around Raisina Hill recording a rise. The officials are overjoyed as the water crisis for the famous Mughal gardens is over. But this could not have been done without Narayanan's personal interest.

In fact, the president broke all official norms to visit the Bhaonta-Kolyala village in Rajasthan to present the *Down To Earth* Joseph C John award for the most outstanding environmental community. It was here that he was witness to the changes brought about by water and its proper management. It is amazing that in a primarily rural country like India, no Indian president has ever visited a village. And certainly no president has had the courage to honour poor villagers for the work that they have done to manage their water resources to show the country a way ahead.

If today, the Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee says that rainwater harvesting is a powerful ideas whose time has come, it is because of President Narayanan's support and belief in this idea. Indian presidents tend to be banal in their addresses to the nation but Narayanan broke rules by endorsing ideas he believed in, including the call for making rainwater harvesting a people's movement for water.

We have only one regret. The president wanted his car converted to compressed natural gas (cng) because he wanted to lead by example in the effort to clean Delhi's air. But Mercedes Benz -- who manufactured this special car -- said they did not have the technical capabilities to do the job. What our Indian bureaucracy could do with rainwater harvesting the multinational auto giant was unable to do.

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