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Check dams make dead river alive, bring prosperity

Sunny Sebastian



A turnaround: Maheshwara river in Kailadevi Sanctuary of Rajasthan's Karauli district.

KAILA DEVI SANCTUARY: Quiet flows the river Maheshwara through the Chambal ravines in the dreaded badlands of Rajasthan. The mountain stream, gurgling its way through the creeks of the Aravalli hill system in this cattle ravaged sanctuary adjoining the more famous Ranthambhore National Park, now stands witness to peace brought about by water.

The cliffs in the area, known for its Chambal outlaws who play hide-and-peek with the police forces of three States - Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh -- do not reverberate any more with the sounds of staccato gunfire: for there is peace. A good number of dacoits and their accomplices now cultivate paddy in these once waterless tracts.

Another miracle has been pulled off with yet another river in Rajasthan. And the accomplishment here is of the villagers and the workers of Tarun Bharat Sangh, led by Magsaysay Award winner Rajendra Singh, better known as "Waterman". out in the area about a decade ago, the Tarun Bharat Sangh team with the support of the villagers and the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation created 369 "*johads*" -- or check-dams, now identified so much with Rajendra Singh's work -- which in turn recharged the ground water and made the river flow.

As in the case of lurking dacoits, the earth of the Dang region too seemingly responded positively to the water "divining" methods of the "Jal Biradari" (the brotherhood created by Rajendra Singh).

The Maheshwara flowed throughout the year in 2007 for the first time in 20 years. The mountain stream is the sixth in the category of rivers brought back to life by Tarun Bharat Sangh. While the rest of the rivers are in Alwar district, 200 km away, this is the first river to turn perennial outside Alwar, the base of Tarun Bharat Sangh.

"The Maheshwara used to flow during the monsoon earlier. Now it flows all 12 months!" says jubilant Roop Singh Gujjar, Sarpanch of Nivera Panchayat in Sapotra tehsil. Roop Singh joined the "water mission" of Jal Biradari during the 2001 convention it held at Neemi in Jaipur district, also attended by the late crusader Anil Agarwal.

"The *johads* have brought about a drastic change in our lives. Earlier the people here used to migrate to Punjab and Haryana to work as farm labourers. Now we have 144 bighas of land under paddy cultivation in my own village Khajura alone," says Roop Singh talking about the new-found prosperity. Nivera Panchayat, which has 11 villages under it, accounts for 5,000 bighas of land under paddy, an unusual crop in arid Rajasthan!

“There is a vast difference in the life here in the past and the life now. There are 16 motorcycles in Khajura where nobody owned even a bicycle in the past. The village has 21 buffaloes besides other animals,” Roop Singh informs proudly. Yes, the familiar sounds in the villages here now are pealing of the bells tied to the neck of cows and the common sights are those of lush green paddy fields and buffaloes soaking themselves in the muddy pools. And unlike at most other places in Rajasthan, one gets water here from hand-pumps.

“Initially I was against paddy cultivation,” says Rajendra Singh, listed recently as one of the 50 persons worldwide “who could save the planet” by the British daily *Guardian*. “Yet I conceded to it finally seeing the local people’s commitment. They saved enough water to cultivate paddy which is a water-intensive crop,” he says.