

Listen to the Waterman

Anu Bhambhani, ET Bureau Jun 5, 2009, 03.01am IST

At an age when most young men look forward to a settled life and career, there was this young man from Jaipur in Rajasthan, who decided to break free from everything 'settled'. In the 1980s, he left his government job and packed his bags for a small village in Alwar district of Rajasthan. The area that once used to be green and full of river water was completely arid with no green cover and a completely dried up river. This was the city that Rajendra Singh walked into.

Despite so many years of winning accolades and getting recognition around the world, this Ramon Magsaysay Award 2001 winner never forgets to mention a farmer. "That illiterate man told me, 'we can buy medicines and books for our kids with money. Here the basic problem is of drying up of wells and rivers that has made farmers leave farming and women of the village have to walk miles to fetch water'.

That man taught me the 200-year-old technique of making johads, sort of a catchment area that holds rainwater," explains Singh. Several johads, several years later, the rainwater stored in those helped the arid land get back its moisture, which ultimately filled up the wells and rivers of the place. 'A miracle' is how most people saw it as, but Singh knew it was only the most practical thing to do.

"A river's life is related to the recharge and discharge of water. And, a johad helps the land retain its moisture. It rejuvenates nature," he adds. As a result of this, men who had left for bigger cities in search of jobs, came back to start their farming, women didn't have to walk miles to fetch water got all their water from the village wells.

While his experiment worked in that small village, one wonders if it would work in the urban areas that are increasingly facing the heat of water scarcity. "In the urban setting, the engineering of johads is not applicable, but the methodology can be used," he suggests.

So, does one see any wars over water being fought in near future? "Near future!" he scoffs, "Talk of now. There are already fights over river water between several states. When the farmers are faced with water crisis and they ask the government for their rights, their demands are met with bullets. What are these if not reasons to lead to wars."

Then, what is it that would ensure water for future and prevent such fights over this natural resource. "I believe conservation and disciplined use of water is the only way to save water," shares the Waterman of Rajasthan.