

Man of the year

Kiss of life for mother earth

Rajendra Singh, son of a zamindar from Uttar Pradesh, motivates the people of 650 villages in Rajasthan to transform their land and life, recharge their rivers and make the Aravallis smile, just by watering their roots.

By Vijaya Pushkarna

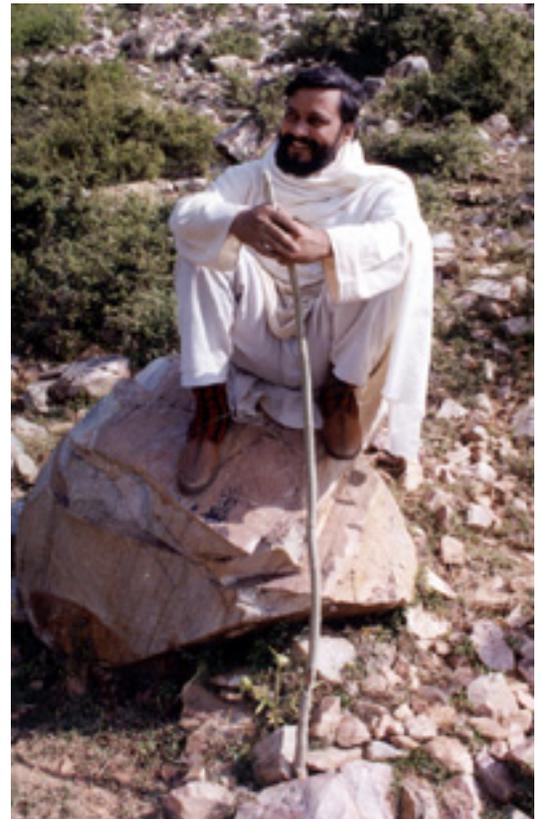
INTERVIEW/RAJENDRA SINGH

Rajendra Singh was 28, and married for a year and a half when he packed his bags. His wife was visiting her parents who like his own father and mother called him nalayak, good for nothing. Not that he had failed school or not found a job. He was a post-graduate in Hindi from Allahabad University and a qualified Ayurvedic physician from the Rishikul Ayurvedic Mahavidyalaya, UP. And he had a government job as project coordinator for youth education in Jaipur.

Nalayak wasn't even an endearing pet name carried over from childhood; the label stuck after he started talking of going into the real India to "do something". Then he quit his job, and drew a line on a map of Rajasthan to mark a 50-km stretch between Thanagazi and Ajabgarh in the foothills of the Aravallis. He wanted to be somewhere there.

Selling off all the furniture, TV and fridge in his house in Jaipur when his wife went to her parents, he boarded a battered bus at the Ghat Gate and asked for five tickets "to the last stop". Four tickets were for his companions, nalayaks to their families! All they carried was a few utensils, a change of clothes and bedding.

Sitting in the bus, Rajendra Singh harked back to a Gandhi Peace Foundation worker called Ramesh



who had lived in his house in Meerut, UP, when he was in class 11. Ramesh had worked quietly, cleaning the village, resolving disputes and setting up a vachanalay, a place for debate.

It was Ramesh who had lit a spark in the zamindar's son, who called on Jayaprakash Narayan before the Emergency and joined the Taruna Dal, a brigade of adolescents for Total Revolution. Later, as a youth coordinator in Jaipur, Rajendra was drawn to a similar sounding forum, Tarun Bharat Sangh, which a few intellectuals had formed after a devastating fire on the Rajasthan University campus in 1975. Three years after he joined it Rajendra had become its general secretary and was travelling to the first destination in his mission.

The bus dropped them at the dry and barren Kishori village, the last stop 20 km past Thanagazi town, on the evening of October 2, 1985. The date had not been chosen as casually as the village which would become the headquarters of Tarun Bharat Sangh.

The villagers watched them warily, mistaking the bearded young men for terrorists from Punjab, till an elderly man admonished them with the authority of his grey hair: "Fools, why would terrorists choose this village and carry bedding."

As no one would still give them shelter he took them to a room at a Hanuman temple where they could spread two sheets. Rajendra, Narendra, Satendra, Kedar and Drighpal spent the next seven nights in that tiny room.

Not that they were particularly active during day. Wherever they went they faced huge boulders of resistance from distrusting villagers, who asked searching questions. "The questions crushed my intellectual arrogance," says Rajendra, "and I decided to learn from them."

More water: Women have more time for work and kids-no more long treks for water



Distrust began dissolving after Sumer Singh, a teacher from the nearby Suratgarh, discovered a living link with the strangers from the city: a relative of his, Mal Singh, was Rajendra's colleague at the youth education project. That strand of trust made the teacher get them a trader's vacant house free of rent, but the trader threw them out in no time.

Then, out of the blue, a landlord called Seth Badri Prasad opened the doors of two big havelis in the adjoining Bhikampura. The strangers from Jaipur had finally got a roof over their heads and a small corner in the hearts of a couple of villagers.

Rajendra started his Ayurvedic practice at Bhikampura while his friends went around motivating people to send their daughters to school. Trying to understand the social dynamics over the next few months, he wondered why those intelligent villagers did little to improve their lot. Why was the land arid and unproductive? Where had the forests of the Aravallis gone? Why was there no groundwater despite an annual rainfall of 600 mm?

Jogging memory, wizened village elders told him about the plunder of the Aravallis which shielded northeastern Rajasthan from the blazing heat of the Thar desert. They still remembered a greedy local prince auctioning off blocks of forests when he sniffed the death of monarchy in an independent India. As the axe hit the woods, rain waters ran down the hills and valleys, eroding the fertile topsoil instead of seeping into the loins of the earth. The land became infertile over the years.

It was then that Rajendra realised the object of his mission, water. Gopalpura, a village near by, was in the fifth straight year of drought; there was not a drop of water, and able-bodied men had trickled out into towns in Gujarat in search of work.

The Arvari rivulet was wet only in the monsoons, the old check-dams having worn away. The government would neither repair them nor help the strangers from Jaipur do it. Unwilling to back out, Rajendra Singh mobilised the villagers into shramdan, volunteer service, to desilt and deepen a pond. After the monsoon, their hearts were filled with joy: the water level in the pond was the highest they could remember, and it had recharged the wells in the vicinity.

Some danced in celebration, some others went to meet Rajendra: could they do some masonry work and repair a check-dam that was 1,400 feet long, 20 feet high and 50 feet wide? Rajendra roped in an engineer friend called Yogendra, but the dam was too big to be rebuilt by the 350 families of Gopalpura on their own. So they hired people from other villages, and paid them from donations.

At the end of 10,000 mandays they could irrigate 600 bighas of land. Now the hired workers and visitors to Gopalpura insisted that Rajendra help them build similar water harvesting systems in their villages. Tarun Bharat Sangh (TBS) had taken off.



The next halt was Govindpura, and within a decade hundreds of ponds and check-dams were built along the course of the Arvari, almost miraculously transforming it into a perennial rivulet. Four other streams would come alive in the next few years.

More Love: Men have come back. "When water comes, another things come automatically," says Prabha

Hamirpur, once a desert-like village near the Arvari, now has the sparkling Jabbar Sagar, rich with aquatic life, amid thick vegetation. The water flows down a big check-dam round the year, and the 2.5-km-long reservoir which looks a like a virgin bird sanctuary forms part of Roormal Meena's 25 bighas. He did not seek any compensation for the land: he is happy that there is a tenfold increase in productivity, and a steep drop in the cost of farming, because of the abundance of water.

The reservoir cost Rs 3.5 lakh, of which TBS bore only 5 per cent. "It benefits five big villages," says Rajendra, "and every beneficiary paid a proportionate amount." Two years ago the villagers launched a 100-day-long satyagraha forcing the government to cancel fishing contracts for the reservoir they had built. It is so ecologically precious that the village sabha slaps fines up to Rs 1,100 if even a single fish is

caught. And it has thus collected a little over Rs 5,000.

If the Jabbar Sagar is a people's bird sanctuary, there is a people's wildlife sanctuary as well: the Bhairudev Lok Vanjeev Abhayaranya has 12 sq. km of dense trees planted and protected by the people of Bhavta. It can be reached only through goat tracks: there is no forest guard, log book, or honking of tourist jeeps. A huge percolation tank for collecting rain water from an 8-km area has raised the water level in dozens of villages around.

The story of the rebirth of the 90-km-long Ruparel river, which had dried up, began with two women of Mala Tolawas, a village high up on a ridge in the Sariska Hills. This is where the first tributary of the river starts trickling down. The women, Gyarsi and Phoola, were the only human beings left in the village, the others having died or fled. A TBS volunteer who climbed up the ridge some time in 1987 suggested that they dig a pond: the two women did it in four months, with help from the volunteer who visited them every ten days.

That year the pond had water only for three months, but within two years it was rippling all year along. By then villagers downstream had also adopted water harvesting techniques. Eventually 350 ponds and check-dams were built on the Ruparel basin, turning the river perennial.



More schools: Brij Mohan's roof-top school at Kyara is just one of them. Many women want to be literate so that they can at least write letters to husband who have deserted them

Help had meanwhile come from some European agencies, encouraging TBS to extend its area of work. At the last count it had facilitated the building of 2,500 ponds and check-dams in 650 villages spread over 7 districts, Alwar, Jaipur, Dausa, Karoli, Sawai Madhopur, Udaipur and Jaisalmer.

Apart from providing work and irrigation, the water harvesting projects reunited families. Men who had fled to the towns began returning home to farm their once barren lands. The villages were no longer inhabited only by old men, women and children. "When water comes, other things come automatically," says Prabha of Kolyali village grazing her cattle.

Water made life more meaningful for the women. They did not have to walk miles with half a dozen pots delicately balanced on their heads: water was now a stone's throw from their homes. Earlier they were condemned to spend their days fetching water; now they had time to take care of their children and send them to school. There was future.

The villagers registered a general improvement in health, for they were eating well, having reaped a good crop for the first time in many years. Mohan Singh of Nangal Bani dug a pond in a relative's field all by himself, and then two small check-dams came up. He now cultivates three crops a year.

The cattle, too, looked healthier and yielded more. "We sell ghee and drink the chach (whey)," says a farmer. Thanks to the quiet food revolution, cases of malnutrition and night-blindness can rarely be sighted.

The transformation did not come all that easy. Not all villages had readily embraced change, and even where most people were ready, there was delay. TBS was very clear that it would not start work until everyone in the village was willing to contribute labour or money. That was why it took five years to build a small dam in Bhanwla.

"This principle helped us," says Rajendra. "The netagiri type of people left us, and the genuine ones were left with us. We never decided things for them, we only trained them to take decisions." Rajendra and his friends worked without deadlines or chalking territories, never showing the intellectual arrogance of social activists. They were simply people come to work.



Nor did the villagers look upon the work as TBS projects; they considered it their own because of their involvement at every level, identifying the need and the location, designing the project, starting the work, buying materials, keeping accounts, making payments. They were meticulous, for it was a matter of life and death.

More pride: Rajendra Singh has a quenching glass from Roormal Meena, the man who boasts a 2.5-km-long reservoir at Hamirpur

Maintenance, too, was left to the villagers. "Whenever they consult us on a problem, we find the solutions from the villagers themselves," says Rajendra. That built confidence along with dams.

Some villages managed even without consultation. The Gujars (shepherds) of Tijara, for instance, brought Meos of the Mewat region to replicate the projects that had changed the lives of the Meos.

"Such work is enduring," says Rajendra. "It is knitted, stitch by stitch, by the people themselves, so it will stay, and spread. If TBS builds it, the villagers will not be able to manage. They may take some time to build, but they'll do it, they have the inner strength."

Rajendra had taken some time to reach out to rural Rajasthani women; they still giggle behind their colourful veils as he passes by. But the women boldly came forward to dig ponds. Initially it was because of the food for work, a gift from an organisation called CASA; the mothers were dying to feed their children and they never missed a day's work. Soon they were earning more than the men.

Then came the idea of Mahila Mandals, which drove the local shylocks out of business. They were charging 20 per cent per month. The women set up a cooperative bank, each member contributing 10 rupees a month, and the borrower paying a small interest.

Rajni Bhatt, 55, of Suratgarh recently got a hand-woven lohi (shawl) in recognition of her initiative. She was the first woman in the village to start digging, and now Suratgarh has nine ponds. The Brahmin housewife who farms her own land freely mingles with the lower castes and was the first to come out of the veil. "Earlier I was housebound," she says. "Now I address crowds of women and men though my heart beats faster then." In October she addressed a large conference on environment in faraway Nagpur.

Sariska was tougher terrain. Dangerous, too. When Rajendra started work in a village in the national park he found all the rainwaters disappearing into the marble mines. The mines had also swallowed life.

The villagers, a happy lot farming or rearing cattle in the forest just 20 years earlier, were denied their livelihood when Sariska was declared a national park in 1978. Most men moved to the cities as migrant labour, leaving the women and children to work in the mines owned by people like filmmaker Subhash Ghai and politicians Balram Jakhar and Bhairon Singh Shekhawat. Many women fell victim to gladd-eyed miners from West Bengal and Bihar. Families broke.

The cattle were worse off, the mines having eaten up the grazing grounds. The mines were also death traps in this tiger sanctuary.

In 1990 TBS moved the Supreme Court against mining in Sariska and got an order in its favour the next year. The Rajasthan government wanted to run the mines nevertheless, and filed false affidavits. The mine owners attacked protesting TBS volunteers and made three attempts on Rajendra's life.

One attempt was made on November 26, 1991 while he was accompanying Justice M.C. Jain, who had come for an on-the-spot study. The mine owners smashed a car, knowing Rajendra was its only passenger. The judge noted it all and the court punished a mine owner whom Rajendra could identify.

The court also made the Union government declare the Aravallis a fragile ecosystem and ban mining. But the mine owners got the notification watered down: only the districts of Alwar and Gurgaon and the Ridge area in Delhi were declared fragile. A crucial clause banning mining in 25 kilometres around the forest boundary was scrapped.

TBS launched a three-month satyagraha in January 1993, blocking the roads to the mines and forcing their closure. Lawyer Dr Rajiv Dhawan, an observer from the Supreme Court, was among those who got roughed up as the mine owners pounced on the villagers. They also slapped 42 cases on TBS, including three rape charges against Rajendra Singh. None of them could hold water.

Coming to the aid of TBS, the Supreme Court ordered that Rajendra should not be arrested without its permission. The Rajasthan government still would not stop harassing TBS, but after three years an all-party legislative committee told the Supreme Court that it had found nothing worth reporting.

The next battle was to win back the right of villagers in the wildlife sanctuary to farm their lands. They ostracised the forest officials, denying them food and water and forcing them to seek transfer. A new forest officer, Fateh Singh Rathore, who understood the symbiosis between the villagers and wildlife, befriended them. The villagers then framed rules to protect the forests and started water harvesting works, and soon the bald forests were dotted with seedlings.

There was the buzz and roar of life all round. Tigers, leopards and panthers roamed thanks to the new watering-holes. The Jahajwali Nadi, a rivulet in Deori, became perennial, and fish flourished in it. The cattle got enough fodder in the forest, so they did not gobble up every plant they sniffed.

The epic revival of the forests turned an illiterate man, Nanak Ram Gujar of Haripura, into a chronicler. He gets his observations recorded in a yellowed notebook every day. A sample entry, made after the

people marched from Himmat Nagar in Gujarat to Delhi along the Aravallis to document the flora and fauna: "In many jungles there is not a single animal because there is no food for them." An early bird to nest in TBS, he was aghast at the rape of the forests as he had grown up tying rakhee on trees, pledging to protect them.

Finally, the government came alive, too. It ordered an impact assessment of TBS work in Sariska and acknowledged that the work had regenerated the forests. The irrigation department had earlier declared the water harvesting structures illegal; in Gopalpura and Bhavta, it had even threatened to demolish the check-dams. Now it started collaborating.

It launched a Rs 16-crore project called PAWDI, People's Action Watershed Development Initiative, to replicate the TBS efforts. TBS got grants for the project convincing a Swiss agency that the government could work like an NGO. Now the government has sought TBS help to hand over all the defunct minor irrigation dams, 2,800 of them, to the people to rebuild and maintain.

"The government has finally conceded that people's cooperation alone will make such work sustainable and permanent," says Rajendra with a touch of joy. Though modest, he is a human dynamo with a burning desire to act, to motivate, and transform.

When you drive from Kishori towards Bhavta, the Aravallis on one side are green with forests, and bare and brown on the other. The green speaks for TBS, which has planted forest trees along 390 km of the 2,400-km stretch of the mountain ranges from Delhi to Himmat Nagar. Rajendra's dream is to green the entire range.

The four nalayaks who started out with him are helping him realise it. Narendra and Satendra live with him, and Kedar and Drighpal have promised to green 20 km each. Kedar started the Gramoday Sansthan at Chaksu village three years ago and Drighpal heads the Gramin Seva Vigyan Sansthan at Dausa.

The five friends have multiplied into 42 full-time workers, 120 part-timers and 2,000 volunteers for TBS alone. Its office-ashram, which was built at the driest spot in Kishori, is today hidden by dense greenery. Clean, spacious and spartan, the ashram virtually recharges the body and soul. The aroma of Ayurvedic medicines permeates the air, the nights are full of sounds of birds and animals.

Rajendra had also started an allopathic hospital but wound it up five years ago since it was too expensive and quite useless for the villagers. Besides, the villagers with a strong oral tradition knew how to make medicines from local herbs.

Some of the knowledge was lost with the shorn forests, and it was to educate the young that the villagers collected herbs during the annual pani yatra, a 45-day march to popularise water harvesting. The TBS vaids have documented 225 types of medicinal plants, and the Ayurvedic hospital coordinates work at 45 dispensaries. The idea, says Rajendra, is to make the villages self-sufficient.

Everywhere it is a new experience in learning. One of the TBS schools is run by Brij Mohan on a rooftop in Kyara village, with the gong hung on a tree. The gong resonates through the village in the morning and evening summoning his students, mainly women and children. There are classes up to the

fifth standard but no exams. "The idea is to educate them, not examine them," explains the master.

The women are eager learners in most villages. Quite a few of them were married in childhood and abandoned years later because of illiteracy. Now they can at least write to their truant husbands to come back home.

There was a quiet family reunion for Rajendra, too. Two years after he sat in that battered bus to Kishori, he went back to Jaipur to appease his wife Neena and brought her home, to Bhikampura where she realised that she wasn't married to a nalayak after all. It was only when she was big with a child that she returned to Jaipur, where she operates as a one-woman communication centre for TBS. "I am happy," says the mother of two. Rajendra Singh has abundantly regenerated the wellsprings of her heart as well.



INTERVIEW/RAJENDRA SINGH **Mountains are mothers' breasts**

A portrait of Mahatma Gandhi has a hallowed place amid the pictures of Hindu divinities on a podium in the Tarun Bharat Sangh ashram at Kishori. Gandhian thought has influenced Rajendra Singh, who is passionate about village self-sufficiency and has mobilised a hundred peaceful satyagrahas. Yet he does not see his mission in the Gandhian mould.

Excerpts from an interview:

Where do you draw your inspiration from?

I have not seen or met Bapu. But I have read him. I was into social work even as a child, I was in JP's movement, I understood Bhoodan. All this was my education. Gandhi is the biggest inspiration.

Any differences with Gandhi, considering that times have changed?

I don't even feel competent to comment on Gandhi. He was a Mahatma, a yugpurush, I am an ordinary man. But there are small differences. In 1909 he had the nation debate on mechanisation. But it remained a debate all his life, he could not give it a practical direction. If you say there is threat to the nation from the trains, buses, diesel, you should offer an alternative to them. Scientists of that time should have addressed that. Same goes for energy. Because of his loftiness in thought he missed some of the ground realities. We are more practical than philosophical.

Gandhi spoke of gram swaraj and ganraj but the Constitution has no place for village autonomy. Everyone used to listen to Gandhi, so he could well have got it included. Had that been done, the state of the nation would have been different today. After Independence, much has been taken from the villages, but nothing has been given to the villages.

We are ordinary workers who cannot carry the ideological burden of Gandhi. But we do follow the path shown by him, and try to make people stand on their own feet.

How?

Gandhi spoke of self-reliance in agriculture and textiles, and approached it through the charkha. It became the symbol of Independence, but he did not invent it. It was the weapon of the old mothers of our villages. Likewise we are using people's weapons. Gandhi wanted the country to learn from nature; he said nature can feed our needs, not greed. We are inspired by that. But we are not Gandhivadi. We have trees and ponds exclusively for birds and animals.

Are you more concerned with people or the environment?

TBS concentrates on society, on people, their needs. The whole debate on environment is a debate on the loot of natural resources.

If our environment was okay, no one would be poor. And if the poor were okay, there wouldn't be any degradation of the environment. It is the rich, 15 per cent of our population, who pollute air and water.

They will stop it if the poor unite and tell them, 'You are drawing more water, you are dirtying the rivers.'

Man has become greedy, extremely materialistic. The mountains are mothers' breasts, and the river waters the milk. The first thing we do in the morning is touch the earth with reverence, out of gratitude for everything nature has given us. Man's share of the earth is just the same as that of the ant. Man has lost that humility. His lifestyle is that of a conqueror, controller of nature. That snaps our ties with nature.

Our work with water harvesting is to restore the relationship between man and nature.

When we fight against displacement, we don't say the jungle belongs to man. We say there is a relationship between the man in the jungle village and the tigers in the forests,

and that relationship should remain intact. The same applies to water.

We love society, therefore we want to protect the environment. The two are linked. Our work is to nurture nature.

What were your greatest challenges?

One is the prevailing system, the laws which are obsolete. They do not allow the villagers to do what they want for their development. If they dig a small pond the government declares it illegal. If the village is not strong it meekly backs down. We took a lot of time to make the villages strong. The main obstruction is from the government.

How do you overcome it?

So far we have done it by slowly strengthening the villages and making government officials understand the rationale of our work. As per the Forest and Wildlife Protection Act, we could not have made the 200 water harvesting structures in Sariska National Park. But after we did it, the government appreciated it, though they had earlier served demolition notices. Some officers are sensitive and understand, most are not. But we carry on.

But you have resorted to agitations.

Yes, but we don't rely too much on agitation. We believe in using people's own weapons. When we were fighting the forest officials in Mandalvas the people in all the villages in Sariska forests decided to have akhand Ramayan to demonstrate our unity and strength. Villagers don't believe in strikes and holdups that disrupt life. All our protests were satyagrahas.

What is the source of your strength?

The moral support, trust and faith of the community here. With that we fought the mining mafia. The community stood by us when we were attacked.

What is your dream?

That the community manages its own water, forests and land in the best way. These are the biggest resources on earth and the basis of the existence. They should be managed well not only here, but along the whole Aravallis, and everywhere else.

What resistance did you face in the beginning?

When people did not know us they had no confidence in us. There was distrust because of the political system, because of the looting tendency of traders. But later the resistance was from local politicians, not ordinary people.

How is your relationship with the government now?

Not linking it with any particular political party, I will say our work has come to be recognised and appreciated. There is some fight because of corruption in the government. But they are coming to us with the idea of cooperation, as in the case of PAWDI. The society and the government are trying to get together.

When was the turning point?

After ten or eleven years of work. It took so much time maybe because the pace of work was slow. We did not take shortcuts, we faced problems in a constructive, principled manner, never compromised on truth, never started a fight.

Did you ever feel like quitting?

Not even on the day I thought I would not survive. That was when we were attacked. Yes, once in a while we do worry about when and how the society will understand. But I never thought of going back to Jaipur.

What has been the model of your work?

I have no model. All this work has been developed out of the vision of the TBS. Technical people, doctors, engineers and chartered accountants came on their own, worked and went. So there is professional touch. But the real work is that of the community. All our structures are 100 per cent safe because the builders are also the users, unlike in the case of the government structures which are built to meet targets. Water harvesting has acted as a flood control as well as a drought control measure. It rained here as much as it did elsewhere in Rajasthan, there were no floods in the Alwar area.

Can this work be replicated elsewhere?

This is designed for this area. But water harvesting anywhere has to be based on the same principle. It can be done on the Vindhyachal, the Western Ghats, anywhere in the world. If harvested properly, rainwater alone can meet all our water requirements even in the cities. This can be done at a very low cost. Many people in Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh are trying it out.

Can this be the alternative to Israeli farming technology that is being adopted in India?

Those are not sustainable in India. The traditional water harvesting system is suited to our land. It is cost-effective, and capable of providing employment to our people.

Vijaya Pushkarna