



'Mithi may flood you once again'

Kartikeya , TNN 12 January 2009, 12:00am IST

MUMBAI: Magsaysay Award winner Rajendra Singh, who has been instrumental in rejuvenating rivers in the parched deserts of Rajasthan, spent Sunday wondering what people could do to revive Mumbai's Mithi river.

"It has flooded you once," Singh said of the 26/7 deluge of 2005, "and I am afraid it will do so again". Standing at a crematorium on the banks of the river in Kurla, Singh observed that the once free-flowing fresh water river had turned into a spill of black toxic waste. Pointing to the efforts to concretise the river's embankments to prevent it from overflowing during the monsoon, Singh said, "This will never work. Man is too weak to harness a river with cement and concrete."

Singh's own works in Rajasthan have demonstrated that flooding can be controlled and rivers turned into a source of life by going back to nature. He is the founder of the Tarun Bharat Sangh which revives rivers through people participation. "Rivers thrive on seasonal ponds that act as a check during the monsoon. Mumbai had thousands of ponds which, over a period of time, were reclaimed," he explained.

Coming down heavily on the bureaucratic and political machinery for its failure to understand the gravity of the situation, he said, "It is time for people to revive their rivers and ponds."

Singh's views were echoed by the residents of Kalina's Air India colony, who have to bear Mithi's brunt every monsoon. "We never faced any problem till 1991. But then the government diverted the river's flow to make way for new hangars at the airport. Ever since then, Mithi has been flooding our homes every monsoon," said a resident.

Singh's walk was organised by Maharashtra Jal Biradari, an organisation which has been fighting for decades to save the city's natural water resources and coastline. "We were dubbed lunatics by the establishment, until 26/7 happened," said Girish Raut of the Biradari.

Singh walked to the Koliwari village in Kalina. The locals took him to a spot where a seven acre pond used to be. "We used to swim in the pond, but in 1970, the collector ordered that it be filled up. We protested but lost to the government. Some of us were even threatened with police cases," said a 70-year-old villager. Thereafter a local politician tried to convert the area into a club but had to bow to the demands of the locals. "You are the real heroes. You saved this space. But now the battle should begin to bring back the pond," Singh said.

"Rivers belong to the community and the state has no business interfering with them," said Janak Daftary of the Biradari. Drawing attention to the recent floods in Bihar where an over-flowing Kosi had rendered thousands homeless, Daftary said, "This shows how meddling with nature can endanger lives."

Singh also visited Mahim Causeway, another spot where the deluge had claimed lives. Expressing optimism that Mithi could be revived, he said, "They have done it with the Hudson river in America and I managed it with Aravari in Rajasthan." He said that as the first step all encroachments along the Mithi must go. He laughed away suggestions that the river could be narrowed artificially or its flow changed. "That has not worked anywhere. The solution is to go back to the natural topography. Dig ponds, plant trees. That will require people's participation, not a bureaucratic plan," he said.