



'Our rivers drying up is a bigger scam than black money'

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NEW DELHI: He's a renowned activist himself, and happened to be serving as Guest Editor of The Times of India on the day Baba Ramdev launched his much-hyped fast against corruption. So, there was a certain inevitability about the question: What does Rajendra Singh think of the Baba's bid to force the government to bring back black money stashed in banks abroad?

Singh — often referred to as the Waterman of India — smiled, paused to gather his thoughts and then launched into a torrent of words. "I support the efforts of Baba Ramdev and Anna Hazare, though I have not physically gone to the protest sites. But the way rivers have been turned into rivulets is the biggest story of corruption in India today. I think the amount of money involved will be far bigger than the black money stashed abroad," he told a small group of environmentalists, editors and representatives from the three villages that TOI honoured at The Times of India office on Saturday.

He listened to presentations made by the villagers with rapt attention, frequently stopping them to clarify a doubt. After the presentations concluded, he voiced a thought that was on everyone's mind. "The struggle for village rights is an invisible revolution that should get far more attention."

The 51-year-old water conservationist from Rajasthan's Alwar district argued that in India, corruption is not about money. "Corruption is also about grabbing and occupying our land, forests and rivers. One third of India's rivers have dried up. And this is all a result of land grabbing by big corporates," he said.

Even as he reiterated his support to Hazare and Ramdev in their fight against corruption, he added that the media had a tendency to turn hyperbolic in its praise. "The media created a Gandhi out of Anna after a few days of fasting. I don't know what position it will take on Ramdev in the days to come. But I believe that the real Gandhis are those people who are living in their villages and fighting for their land, rivers and forests. There are Gandhis in every corner of India. The media should pay attention to people's struggle to protect and conserve their land," he said, smiling to reduce the sting of his words.

Singh maintained that in ancient India, the place of every river's origin was considered a holy site. "Saints lived in these places and preserved them. Every saint used to say that there should be no pollution, encroachment and overexploitation of rivers. Where has all that gone? Now that Baba Ramdev has launched an agitation against corruption, I wish he would also revive this tradition of saints working to protect rivers. Our health, our economy and our future depend on our rivers. We need to pay urgent attention to them," he said.

He spoke passionately about the bridge being built over the Hindon river that, environmentalists say, might force the river to change its course. The bridge seeks to connect Raj Nagar Extension to Karhera village in Uttar Pradesh's Ghaziabad district. "Any lay person can tell that you don't build a bridge on the curve of a river because it automatically kills its growth and flow," said Singh, founder of the NGO, Tarun Bharat Sangh, that played a vital role in reviving Arvari river.

The water conservationist said that the movement to protect the water of Arvari which is spread over 504 acres created its own parliament and stopped most corporates from acquiring its water. "But companies closer to Delhi reach the rivers much faster by bending the rules and violating laws," he added.

He said you only get arrested and jailed if you work to protect the environment. "During the water conservation movement, I had 377 cases against me. After the movement became a success, President K R Narayanan came to visit me.

Suddenly, all those cases disappeared overnight. I have no idea where they all went," Singh said.