



Wednesday, March 29, 2000

## President praises villagers' initiative



By Soma Basu

ALWAR (Rajasthan), MARCH 28. Quietly flows the Arvari river here now. It is difficult to believe that barely a decade ago it was a `dead river.' The lush fields in and around its banks today simply belie the claim.

Standing by the Arvari banks against the backdrop of the Aravalli range, when the President, Mr. K.R. Narayanan, today acknowledged and appreciated the role of the villagers in turning the region's landscape from brown to green, it was not an exaggeration. Rather, it was well-deserved praise for the ordinary villagers, who without any Government help or support, have changed the course of their lives. It was an unusual occasion too because for the first time perhaps the first citizen of the country came to a village to honour people in recognition of their work. The Governor of Rajasthan, Mr. Justice Anshuman Singh, and the Chief Minister, Mr. Ashok Gehlot were also present.

The occasion marked the presentation of the ``Down-to earth- Joseph C. John Award" by the President to the people of twin villages of Bhaonta and Kolyala for their collective contribution and participation in improving the environment.

The villagers were selected as the country's ``Best Environmental Community" for the award instituted by the trust formed in the name of environmentalist, Joseph C. John, and the Centre for Science and Environment, a Delhi-based Non-Governmental Organisation from a total of 149 entries from all over the country. Apart from showering praises for the work, the President also gave away a cheque of Rs.100,000 and a citation.

Till the eighties, water was extremely scarce in the region, and poverty was widespread. The villagers - inspired and egged on by a local NGO, Tarun Bharat Sangh, founded by Mr. Rajinder Singh, in 1989, returned to traditional system to harvest rain water by repairing the old and constituting new ``johads" - small earthen check-dams.

Believing in a simple fact that eludes most water-planners, villagers here have proved that drought is a myth. Water comes from rain and can be prevented from running off by holding it with the help of checkdams. This allows water to percolate into the ground, recharges ground water aquifers and improves the water balance. It is this sensible water management that has set the Bhaonta Kolyala villagers apart.

``You have shown how without damaging nature and the environment, development and progress can be achieved," Mr. Narayanan told the villagers.

Donning the traditional Rajasthani `Pagadi' (headgear) presented to him by the villagers, the President said the villagers had set a true example of Gandhiji's concept of ``Gram Swarajya" by being self-reliant. The President warned against the lack of water emerging as the greatest challenge in the coming years and hoped that the Bhaonta-Kolyala example would be replicated soon and by all.