



The 2001 Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership

## **RESPONSE of Rajendra Singh**

*Ramon Magsaysay Award Presentation Ceremonies  
Manila, Philippines, 2001.*

Your Excellency President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, trustees of the Ramon Magsaysay Award Foundation, brothers and sisters, distinguished guests.

It is with great humility that I accept the Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership. This Award really belongs to those communities in Rajasthan in northern India, who have worked against tremendous odds to bring life back to their lands. They share this achievement with the men and women of the Tarun Bharat Sangh who have shown courage and determination.

Some 16 years ago when I arrived in Bheekampura village in Alwar District, we found that lack of water was driving young people away from their homes. Forced to abandon their families and the village, people had lost hope of seeing better days. The government had declared Alwar a "dark" zone, meaning an area suffering from severe water shortage.

However, the elders in the villages still had among them the wisdom of their ancestors. Working side by side with TBS, they built traditional earthen dams known as johads. These small-scale, low-cost structures do not look like very much but taken together in hundreds and thousands, they have changed the face of this part of India. With water has come productivity, more income, a sense of community and a real feeling of self-reliance.

In 1996, we were amazed to find Arvari river flowing even at the peak of summer. We had been building water harvesting structures in the catchment area of Arvari over the years without realizing that we were in fact recharging the river through underground percolation. Since then 4 more rivers have become perennial.

With the arrival of water, problems of sharing arose. As a result Arvari Sansad (or River Parliament) came into existence representing 72 villages. This Parliament meets four times a year.

On another front, TBS had to wage a difficult battle against powerful marble mine owners who were destroying the ecology of the Sariska Tiger Sanctuary. Being located in the periphery of this Sanctuary, we filed a petition in the Supreme Court of India. While the case was on, I and my colleagues had to face continuous harassment and character assassination. The Supreme Court in its judgment vindicated our stand and over 450 marble mines were closed down in 1992.

I may mention that Mahatma Gandhi has a special place in my perception and ideas. He wanted every village to be self-reliant. Our efforts culminating in this Award are a small tribute to Mahatma's vision and thinking.

Since being named a Magsaysay winner, I have told my brothers and sisters back in India that this Award is a recognition of their untiring efforts. I have told them that the decision-making process leading to the building of johads can be replicated in other parts of India and in Asian countries where communities face similar challenges.

This Award will inspire communities of Alwar and other parts of Rajasthan where we work. On their behalf, I am proud to thank you from the bottom of my heart.

Thank you.