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The Broader Picutre: White-harvesters of Rajasthan

By DAVID NICHOLSON-LORD

THE RAINS in Rajasthan are sparing and unpredictable. In the west, there is scarcely any rain at all; to the east, perhaps 25in a year, four-fifths of it in the rainy season. In the 1980s, the hottest decade on record, a series of droughts devastated crops and drove villagers off the land, into the slums of Delhi and Ahmadabad. Thirty per cent of livestock died. But in one corner of the state, old lessons had been learnt.

In a fold of the Aravalli hills to the east of Jaipur, women use pick-axes to break up the earth and carry it away in buckets. Rising behind them is a rich red embankment, 20ft high in places, that looks like an Iron Age earthwork. Enclosed by another such earthwork, a mile or two away, is a small lake, containing the waters of two previous rainy seasons.

Dams have had a bad press recently, with good reason. Dams line the pockets of politicians, supply electricity to urban elites by drowning the homes of peasants, look good on lists of prestige aid projects but bad in most other places. But these are not dams. They are johads: traditional Indian 'water-harvesting' structures, built along the contours of a watershed to check the monsoon rains before they rush away in the nalas, or seasonal drains. Their object is not to impound water; in the hot Rajasthan summer this would increase losses from evaporation. Instead, they soak the ground, raise the water table and thus replenish the wells and prevent soil erosion. In 1985, johads were just a memory in the land around the Aravallis. Then a group of young graduates arrived in the district to promote Gandhian ideas of village development - small-scale, low-tech, indigenous - and set up an ashram, Tarun Bharat Sangh. One result was a johad revival: there are now more than 200, all built by the villagers themselves.

One might have expected the Indian government to welcome such self-reliance. Few wells now dry up. Formerly barren land has been returned to crops; maize production has doubled or trebled. And with the johads has come local democracy - more than 40 villages now have gram sabhas (self-governing committees). Yet the first johads were declared illegal. Watercourses and water were government property, claimed officials: the johads were 'competing' with a nearby state-built dam. Officials also argued that they were unsafe - but revised this argument after a heavy downpour destroyed the state dam but left the johads largely intact. Rajendra Singh, the leader of Tarun Bharat Sangh, says that officials were hostile to johads because there was no rake-off for them, and because self-governing villages are hard to manipulate. The government has since relented on the johads, but the prejudice, says Singh, remains: 'Civil servants in Delhi come from an elite class and have blind faith in Western expertise. They consider villages primitive. If somebody is trained in the West, he is regarded as a perfect man.'

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