

The water man

An ancient practice revived

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RAINWATER harvesting seems as obvious as putting a barrel in your back yard. In the more arid regions of India, however, it involves bigger projects than mere barrels, stretching to quite significant dams, underground tanks and reservoirs, often of great antiquity. That is why there is such interest in the revival of rainwater harvesting in Rajasthan, led by the charismatic Rajendra Singh, known as the water man.

Mr Singh's organisation, Tarun Bharat Sangh, based in a tiny remote village near Alwar, has attracted visits and support from the World Bank, the UN and USAID, America's development agency. The atmosphere inside the whitewashed compound is almost temple-like: Mr Singh brings all the fervour of a religious zealot to his mission. His team goes out to find and re-open ancient tanks and underground storage facilities, as well as getting villagers to build new ones. This work, he claims, has allowed well over 1,000 villages in eastern Rajasthan to escape the effects of a five-year drought. His structures also offer protection from the dangers of floods, such as the one that struck in September 1996, the last time it rained heavily in the area.

Mr Singh is opposed to most of the Indian government's ideas for solving the country's water problems, including dams, the "very dangerous" project for interlinking of rivers, and privatisation. Last year he was attacked and badly beaten for his stance at a workshop meeting in Uttar Pradesh. He prefers the notion of "communitisation"—getting local communities to deal with water shortages by building and maintaining their own water tanks and other structures, usually giving their labour free. Nor is rainwater harvesting just for rural areas, he says: it can also be used in big cities and in other countries. He claims that in Rajasthan alone there are 7,600 examples. Even the Delhi Jal Board promotes rooftop rainwater harvesting.

It would be fanciful to suggest that rainwater harvesting can resolve all water problems. It is harder in big cities, and if too much is collected not enough water may reach rivers or replenish groundwater supplies. But it has a role to play. Perhaps above all, it offers a useful lesson in the benefits of treating water as a local issue, best dealt with by local communities