

Trickle of hope

ZIYA US SALAM



Life's liquid A devotee offers prayers in the Yamuna river; Om Thanvi, Rajendra Singh and Shubhu Patua at the Jaipur Literature Festival
PHOTOS: AFP and (left) Rohit Jain Paras



Rajendra Singh (centre) and Shubhu Patuwa (right) with Om Thanvi at the Jaipur Literature Festival in Diggi Palace.
PHOTO: Rohit Jain Paras

ENVIRONMENT
India's Waterman Rajendra Singh gave some fascinating insights into the state of our rivers at the recently concluded Jaipur Literature Festival, says ZIYA US SALAM

Bikaner bhujia is made with rainwater. Private small wells made with *chulha* ash last longer than the cement small wells or kuin made with Government money. Cities across India have no rivers left. There are just nullahs. Interesting bits of information? Yes. Pity there were only the diehard faithful who turned up to listen to the Waterman of Rajasthan who came to deliver a talk 'Kuwein, Bawri, Talab' at the recently concluded Jaipur Literature Festival.

Married to his mission, Rajendra Singh had arrived in the city minutes after a family wedding, but he was on the ball from the first moment. Speaking in a mixture of Hindi and Rajasthani, he held the audience spellbound as much for the way he spoke as the things he spoke about. Ironically, as half consumed bottles of mineral water lay in the trash bin at the venue, Singh sought to draw attention to preserving every drop of water in the desert. He got help from fellow panellist Shubhu Patua at the talk moderated by seasoned journalist Om Thanvi. But Singh, a Ramon Magsaysay award winner for community leadership, was clearly the winner.

Urging the gathering to take care of 'Neer, Nari, Nadi' (Water, Women and River), Singh wistfully said, "We have poetry about raindrops in the desert. It is a crime to waste rainwater. Unfortunately, today, exploitation of resources is regarded as the in thing. Whether of land or water, we teach our students and technocrats to exploit the resources or natural wealth. We do not teach them enough about preservation. We do not need to import European technology to our rivers. The saline content of their rivers is different from ours. Our rivers have a cleansing mechanism of their own."

Pointing out that in the good old days when we did not have tiled pavements and the houses had mud floors, roads in Rajasthan — and indeed elsewhere — could absorb all the rainwater, Singh said today there are floods in places like Jaisalmer and Barmer. "Earlier our land could absorb water. Now we don't know how to tackle flood waters."

It is precisely to fight this wastage that many summers ago Singh started a campaign to save water in the desert. The mission started with a single village in Alwar. It led to a revolution in 36 villages. And then there were thousands of villages that benefited from Singh's work on Johad, a concave which collects and stores water for use by human beings and animals. Incidentally, Singh's organisation Tarun Bharat Sangh has been working for the revival of johad, streams and small wells in the desert. Last year he embarked on a Save Ganga campaign, highlighting the need to get rid of encroachment on the riverbank to avoid floods.

"I am not against new technology. But it has to be according to the needs of the local people and climate. What works elsewhere may not necessarily work in our country," he said, pledging to protect the rivers in the cities. "You go to Delhi, Yamuna is a nullah. Same with Chennai, Hyderabad, Mumbai, Kolkata. We have no rivers left, just vast, open drains," he rued.