

Mind over matter

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THOUGH the world focuses only on one form of poverty that is financial there are two other forms - ecological poverty and poverty of the mind or mental poverty - that are even more relevant for the rural poor for they are closely associated with the state of the environment.

When I had first visited Jhabua in 1984, it was a degraded moonscape. Its transformation into a green village came as a pleasant surprise to me. After the transformation of Jhabua, I had another pleasant surprise last fortnight. It was seeing the changing face of Alwar.

Rajendra Singh, who had founded Tarun Bharat Sangh in the mid-1980s, has been working with the villagers of Alwar district to restore their traditional water harvesting structures, check dams called johads. In these 14-15 years, his work has spread from one village - Gopalpura - to about 500 villages and through the relatives of these villagers, has even extended the work to nearby districts of Jaipur and Sawai Madhopur.

Some 5,000 johads have been built till now.

The change in the mindset of the rural people and in the ecology is extraordinary. Firstly, the mental poverty has gone and secondly the ecological poverty is slowly disappearing. With villagers encouraged and emboldened to take their life and their destiny into their own hands, they have gone out and undertaken efforts to harness the one critical ecological element that was missing from their lives, namely water. By catching the water that falls regularly from the heavens, they have ensured so much ground- water recharge that wells are now full of water round the year. So much so that several streams that were dead for decades now flow round the year.

What is the biggest change that has taken place in your lives, I asked one of the villagers. "Oh, our women can now bathe everyday," he replied with a smirk.

But that is not all. Building water harvesting structures has slowly but inevitably linked the people to their environment. All over the hills where the mental poverty has gone, new ecological wealth is emerging. The hills are no longer barren. Three to five- year-old trees can be seen growing all over. In one village the forest has become so good that the village has declared it a peoples' sanctuary in the name of the local goddess, with a whole set of rules proudly displayed on its village dam.

The mental wealth and the ecological wealth is now bringing in financial and economic wealth. Sixty five- year-old Dhanua remembers his long years as a labourer in Delhi. Long before independence, the local Raja had sold of the forest to contractors who wanted to make charcoal. The forests had rapidly disappeared and so had water. Dhanua never remembers tilling his fields. "I was in Delhi moving gunny bags around when Mahatma Gandhi was killed. I was doing the same in Delhi the day Indira Gandhi was married." But this year for the first time in his life he has tined his land and his sons are working with him.

Dhanua and his fellow villager, Arjan, happily remember the days when they used their lath (not a bamboo stick to beat people with, but their moral insistence) on the other villagers to contribute their labour (shramdan) to make the village dam.

In another village downstream villagers again said that for the first time they had enough to eat and even some produce to sell. So I asked "What next? Will you now build your own school and health centre?"

"We already have these," they answered.

A lot of villages are rich in hardware like buildings for schools and health care centres. They normally lack software like trained personnel and qualified teachers. So I was tempted to put forward another question.

"But does the school teacher come regularly?" I asked.

Rajendra Singh took up the conversation from here. "Yes he does," he explained because these villagers are so organised they will immediately complain." Well then I thought these villagers have got everything they want and I voiced my opinion.

"No," said an old man, "we would like Tarun Bharat Sangh to start evening classes to teach old people like me." The earlier desperation is clearly dead in these villagers. There is a new confidence and a new zeal. They are looking for help but with an internal strength. And they are beginning to respect themselves and their environment and manage it.

Atomisation is being replaced with cooperation. They are on the road to progress not like the elite flowers of a manicured garden but like the thousands of tiny flowers that make a mountain pasture come alive.

Mental wealth, ecological wealth and economic wealth are all slowly rolling into one. And the Tarun Bharat Sangh is now even becoming a beneficiary. Several villagers are coming forward to work with the organisation to spread the message of love, respect, pride and confidence: love and respect for nature and pride and confidence in themselves. None of this will appear in the GDP calculations of the government.

But true economic growth has begun in these villages.

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