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A river is reborn



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River Aravari came to life in 1994. Till then, it was a largely dead and dry watercourse that flowed only during the monsoons. Now johads (small water harvesting structures) are full to the brim and fresh green foliage peeps out of the arid and denuded slopes of the Aravalli hills.

In 1987, a non-governmental organisation, Tarun Bharat Sangh (TBS), took the initiative to rejuvenate the streams of River Aravari by constructing a johad at Bhavta village. As the many advantages of johads came to the fore, other villages followed suit.

In 1988, johads came up in Bhurivas, Dumli, Khadata, Khatala, Samastar, Chosla and Lalpur villages. Between 1989 and 1991, the idea spread to Palsana, Loge ki Dhani, Bhaonta, Kolyala, Hamipur, Samara, Natata, Kaled and Jagnathpura villages which fall under the Thanaghazi block of Alwar district in Rajasthan.

The water in the johads helped raise the watertable of the river's catchment area and also enriched the surrounding forests. The forests and scrubs, in turn, helped retard the run-offs from monsoon rains. Within a decade, the Aravari came to life and it now flows throughout the year.

Says Rajendra Singh, General Secretary of TBS, "The conservation miracle was possible through the concerted efforts of villagers who were assisted by our organisation. Our movement is really 13 years old, though the river came back to life in 1994. The villagers have shown extreme patience and tenacity while attempting to improve their own livelihood and living conditions. When we started our work we adopted a strategy which was entirely different from Government-sponsored programmes. We make the villagers stakeholders in whatever activity we undertake and that itself ensures its survival and long-term sustainability."

Thus a perennial river was reborn despite an unforgiving climate. Rajendra Singh admits that the success was much bigger than anticipated. "All we wanted to do was revive the traditional johads as there was tremendous demand for water in this dry region, as well as protect the trees, forest and wildlife of the region," he says.

The water conservation miracle in the Aravalli range has earned several accolades for Rajendra Singh including the National Award instituted by Rotary International, Sanskriti Puraskar, Nisarga Premi Puraskar and the Basu Bhatia Environmental award. He was also selected Man of the Year for 1998 by The Week magazine.

When Rajendra Singh and his TBS activists first arrived in Bheekampura, the land was bleak and desolate. Even during winter the few peepul and babul trees lining the dusty road appeared withered. The Aravalli ranges were bare except for a few forest patches at the foothills where the rainwater collected and, soon after, trickled away.

The hills were scarred due to marble quarrying. The greenery had all but vanished and, during rains, rock and sand slid down the hillsides leaving gaps on their face.

TBS first focused on Gopalpura village which, like most parts of Rajasthan in 1985-86, was in the grip of a severe drought. The wells were dry, the top-soil had eroded and water had to be fetched from 1.5 km away. Agriculture was uneconomical and the men migrated to Ahmedabad and Delhi in search of work.

The village check dams were in a state of disrepair. TBS had the support of the area's Block Development Officer (BDO) and the Junior Engineer (JE) who assured all technical help even as they pleaded helplessness in securing Government funds. TBS persuaded the villagers of Gopalpura to offer shramdaan (voluntary labour) and collected grains to feed the volunteers.

As a test case, one johad was taken up for desilting and excavation in 1985 and the results were apparent within two years -- following the 1986 monsoon, the water level in the johad was higher than before and remained intact for a longer period.

The villagers were wonderstruck by the miracle wrought by their own hands. "It qualitatively changed the life of the villagers," 70-year-old Dhanna of Bhaonta village says, "our women had to walk over 3-5 km just to fetch water but now there is water in the river and in the wells. Children splash about in the river, women wash clothes, men have leisurely baths and even animals have a ghat to bathe and drink."

"Things have improved to such an extent that people who had earlier migrated to the slums of Delhi and Ahmedabad are returning to their villages," Arjun Gujjar says. "Even the river has come alive with fish that are 2 ft in length and weigh up to 10 kg."

The fish are, however, protected and fines imposed on those caught fishing. A Jaipur-based businessman who was awarded a contract to fish in the river by the Government's Fisheries Department was driven away by the villagers.

The task of restoring a dam which is 1,400 ft long, 20 ft high and 50 ft wide was tough for a small village with 350 people. By putting in 10,000 mandays and sharing the cost of repairs to the sluices and overflow systems, the tank has been restored to irrigate up to 600 bighas (200 hectares) of agricultural land. Inspired by Gopalpura, Govindpura soon followed suit.

Today, more than 3,000 johads have been restored or built in 350 villages which has benefited about 700 other villages. TBS's work in the region also extends to the preservation of the Sariska Tiger sanctuary, producing organic manure, promoting indigenous methods of farming, village education, public and traditional healthcare systems, bio-mass projects, afforestation, self-employment in spinning and weaving industry, eradication of child labour and grain stocking, running creches, training panchayat representatives and launching movements for the closure of illegal mines.

Pic.: River Aravari -- from death to rebirth.