



The 2001 Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership

CITATION for Rajendra Singh

*Ramon Magsaysay Award Presentation Ceremonies
Manila, Philippines, 2001.*

Even in the best of times, it is arid in the Alwar district of Rajasthan, India. Yet not so long ago, streams and rivers in Alwar's forest-covered foothills watered its villages and farms dependably and created there a generous if fragile human habitat. People lived prudently within this habitat, capturing precious monsoon rainwater in small earthen reservoirs called johads and revering the forest, from which they took sparingly.

The twentieth century opened Alwar to miners and loggers who decimated its forests and damaged its watershed. Its streams and rivers dried up, then its farms. Dangerous floods now accompanied the monsoon rains. Overwhelmed by these calamities, villagers abandoned their johads. As men shifted to the cities for work, women spirited frail crops from dry ground and walked several kilometers a day to find water. Thus was Alwar when RAJENDRA SINGH first arrived in 1985.

That was the year twenty-eight-year-old SINGH left his job in Jaipur and committed himself to rural development. With four companions from the small organization he led, Tarun Bharat Sangh (TBS, Young India Association), he boarded a bus and traveled to a desolate village at the end of the line. Upon advice of a local sage, he began organizing villagers to repair and deepen old johads.

When the refurbished ponds filled high with water after the monsoon rains, villagers were joyous and SINGH realized that the derelict johads offered a key to restoring Alwar's degraded habitat. Once repaired, they not only stored precious rainwater but also replenished moisture in the soil and recharged village wells and streams. Moreover, villagers could make johads themselves using local skills and traditional technology.

As TBS went to work, SINGH recruited a small staff of social workers and hundreds of volunteers. Expanding village by village--to 750 villages today--he and his team helped people identify their water-harvesting needs and assisted them with projects, but only when the entire village committed itself and pledged to meet half the costs. Aside from johads, TBS helped villagers repair wells and other old structures and mobilized them to plant trees on the hillsides to prevent erosion and restore the watershed. SINGH coordinated all these activities to mesh with the villagers' traditional cycle of rituals. Meanwhile, with others, TBS waged a long and ultimately successful campaign to persuade India's Supreme Court to close hundreds of mines and quarries that were despoiling Sariska National Park.

Guided by Gandhi's teachings of local autonomy and self-reliance, SINGH has introduced community-led institutions to each village. The Gram Sabha manages water conservation structures and sets the rules for livestock grazing and forest use. The Mahila Mandal organizes the local women's savings and credit society. And the River Parliament, representing ninety villages, determines the allocation and price of water along the Arvari River.

Now, 4,500 working johads dot Alwar and ten adjacent districts. Fed by a protected watershed and the revitalizing impact of the village reservoirs, five once-dormant rivers now flow year round. Land under cultivation has grown by five times and farm incomes are rising. For work, men no longer need to leave home. And for water, these days women need walk no farther than the village well.

RAJENDRA SINGH is TBS's charismatic motivator. Villagers call him Bai Sahab, Elder Brother, and listen to his every word. People have become greedy, he tells them. They should learn again to be grateful to nature. That is why, he says, in Alwar, "the first thing we do in the morning is touch the earth with reverence."

In electing RAJENDRA SINGH to receive the 2001 Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership, the board of trustees recognizes his leading Rajasthani villagers in the steps of their ancestors to rehabilitate their degraded habitat and bring its dormant rivers back to life.