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AWARDS

The water man of Rajasthan

Rajendra Singh, who has undertaken extensive water conservation efforts in drought-prone eastern Rajasthan, wins the 2001 Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership.

SUNNY SEBASTIAN

in Jaipur

RAJENDRA SINGH, the man who 'divined' water in the arid regions of eastern Rajasthan by building water-harvesting structures, is the winner of the 2001 Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership. The non-governmental organisation Tarun Bharat Sangh (TBS), which Rajendra Singh leads as its general secretary, has since 1985 built some 4,500 earthen check dams, or johads, to collect rainwater in some 850 villages in 11 districts in the State. The TBS has also helped revive five rivers that had gone dry. The award is not only a recognition of his conservation efforts but also an acceptance of the traditional wisdom of the people of rural Rajasthan.

Rajendra Singh, winner of the Magsaysay Award.

Incidentally, the honour has gone to an NGO working in rural Rajasthan for the second year in a row. Aruna Roy, whose Rajsamand-based Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) spearheaded the campaign for the right to information and transparency in development works, was the recipient of the 2000 Ramon Magsaysay Award in the same category.

In his reaction to the honour, Rajendra Singh said: "This is a recognition of the rural communities. The village society taught me the

GOPAL SUNGER



value of water. Prior to 1984 I knew nothing about water or its conservation methods."

Johadwala Baba (bearded man of check dams) to the villagers and Bhai Saheb (elder brother) to his associates in the TBS, Rajendra Singh said: "This is the triumph of the traditional wisdom of the people over classroom learning. It is time the governments recognised their deep knowledge of the land and the environment and made use of it for the uplift of the rural masses."

The draft of the citation for the Award, to be presented to Rajendra Singh in Manila on August 31, reads: "In electing Rajendra Singh to receive the 2001 Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership the Board of Trustees recognises his leading Rajasthani villagers in the steps of their ancestors to rehabilitate their degraded habitat and bring its dormant rivers back to life."

Not long ago, when a group of five youth from Jaipur, which included Rajendra Singh, landed in Alwar district's Thanagazi tehsil, the villagers viewed them with suspicion. The backward Gujjars and the tribal Meenas branded them as child-lifters and terrorists. They were not to blame, for the villages, nestled in eastern Aravallis, were going through difficult times in the 1980s. Most parts of Alwar district had been declared a "dark zone", which meant that there was very little ground water left. Rivers and ponds were drying up and most of the menfolk had left for cities in search of work. Life in the villages had come to a standstill with farming activities getting severely affected and the bovine wealth, the backbone of the rural economy, shrinking in the absence of fodder and water.

Fifteen years and many johads later, water has restored life and self-respect in Alwar. Of late, several villages in the neighbouring districts of Jaipur, Dausa, Sawai Madhopur, Bharatpur and Karauli have been revived by the TBS. Neembi in Jamwa Ramgarh tehsil of Jaipur district is one such village which caught the fancy of planners this summer as the perennially drought-prone village had water at three feet from ground in the third consecutive drought year. Neembi's residents, who spent Rs.50,000 in 1994 to construct two earthen dams with the help of the TBS, now produce vegetables and milk worth Rs.3 crores annually.

Farming activities have resumed in hundreds of drought-prone villages with the rivers Ruparel, Arvari, Sarsa, Bhagani and Jahajwali flowing again after remaining dry for decades. The villages, which were deserted by its inhabitants, have been populated once again. There is a sense of belonging among the people as the gram sabhas created by the TBS to facilitate the

management of the johads have a say in the general well-being of the community as well.

The rebirth of the Arvari was something of a miracle. In 1986, the residents of Bhanota-Kolyala village, with the help of the TBS, constructed a johad at its source. Soon villages around the catchment area and along the dry river constructed tiny earthen dams. When the number of dams reached 375, the river began to flow. "We were amazed," says Rajendra Singh, recalling the revival of the Arvari, which earned him the titles of water diviner and miracle man. "It was not our intention to re-create the river, for we never had it in our wildest dreams," he remarked. The villagers who revived the Arvari were felicitated by President K.R. Narayanan with the Down to Earth Joseph C. John Award in March 2000.

The residents went on to constitute a parliament of their own. Arvari Sansad, inspired by the Gandhian concept of gram swaraj, is a representative body of 72 villages in the areas served by the river. The Arvari parliament has framed 11 major rules to fix the cropping pattern and water use. The rules permit only landless farmers to draw water directly from the river and bans the cultivation of sugarcane and the raising of buffaloes as these activities would require relatively large amounts of water.

Rajendra Singh, who was associated with Jayaprakash Narayan's Sampurna Kranti (Total Revolution) movement in his student days, has mobilised the people to stand up and speak for themselves and use natural resources in a sustainable manner.

AN air of festivity filled Gopalpura on August 1 when Rajendra Singh reached the village where he introduced his community-based water harvesting method in 1985 by building the first structure. This was two days after the award was announced, but it was the first thing he did after accepting felicitations and addressing a media conference in Jaipur. (In fact, one full day had lapsed after the news was reported, but there was no clue of Rajendra Singh. Journalists eager to get his reaction after a chase learnt that he was at Shekhawati village looking for new locations to erect check dams. Rajendra Singh came to know about his Award from the morning's newspapers.)

Gopalpura elder Mangu Ram Patel (Meena) was the happiest man, for it was a teaser from him - *thein to kuch karo Rajinder, kal favte gonti ler agyo* (do something Rajinder, bring spade and pick axe tomorrow and start work) - that spurred Rajendra Singh and the bunch of youth who formed the Tarun Bharat Sangh, or Young India Association into action. The following day the youth

were digging and desilting the Gopalpura johad, which had been neglected after long periods of disuse. A village resident recalls that the local Station House Officer (SHO) who reached the village looking for the "outsiders" and with an arrest warrant, found Rajendra Singh with a basket of mud on his head. He made a silent retreat.

Activities of the TBS are spread over an area of 6,500 sq km, which includes also parts of Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh.

RAJENDRA SINGH, 43, hails from Dola village of Meerut in Uttar Pradesh. He says the crusade he began, unwittingly, against marble miners in the Project Tiger Sanctuary of Sariska in the early 1990s made conservationists take note of his efforts. "The TBS found that even after constructing johads, the water level did not go up in the ponds and lakes around Sariska. But we soon found what was wrong. We traced the missing water to the pits left unfilled by the miners after their operations. Water collected in them, depriving the wells and lakes of water."

Rajendra Singh and his companions at Tarun Ashram, the TBS headquarters in Kishori-Bhikampura in Thanagazi tehsil bordering the sanctuary, took up the issue, which eventually led to the closure of 470 mines operating within the buffer area and periphery of the sanctuary. A public interest petition was filed in the Supreme Court. In 1991, the court issued an order against continuing mining in the ecologically fragile Aravallis. This was followed up by a notification by the Ministry of Environment and Forests in May 1992 banning mining in the Aravalli hill system.

TBS activists had to face the wrath of the mine owners. Rajendra Singh was threatened and attacked. The miners carried on a vilification campaign against them.

Vishnu Dutt Sharma, who was the Chief Wildlife Warden of Rajasthan at that time, recalls: "He was pulled out of the jeep inside Sariska by the agents of the mine owners. I saw them beating him even as the District Collector looked on. Initially my impression was that Rajendra Singh was a rascal who provoked the local people. After seeing him in this situation, I felt he was doing what I should have done - protect the forest land from mining activities."

Initially the forest authorities viewed TBS men with suspicion and banned their entry into the sanctuary. However, things changed dramatically for both Rajendra Singh and the park. The TBS constructed 115 earthen and concrete

structures within the sanctuary and 600 other structures in the buffer and peripheral zones. These facilitated a rise in the groundwater levels and helped turn the area into a "white zone". So much so that the Forest Department invited the NGO to take an active part in the park's management. Rajendra Singh helped reform many poachers. Some of the reformed poachers have been recruited by the TBS as nahar sevaks (tiger protectors). Rajendra Singh also agreed to act as an intermediary between the park authorities and the inhabitants of 17 villages inside the park in the matter of their translocation.

Rajendra Singh has been instrumental in creating a people's sanctuary, Bhairondev Lok Vanyajeev Abhyaranya, spread over 12 sq km in villages upstream of the Arvari. During a visit to the wooded sanctuary last year this correspondent spotted the pugmark of a tiger. "We believe that a tiger in the neighbourhood of the village is a matter of prestige," one of the villagers, Nana Ram, said proudly.

Rajendra Singh's activities are indeed multifarious. He has set up educational institutions, mahila sangathans, forest protection committees and now a brotherhood for water conservators - jal biradiri. The TBS conducts padayatras extensively in order to reach out to the people. It has either initiated or participated in long marches. These include the Aravalli Bachao Padayatra (1993), the Gangotri Yatra (July 1994) and the Jangal Jeevan Bachao Yatra (February-March 1995). This summer's Akal Mukti (drought proofing) yatra was led by Rajendra Singh, along with a few sadhus.

A graduate in Ayurvedic Medicine and Surgery and a post-graduate in Hindi literature, Rajendra Singh initiated the documentation of medicinal plants and their uses. The TBS has an Ayurveda centre and a laboratory at Bhikampura.

DURING the past 15 years, the TBS has often fought with governments in power in the State over the people's right over the natural resources available in their neighbourhood. Ever since 1987 when the Rajasthan Irrigation Department served a notice against the first johad built in Gopalpura declaring it illegal, the NGO and the Department have been at loggerheads.

The Magsaysay Award has come at a time when Rajendra Singh is battling the Alwar district administration and the Irrigation Department to retain an earthen dam built at Lava Ka Baas in Thanagazi on the tributary of the Ruparel. The johad, built at a cost of Rs.9 lakhs three months ago, was the first of the water-harvesting structures the TBS had planned to construct with the help of business houses.

"So that everyone gets a chance to contribute towards water conservation and rainwater harvesting," Rajendra Singh would say in defence of soliciting the support of the rich. Pani ka kaam punya ka kaam hai (working for water conservation is a pious act), he tells the villagers.

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