



Photo: Amit Shankar, Courtesy CSE

Rajendra Singh amidst the regreened hills of Alwar

Reasserting Their Lost Wisdom and Rights

Villages in Rajasthan Overcome Sarkari Dependence

Profile of Rajendra Singh and his Work

○Madhu Kishwar

This is the story of a man who did not go to poverty stricken villages of Rajasthan with the intent of “developing” the “under-developed”. Nor did he imagine he had all the answers to people’s problems. He went in all humility to find out if he could be of service to one of the poorest farming communities in India. Instead of telling them what to do, he simply put himself at their disposal. And yet his presence catalysed a powerful process among these farming communities, helping them rediscover their traditional knowledge, wisdom and socio-cultural heritage. Together, they began producing miracle after miracle — five dead rivers were brought back to life and hundreds of villages began moving out of the poverty trap with the regreening of this land which had turned arid from neglect and poverty.

*This account is based on long tape recorded conversations with **Rajendra Singh**. In addition, I got valuable inputs from **Anupam Mishra**, one of our leading environmentalist, who has kept close contact with Rajendra Singh’s work from its very beginning.*

Rajendra Singh was drawn towards the J. P. Movement in 1975 and joined the youth organisation, Sangharsh Vahini. However, he soon got disillusioned with that brand of radicalism. Later in 1980, he joined the Rajasthan government’s education department as a project officer. During this period, he began his association with another

youth organisation called Tarun Bharat Sangh which had a few units in some urban pockets of Rajasthan. However, neither his work in the government’s education department nor his association with Tarun Bharat Sangh of that era provided an adequate outlet for his desire to live a socially useful life. In 1984, he resigned from his government job and

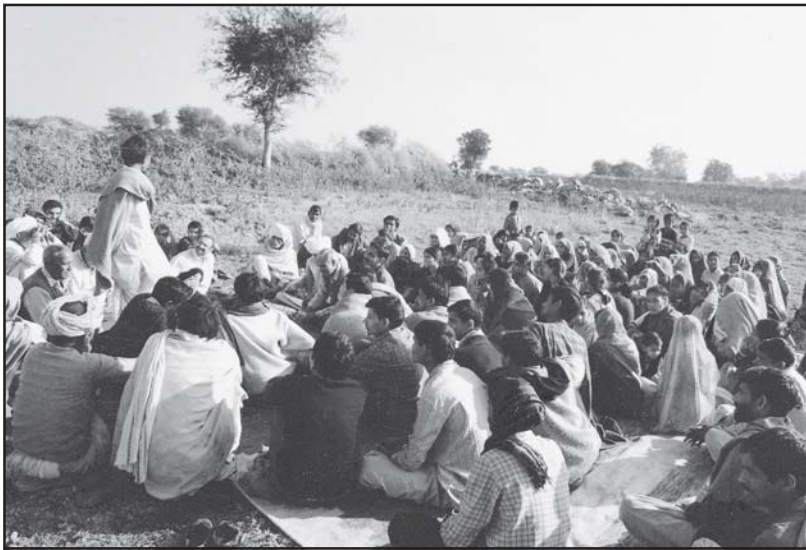
along with four other friends and colleagues, set out for one of the most poverty ridden regions of Rajasthan. What about the economic insecurity that inevitably comes from taking such a plunge since Rajendra Singh and his friends had gone there on their own initiative rather than as a part of any well-funded NGO able to take care of their financial requirements?

“I had some savings from my government job, and more importantly, at the back of my mind was the security from the knowledge that my father, who owns agricultural land in the Meerut district of Uttar Pradesh, would not let me and my family starve. Even though both my father and my wife were very upset with my decision, I still knew when it came to the crunch, I could count on their support,” explains Rajendra Singh. Thus, the security net provided by the joint family made it possible for Rajendra Singh to take such a major risk with his life and career.

Mistaken for Terrorists

But defining a role for themselves in that region was not easy. The group was subjected to a series of tests for the first three years before they came to be trusted by the people of the villages they chose to make their own. Looking back on those days, Rajendra Singh can afford to recount with amusement: “When five of us landed in Bhikhampura village, the villagers thought we were terrorists from Punjab on the run. This anxiety was understandable since at that point of time Punjab was experiencing the most severe phase of terrorism.” As these five men got off the bus with no clear idea of where to go, people got suspicious and began questioning them. Some of the village men even expressed the fear that Rajendra and his friends could well be criminals escaping the police.

Luckily for this group, the older men of the village suggested that in order to check out, all the five should be thoroughly searched. When nothing incriminating was found on them, the villagers told them they could stay in the local Hanuman temple.” Like the Sikh *gurudwaras*,



On the occasion of the inauguration of Aravari Sansad

Photo: Amit Shankar, Courtesy CSE

traditionally temples are supposed to provide shelter to the needy. In those first five days, so many people of the village came and asked them all kinds of questions regarding their background, their purpose in coming and so on. Their willingness to satisfy the curiosity of the local people managed to appease them. But they were not yet trusted nor taken seriously. Doubts persisted for a long time.

As someone influenced by a heavy dose of youthful and rhetorical radicalism that Rajendra had imbibed from the JP Movement with the heady slogan of *Sampoorna Kranti* (Total Revolution), it took him a long time to

“Even a “big landlord” family, like that of Mangu Patel of Gopalpura village, owning 200 *bighas* of land, was dependent on the cash flow that came from the earnings of three of his grandsons who plied cycle rickshaws in Ahmedabad city.”

shed his naïve ideas and understand that the ground reality was altogether different from what he was led to believe by urban based leftist intellectuals.

One of the first jolts his supposedly radical theory received was when he realised that all the political orientation he had imbibed regarding the “inherent conflict” between big and small farmers in villages was completely off the mark. Among the first eye opening experiences was when he found that even a “big landlord” family, like that of Mangu Patel of Gopalpura village, owning 200 *bighas* of land, was dependent on the cash flow that came from the earnings of three of his grandsons who plied cycle rickshaws in Ahmedabad city. In the 1980s they barely earned Rs. 30 a day from rickshaw pulling. Yet, it was more than what they would get if they worked on their own land in their village.

This made it clear to Rajendra Singh that even when a family owns 200 *bighas* or even 1,000 acres, it can not become rich from relying on agricultural income alone. To quote him: “Agriculture in today’s India does

not provide you avenues for wealth generation — no matter what the size of your holding. It is merely a matter of keeping your family going. The farmers are not being adequately paid for either their hard labour or the mental and intellectual inputs that go into agriculture which has given our country such a rich legacy of bio-diversity with an incredible array of seed varieties. Our society is not putting the right value on any of these skills. At the same time, farmers are being encouraged to go for high investment agriculture which is leading to even greater distress, indebtedness and suicide.”

Old Assumptions Challenged

A more important turning point for this Sangharsh Vahini trained class struggle oriented radical, who had deliberately chosen one of the poorest rural pockets as his *karmabhumi* (field of action) in search of the *antim jan* (the last person in the economic hierarchy), was witnessing the *sahaj judav* (spontaneous and easy social connections) between various castes and classes in the village society: “I was really stunned to see the warm social interaction between Mangu Patel (one of the “bigger” landowners) and Nathi Balayan (a scheduled caste woman). I would see them laugh and joke with such ease at the village square that one hardly saw any awareness of class differences between them.” He thinks the westernised urban elite which never tire of advocating the need for class struggle in rural India, do not ever show similar warmth and closeness in dealing with the urban poor in their immediate milieu—including their own domestic servants. Insights gained through numerous such incidents and interactions convinced Rajendra Singh that the leftist obsession with class struggle,



Two of Rajendra Singh's gurus from whom he learnt the art of water harvesting

Photo: Amit Shankar, Courtesy CSE

“Our villages don’t need class struggle, but strengthening of their mutual bonds which traditionally knit various caste groups into mutually interdependent and cohesive village communities.”

“minimum wage” legislation sought to be implemented through a corrupt and insensitive bureaucracy or propagated through culturally alien, western educated political activists have led to severe fragmentation of the village society. “Our villages don’t need class struggle, but strengthening of their mutual bonds which traditionally knit various caste groups into mutually interdependent and cohesive village communities.”

Nathi Balayan and Mangu Patel became the guiding stars for Rajendra Singh’s team. He received yet another jolt when Mangu Patel confronted him somewhat angrily saying: “*The padhya likhya chhora chhoo na batan ghani karya chho.*

Kaam koyi nahi karyo, batan ka hi khaya chho.” (You educated young men—you talk a lot but do no work. You want to earn your living from mere talk.)

Though taken aback, Rajendra Singh replied with humility: “I can’t figure out what work I should do. Why don’t you advise me what I should do?”

“Will you do what I tell you to do?” asked Mangu Patel: “If so, tomorrow bring a *phavda* and *gaiti* (two implements for digging), I will then tell you where to make a beginning.”

Rajendra Singh admits this conversation shook him up, but he decided he was going to follow Mangu Patel’s suggestion. In any case, he and his colleagues were at crossroads and he felt it was time they started something. That day there was a heated discussion among the five of them. Two of their team members were convinced that this village society was sick and irrational and needed “guidance” from outsiders like themselves to come out of its morass.

Water overflows even after three drought years from the check dam on Aravari river. Photo taken on January 17, 2001

But Rajendra Singh and the two others stuck firm that “they should follow whatever this *samaaj* (community) directs them to do.”

This led to a split. Two of their colleagues left the village and went back to their homes. The remaining three presented themselves next morning before Mangu Patel for orders. He told them to desilt the dried up village pond. The team of three worked on it for seven months. When they began, no one from the village gave them any help. But slowly, seeing their unconditional commitment and hard work, people began to lend them support. This desilting exercise meant not only that with the first monsoon the pond itself filled up, but a dried up well in the neighbourhood also got recharged.

Beginnings of Trust

From then on, this trio began to be trusted and taken seriously for they had passed the most crucial test- *nishkam sewa without swarth* (selfless service for the common good without any hidden, personal agenda). But their digging performed miracles more powerful than mere recharging of dried up water sources. The trio’s labour acted as a catalyst for galvanising the village society to take charge of the well being of their village and perform much greater miracles in the years to come. When Rajendra Singh and his friends had initially come to the village, they found the people demoralised from long years of disempowerment, marginalisation and consequent impoverishment. The effort by this trio held a mirror to the people and

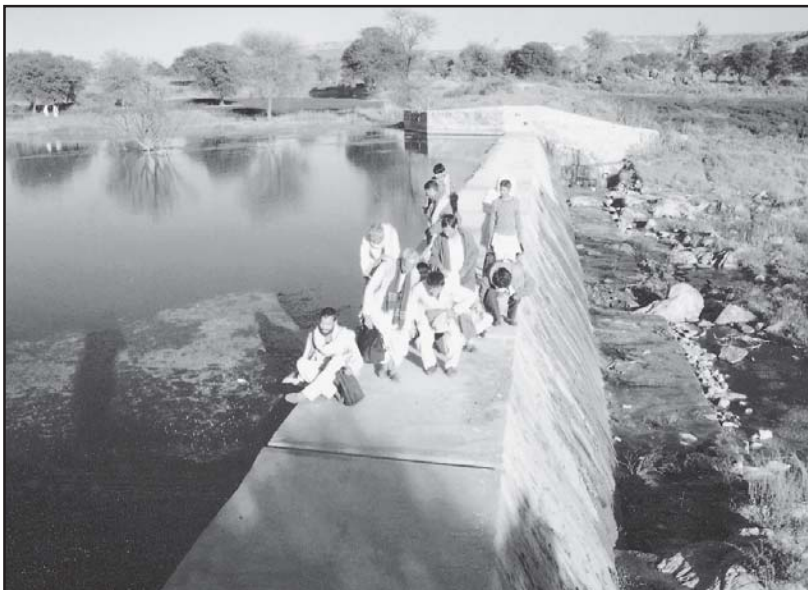


Photo: Amit Shankar, Courtesy CSE

showed them what they had lost by allowing the outside world to defeat them, to fragment them and to inculcate a culture of hapless dependence on the *mai baap sarkar*.

Rajendra says that in the early 80s, due to severe drought, people in this area of Alwar district had all but given up agriculture, even as a means of mere subsistence. The four consecutive years of famine between 1983-87 had wrecked the lives of millions of villagers in Rajasthan. Most of the land in the area was hilly and rocky, with highly denuded forest cover. Even when farmers undertook agriculture in small pockets, they did so with indifference because they were never sure that a crop would actually materialise. Able-bodied young men left the villages because they saw no future in agriculture. Thus farming was not only starved of financial inputs but also human

Their digging performed miracles more powerful than mere recharging of dried up water sources.

capital. Most of those left in the villages depended on animal husbandry. But since even milk yields were shrinking, as their pasture lands became barren due to perennial drought, the communities which had once prided themselves on large cattle herds and producing abundance of milk, ghee and curds, were forced to migrate along with their cattle in search of greener pastures. By recharging the neglected water sources, the three young men kindled new hope among the villagers.

Mangu Patel’s statement said it all. “Now you don’t need to do any more manual work to prove yourself. From now on, we will do our own work. You simply help us in figuring out ways by which the young men who have left the village in search of a livelihood can return to their homes and join together to make things better here itself.”

That is when they all felt the need to have an organisation as well as additional resources to run the organisation. Rajendra Singh’s old association with Tarun Bharat Sangh (TBS) came in handy. The organisation was almost defunct at this point, except for a handful of young

Women have got involved as they stand to benefit most from regular and easily available supply of fuel wood, fodder and water.

members in a few urban pockets of Rajasthan. Instead of creating a new organisation, the trio decided to use TBS as their platform and instrument. The old management committee gave them a free hand, saying that from then on they could take charge. To start with, TBS got a grant of 40 tonnes of wheat from CASA of UK (a church based international aid organisation). This became the basis for a locally organised “food for work” programme to undertake building of series of check dams, *johads* (ponds) and other water harvesting structures in the area. It took a couple of years of hard work and several such successful public works before the villages reposed full trust and confidence in them.

In all these, the planning, decision making and monitoring of all the earthwork was carried out by the Gopalpura people themselves. People not only voluntarily contributed their labour but also bore the cost of materials required for the repairs of the *johads* as also the building of sluice systems. Many young people returned from cities to give greater momentum to this work in their villages.

In the initial years, Rajendra Singh and his friends supported themselves through their personal savings since the village families were too poor to support them. Also in the early phase, the village people had no reason to trust and desire their presence in the village. It took about three years for their work to get recognised in the village. After that they did not face any special hurdles from the community. Rajendra Singh's



Photo: Amit Shankar, Courtesy CSE

experience convinced him that once people see you work in a selfless manner, without any hidden agenda, even caste and community considerations become insignificant. His being from the Rajput caste in a non-Rajput village had not posed any hurdles in his way.

As the fame of the Gopalpura *johads* spread to nearby villages, people came to witness this quiet transformation and expressed their enthusiasm by organising a *padyatra* (people’s walkathon) to spread the message and evaluate the possibilities of building *johads* and other water harvesting schemes in other villages. During the course of this month and a half (from January 30 to February 12) the *padyatra*

traversed several villages discussing some of the acute problems being faced by these rural communities—including social problems like increasing alcoholism.

Culture of Self Help

Not wanting to merely become an efficient substitute for the dysfunctional Public Works Department of the government, the TBS team took the next leap forward by adding the message of self-respect to the self help campaign already in motion. They resolved that they would support building of *johads* only in those villages which voluntarily gave up the making and consumption of alcohol. Far from creating a resentment, it further strengthened the credentials of the organisation. Gopalpura, which was the initiator in reviving the lost tradition of water harvesting, became the first one to give up alcohol as well. TBS was at the same time motivating people to undertake a comprehensive programme of village drainage and sanitation along with community cleaning of their houses.

As the news of this ferment reached the state capital and district

The *babus* and *netas* who had paid no attention when these villages were dying from drought, suddenly woke up to their “power and responsibility” to thwart and punish social initiative.

headquarters, the *babus* and *netas* who had paid no attention when these villages were dying from drought, suddenly woke up to their “power and responsibility” to thwart and punish social initiative. The law that came in handy to harrass them is the colonial-minded Drainage Act of 1956, which lays down that water works are a government monopoly. The police too began exercising its nuisance value. TBS was served a legal notice by the state irrigation department on March 13, 1987 declaring the rejuvenated *johads* as illegal and informing the villages with characteristic imperial arrogance that all the drains and *nallahs* are government property. This in effect meant the villagers were committing criminal offences by trespassing on *sarkari* land. It was precisely this alien idea of eminent domain introduced and legally enforced by the British which had led to the loss of people’s tradition and right to self-governance over community resources. But this time round, the villagers were not ready to yield before such blatant usurpation of their age old rights.

The administration soon realised that the people would not allow their *johads* to be destroyed. Any ugly confrontation would make them look bad and so the orders were revoked. It took many years of struggle for the draconian law to be put aside in Rajasthan. But more importantly, at least some people in the Public Works Department began to appreciate the value of Tarun Bharat Sangh's work and even lent a measure of support to it.

Rajendra Singh admits that such a retreat was not likely without an organisation like TBS playing the role of a political buffer, with its extensive

Village women pass by the Kraska check dam carrying water drawn from a stream downside of the reservoir

contacts in the media, and among the political activists in other parts of the country, along with support from international aid organisations. This network of solidarity has been crucial in protecting the self-help initiatives by the communities in this region.

Villages Make Own Rules

In the 80s, people of Gopalpura were able to cultivate only 30 per cent of the entire land area. Out of this only nine per cent was under irrigation. Yet the ground water level of the region was showing signs of rapid decline. The forest cover on the Aravali hills was altogether denuded. The lack of a tree cover to trap the moisture resulted in rain water swiftly flowing away during monsoons leading to rapid soil erosion. That is why the pastures had dried up and the agriculture land was also degraded.

A code of moral restrictions and regulations was collectively evolved to prevent lopping or pruning of green branches and leaves or causing any other damage to the trees.

The next step, therefore, was to begin conservation of the forests. It all began in 1987 with 60 acres of classified barren land. The Gram Sabha collectively resolved to afforest this area. On their own initiative, they planted their own trees and built a stone wall to demarcate the boundary as also to keep the grazing cattle from destroying the newly planted trees. A code of moral restrictions and regulations was collectively evolved to prevent lopping or pruning of green branches and leaves or causing any other damage to the trees. Anyone violating this code was fined Rs 11. Anyone guilty of withholding information after witnessing any violation of the self-imposed rules was to pay a double fine. If anyone repeated the offence, members of the Gram Sabha would sit at the person’s doorstep in protest, thereby exerting a strong social and moral pressure. When all else failed, the person would simply be ostracised and expelled from the *biradari*. But such extreme steps were rarely necessary because everyone could see how their incomes and quality of life were being improved by observing this code of preservation.



Photo: Amit Shankar, Courtesy CSE

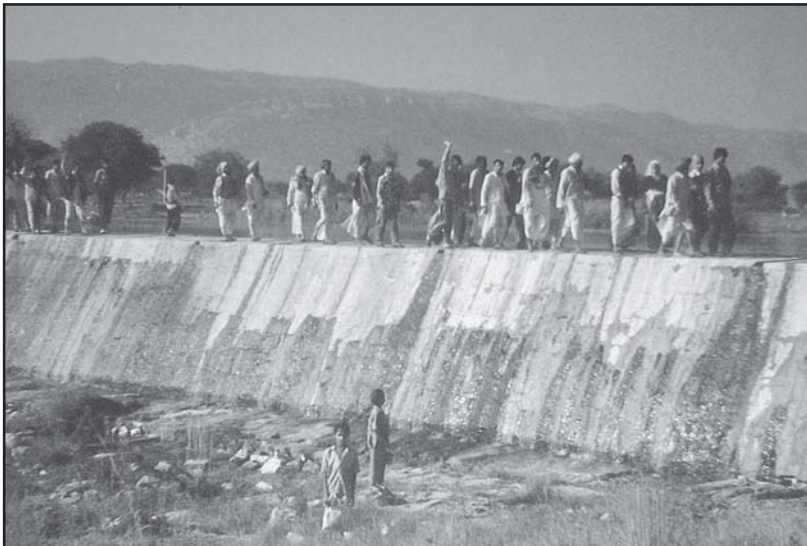
Within two years there was a lush growth of vegetation provoking yet another vicious reaction from government officials. The local *patwari* (revenue official) complained to the district level politicians and officials that Gopalpura villagers had encroached on government land and even built a stone wall to mark their ownership. Such a proof of people's unity and initiative was too threatening to the agents of *mai baap* sarkar who naturally felt that they would lose their tyrannical hold if people got used to managing their own affairs.

Govt. Repression Increases

Ironically enough, the provisions of the Forest Conservation Act of 1988 were cited and used for obstructing the greening and forest conservation work undertaken by the Tarun Bharat Sangh. In 1987, Rajendra Singh was banned from entering the forest of Sariska. Cases were filed against 377 workers of TBS. Since the organisation's work involved detecting cases of theft of timber and illegal felling by employees of the Forest Department, there was bound to be a degree of hostility.

A penalty of Rs.4,950 was imposed on the village, to be paid by June 8, 1989. A legal notice to destroy the protective wall was also issued. In early July, the government officials came and destroyed the planted trees, that too under police protection.

To break down the growing spirit and unity among the people and to sow the seeds of dissension among them, six families from outside were settled on this land under the guise of giving land to freed bonded labourers. This led to a protracted struggle in which the government had to finally admit defeat and agreed to



Check dam on the Bhagani-Tildeh catchment overflows even in drought

Photo: Amit Shankar, Courtesy CSE

provide another 60 *bighas* of land in exchange along with a grant of Rs.10,000 to the Gram Sabha for restoration work. Numerous court cases, enquiries and investigations were launched against TBS over the years.

But once they realised that the TBS just did not yield ground and continued to work in a disinterested manner, some of the forest officer even began to join hands with them. For example, the Forest Department had given a good deal of forest land in Sariska National Park for mining. TBS fought cases against this in the Supreme Court for ten years, leading to the closure of 470 mines. During this phase, in the early 90's, the mining mafia even tried to kill Rajendra Singh. On November 26, 1992, his car was part of a convoy of 30 to 40 vehicles

which accompanied the Supreme Court appointed commission to investigate the mining leases in Sariska forest. Rajendra Singh's vehicle was attacked and smashed, but he received only minor injuries. He attributes this survival to the grace of providence. To quote him: "People's power remains with you till the time God wants you to carry out certain tasks. In any case, very little is in our hands. Much depends on what God has planned for you."

Dead Rivers Rejuvenated

Since then, despite many odds, there has been no looking back. Today half of the 503 sq. km. area has been completely regreened. About 35,000 check dams have been built in the region, which have not only recharged dried wells and filled numerous *johads* but also made history by rejuvenating the Aravari river which had altogether disappeared during this century. This miracle happened quite unexpectedly after 11 years of water harvesting and growing a whole new tree cover. The river Aravari originates in the Thanagazi block of Alwar. It meets several other streams and finally

These bounties of nature had been returned as a reward of people's hard work. The government therefore, had no right to claim ownership of the river.

submerges in her own big reservoir, a *Sainthal Sagar* — product of a large dam on the same river.

The rejuvenation of Aravari also resulted in a thriving aquatic life. The smell and sight of a wide variety of fish, instigated the government officials to come and create more trouble. The villagers had not only prohibited fishing but also devised special rituals to encourage feeding of the fish. The Fisheries Department of the Rajasthan government began to issue fishing contracts to commercial interests from outside the area. The people of Hamirpur, from where the river originated, were outraged and refused to let outsiders come and take their fish. Their logic was simple. When the river was dry and the region drought-stricken, the government paid no attention. These bounties of nature had been returned as a reward of people's hard work. The government therefore, had no right to claim ownership of the river, especially since any water sources that the government took over either dried up or were hopelessly polluted. In December 1996, the villagers launched a *satyagraha* to save the river and the aquatic life of the region. They sat on a peaceful vigil on the banks of the Aravari. TBS was sent a legal notice and threatened with dire consequences, if it supported the agitation. It responded by asking the government to show proof that it had ever before awarded fishing contracts. A three month long agitation followed, with the government issuing newer threats to intimidate TBS activists who by then had won support from several human rights organisations and also good coverage in the local media. Once again the government had to withdraw and cancel the fishing contract. On April 11, 1997, well known environmentalists from all over the country

Even animals, from experience, do not trust government's promise of protection.

gathered at Hamirpur to celebrate and participate in the victory of the people.

Meanwhile, people decided to institutionalise their rights to protect and safeguard the river not only from government encroachment but also from individual greed, getting the better of collective well being. A lot of migrants returned to their villages with the return of water and began irrigating their fields from river water. This reduced the flow of the river. If the diversion of water was allowed to continue unchecked, it would dry up the river again.

Collective Resolves

Therefore, in 1998, the Aravari *sansad* (parliament) was elected with representatives from every village of the area. Today this parliament has 142 members and it has defined comprehensive rules for water use. They collectively resolved that :

1. No one in the Aravari area would grow water guzzling crops like sugarcane and rice. That crop choice and pattern would be determined by the total available water resources in the area rather than on individual whims.
2. After *holi*, with the onset of spring, no one would draw water straight from the river. This prevents the river from drying up in the summer months.
3. While there are no restrictions on people selling their land to other farmers, no one will sell his or her land to outsiders for industrial use because that will mean loss of power for local village institutions for self-regulation.
4. To revegetate the whole area, every village has to have a strictly observed code of conduct with regard to grazing.
5. No one is allowed to hunt wild animals in that area. So successful is this ban that many of the wild animals from government controlled Sariska Wild Life Sanctuary are migrating to the people's protected forests as even



The Aravari river remains in flow despite droughts

Nimbi's proud harvest of melons. This area which had become a virtual desert, today grows even fruits and vegetables.

animals, from experience, do not trust government's promise of protection. One village called Bhanwata has, in fact, created its own sanctuary.

6. People who lift the river water for irrigation give Re 1 per *bigha* to the Gram Sabha per day.

Prosperity through Cooperation

Today this area is able to grow two crops a year. Each family contributes 5 kgs of grain to the *gramkosh* (village fund). In the year 2000 when Rajasthan and Gujarat were experiencing severe draught, the crops in this region of Alwar had not failed. This is because, during the year 1995-96, three times more than the average rainfall fell and people here made sure to harvest every possible drop of rainwater. This stored water is seeing them through the second consecutive year of drought. Equally important, when the monsoons failed last year, people made a spontaneous decision to sow only those crops that can survive with a minimum amount of water. Thereafter, there is no more hunger-induced migration of village youth from this area. Even the *khoya* production, which is an indicator of enhanced milk output, has increased fourfold.

The work of TBS has spread over 700 villages covering Alwar district, parts of Jaipur and Sawai Madhopur districts. In this area, nearly 7000 water bodies of varying sizes have been either newly created or old ones repaired and restored to usage. This includes 100 to 200 checkdams and ponds by the side of each river and stream that flows through this area.



Photo: Amit Shankar, Courtesy CSE

Five dead rivers have been regenerated as a result of this massive endeavour. Not surprisingly, while large parts of the country including Rajasthan are witnessing near famine conditions in villages during the third successive drought year, there is no such crisis in the 700 villages that worked under the influence and guidance of TBS. In nearly 150 villages where the TBS has struck deep roots, the forest cover has actually grown rather than depleted, despite scarcity of rainfall in the last three years. This could happen because in these villages people were even more disciplined about water harvesting and usage, as well as protecting their forests. All of the 700 villages have been able to harvest regular crops. Since the once depleted ground water table has risen from 130-140 feet to 22-30 feet, the wells have enough water not only for human

consumption but also for animals and irrigating their crops. Despite three continuous drought years, there has been no economic crises in this area. Since there has been enough fodder for animals, even milk production has not suffered in this region.

By contrast, in other drought affected villages of Rajasthan, government has had to send tankers to meet the need for drinking water. It is noteworthy that TBS has never needed the help of trained engineers for their work. They rely primarily on local and traditional wisdom.

Regeneration of Nimbi

One of the big success stories among the TBS repertoire is the regeneration of Nimbi — a village near Jaipur which had become a near desert due to big sand storms that lashed this area since it falls in the region which faces a gap in the Aravali hills. Therefore, sand from the desert areas of Rajasthan had begun to make this semi arid village into a deadly desert with huge sand dunes covering the entire landscape. In the mid 90s people from this village approached TBS for help. Nanak Ram, an activist of TBS, took charge of the action plan. In 1996,

TBS has never needed the help of trained engineers for their work. They rely primarily on local and traditional wisdom.

they repaired a 200-year-old tank which had broken down nearly a century ago during the colonial era of siphoning off rural surpluses, leaving the villages too impoverished and powerless to maintain their traditional public works. With a mere investment of Rs 2 lakhs, the villagers joined TBS in desilting the tank and reinforcing its embankments. Luckily for them, 1996-97 turned out to be years of good monsoon leaving a massive water deposit in the newly repaired tank. Its moisture spread all over, recharging underground water channels and wells. As a result, even after three successive years of low rainfall, there is enough water in that pond. Even the wells of the village have more than adequate water for all the local needs. This was such a poverty ridden village that most of the adult males had migrated to Delhi or Jaipur in search of work. Agriculture had all but died in the area. However, the greening of this village has been so effective that in the last three years they have marketed crops worth a crore of rupees. This is a big sum considering that the village plays host to no more than a hundred families.

This area became so productive, that farmers from vegetable-growing regions began coming to this village for share cropping arrangements. Today, nearly 15 trucks come daily from Jaipur to fetch vegetables and flowers being grown in this tiny village. Easy availability of fodder also led to the revival of dairy farming. From Nimbi alone, nearly 500 litres of milk are being picked up Jaipur Dairy vehicles. All this appears miraculous if one considers the fact that till five years ago this village had nothing to sell, except its labour, to the outside world.

President of India conferring the Joseph John Award for Environmental Protection, 2001 to Gram Sabha of Bhaonta-Kolyala.

Opening New Opportunities

The resultant prosperity has helped bridge the rural-urban divide. Although no more than 35 kms from Jaipur, this was a 'backward' 'remote' village till some years ago. Today, two Rajasthan transport buses come to this village and the regained self confidence of Nimbi has led them to explore newer avenues for social advancement.

Today, TBS does not have to canvass their cause anywhere. As the news of this miraculous regeneration spread, people from neighbouring districts, as well as far off states of India, come to learn from and seek the guidance of TBS. According to Anupam Mishra, last year nearly 35,000 people visited TBS to witness the miracles performed by ordinary people of the Alwar region and also to learn from its success.

Last year Bhanwata Kolyala village, which triggered off this socio-economic upsurge by regenerating the Aravari river, received the Joseph John Award for Environmental Protection. The Centre for Science and Environment which manages this award made history by organising for

the President of India to go and give the award in that village rather than make the residents of Bhanwata Kolyala come to Rashtrapati Bhawan for the ceremony.

All this national and international recognition has meant that TBS workers are not being harassed by the government any more, as they once were. They have performed the job that the Public Works Department is supposed to do, but does not. If we had a responsive administration, all the funds earmarked for such work should have been transferred to TBS. Even today, support from the government is not forthcoming as most of the funds needed for TBS work come from international aid organisations. However, TBS is careful in the use of its funds. No more than 10 per cent of the funds are used for overhead costs. Salaries of full time workers are modest — no more than Rs 4,500 per month, apart from travel allowance.

In order to combat the culture of dependence and encourage self help, TBS does not undertake any water harvesting work in a village, unless the local people get organised to take



Photo: Amit Shankar, Courtesy CSE

Akaal Mukti Padyatra to spread further the message of water harvesting. Photo taken on February 22, 2001

responsibility, including raising part of the funds from within the village. For public works, the village has to raise at least 25 per cent of the money locally, with TBS bringing in 75 per cent from the “development grant” it receives. For water work on private lands, the ratio is fifty-fifty.

As this work culture gets entrenched, the proportion of contribution from the villages keeps increasing. For instance, Bhanwata Kolyala has the closest links with TBS. But they do not take any monetary contribution from the TBS account for maintenance of their public works. In other words, the spirit of self reliance has grown with increasing self esteem.

When I met him in the summer of 2000. Rajendra Singh had just come from a visit to the drought-stricken prone areas of Gujarat where the fame of his work had inspired several large scale water harvesting programmes being initiated by people’s own initiative. According to Rajendra Singh, famines are not just the product of monsoon failure :

“Our society had numerous ways of coping with droughts, especially in low rainfall areas. Even marriages were performed in proper rainfall years and avoided during drought years. For example, the people of Shekhawati would marry their sons in *Mag*¹ region and the Mag communities would look for marriage alliances in the Shekhawati area. The calculation behind it was that in case of drought in one region, people would migrate to an area



Photo: Amit Shankar, Courtesy CSE

where there was no comparable water scarcity where their relatives would provide them the necessary hospitality and support in times of water scarcity. Only the old people stayed back in the village. By the end of August, they would know how much water they had for year round consumption. So they planned for water usage accordingly – what crop to grow, which piece of land to use or leave fallow --all these would be decided in August keeping the water situation in mind. The first priority would be given to providing for drinking water – both for humans as well as animals. All these considerations decided which crops they would cultivate. But today I find that in drought-stricken ridden Gujarat where there have been recurring crop failures, they are growing the very same crops that are cultivated in good rainfall years. Thus, our people are forgetting the traditional methods of water management and rational water usage.”

Rajendra Singh blames the government agriculture and irrigation departments for this. They have systematically brainwashed people into adopting water guzzling crops. So with seeds. Over centuries people had developed drought resistant seeds which could survive fairly severe dry spells and give at least subsistence level crop even in no-rainfall year. This is called the *palewa* form of cultivation. But in the last 30-40 years, the agriculture being promoted by our government agencies involves systematic neglect and pushing out the traditionally prevalent, time tested methods developed by our farmers over centuries.

Fighting Mental Slavery

Rajendra Singh's crusade is as much against the mental slavery inflicted on our people by our rulers which has also eroded the self confidence and self respect of our people. “We tend to adopt the methods used in western countries, without even putting their worth through proper scrutiny.”

He is also critical of the fact that, we have mindlessly adopted the

technology for digging deeper and deeper into the bowels of the earth to draw out as much water as possible. We have not paused to consider that we cannot possibly go on extracting endless amounts of water from the Mother Earth without replenishing it. He is convinced that our governments have been the bigger culprits in this because in our society we still have many people who are sensitive to this question. For example, he recounts how he recently met a person in Rajasthan who uses only 52 tolas of water for his entire bath. This was in Ratangarh village of Churu district. This was the traditional practice in the absolutely water scarce desert regions of Rajasthan. He has a *chowki* with a hole in the centre. Underneath is kept a *paraat* which does not let even a drop of water escape. This man takes exactly 52 tolas water in a vessel, which he pours over his body, bit by bit, starting from the head. That water flows into the *paraat* so that it can be used for the first washing of his *dhoti*. Thereafter, it is fed to a tree.

Even today, in village many people practise this discipline. The water used for washing clothes is not allowed to flow away but used for watering trees. They can do so because they do not use chemical based soaps and instead use the rough surface of the washing stones to remove dirt. Rajendra Singh rues the fact that, the discipline inculcated over centuries in using water is breaking down:

“Now, every region is growing wheat, paddy and installing the same uniform kind of water guzzling toilets and bath tubs – be it the desert of areas of Jaisalmer or Chirapunji, the highest rainfall area of India. In Saurashtra, the shortage of water began to be felt 40-50 years ago.



Two Women in the rejuvenated Sariska forest

That is why many people left villages and started doing businesses in the towns and cities. But even if they earned lakhs and crores, they would still visit their villages, along with their families during the Diwali season because they stayed culturally rooted in their villages. When they saw the trouble faced by their female relatives in fetching water, they felt they had to do something for their motherland. That is what has brought about a new zeal in water harvesting among businessmen of Saurashtra, many of whom look towards TBS for inspirations.”

One such large scale effort to be triggered off by TBS example is that of the Saruashtra Jaldhara Trust. (For details see MANUSHI No. 118). In May-June 2000, Rajendra Singh had led a *padayatra* to spread awareness about water harvesting in the drought stricken areas of Saurashtra at the invitation of some local diamond merchants who wanted to rid their villages of recurring droughts and famines. Even during that experience of walking through Gujarat villages, Rajendra Singh found many touching

instances of caste and class collaboration maintained through traditional give and take gestures.

Strengthening Village Bonds

For example, during his *padayatra* of Gujarat villages in Bhavnagar district, the Patels who had initiated the water harvesting work, one day told Rajendra Singh that he must personally visit the house of a particular woman and thank her for her contribution of Rs 11,000. Because that woman belonged to a supposedly lower and poorer caste of Bakhads, they wanted to make a special gesture of gratitude and recognition for her support. The Patels all went to her house with him.

He cites another interesting incident which led to old hostilities being buried and a new bond forged due to the need to bring different communities together for this common endeavour. The Patels who were leading the *padayatra* told him that in a particular village called Bilsara, Rajendra Singh should make a special effort to invite the Rajput community leaders for a discussion. Rajendra Singh was puzzled and asked

why this special emphasis on wooing Rajputs — rather than follow their usual method of inviting everyone together and treat them at par. He was told that some years ago, there had been a serious clash among Rajputs and Patels in that village over some land in which 11 people got killed. Now they wanted to bury that hatchet, withdraw the case from court and instead bring about a reconciliation through love and mutual forgiveness. Rajendra Singh did as told and it did indeed pave the way for the two estranged communities reestablishing their old *bhaichara* (brotherly) bonds. Several such incidents have convinced Rajendra Singh that the community initiated work of harvesting water and recharging water sources unites people and builds bonds of cooperation between different communities, while government

“The community initiated work of harvesting water and recharging water sources unites people and builds bonds of cooperation between different communities, while government interventions tend to create divisions and generate new conflicts.”

interventions tend to create divisions and generate new conflicts.

Even though Rajendra Singh's work was gender sensitive from the very start, yet he admits that it has been much harder to mobilise the women of Rajasthan or enable them to become an organised force in villages. His recent experiences in Gujarat have convinced him that there is a big cultural difference between the two provinces. In Gujarat, women

have become an active force in all the water related work being undertaken by community leaders. However, women of Alwar district, have not come to play a similar role. There have been a few exceptional women who contributed generously to this work. One woman even got a whole pond dug with her personal savings. But on the whole he feels sad to see that women of Rajasthan have not become active players in this endeavour. He attributes the low initiative among Rajasthani women to the fact that the area witnessed dual slavery of the English as well as the zamindars. Thus women got crushed under the triple burden. Even though the women see that the quality of their lives has improved dramatically due to the easy availability of water, this has failed to enthuse them enough to begin taking on a leading role in the village affairs. □



Women Bhakt Poets

*“No one can stop you - Mira set out in ecstasy.
Modesty, shame, family honour - all these I threw off my head
Flinging away praise and blame, I took the narrow path of knowledge.
Tall the towers, red the windows - a formless bed is spread,
Auspicious the five coloured necklace, made of flowers and buds,
Beautiful armlets and bracelets, vermillion in my hair parting,
The tray of remembrance in my hand - a beauty more true.
Mira sleeps on the bed of happiness - auspicious the hour today.
Rana, you go to your house - you and I cannot pull together.
No one can stop you - Mira set out in ecstasy.”*

Mirabai

Available in an attractive hardbound edition. Contains accounts of the life and poetry of some of the most outstanding women in Indian history from the 6th to the 17th century - Mirabai, Andal, Avvaiyar, Muktabai, Janabai, Bahinabai, Lal Ded, Toral, Loyal. Many of these poems had never been translated into English before.

120 pages, profusely illustrated u Price: Rs 100 (+Rs 15 postage) u Overseas Price: US\$ 10

Send advance payment to the **Manushi** address.

Makes A Beautiful Gift