

Reviving India's Water Harvesting Systems

Alwar district of Rajasthan, a semi-arid region, receives a meagre 620 mm average annual rainfall. Droughts are a recurrent feature in the region. In the early 1980's with pressures of population, increase in consumption and overall environmental degradation, the water situation became worse. The district was officially declared by the Government of Rajasthan as a "dark zone", an area where the ground water table has receded below recoupable limits.

In 1985-86, a severe drought hit the region, adding to the already bleak situation. Into this grim scenario entered a team of dedicated volunteers from the Tarun Bharat Sangh (TBS), a voluntary non-governmental organisation. TBS volunteers were convinced that one of the ways to improve the situation would be to revive traditional practices, especially Johad (an earthen bund or check dam to conserve water), that had sustained Alwar and its populace in the past. But initiating a dialogue with the villagers and convincing them to take part in the revival was not an easy task. They decided that the best way to do this was to practice rather than preach. They themselves started digging to revive an already existing Johad in Gopalpura village.

The hard work and patience paid off. Villagers started taking part in discussions and gradually getting involved in the process. TBS activists invoked a sense of commitment and involvement in the community. To spread the movement to the entire area, TBS organised Pani Yatras (Water Tours). Every year these Yatras of about one and half months would travel extensively, to share the experiences of water harvesting. The march carried the message of harvesting rainwater and saving forests, by using traditional systems and knowledge. Today, there are more than 4000 Johads, which are totally managed by the community and have come to be regarded as community or village property. In many cases villagers have contributed around 90 percent of the total cost. The role of TBS has been that of a catalyst and motivator.

The perceptible changes brought about by building Johads have been no less than a miracle. Wells have been recharged and water supply could be ensured for the entire year to meet the needs of the people and livestock. In addition there has been increased food production, soil conservation and increased biomass productivity. These efforts have also brought back life to two rivers, Aravari and Ruparel. These once perennial rivers had disappeared during the drought in the 1980's. Sparsely cultivated areas are now cultivated with higher cropping intensity. The transformation brought about by these efforts have turned an official 'dark zone' into a 'water-surplus zone.'

