THE 2001 RAMON MAGSAYSAY AWARD FOR COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

BIOGRAPHY OF RAJENDRA SINGH

Rajendra Singh was aware, even as a child, that he was "a little bit different." He learned at an early age that, according to Hindu culture, as the oldest son, he should be responsible for his family. At the same time, however, he realized that he was responsible for other people, "that my responsibility is not only for my family or my relatives; my responsibility is a little bit bigger."

Singh belongs to the *rajput* caste, the warrior ruling class in old Indian society. *Rajput*s were responsible for the protection of a village, but like most of the other castes, they also engaged in agriculture. Although as a *rajput,* "protection of the good and destruction of evil" was in his blood, Singh absorbed Gandhian philosophy in his younger days and has always believed that nonviolence is the best way to achieve his goals.

On both sides of his family tree, Singh came from the *zamindari,* or landowning class. He was born the eldest of seven children on August 6, 1959, in the village of Daula in the district of Bagpat in Uttar Pradesh, east of New Delhi. His father was an agriculturist who managed sixty acres of land that were planted to sugarcane, rice, and wheat.

As the first grandson, Rajendra basked in the attention not only of his grandfather and his uncle, but also of members of his extended family who lived in and around the village. He spent his early years at the farm, playing among the cattle and the buffalo and deriving fun from organizing them. His father, he says, was a "very dominating person," but his mother was a "very affectionate" and supportive woman to whom he could turn for all his needs.

Singh describes himself in his student days as "mediocre" at best, especially in English and mathematics. In 1975, however, he had an English teacher named Pratap Singh who taught him more than a foreign language. Every day after class, they would meet for spirited discussions on politics and social issues. Their main topic was the so-called Emergency. In June of that year, the High Court of Allahabad had found Prime Minister Indira Gandhi guilty of having resorted to illegal practices during the parliamentary election campaign in 1971. Instead of resigning from office, she declared a state of emergency in the country, which she claimed was necessary to prevent internal disorder. Hundreds of her political opponents were arrested, and the press was subjected to censorship. In November, the Supreme Court of India overturned Mrs. Gandhi's conviction and, in 1976, the Indian Parliament passed legislation that greatly increased its members' powers, while reducing those of the courts and government agencies.

Singh's teacher wanted to organize students to address social issues. Through him, the young Singh became involved in political issues and developed his own views about the political situation in his country. Like many of his peers, he believed in democracy and equity.

As early as in 1974, while still a high school student, he had his first taste of actual social work. A worker from the Gandhi Peace Foundation named Ramesh Sharma came to live in his family's house in Meerut and invited Singh to get involved in improving the life of the villagers. While Singh was at school, Sharma would go around the village, cleaning it, settling conflicts, and establishing a *vachanalay* (library) or a place for debate. He also

showed the people how they could help themselves. Singh joined him after school. Together, they tried to eradicate alcoholism in the *rajput* village where people were habitual brewers and drinkers. Sharma helped Singh to organize the youth, but Singh became frustrated with the villagers, who would not listen to him because he was young. So Mr. Sharma encouraged Singh to join him in starting an organization through which they could communicate more effectively with people.

After high school, Singh enrolled himself at the Bhartiya Rishikul Ayurvedic Mahavidyalaya College in Baraut, Uttar Pradesh, a private coeducational college where he earned a degree in Ayurvedic Medicine and Surgery. Graduates of the course are qualified to practice medicine or to join government service. Singh wanted to become a doctor so that he could serve the people.

While still at the college, Singh spent most of his time engaging in politics and doing social work, shuttling between New Delhi and Baraut and Meerut. He joined rallies against corruption, inequity, and injustice, and attended meetings where young people like him debated contemporary social issues. Because he believed in nonviolence, he convinced other students to join him at a peaceful sitting protest rather than taking direct action, which he said would not achieve anything. He argued that the enemy was stronger and more powerful; it would be futile to use force.

He became the leader of the local chapter of the Chatra Yova Sangharsh Vahini, or the Student Youth Struggle Battalion, founded by Lok Nayak Jayaprakash Narayan. Narayan was the author of the "total revolution" concept, and it was from him that Singh learned the Gandhian ideas that influenced his later work. Singh met Narayan a few times at the Gandhi Peace Foundation in New Delhi during his years as a student activist. Narayan taught him and other students that the system needed correction and that only the youth could change it.

The Chatra Yova Sangharsh Vahini started out as a small group, but by 1977 its members had greatly increased. Many students wanted to join in order to oppose the Emergency and its negative implications. That year, the Janata Party, spearheaded by Singh's mentor Narayan, defeated Mrs. Gandhi at the polls. But soon, when Narayan fell ill, the Student Youth Struggle Battalion was immobilized. Disappointed, Singh joined a congregation of parties that wanted to wrest power from Mrs. Gandhi. But even the new affiliation failed to satisfy him.

As much as Singh wanted to take postgraduate studies in medicine, he opted for a course that did not involve mathematics, in which he did not do well. Since he spoke Hindi fluently, he enrolled in a postgraduate course in Hindi studies at one of the affiliated colleges of the University of Allahabad in Baraut immediately after receiving his degree in Ayurvedic medicine. He remained a student activist.

Having completed his studies and lacking a better option, Singh joined government service in 1980. His first job was as a National Service Volunteer for education in Jaipur. He was assigned to take charge of an adult education project in the Dausa District, where one of his responsibilities was managing some newly opened adult education schools. He also encouraged youth to take part in development activities. It was at this job that Singh realized that he was just a very small part of a big system. Every time he tried to call his superiors' attention to a problem, they would dismiss it as inconsequential. From his first day of work until the day he resigned, he felt that "I am a small part and I am always against this big system."

At about this time, Singh's family arranged for his marriage to a beautiful and simple girl named Meena, whose family background was similar to his. Following tradition, he and his bride did not meet until the third and final day of their wedding celebration. The marriage was certified upon their meeting. Singh was now a married man with a good job.

The former student activist who had rallied against the system and the government did not relish the idea of an arranged marriage, but as the eldest child he could not forsake his responsibility to his family. He was also afraid of his father.

Singh's married life in a Jaipur village was happy for two or three years, until Rajendra confessed to Meena that he did not like the type of work he was doing. He spoke about going into the heart of India to "do something." Twenty years later, he told an interviewer: "Maybe it was some social chromosomes that fired my imagination to do something useful. I was just a government servant in Jaipur, fed up with just sending statistics to officials." Meena seemed to understand him at first and they moved to the city. Singh, however, was still unhappy. Annoyed and frustrated, Meena left their home to visit her parents. When Singh's parents-in-law heard about what he wanted to do with his life, they began calling him *nalayak* (good for nothing), a term, he admits, his own parents had been using to describe him since he was young.

It was 1981. Singh was twenty-eight years old and had been married for only a year and a half. With Meena gone, he sold all the household items that she had accumulated—furniture, the television set, their refrigerator—for twenty-three thousand rupees and deposited eight thousand in a bank. With the rest of the money in hand, he met with four fellow members of the Tarun Bharat Sangh (TBS), or Young India Association, who felt the same way he did. He invited them to join him in doing "something useful and interesting." Their names were Narendra, Satendra, Kedar, and Hanuman—four *nalayak*s like himself, according to their families.

The TBS was a nongovernmental organization (NGO) that officers and students of Jaipur University had formed in 1975 to assist victims of a campus fire. Morale among the members, who were mostly from the elite, waned after the initial outburst of enthusiasm to help the poor. Three years after he signed up, Singh became the group's secretary-general. He had previously been dissatisfied with the organization's performance, complaining that the members were content to dabble in issues but had not produced any substantial results. In 1984, exasperated with Singh's questions and complaints, the board resigned, leaving the TBS to him. Upon becoming secretary-general, he resigned from government service.

His first act was to take up life with a group of nomads who moved from village to village and supported themselves as blacksmiths. He wanted to understand their way of life and show them ways to improve it. By tradition, the nomads were entitled to the use of resources in the areas where they stopped because these were common property. But wherever they went, the villagers made life difficult for them.

After this exposure to nomad life, Singh pondered his future. He thought of Ramesh Sharma, his friend from the Gandhi Peace Foundation, and how his own life now seemed to be following the same path as his. One day, as he sat in a rickety bus, Singh remembered a place he had passed when he was still working for the government. Alwar District had some of the worst living conditions in India. It had no water, and the district's young people had all left in search of a better life. Singh decided that Alwar would be a good place for him to start his new life.

Together with his five TBS compatriots, Singh went to the bus station to buy tickets. All they had with them, aside from a change of clothes and bedding, were a few utensils. Having no definite plans, they disagreed among themselves about where they would get off the bus. Singh likened their situation to going into battle without knowing who their enemy was and what they were supposed to do. To end the bickering, they agreed to get off at the last stop.

The bus's last stop on October 2, 1985, it turned out, was Kishori village, twenty kilometers past the town of Thanagazi in Alwar District. It was where Singh had earlier

hoped to “do something” after leaving his government job. At that time, he had taken a map of Rajasthan and drawn a line to mark a fifty-kilometer stretch between Thanagazi and Ajabgarh at the foot of the Aravalli mountain range. Now he was there.

It was nighttime when he and his friends arrived. Local people immediately gathered around them, eyeing them with suspicion. There had been reports over the radio earlier of terrorists returning from Punjab to Rajasthan. Because the five strangers appeared in the village not long after that broadcast and because they all sported beards, the people of Kishori mistook them for the terrorists. It took an old man to point out that their dry and barren village was so poor and backward that no terrorist would ever think of going there, much less spending the night. That argument did not mollify the villagers, and so the old man led the five travelers to a small room in a Hanuman temple. The room could accommodate only two of them, so the three others had to sleep outside.

When the people asked why they had come to their village, Singh replied that they were there to see how they could help the people with health services and education, and to assess what else could be done. The people responded with disbelief and derision. The villagers’ distrust of the five strangers began to wane only after Sumer Singh, a teacher from nearby Suratgarh, discovered that a relative of his had been Rajendra Singh’s colleague in the youth education project. Sumer then helped them get a trader’s vacant house in Kishori village for free. The villagers’ raucous skepticism disturbed Singh, who said years later, “Their questions crushed my intellectual arrogance, and I decided to learn from them.”

The truth was the five men did not know what to do. But they decided to keep themselves busy. Some of them went around talking to people and surveying the area, while the others did chores at home. Soon, however, the trader threw them out of the house, perhaps because it did not look good for his business that they were not paying any rent. Then, a landlord named Seth Badri Prasad came to their rescue. Since he spent most of his time doing business elsewhere, he offered them the use of his house in the adjoining village of Bhikampura, as long as they looked after it. He also donated five hundred rupees to their work.

While his four friends went around the village encouraging people to send their daughters to school, Singh opened an Ayurvedic practice in the nearby village of Gopalpura. In the next few months, he struggled to understand the existing social dynamics among the villagers, wondering why the intelligent ones were doing so little to help themselves. He tried to find answers to other questions as well: Where had the forests gone? Why was the land so dry and barren? Why, in spite of six hundred millimeters of annual rainfall, was there no groundwater?

It was a sixty-year-old man named Mangu Lal Patel who provided the direction Singh needed. One day, six months after Singh started working at Gopalpura, the man told him that what the villagers needed was neither a school nor medicines but water. As Mangu Lal Patel later recalled: “‘Why did you come here?’ I asked. ‘To do some social work,’ the strangers said. ‘We’re not interested,’ I told them, ‘outsiders are always coming, making studies, and doing nothing. If you are interested in helping the village, build a *johad.*’”

*Johad*s are the traditional system of collecting rainwater in Indian villages. They are small, earthen check-dams or round ponds that capture and conserve rainwater, allowing it to percolate and recharge the groundwater below. This is how Singh describes a *johad*: “Imagine a semi-circular pond, collecting the run-off from the tiny streams and rivulets of much wider area.”

Although India has enough water to meet the needs of its one billion inhabitants, water is unevenly available. Along with Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan counts

among the states worst affected by water shortage. Extending in the northwest to the vast Thar Desert, Rajasthan has been described as one of the most arid zones in the world. It has 8 percent of India's population but only 1 percent of its water resources, including groundwater and rainfall. The Indian government's response to the water problem has been to construct dams, but these have not been effective. Moreover, widespread allegations of corruption have surrounded the construction of dams.

Singh's colleagues did not welcome Mangu Lal Patel's advice. Two of them, feeling insulted that a simple villager would dare tell educated men such as themselves what to do, left for Jaipur the very next day. The two others said they preferred to teach in a school rather than work with their hands. Because the young men of the village had all gone away, Singh had only the women and the elders to work with. He told them that he was not an engineer and did not know much about water. But Mangu Lal Patel was insistent. More than engineering, Singh recalled the old man telling him, what he needed was a "firm commitment."

In the Gopalpura of his youth, Mangu Lal Patel said, "the *johad*s had been filled with water, the livestock healthy, the fields green. Villagers had kept the dams in constant repair; they performed rituals in small temples on the banks. The nearby hills were thick with forests, the milk plentiful. The huge storage houses had always been full of grain, now they stood empty…." Singh began to understand the seriousness of the water problem when he himself had to walk for miles to get drinking water and it was dirty.

Mangu Lal Patel showed Singh how to dig a pond and, for the next six months, Singh did as he was instructed, even though he could not see any scientific basis in the old man's advice. "I just had faith in his wisdom," Singh says. As the son of a landlord with seventeen acres of land in Daula village in Uttar Pradesh, he had memories of rich and prosperous fields, a stark contrast to the land in Alwar, which was rich but, lacking water, had become unproductive. It saddened him that almost a century ago there was a grain market in Alwar, an indication that the water supply in the area had once been plentiful.

Village elders told him that the Aravalli mountain range, which protected northeastern Rajasthan from the heat of the Thar Desert, had been plundered by a local prince who, in the dying days of colonial India, feared that the Jagirdars and royalty would lose their properties after independence. He auctioned off huge blocks of forest, which were subsequently denuded of their trees by miners and loggers. With the forests gone, rainwater ran down hills and valleys, eroding the fertile topsoil, instead of seeping into the earth. Over time, the land became infertile.

Singh now realized what had brought him there. It was to help restore the villagers' water supply. Gopalpura was what engineers called a "dark zone" because it had been without groundwater for five years. The government was not willing to repair the check-dams that had deteriorated along the Arvari rivulet, nor was it inclined to help the strange young men from Jaipur. When the monsoon came, young men returned to work in the fields. Singh organized them to rebuild a neglected check-dam's earthen wall and scrape the silt off the *johad*, moving the rich topsoil to the fields. When the monsoon came, the pond began to fill with water, which then seeped into the earth and recharged the water table. Fresh water now filled wells that had been dry for years.

At the end of the monsoon, the people were elated. The water level in the pond had never before been high enough to recharge the wells in their community. Three years later, they made a pond around five feet deep with an area of a hundred to two hundred square meters and a catchment area of a hundred hectares. It filled up when the rains came, and so did the wells.

Singh credits the farmers for teaching him how to build a *johad*. He says, "How you harvest water depends on your objective, the geography, the topography, catchment area, pond area and soil type. You need soils with high-retention capacity. These are things that you have to learn by living with local communities who know the area best. Our [farming] communities use earth science principles to recharge the groundwater. They also build small ponds and lakes and check-dams on rivers, plug gullies, and make bonds along the field contours to stop soil erosion and water loss."

Using a technique that he called the "internal relationship network," Singh encouraged Mangu Lal Patel to invite his relatives in the other villages to see the revived *johad* so that they could be inspired to replicate it in their communities. To further spread the word about the benefits of building *johad*s, in 1986 Singh and the TBS also launched the first *padyatra*, or "march for water," a practice that has since become popular in communities well beyond Gopalpura. In a *padyatra*, TBS workers and local men and women walk for weeks through rural villages carrying banners and shouting slogans about conserving water, saving forests, and planting trees. Through these "marches for water," they tried to promote the ideas of water harvesting and water management among riverside communities and also to draw them into TBS's relationship network.

Twenty kilometers away, in the village of Bhaonta-Kolyala, the people noticed that Gopalpura village now had water in its wells all year round. In 1986, the same year the first *johad* was completed, the TBS *padyatra* passed through Bhaonta-Kolyala from Gopalpura. The people asked Singh to help them as well. Singh agreed, but first he laid down some rules. The villagers, he said, had to organize a *gram sabha*, or an assembly, to which every household would send a representative. The *gram sabha* would decide, with the assistance of a TBS representative, the sites for the *johad*s and the amount of work each family would contribute. Finally, since the catchment areas were completely degraded, the people had to protect the forest and regenerate it to stop soil erosion and silting.

Work in Bhaonta-Kolyala started on March 6, 1987, when the villagers, having organized not only themselves but also people in the adjacent villages, mapped the natural drainage system and chose the sites for their new *johad*s, while repairing the old ones. They were determined, as one of them put it, "to catch each and every drop of rain water that fell within the village boundaries."

Having completed one *johad*, the people of Bhaonta-Kolyala went on to construct more. Today, they have fifteen water-harvesting structures, the most ambitious of them being a 244-meter-long and 7-meter-tall concrete dam in the Aravalli hills, which they designed to stop water before it flows downstream. Taking the cue from them, people in the other villages along the Arvari River began to repair and build their own *johad*s.

Little did the villagers realize that by coming together to rejuvenate their environment, they were also reviving the Arvari River. When work on the big dam started in 1990, no one knew that the site was the origin of the river and that, by catching and percolating water, they were bringing the Arvari back to life. From a small stream that first emerged in 1990 and then disappeared after a few weeks, the Arvari began to flow every year, each year for a longer period, until in 1995 it became a perennial river. Another huge dam has been built in Agar village, site of the second source of the Arvari. In the catchment areas of the twenty-two-mile river now stand 375 *johad*s. Besides the Arvari, villagers have successfully revived four other streams in the region.

"We didn't start out with grand ideas of reviving rivers. We were just aiming to meet local needs—which were severe," says Singh.

The village of Hamirpur, where the Jabbar Sagar stream now flows throughout the year and teems with fish, also boasts a bird sanctuary. Its 2.5-kilometer-long reservoir

benefits five large villages. Two years ago, the people launched a one-hundred-day *satyagraha*, or peaceful demonstration, to force the government to cancel fishing contracts for the reservoir they had built. The *gram sabha* is so strict it imposes a fine for every fish that is caught.

The phenomenal revival of the Arvari could not be kept a secret for very long. A contractor from Jaipur soon showed up with a license to fish issued by the Rajasthan government. The seventy-two villages were not to be cowed so easily. Realizing that they had to safeguard the river against intruders and ensure the proper management of both their land and water resources, the people came together and organized the Arvari River Parliament. The fish contractor eventually had to back off, as did a beer company that had planned to exploit the abundance of barley and fresh water in the area to set up a brewery.

Since the parliament's first meeting in 1999, 140 representatives from seventy-two villages have been meeting twice a year to discuss problems and strategies. The parliament has also set down rules for the protection of the river and the land. For example, only the landless are allowed to get water directly from the river; for everyone else, there is well water. Self-discipline has succeeded without any outside intervention.

The villagers have not been content with erecting *johad*s and big dams. They have also focused their attention on the problem of soil erosion and regeneration of the forests. Following the completion of their water-harvesting structures, they declared twelve square kilometers of the adjoining forest area as a public wildlife sanctuary. The words "Bhaironath Public Wildlife Sanctuary" appear on the huge dam at the entrance. It is said to be the first such sanctuary in India and is already attracting wildlife from the nearby forests.

The restoration of the forests to the people was a victory for the community, which had been deprived of its forest rights in 1888 when the maharajah of Alwar promulgated the Alwar Rajya Forest Act. Before this time, the community had managed most of the forests in Alwar. Under the new law, many of these forests became the exclusive hunting reserve of the king. Fifty years later, under the British-influenced Alwar Rajya Act of 1938, the forests were opened to commercial use. The king distributed the forests among the village Jagirdars, and the people lost any residual rights they still claimed. By the time the Forest Department of the state of Alwar took over (after India achieved independence), the Aravalli had been ravaged.

For nearly fifteen years beginning in the 1930s, villagers in the region saw for themselves how the forests were abused through large-scale deforestation. In the 1940s, the king decreed that the forests be given to charcoal contractors, leading to the death of hundreds of trees and the loss of livelihood for the community. The merger of Alwar State with the Indian Union in 1947, and the king's replacement by the state bureaucracy did not improve the situation. What Singh saw when he arrived in 1985 were "naked hills all around." Today, the Aravalli Hills are becoming green again. TBS reports that more than 60 percent of the 6,500-square-kilometer area where it has worked now has forest cover.

To the grateful communities, Singh became a "water diviner" and "miracle man." But not everyone was ecstatic about the breakthrough that he and the TBS initiated. Singh says he encountered opposition from "power brokers and money lenders—those who mistakenly think that economic empowerment of the poor means loss of their riches. And the government engineers felt illiterate villagers had no right to enter their domain of construction. They questioned the technical features and safety. Bureaucrats felt that ponds could not be built without their permission. Politicians worried that if communities started doing water work themselves, then who will vote for them?"

Even while the first *johad* was under construction, the Rajasthan Irrigation Department, citing the Irrigation and Drainage Act of 1954, declared that it was illegal and

ordered it demolished because it had been built on government-owned land. Besides, the department said, the *johad* would not survive the monsoon. Singh argued that he and the villagers could not stop rain from falling on their land. When the monsoon did come, the *johad* proved the bureaucrats wrong. It withstood the heavy rains, in contrast to the concrete dam that the government had commissioned a contractor to build.

The ninety-kilometer-long Ruparel River was also revived—thanks to the persistence of two women, the only inhabitants left in the village of Mala Tolawas on a ridge in the Sariska Hills, where the river's first tributary trickles down. Everyone else in the village had either died or fled. A TBS volunteer who climbed the ridge in 1987 suggested that the women dig a pond. For four months they did as they were told; the volunteer came every ten days to help out. Villagers downstream did the same and, before long, 350 ponds and check-dams had been built on the Ruparel basin and the river had come alive again.

Another success story is that of Nimbi, a village near Jaipur. For a hundred years, it was being overtaken by shifting sand from the Thar Desert. In 1996, at the request of the people, TBS came in to help. A tank that had been constructed two hundred years ago and had long since silted over was de-silted and repaired. When the monsoon came, the people were ready with a reservoir. Singh says that the reservoir "literally pulled this village out of acute poverty." Until five years ago, he reports, Nimbi "had nothing to sell except its labour to the outside world," but today it exports millions of rupees worth of vegetables and fruits to urban areas, and a van from the Jaipur Dairy regularly arrives to collect its supply of Nimbi milk.

Not all villages, however, were ready for the change that the TBS wanted to bring to their communities. The TBS always made it clear that work would not start until everyone was willing to contribute either money or labor. Singh says, "This principle helped us. The *netagiri* (politically inclined) type of people left us, and the genuine ones remained with us." He and his coworkers never imposed their will on the villagers. "We never decided things for them; we only trained them to make decisions," he explains. Since villagers were involved in the work every step of the way—from identifying the need, to choosing the location, to designing the project and then scheduling the work, purchasing materials, and paying the bills—they embraced it as their own rather than as a TBS enterprise. Maintenance became the villagers' concern too. Singh says, "Whenever they consult us on a problem, we find the solution from the villagers themselves." Indeed, the TBS, while helping the people to build dams, was also helping them to believe in themselves.

As of 1998, the TBS had enabled the construction of 2,500 ponds and check-dams in 650 villages spread over the districts of Alwar, Jaipur, Dausa, Karoli, Sawai Madhopur, Udaipur, and Jaisalmer. Of these villages, at least five hundred learned about the benefits of building *johad*s from the *padyatra*. The TBS continues to receive requests from other villages to help them build water-harnessing structures.

"By any standard, TBS's work in the 600-odd villages can be termed as the largest ever mobilization of people for environmental regeneration," said G. D. Agrawal, former head of civil engineering at the Indian Institute of Technology, in 1999. He added: "It is the effective village-level institutions that have made possible such a massive network managed entirely by the people."

Community participation has increased at a phenomenal rate. When the TBS began work on its first *johad* in Gopalpura in 1986, it had the cooperation of only 3 percent of the people. In 1999, the extent of community participation recorded by the TBS was about 70

percent. Singh observed: "It can be explained in terms of people's understanding of the cost-benefit analysis of *johad*s. The return from a small *johad* has made people contribute more to it. We have instances where the community is contributing 90 percent of the cost."

Over the years, the TBS has experimented with varying levels of contribution from the villages with which it works. In 1989, the rate was at least 25 percent of the cost of the *johad*. The TBS has since updated this to 67 percent. In fact, it is the *gram sabha* that determines the actual share of the cost. Indeed, the *gram sabha* oversees all water-conservation activities in a village. Once the people agree to work with the TBS, they have to call a general meeting so that they can organize a *gram sabha* and elect its head. The villagers can deny membership to anyone whose conduct they deem unacceptable or whose performance is below standard. *Gram sabha* meetings are held every month on the *amavasya* (no-moon night), which the Hindu calendar sets aside for community work.

Following the organization of the *gram sabha,* the members form a resource committee that prepares a clay demographic map of the village. The committee then goes from door to door, ascertaining the problems of the village and gathering the people's views on the location and size of the proposed *johad.* Next, the committee presents its report to the *gram sabha,* which then decides on the site and the first day of work.

Five committees are then created by the *gram sabha:* the construction committee, the forest committee, the grazing committee, the water committee, and the women's association. The construction committee is responsible for all construction work and for mobilizing villagers to participate. The forest committee enforces the ban on felling trees and monitors the regeneration of the forest in the village's catchment area. The grazing committee prevents grazing in protected areas such as regenerating forests. The water committee manages the new *johad* and monitors how the newly generated water is shared. The women's association is a relatively new idea. It exists to make sure that the *gram sabha* hears women's views as well as those of men.

Significantly, these committees are merely the implementing arms of the *gram sabha.* It is the *gram sabha* itself, during its monthly meetings, that makes all the important decisions. It is also the *gram sabha* that holds the money and issues payments.

"The beauty of it," says Singh, "is that TBS just remains a facilitator. The people come out stronger when working through their *gram sabha*s and their leaders. But all this is possible when every member of the village community has a feeling of ownership. This feeling of ownership is very important and is a product of one's contribution, participation, and sharing."

When asked what the model for his work has been, Singh says that he had none, and that all the work had been a result of TBS's vision. But, he clarifies, "the real work is that of the community. All our structures are 100 percent safe because the builders are also the users, unlike in the case of the government structures which are built to meet targets."

Singh does not believe in rituals personally, but he integrates rituals into TBS activities because he knows they are a means of getting the people's attention and cooperation. In older times, people believed that building a *johad* would bring them enlightenment. As a policy, therefore, TBS connects the maintenance of the *johad*s to religion, to ensure that people will take care of their check-dams.

The TBS's water-harvesting projects have given their beneficiaries more than irrigation. They have also brought together families that had been sundered by the lack of work opportunities in once arid and barren villages. Men who left their villages in search of work have returned to till the land. With crops thriving for the first time in years, villagers have been eating well and their health has improved. The incidence of malnutrition and

night blindness has decreased. Moreover, the region's women no longer have to spend five to six hours a day walking to the two-hundred-feet deep wells just to get a pot of water. Now they have time to look after their children and send them to school (even their daughters), and to involve themselves in community activities.

To support its work, the TBS receives donations from nongovernmental organizations such as Churches Auxiliary for Social Action (CASA), Oxfam, ECCO-Netherlands, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). It was a man named Bhupendra Bhatia who helped Singh with the paperwork required by formal organizations, such as project proposals and budgets. Bhatia was working with another organization at the time, but decided to visit Singh at one of his *johad* building sites. Following that visit, Bhatia decided to sign up with the TBS.

Having been previously involved in education, and with his background in Ayurvedic medicine, Singh uses school and health practices as entry points to explore what other work TBS can do in the villages. School teachers themselves have become involved in the water-harvesting and forest-conservation projects.

Singh likes to credit Rajasthan's women for the success of the water-harvesting projects. He says 60 to 70 percent of the people working on *johad*s are women. In the beginning, they were not allowed to participate in digging work. When CASA offered a food-for-work program, however, the women could not be stopped. They seized the opportunity to provide food for their children. In one village, the women have banded together into a *mahila mandal*, or women's committee. Women have also formed cooperative "banks," or self-help groups, to which each member contributes ten rupees every month. Borrowers are charged a small interest.

Previously, women were banned from attending the *gram sabha*s. TBS solved the problem by assigning them a separate building and making sure that the assemblies heard their views. The TBS also organized *padyatra*s exclusively for women. Singh attributes the social change in the villages, particularly in the women's lives, not to any campaign for women's empowerment "but due to the change in the male villagers' attitude." In the village of Bishnoi, for example, female children attended school for the first time in 1998. The TBS has set up twenty-eight village schools so far. Many of the village women had married as children and, being illiterate, were later abandoned by their husbands. They are among the schools' most eager supporters.

Singh's wife Meena has been a tremendous help in making him understand women's peculiar situation in Indian society and in establishing rapport with them. The couple reconciled two years after Singh left home. He returned to Jaipur to see her, and Meena, having been appeased and convinced that he was not a *nalayak*, agreed to join him in Bhikampura. She returned to Jaipur when she was heavy with their first child, but she continued to assist him as a one-person Jaipur-TBS communications center. She and her husband now have a seventeen-year-old son and a twelve-year-old daughter. Singh concedes that, in his case, the system of arranged marriages has worked. He calls himself the happiest person with his wife, whom he describes as "a great lady."

Although Singh and the TBS have reaped one success after another since they built their first *johad*, their work has not been without risk and danger. Their experience at Sariska, a tiger sanctuary, is a case in point. When the forest of Sariska was declared a national park in 1978, the local villagers, who were farmers and cattle raisers, lost their means of livelihood. Most of the men became migrant workers in the cities, leaving the women and children to work in the mines. The mines ate up the grazing ground for cattle. In 1991, TBS got the Supreme Court to issue an order against mining in Sariska. The Rajasthan

government, however, wanted to operate the mines; it filed false affidavits. When TBS volunteers engaged in a public protest, mine owners attacked them; on three occasions they tried to kill Singh himself.

Despite these attacks, Singh, the TBS, and the community won the battle. A court ordered the government to declare the Aravalli range a fragile ecosystem and to ban mining there, but the mine owners succeeded in having the declaration limited to a few districts. Moreover, a crucial clause was scrapped that would have banned mining within twenty-five kilometers of the forest boundary. In response, the TBS launched a three-month *satyagraha* in January 1993. TBS members blocked the roads to the mines, forcing their closure. In retaliation, the mine owners harassed the villagers and filed forty-two court cases against the TBS, including three accusing Singh of rape. None of the cases prospered. Finally, a legislative committee informed the Supreme Court that it had nothing substantial to report against the TBS.

The villagers in the Sariska Wildlife Sanctuary eventually won back the right to farm their lands. Forest officials sympathetic to the mine owners were forced to leave after having been ostracized by the people and denied food and water. New forest officers turned out to be sympathetic to the villagers, and together they formulated rules for the protection of the forest and its wildlife. The community also began to construct *johad*s in the protected area for the animals. Moreover, TBS got the Supreme Court to order a ban on mining activities in the area.

Shortly afterward, the government had to acknowledge that, based on an impact assessment it had commissioned, Singh's organization had indeed regenerated the forests. The irrigation department, which had earlier denounced the water-harvesting structures as illegal and even threatened to demolish the *johad*s at Gopalpura and Bhavta, changed its tune. It became a collaborator.

"In a democracy," Singh believes, "it is the duty of the government to make sure every person has drinking water. If the government is unable to provide it, it should take help from communities. They can work together."

Realizing this, although belatedly, the irrigation department began a project called the People's Action Watershed Development Initiative (PAWDI), a replication of the TBS's work. Through the efforts of the TBS, the project received a grant from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). The government has already asked the TBS to help it turn over to various communities 2,800 nonfunctioning minor irrigation dams for the people to rebuild and maintain. The irony in that request has not been lost on Singh and the TBS. He says, "The government has finally conceded that people's cooperation alone will make such work sustainable and permanent."

TBS's work today covers seven hundred villages in eleven districts, a total area of six thousand square kilometers. It has forty-two full-time workers and 120 part-time workers, not to mention two thousand volunteers, the majority of whom are women. There is at least one TBS worker in every village to help people determine their problems and discuss solutions with them. The social workers are available on call and may be said to work twenty-four hours a day. They receive a monthly honorarium of three thousand rupees, the minimum wage in India.

The four men who journeyed with Singh to Kishori in 1986 and then abandoned him have now rejoined him. Two of them, Narendra and Satendra, live and work directly with him, while Kedar and Hanuman have committed themselves to the task of greening twenty kilometers each of village land.

Singh says that when the TBS receives a request for advice from other states of India, it sends young workers from the villages in which it works. In the past, the TBS hired well-

educated youth from the urban areas but, without the comforts and facilities to which they were accustomed, they lasted only a few months. The group workers now have had at least a high school education in village schools and have been given training, exposure, and experience at TBS sites. Some years ago, the TBS ran technical training courses that lasted from six to nine months. The TBS's motto, Singh says, is "Do not expect others to do what you cannot do yourself."

Tarun Bharat Sangh general assemblies are held twice a year, on the second of October, which is Mahatma Gandhi's birthday and the TBS's organization day, and on another date for decisions affecting policy. TBS members meet on the fifth day of every month to report on their work in their respective communities.

As secretary-general, Rajendra Singh is the villagers' "face" to the external world. He manages and oversees the activities of the organization, represents it at meetings, and links it with other agencies. To villagers, he is *johad wala baba*, or the "bearded man of check-dams." To his associates at TBS, he is *bhai sahib,* or elder brother. In describing his role in the communities' lives, Singh insists he is a crutch rather than a leader. He keeps in touch with the people through regular visits to the different villages, and he is careful to consult the local leadership and the *panchayat.*

The TBS office-ashram in Kishori is a showcase of the successful "greening" that the organization has become known for. The site, once the driest part of the village, now boasts lush foliage, clean air, and the joyful presence of birds and animals.

Singh says quitting was never an option for him, not even when his life was in danger. The success of TBS's work, he believes, "is the triumph of the traditional, of the people over classroom learning." His concern has been to "fight injustice against people" and "to clean the society of all evils." He has pursued his goals and drawn strength and inspiration from the trust and faith of the communities. "I am a follower of the community, and the community made me a leader," he says.

His family, who for years had given him up as a useless person, has had to concede that he has made significant contributions to Indian society. "Now," he says, "even the family is proud that the 'madman' has done the unimaginable and brought water to thousands of villages, despite droughts year after year."

Singh turns philosophical on the question of his life's work: "Our work with water harvesting is to restore the relationship between man and nature. When we fight against displacement, we don't say the jungle belongs to man. We say there is a relationship between the man in the jungle village and the tigers in the forests, and that relationship should remain intact. The same applies to water. We love society, therefore we want to protect the environment. The two are linked. Our work is to nurture nature."

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