

# **AID Conference 2004**

## ***Minutes for Session Named Rajendra Singh Talk***

**Date:** Sat, 29 May

**Time From:** 5:15

**To:** 7:15

**Minutes Taken By:** Devashree

**Number of attendees:** 140

### **Audio/Visual Component?**

Yes. Started with a video titled "River Reborn," by Deepak Mahaan The video talks about the work of Tarun Bharat Sangh.

### **Speaker/Panelist Names:**

1. Rajendra Singh, waterman of Rajasthan.

### **What they are speaking about:**

Rajendra Singh discussed Tarun Bharat Sangh's work on water conservation and harvesting since its inception in 1985. He also talked about the national water policy and how current policy developments have the effect of alienating local communities from their water, land and forest resources. Rajendra Singh emphasized the important role that women can play in water decision making process.

### **Main Presentation:**

Rajendra Singh started his presentation by telling the audience about some defining moments in his life, which provided the impetus for him to start working on water issues.

Rajasthan is considered one of the driest areas in the country consisting of semi-desert and desert areas. It lies about 200 km west of Delhi. In 1980 Rajasthan was called the dark zone because ground water level was very low.

During those days Rajendra Singh used to work for the government but there was always a niggling doubt in his mind that he was wasting away his time in worthless activities. He gave up his job and was joined by four other likeminded people. Their journey took them to a village in Rajasthan. Immediately on their arrival, they were surrounded by the village elders who thought that they were terrorists from Punjab. However, one old man came to their rescue and gave them shelter in the village mandir. Rajendra Singh, along with his friends, started living there. One day a 62 year old tribal came up to them and asked why their village had fallen on such bad days and

what is the single most thing that the village needs. Rajendra Singh replied that the village needed education, healthcare and so on. To this the old man retorted that educated people always think in abstract and talk about big stuff. They do not realize that we make our living off the land and it is important that first we understand the land we live upon. What the village needs is water and once that is taken care of, the rest will fall into place.

The old man's logic appealed to Rajendra Singh on an emotional level. He went to his friends and told them that he was going to start working on the water problem in that village. His friends were highly skeptical and mentioned all the difficulties involved in taking up such a project. Differences evolved among the friends over this issue and two of his friends left. The other two promised to stay with him but said clearly that they would not be working with him on the water issue. Those two friends till this day are with him.

Next Rajendra Singh talked about the genesis of Tarun Bharat Sangh and the work that has been done in Rajasthan. TBS has been working on water issues in eastern part of Rajasthan since 1985. Rajendra Singh showed the location of arvari river on a map. In 1985 the area close to the river was characterized as a dark zone. In fact, arvari river had almost disappeared from this region by the 1940s. In 1985 TBS started bringing the people together to work on water use and management. In mobilizing people on this issue, emphasis was placed on women participation since women tend to be the most affected by water problems. For instance, in Kraska village women would get 30 litres of water from a distance of 9 kms.

Today Kraska village is one place where people use water they themselves have helped conserve. The women have been intimately involved in the entire water management process. Here Rajendra Singh brings up an important point. When the drudgery of women is reduced, they have more free time and they are better able to participate in the decision making process. They become economically better off and their voices are heard more. Rather than depending on water that comes from some far off place, now the women themselves decide how water is going to be conserved. In this way, women's contribution to society becomes manifold. If AID wants to work on gender issues and gender equality, then it has to start with first understanding the traditional knowledge base of Indian women.

During this period awareness campaigns were run in the villages with the help of children. There was a time when most children hardly went to school but now 90 percent of them go to schools. Religious traditions were also used as a uniting factor. Religious mendicants were roped in as well to work on water issues. Village councils were constituted with the specific purpose of rejuvenating Arvari river and the protection of forests. In all this efforts, women were at the forefront. Their self confidence and several other initiatives helped in reaching consensus when decisions on major issues were required.

Rajendra Singh also discussed in length the national water policy. The first water policy was released by the government in 1987, which went unnoticed by all sections of society. The second policy document came out in 1999. By that time people had started questioning many of the developmental activities undertaken by the government. The water policy was changed on April 1, 2000. While the PM in a speech highlighted and supported the community conservation and management of water resources, all this was missing in the announced policy document.

While examining the water policy critically, one cannot but notice that the government has made water a commodity. The provisions contained in the present policy create an environment wherein the private sector will have more say in planning and managing water resources in the nation. There is also the fear that resources developed by the efforts of numerous communities in various parts of the country will come under the ambit of privatization in the long run. All this will be detrimental to the interests of the poor and marginalized people as control and access over water resources would shift from the hands of local communities to private enterprises. The current change in government has not changed the policy. As soon as they came into power, the present government announced that they will continue with the same water policy.

Rajendra Singh pointed out that there are numerous examples where communities have been mobilized for water conservation and regeneration. In those areas droughts have been

minimized, water availability for irrigation and drinking has increased, migration has gone down and there has been a substantial increase in income from sale of agricultural products. He specifically gave the example of Nimmi village where there has been successful water harvesting. Now the produce from that village is sold in different places. There was a time when people from Nimmi used to go to Jaipur to earn a living. Today people from other areas come to this village to make a living. This small village has provided work for more than 700 people. He also showed a before and after picture of arvari river and how it has changed in the last 10 years. The investment was not so much in terms of money as of people's work and involvement.

Indian society, as opposed to American society, views water as the very basis of life. All religious and cultural systems in India have basically viewed water resources with reverence and there still exists a strong water philosophy in the nation based on judicious use of water.

Some of the benefits of johad are as follows: water is made available to cattle and wildlife; there is more harvests per season; there is reduced migration; social issues of women and education get more attention; there is increased awareness about the use of forest resources.

Among some of the special features of people's participation is that water, forests and wildlife are viewed as community's common resource, there evolves a tradition of their management by consensus, and finally it promotes a sustainable lifestyle. For example, in the arvari parliament, 72 villages situated along the arvari river are represented. Rules are framed on issues of water conservation and forest conservation. Villagers democratically decide how to use the water.

A community driven decentralized democracy still exists in India. If we learn to respect this, we can change a whole lot of things.

#### **Question/Answer Session:**

Q: Are there many such efforts happening in other parts of India?

A: In the last two years he has visited many places. There are large numbers of people working hard to improve the situation. People have the vision and the commitment and given the right circumstances, the situation is quite hopeful. India has to learn to solve her own problem and not be dependent on how others define our problem for us. Rather than being dependent on technical analysis which ignores the human element, we have to search for our own solutions.

If Gandhi were alive today, he would have launched a massive campaign against privatization. The 'talab' and 'dhekli' would replace the 'charkha' as his weapon for regeneration of the downtrodden today. He would fight for the right for conservation of water resources as a fundamental non-tradable right.

#### **Additional Notes/ Observations:**