

Interview

'70% of Small Rivers in India have Died' An interview with Rajendra Singh, Jal Purush

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Niti Aayog of India recently came out with a Composite Water Management Index to assess and improve performance in efficient management of water resources. Some of the report's findings are alarming : 600 million Indians face high to extreme water stress and India ranks 120th among 122 countries in water quality index. Water conservationist Rajendra Singh recipient of the Ramon Magsaysay award and Stockholm Water prize, for his efforts to galvanise community based water harvesting and water restoration efforts—spoke about sustainable solutions to tackle India's water crisis:

Q. What are your observations on Niti Aayog's Composite Water Management Index?

A. Niti Aayog's report presents a dangerous scenario. It also reflects that MGNREGA is not going in the right direction when it comes to river rejuvenation. MGNREGA model was based on our work and was expected to create water assets. But it was not taken seriously. The money was used for building roads, constructing toilets, etc. If money and efforts were put to construct johads (rainwater storage tank) and recharge water aquifers, India's rivers would not have died. The money meant for water projects has been misused and corruption is rampant.

Q. But haven't some states done constructive work in water conservation?

A. I would rank Maharashtra's Jalyukt Shivar programme at the first place. The state has done a good job of rejuvenating small rivers. I would rank Telangana and Karnataka at second and third place respectively for doing good work under MGNREGA. Other states have wasted the opportunity.

Q. What is the way forward to save our rivers and tackle the water crisis?

A. India needs a river literacy movement. There is need to include river and water literacy in the curriculum. All river basins must have resource mapping and community driven water harvesting, and conservation structures must be created. Contractors must not have a place in these works and people must lead from the front. There is a need to classify river water as per the usage. It is a must for efficient use of water. 'A' class water must be allocated for drinking. 'B' class water for growing vegetables and food grains, and 'C' class water for industries, etc.

Q. Do you think more efforts are needed to encourage public participation in water conservation projects?

A. There are no serious efforts to encourage public participation. The government's definition of public participation is meeting, eating and cheating. The government calls meetings as part of public participation, feeds people and then cheats them by changing meeting proceedings. There is no point in such public participation. I have been talking about this for the last ten years at national and international forums. But nobody is willing to hear the truth.

Q. Are communities coming forward for popular voluntary participation to save rivers?

A. In many states, people have joined hands to save rivers and are putting pressure on governments. Public participation is only meaningful when people and government hold equal stakes in planning and execution of water projects.

Q. What efforts are being made to take forward the Arvari Sansad (Arvari river parliament) model?

A. At government level there are no efforts made in this direction. But we are trying to implement this model at the national level by launching community driven river rejuvenation programmes. About 70% of small rivers in India have died. Rejuvenation efforts are possible only in places where people have taken initiative and we are ensuring that community participation increases. The river parliament model focusses on river basin approach and it aims to encourage participatory, equitable and decentralised water management by stakeholders.

Q. Is water crisis in rural areas prompting massive migration to cities?

A. It is necessary to ensure that rural areas get enough water. In absence of water, massive migration to cities will continue and major chunk of migrated population will not return to villages. Migration to cities would stop if water is made available in villages as water availability is directly linked to health, employment and overall well-being.

Q. You have strongly opposed government's river linking project. What alternative do you suggest?

A. Community driven decentralised water conservation and harvesting structures will help India to fight water crisis. Water conservation efforts must involve people and not contractors.