

Learnings from the Rashtriya Jal Yatra

A Synthesis Report

(Water Literacy Movement)

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Rashtriya Jal Biradari

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1. Genesis of the Yatra

Tarun Bharat Sangh (TBS) has been working on water issues in eastern part of Rajasthan since 1985. After 18 years of learnings from village and river basin level interventions it was felt that water management issues cannot be addressed at local level only, as the water use and management is guided by macro policies of the State and the nation. The first water policy document was released by Government of India (GOI) in 1987 and was almost verbatim adopted by all the State Government, which went unnoticed by all sections of society, i.e. academics, technocrats, politicians and civil society organisations. The second policy document came as late as 1999. By that time NGO's had already started questioning many of the government's developmental activities mostly from environment point of view.

The TBS learnings from water related work provided insight to question the National Water Policy document published in 1999 and later revised in the year 2000. NGOs and water specialists were mobilised to discuss the National water Policy at Delhi and also provide an alternative water policy.

It was also the period when at global level lot of organisations were formed around environmental issues and debates were

initiated. Public awareness was aroused by media, publication of books, global conferences etc. All these activities came in limelight because the negative impact of developmental activities started affecting the life of people all around the world, particularly the impact of large dams became the contiguous issues for debate.

The National Water Policy was declared in 2002. It was widely felt all over the country that the provisions of the Policy would drive India towards a more centralised control of water and an atmosphere in which the private sector would have more say in planning and managing water resources in the country. In addition to this, a colossal scheme for linking of 37 rivers all over India to enable inter-basin transfers has also been recently proposed by the Government of India as a panacea for tackling problems of drought, flood and agricultural and industrial development in the country.

In the above environment, activists and groups working on community-based water harvesting fear that in the long run, resources developed by the efforts of countless communities in various parts of the country could come under the ambit of privatisation. It is also widely recognised that lack of the right to develop, manage and control their own water resources is the major reason for alienation of local communities from their water (and hence land and forest) resources. The current policy developments would further alienate such communities and would result in pushing the country into an ecologically and economically disastrous downward spiral, affecting most the poorest sections of Indian society.

This urgency was further accentuated by cases in Chhattisgarh, Orissa, Kerala and other states where water resources had been (or were proposed to be) put under BOOT schemes and where the corporate sector has been given unfettered priority rights by the State over water resources completely ignoring the rights of local population.

The Rashtriya Jal Biradari, a national group of activists, NGOs, scientists and other concerned citizens working in various parts of India on water issues was formed in this background with the objectives of involving various sections of Indian civil society in dialogue and constructive action on water issues. (See Annex 1 for background on Jal Biradari).

2. Objectives of the Rashtriya Jal Yatra

The Rashtriya Jal Biradari felt an urgent need to organise civil society against the disastrous implications of the NWP and river-linking scheme. In order to sensitise people at large about the major issues involved and to seek a diversity of opinions from various parts of the country on the same, the Rashtriya Jal Yatra was planned with the following objectives :

- To increase awareness about the need for judicious use and regeneration of water resources for enhancing water quality and quantity in all parts of India.
- To increase awareness about water as a basic right of each citizen of India and the consequences of Government policies regarding privatisation of water and interlinking of rivers of India.
- To meet persons/ institutions doing exemplary work in water conservation and management in India.
- To knit activists who are working on water issues in isolated pockets of India to form a national forum against privatisation of water.
- To form a pressure group for making state and national water policies more people-oriented and responsive.

The Rashtriya Jal Yatra started from Mahatma Gandhi Samadhi, Rajghat, New Delhi on December 23, 2002 and Sabarmati Ahmedabad, on January 30, 2003. In 14 months, the yatra touched 320 districts in 30 states of India (of which 17 states are severely

drought affected) and met concerned persons in 90 cities and 3 metropolises. Annex 2 gives details of the various states covered during the yatra.

3. Issues that emerged during the yatra

3.a. Degradation of surface and groundwater resources

Acute degradation of land, water and forest resources in all parts of the country is leading to an acute scarcity of water with all its consequent impacts. Nature is fast losing its capacity to regenerate its capacity to provide water for human and ecological use. The cycles of floods and droughts are becoming more recurrent and severe.

Over exploitation and unsustainable use of surface and groundwater is leading to a rapid fall in groundwater table. The number of districts in the dark zone is increasing sharply.

3.b. Drinking water

The availability of clean and potable drinking water is falling very fast, leading to a rapid rise in exploitative drinking water markets. In 1952, according to Planning Commission study 232 villages in India were without any water source in 2002 this number has increased to 90,000 villages. In 2003. This figure has reached 1 lakh.

Where potable water is not available, water borne diseases and drudgery of fetching drinking water for human and animal population are on the increase.

Water quality is also being severely affected by human interventions such as excessive ground and surface water exploitation (leading to increase in fluorides and salinity) and industrial and household pollution of water.

3.c. Failed promises of large dams

Modern methods of water management such as large and medium dams have failed to deliver on promises of flood and drought control. These are in many cases now the causes of droughts and floods. The social impacts of such large dams have still not been addressed. However, such structures (as in Tehri and Narmada) continue to be built and supported by the State.

3.d. Conflicts on water

At a local level, increasing inequity in access to water is being manifested in the form of conflicts over water use between :

- Urban and rural areas
- Various sectors such as agriculture, industry, energy
- Advantaged classes and marginalised sections.
- “Lower” and “upper” castes.
- Upstream and downstream water users.
- Various states.

3.e. Water for irrigation

There is a drastic decrease in water availability for irrigation, severely affecting food security.

Non-judicious use of water is also visible in the promotion of water-intensive crops. As an example, of 3700 dams built in India 1600 are in Maharashtra. Thus Maharashtra has consumed 40% of the total expenditure on water resources in India. In spite of this, out of 45,000 villages in the state, 6,000 are facing acute drinking water scarcity and water is being supplied to these by tankers. In Mann tehsil of Satara district, 69 villages out of 80 villages are supplied water by tankers. There is the bizarre phenomenon of coexistence of

a thriving water market on the one hand along with large areas in the state being under water intensive crops such as sugarcane. In fact, the yatra found that in more “developed” states such as Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, etc., the incidence of farmers’ suicides due to the above problems is very high.

The pricing policies of electricity and subsidies in water pricing in canal irrigation are promoting a non-judicious use of water in some pockets. Canal irrigation is itself causing increased salinity through water logging in large pockets in the country.

The increased cost of water in almost all parts of the country is fast making milk cheaper than water and is hence making dairying unviable. Thus the cost of production of agricultural and associated products is on the increase.

3.f. Impact of pressures of globalisation

Although the National Water Policy underlines that priority in water allocation should be given for drinking water and irrigation, in reality, water allocation for industry and urban water use is getting a priority.

Eentries were cited and argued that the entry of private water companies is being portrayed as a cure for the mismanagement of water resources by State and Municipal authorities in urban and semi-urban areas to meet drinking water and industrial water needs. However, this has grave consequences for the poor sections that do not have the purchasing power to compete in the market. Thus in Chhattisgarh, Radius Company was given a contract for providing 30 MLPD from Shivnath river to Borai Industrial area and Durg city.

In Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh meeting it was argued that the State's policy of handing over control of water resources to private sector under various BOOT schemes as a result of global pressures and due to the nexus between industry, politicians and bureaucrats. These policies are leading to exclusion of poor tribals and local residents from using water for their basic subsistence in various areas such as Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, while at the same time promoting profit ventures for the private entrepreneurs. Similar examples were given in Kerala, where Coco Cola is posing serious threat to large number of villages.

3.g. River linking

The river linking issue was quite fresh in the mind of most people. In most states people were not clear of what they will gain out of it during short and long run consequences. In the southern states Cauvery issue made people skeptical about the linking project. People were concerned about the inter-state disputes and time taken for resolution. People tried to obtain more information than taking side for or against the project.

3.h. Negligence of Traditional Water Harvesting Systems

India has a rich bounty of traditional systems of water harvesting in various parts of the country that evolved from the agro-ecological-climatic diversity of the country. All religious and cultural systems in India have viewed water resources with reverence and there still exists a strong water philosophy in the country based on prudent and judicious use of water.

However, there has been a gross negligence in regeneration and maintenance of traditional water structures in almost all parts of the country. There is also now a dependence on the Government for maintaining the same.

During Jal Yatra people in all the states showed good deal of interest in rejuvenating the existing structures and also building new structures. Concern about encroachment over water bodies was manifested by different groups and sought support in mobilizing community for removing it.

3.i. Learning from positive efforts

On the positive side, there are innumerable examples in different parts of India where communities have been mobilised for water conservation and regeneration. In such areas, the ill effects of drought have been minimised. Water availability for drinking and irrigation has increased, migration has decreased and an increase in income from sale of agriculture and associated produce has been the result. Such examples are visible in Neemi and many other villages in Alwar in Rajasthan, Hirwe Bazar, Ralegan Siddhi in Maharashtra and other states. These experiences were shared and new lessons were learned from each state.

This underlines the need for promoting decentralised methods and techniques of water conservation and management to respond to cultural and agro-ecological-climatic diversity in various parts of India.

4. Perspective of Jal Biradari on above issues

Jal Biradari feels that the above issues must be seen in the following perspective:

- Water is a basic human right and is the very basis of human existence. It is not a property of the state or any individual. Water is an endowment of nature to mankind and human society can manage water for both human and environmental benefit.
- Water is never a private asset and ever a universal resource. The state is the trustee (not an owner) of all natural resources,

which are by nature meant for public use and enjoyment. The state is thus under a legal duty to protect the natural resources. These resources meant for public use cannot be converted into private ownership. Privatisation of water resources is thus a crime against mankind and should not be encouraged.

- The current crisis of water is one of management and not that of supply. The solution is to regenerate water resources to such an extent that supply far exceeds demand. This is the only long-term way of fighting current globalisation and privatisation of water.
- If Gandhi were alive, he would have launched a massive campaign against privatisation. The talab and dhekli would replace the charkha as his weapon for regeneration of the downtrodden today. He would fight for right for conservation of water resources as a fundamental non-tradable right.
- Rather than linking rivers, it is more important to link people with rivers today. For this, communities should have the right to plan, conserve, manage and control their water resources at local, river basin and state levels.
- Traditional values of reverence and prudence in use of water need to be revived on an urgent basis. Our national water policy must be based on the philosophical and cultural values of Indian society.
- In urban areas, there is a strong need for a differential water pricing to ensure that five-star hotels, industries, affluent colonies are not subsidised and that poorer sections and people living in slums pay according to their capacity.

5. Future Directions

- State level public water commissions (Jan-Jal-Aayog) are to be formed in various states which would prepare a white

paper on the situation of water in their states, the gaps in their state water policies and how state and national water policies could be made responsive to people's needs.

- The Jan-Jal-Aayogs should contain at least the following :
 - A justice of the High Court from the respective state.
 - An eminent water scientist.
 - An experienced water engineer or a gajdhar.
 - A women social activist.
 - A journalist and environmentalist.
- For long-term sustainability at village level, a village water fund is required which could be raised from the following :
 - Labour contribution by one person from each household per month.
 - Contribution of one day's salary per month by each household engaged in job or service.
 - Setting up grain bank in each village.
- Under the 73rd and 74th amendments to the Constitution, Panchayats and local municipal bodies have been given rights to plan, conserve and manage their water resources. These must be supported to carry out the same.
- Formation and supporting river parliaments for planning, conserving managing resources and resolving conflicts at a basin level is an urgent priority.

Annex 1 : Appeal from Rashtriya Jal Biradari

Jal Biradari is a people's organisation of individuals and organisations that are concerned for the conservation of Jal-Jungle-Jameen especially to promote water conservation work and to re-establish the community rights over water. From 1998 onwards Jal Biradari is working to make peoples oriented National and State Water Policy.

Jal Biradari was formally initiated in the National Water Convention held in April 2001 in the field area of Tarun Bharat Sangh at Nimmi village (near Jaipur). More than 7,000 water warriors from all over the country participated in the convention and from here only the water movement started regarding **water rights** and to establish communities right over water. The responsibility of leading the movement was given to senior worker of Tarun Bharat Sangh, Shri Rajendra Singh (Magsaysay Awardee).

Jal Biradari is a platform of various individuals, farmers groups, social groups, voluntary organizations, Non government organisations, research institutions, social scientist, water experts basically all those who are concerned and have deep interest with the issue as important as water which forms the basis and support system of life and to make the water conservation work a mass movement as well as to give full support and efforts to have peoples oriented water policy both at the National and State level.

You are already aware of **Rashtriya Jal Biradari** and its concern for water issues especially in case of the recently declared National Water Policy for which we are fighting for the past few years. Even now after the declaration of the policy on 1st of April, 2002 not much reaction has been there from any corner of the country. So Jal Biradari has taken up this responsibility to fight for this issue and to create mass movement regarding water conservation work all over the country.

After the finalization of National Water Policy a deep concern has been there among Jal Biradari members on various issue mentioned in the policy and the general opinion in the country is that it **does not fulfil the Indian people's expectations especially the poorest of the poor. This policy emphasizes on private control by declaring water as an asset questioning the fundamental rights of the people. The item no. 13 in the policy, which illustrates on the private sector participation in the planning, development and management of water resources, is not acceptable to the common people of this country.**

Jal Biradari members have reiterated their commitment to have a people's friendly water policy and awareness campaign. To meet this goal number of regional Jan Sunwai (public hearings) are planned inviting politicians, activists, academicians and other stakeholders. The intention is to highlight the shortcomings and weaknesses of the existing policies and establish direct dialogue between community and the state. The Hon'ble PM in his speech on April 01,2002 in the National Water Council has highlighted and supported the community conservation and management of water resources and also emphasised on social auditing of large water projects. These issues are missing in the announced policy document. The Jal Biradari will like to incorporate these points and make it a base for new water policy. The existing policy separates poor people from water rather than fulfilling their basic needs. It negates the people's ownership rather strengthens the centralised control. The Jal Biradari wants to reverse this phenomenon by bringing people's control over water resources.

The intention is also to implement the main thrust of PM's speech delivered on April 01,2002 in the National Water Resource Council meeting and make those ideas as basis of the Water Policy. The item 13 on privatisation of water resources is not acceptable to the members of Jal Biradari. On the contrary, members are unanimous in highlighting the decentralisation of water

development and management and encouragement to community based water harnessing and conservation practices. A countrywide movement to oppose privatisation and encourage community control will be launched very soon.

While examining the water policy critically, it gives an impression that it is highly influenced by the policies of international organisations namely: World Bank and International Monetary Funds (IMF). It is so because from beginning to end of this policy the interest of Indian people is marginalized and MNCs are protected. It provides direct invitation to MNCs in the Indian [ater sector. It will be detrimental to the interest of poor and marginalized population, as the control and access will be shifted from community and people to powerful private enterprises. It is fundamental issue because the experience of such policies adopted by countries indifferent part of the world shows that wherever privatisation of water resources was practised it ended with blood revolution. Country like Bovinia is one live example of this. Therefore Jal Biradari will fight against privatisation and try to establish community ownership and participation in water resource management in India. This is the ultimate and the only way to solve water crisis in India.

It is also shocking to see that water allocation priorities as listed under item 5 do not specifically mention about the protection of the interest of poor population, marginalized section and marginalized areas such as drought prone areas. It should have been clearly mentioned that drinking water for whom, gets priority. Similarly, irrigation for which crop and region gets priority. In the absence of such qualified statements listing of priority sectors lead to wastage and inefficient use of water and denies access to needy users. Hence the struggle which was initiated basically to make dent in the perception of state in managing water resources will continue with more vigour and efforts all over the country.

Due to this policy community will take away itself from doing conservation, harvesting, and management of water. And now talk is going around regarding **Inter linking rivers** in the country. Preliminary estimates indicate that such a project would involve investments of the order of Rs 5,500,000 crores (\$125 Billion), making it one of the biggest engineering efforts ever to be undertaken in our country – or, indeed, anywhere.

Today whole country is facing severe water crisis resulting in natural calamity such as drought and flood. Solution lies only in having community based water conservation work rather giving water rights/ control to private sectors. Earlier when society used to see the water work as holy work and with its own traditional knowledge, wisdom, using local resources and doing voluntary labour to save each single drop of water. Till this tradition was followed we didn't had any water scarcity. Still we have hundreds of village like Bhawta, Nimmi and Mandalwaas where the community has managed their natural resources such as forest and conserved rain water through building johads, anicuts, check dams, with their traditional knowledge and wisdom. We find they have enough water to support their life both for human being and livestock.

So Jal Biradari believes it is more important to associate community with the rivers for its conservation and management rather than interlinking of rivers and also to promote community based efforts in conservation and management of natural resources such as water and forests. Then only we can become water self-reliant.

Jal Biradari also says that water is a common natural resource rather a property of an individual. It is the basis of life and common future of the country. So community has equal rights in conservation of water resources. A request is there from

Jal Biradari to the government to declare water as national common resource instead as an asset and to promote community based efforts of water conservation rather giving water control to private sectors. Then only it will be a true participatory decentralised form of water management.

Jal Biradari in the coming two years is going to fight to make State Water Policy (SWP) according to the expectations of people so that even the last person's interest gets its due attention and share. For making such a policy, active peoples participation should be assured to make alternate water policy based on peoples recommendations. To achieve this objective we have started a mass campaign and are organizing several Jan Sunwai (public hearings) along with Jal Adhikar Yatra (Water Rights Marches) all over the country.

Jal Biradari wants to start a process towards making people's oriented water policy in each state. Each state Jal Biradari should see that the community experience should be documented and focus should be given to different agro-ecological climatic zones diversity to make State Water policy giving due respect to the community efforts for water conservation work.

Rashtriya Jal Biradari aims that society should get rights to share responsibility for water conservation and management work. So in each state Jal Biradari should see that **Rashtriya Jal Chetna Yatra** creates an environment and awareness to prepare good water policy and also to promote traditional water conservation through indigenous knowledge and wisdom.

Rashtriya Jal Biradari from the first day of the New Year 2003 has started a massive campaign to create awareness to save Jal-Jungle Jameen. To have a wider impact in the country, decision has been taken to organise several camps, conferences, and conventions in all over the country during this campaign

and to hold marches and prabhat-pheris (morning march) for the environment and natural resource conservation. On **January 30, 2003** a **National Jal Yatra** is going to start at **Sabarmati Ashram, Ahmedabad** to spread the message of the campaign to each citizen of the country. This yatra would move in all the states.

On **January 30, 2003** senior Gandhian leader Shri Siddhraj Daddha, Karnataka State Water Resource Minister Shri H.K.Patil, Jal Biradari, Chairman, Shri Rajendra Singh, Gujarat State Jal Biradari Chief Shri Shyam Ji Bhai Antala, Vanadan Shiva, Women Coordinators of Jal Biradari Nafisa Bahen (Pravah, Gujarat), Jaswin Jairath (Saci Waters, Hyderabad), Savita Gokhale and other water warriors from all over the country would participate in the function and would discuss regarding water issues.

In the **first phase** the yatra will proceed in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Orissa from January 30, 2003 till March. The **second phase** will start from April till May in Maharashtra and will move in Goa, Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Andhra Pradesh. The **third phase** starting from Leh (Jammu & Kashmir), Uttaranchal, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Delhi from June 20th to August 15, 2003. **Fourth Phase** will begin in September/October, 2003 and would move in West Bengal, Bihar, and Jharkhand. From November till December **fifth and last phase** of yatra will proceed in Sikkim, Meghalaya, Tripura, Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, and would end at Assam.

Today there is huge crisis and scarcity of water all over the country. On one end we have flood and other side we face drought. The environmental calamities such as famine and drought are increasing in the country. Land has got emptied without water. People are dying either with thirst or drinking polluted water. On other end

we find the upper class misusing and wasting the water. To stop such injudicious use of water, we have to create massive water awareness campaign. This may not be possible only through talking instead we have to do voluntary labour to build water harvesting structures such as johad, taal, pal, bandh, checkdam, anicut etc.

We have to start conserving rainwater from the roof of our house to farm, pasture, forest, village, and city. We also have to use water judiciously in the farm, factory, and industry. Jal Biradari in the coming two years is going to fight to make State Water Policy (SWP) according to the expectations of people so that even the last person's interest gets its due attention and share. For making such a policy, active peoples participation should be assured to make alternate water policy based on peoples recommendations. To achieve this objective we have started a mass campaign and are organizing several Jan Sunwai (public hearings) along with Jal Adhikar Yatra (Water Rights Marches) all over the country.

Annex 2 : Programme of the Yatra

Phase	Duration	States covered
Phase I	23 Dec. 2002 to 10 Mar. 2003	1. Delhi 2. Haryana 3. Rajasthan 4. Gujarat 5. Madhya Pradesh 6. Chhattisgarh 7. Orissa
Phase II	10 Mar. to 30 May 2003	8. Uttaranchal 9. Delhi 10. Madhya Pradesh 11. Maharashtra 12. Goa 13. Karnataka 14. Andhra Pradesh 15. Tamil Nadu 16. Pondicherry
Phase III	Jun. 1 to Jul. 15 2003	17. Kerala 18. Karnataka 19. Maharashtra 20. Madhya Pradesh 21. Uttar Pradesh 22. Delhi 23. Haryana 24. Punjab 25. J & K
Phase IV	Jul. & August 2003	26. Himachal Pradesh 27. Punjab 28. Haryana 29. Uttar Pradesh 30. Rajasthan

Phase V Sep. to Nov. 2003, Dec. 2003

31. West Bengal
32. Bihar
33. Jharkhand

Phase VI Dec. 2003 and Jan. 2004

Follow-up visits in :

34. Maharashtra
35. Kerala
36. Uttaranchal
37. Uttar Pradesh

Phase VII Feb. to April 2004

38. Arunachal
39. Assam
40. Manipur
41. Meghalaya
42. Mizoram
43. Nagaland
44. Sikkim
45. Tripura

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