

## **Alwar Shows the Way**

**Abhijit Guha**

Basically, all forms of communist ideologies justify violence against the State. The communists, whether they are in power or in the opposition harp on overthrowing the bourgeoisie by the proletariat. Real development of human society, according to all brands of communist ideologies, must undergo the ordeal of radical transformation of the polity from one stage to another by some kind of forceful means. The communists, whether honest or deceitful, never believe in changing the world around them by conscious and peaceful participation of a large number of poor people working around a development agenda; those who attempt to achieve it are viewed by the communists as 'idealists', 'reactionaries', 'friends of the bourgeoisie and finally enemies of the working class' who should be removed by force. One may recall here Marx's famous statement: 'Force is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one' (*Genesis of the Industrial Capitalist, Chapter Thirty-One, Capital Vol.1, 1887*). Compare it with Mao-Ze-dong's more popular aphorism: 'Political power grows out of the barrel of a gun' (November 6, 1938). It is true that the philosophical depth of these two statements is great but the justification of violence in bringing about social transformation both by the theoretical guru and one of its most successful practioner is strikingly similar.

Another important characteristic feature of communist ideology is revealed through its culture of protest. The communists give primacy to protest and rebellion before taking up or giving any thought to plan their future development agenda. Take for example, the demand for giving land to the poor through land reforms in West Bengal. When the communists were not in power they undertook forcible capture of land from the big landlords to distribute the same to the landless and after coming to power they used the state machinery to expedite the process without giving an iota of importance toward the formation of farmer's cooperatives and ecologically sustainable mode of agricultural growth, which if previously planned would have been more congruent with their socialistic ideals. Instead of doing that they have simply sabotaged their own creation by inviting big capital to build industries on fertile land, parts of which belonged to land reform beneficiaries, like the bargadars. The story is similar about the present day Maoists of Bengal who began through violence but has not yet placed their programme of development in detail before the public if they ever come to power. So, if one goes by these three parameters, viz. violence against the state, giving primacy to protest and lack of concrete development programme, then all brands of communist parties seem to belong to the same genus in politics. Notably enough, Trinamul Congress, which does not believe in communist ideology is also showing the last two features of the communists in a very prominent manner.

### **THE COUNTERPOINT**

Any approach to development of the people through a slow and non-violent path by raising their consciousness through constructive work stands in direct contrast to Marxist or Maoist notions of class struggle. Many great thinkers like Gandhi,

Tolstoy and Rabindranath championed the nonviolent path to development and made attempts to practice this method in their own ways. A recent non-violent experiment towards development which has achieved remarkable success is described in this article. The specific locale for this experiment lies in Thanagazi area of the Alwar district of Rajasthan and the organization which was instrumental in this experiment is Tarun Bharat Sangha (TBS) and person who led the movement is Rajendra Singh (popularly known as the 'Waterman of India') who had won the Ramon Magsaysay Award in 2001. 'Rajendra' is different from any Sadhu or Baba who has importance in the arena of development for the rural poor. The Magsaysay Award was bestowed upon Rajendra Singh for community leadership in involving people in the construction and revival of traditional small rainwater harvesting structures (locally known as *Johads*) and various poverty alleviation programmes through non-violent means. No wonder that Marxists and Maoists belonging to all shades and colours have ignored the Herculean work of Tarun Bharat Sangha and Rajendra Singh. Here is the story with some factual materials taken from the accounts of two noted scientists of India, R N Athavale and G D Agarwal.

R N Athavale is a noted Geophysicist and Emeritus Scientist with the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research. He is a pioneer on the study of water harvesting structures with over forty years' of research experience in the field.

G D Agarwal is a retired professor and former head of the Civil Engineering Department of the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur.

Both Athavale and Agarwal visited Alwar area where the TBS has built Water Harvesting Structures (WHS) and studied them in detail considering the geological and engineering aspects of the water harvesting structures constructed by the TBS. It is interesting to note Athavale's account: "Alwar, a district of Rajasthan state is located approximately 175 km South West of Delhi. The total area of the District is 8380 sq km and the population in 1991 was 2.3 million. Most of the population lives in valleys...and is dependent on agriculture. The annual rainfall is 600mm and of this about 80% is received during the four monsoon months of June to September... Water scarcity was at the root of all social and economic ills. The area was once thickly covered with forest and vegetation but extensive deforestation since 1890 had led to soil erosion, increase in runoff and lowering of the groundwater table. Only 10% of the total agricultural land had supplemental irrigation. Many farms were left fallow, with the male members of the families migrating to cities for employment. The wells went dry in summer and women used to trek several kilometres every day to collect a pot of drinking water." [*Water Harvesting and Sustainable Supply in India*, 2003]

Athavale then depicted how Rajendra Singh and his Tarun Bharat Sangha intervened in this grim scenario of rural poverty and environmental degradation and transformed the whole state of affairs. In his words: "Volunteers of Tarun Bharat Sangha (Young India Forum), led by the secretary Mr Rajendra Singh, came to this region in 1985 for rural development work. Discussions with the villagers convinced them that one crucial aspect of their work would have to be water harvesting.... They became aware of the traditional practice of construction of *johads*. *Johads* are micro-percolation tanks, which collect the seasonal runoff

water and let it percolate underground. They may be constructed by building a barrier across an ephemeral stream or by excavation of a pond at a natural depression. Villagers had given up the construction of *johads*... the practice of construction of *johads* was revived by the TBS volunteers. The work was carried out by common participation of the villagers at all levels. They were involved in preparing a map, designing the structure, determining the storage capacity and financing up to 70% of the total cost through local material and free labor. The entire work was planned and executed in each village by the *gram sabha*, a voluntarily elected body having a few women members. The gram sabha is different from the gram panchayat. The womenfolk also contributed at all stages of this activity in some cases even taking the initiative." But what were the effects of the construction of the *johads*? Athavale continued the narrative in a factual manner: "Construction of a few *johads* in some villages led to a remarkable rise in the local water table and as a result the movement spread over the region. At the end of 1997, about 3000 water harvesting structures (WHS) were constructed in about 650 villages in the region. The construction of *johads* was accompanied by other activities such as farm and contour bunding, construction of anticuts, check dams etc. and afforestation. The net result was soil and water conservation worked out on a watershed scale. This had a *synergistic* effect in raising the water table by several meters. The farmers started getting more yields because of the availability of supplemental irrigation and could grow two crops in a year in place of one. More land was brought under cultivation, more fodder was available and milk production increased. The drinking water wells became perennial and the womenfolk were saved the daily chore of fetching water from distant locations. Migration of males to cities for labor stopped and there was a reverse flow of income to the villages. The per capita income has also gone up. The additional money is being used for essential but till now unaffordable items such as clothes, education and house repair." (Ibid)

The most thrilling effect of rainwater harvesting in the Alwar district of Rajasthan was that the five ephemeral streams of the area, which flowed only during the monsoon months, became perennial. The five streams are Arvari, Ruparel, Sarasa, Bhagani-Tildeh and Jahajwali.

Athavale visited the Alwar area in December 1998 to study the work of TBS, Rajendra Singh wanted a scientific explanation of the pheno-mena of the rivers becoming perennial. Athavale's explanation ran like this. The hilly terrain and the precipitation pattern are conducive to quick run off of a large percentage of the rainfall. ...The water harvesting structures has not been able to substantially reduce the runoff but has been able to regulate it. ...The additional recharge caused by various WHS has raised the water table. ...The crystal clear appearance and tranquil flow during December were sufficient to indicate that it was the ground-water, gently oozing from the riverbed, which had made the river perennial."

G D Agarwal carried out a more technical evaluation of the various WHS from the engineering point of view. He studied 166 WHS from 36 villages. They had a storage capacity ranging from 500 - 2000 m<sup>3</sup>/hectare. Athavale says that Agarwal "found 36% of the structures had the right capacity although no prior calculations were done. Around 13% had the higher capacity than required while

22% had lower capacity. The small capacity is not a disadvantage as such structures were constructed in a series. The best aspect of these structures is that all of them have withstood the vagaries of monsoon for over a decade. Similar structures, constructed by the government departments, are more expensive and less durable. The statistics given by Agarwal are really amazing since the villagers and TBS volunteers did not have engineering expertise and the work was carried out based on traditional knowledge, experience and "gut" feeling. Agarwal found that the average cost of these constructions was Rs 1.00 to Rs 2.00/cubic metre of storage, which was much less than Govt. costs and an investment of Rs 100/- in WHS gave an additional income of Rs 400 per year to the village community in terms of increased yield of farm produce and fodder." (Ibid)

### **NON-VIOLENT STRUGGLE**

The construction of *johads* by TBS in Alwar raised an important issue regarding the ownership and management of natural water by the state and the civil society. The Waterman's non-violent movement to catch rainwater was not an easygoing and smooth affair. On June 20, 2001, the TBS secretary received a notice from the Rajasthan Irrigation Department "saying that the earthen groundwater recharge structure, which it had helped to build in the village Lava Ka Baas, was both technically unsafe and illegal. TBS was given 15 days to remove the structure, failing which action would be taken under the Rajasthan Irrigation and Drainage Act, 1954.

The structure in question is a small earthen embankment over a narrow; almost triangular gorge, in a *nullah*. The total length is only about 225 metres and the average height is 15.5 metres. It is built on the community grazing lands of the village. The village has only one hand pump for its entire human and animal population and they have invested Rs 3 lakh of their own meagre savings in building the structure. The rest of the funds - Rs 5 lakh - came from an industrialist in Churu district who gave the money in memory of his mother. The work began in March 2001 and was completed by Mid-June.

The Rajasthan state irrigation department conducted a technical study on the rainwater harvesting structure and in its report detailed the technical and legal problems with the structure. The report said that the structure would violate the 1910 agreement between Alwar and Bharatpur districts because in the agreement it was resolved that the monsoon water of the river should be divided on a 45: 55 percent ratio between Alwar and Bharatpur. Moreover, since the villagers did not seek permission from the department before the construction of the dam they have violated the state irrigation Act (Wastelands News Vol.XVII,No.1, August-October 2001).

On July 1, 2001, the district administration decided to take action by breaking down the structure with the help of the police force. The TBS volunteers were also ready to sacrifice their lives to protect the small dam. The key opposition leader and former Chief Minister of the State Bhairon Singh Shekhawat condemned the villagers' effort towards the construction of the dam. But at this time the Delhi based NGO Center for Science and Environment (CSE) led by the late Anil Agarwal and Sunita Narain appealed to the then Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot to stop the district administration from demolishing the structure. The Chief

Minister ordered the district administration not to break the structure but to direct the villagers to deepen the existing spillway of the structure to drain out the water. Meanwhile, the CSE formed a citizens' committee consisting of five eminent persons of the country to enquire into the matter through field visit and meetings with the villagers and the district administrative officials. The group composed of the following members:

Dr M S Swaminathan, Agricultural Scientist.

Dr N C Saxena, Secretary Planning Commission, Govt. of India.

Dr M C Chaturvedi, former founder head of the Dept. of Civil Engineering, IIT, Kanpur and Professor Applied Mechanics Dept. IIT-Delhi.

Dr G Mohan Gopal, Director, National Law School of India, Bangalore. Mr Om Thanvi, editor *Janasatta*, New Delhi. The work of the group was coordinated by CSE.

The report entitled "Technical, Legal and Administrative Issues Concerning the *Johad* in Lava Ka Baas" was published by CSE in July 2001.

In the lengthy report the experts observed that the notice served on TBS by the district administration has been prepared without looking into the technical and legal points. Among others citizens' group raised two crucial points, which is reproduced below in their words :

(i) A *johad* is not a large dam as conventionally understood. It is a very small structure, which has developed evolutionally for the storage of water by the people using locally available materials. So the notice served on TBS is legally deficient because the Irrigation and Drainage Act, 1954 explicitly states that it does not apply to minor irrigation structures. The worst it can do is to reduce the monsoon flow by a very slight amount but at the same time it would also increase the dry season flows in the river because of increased groundwater recharge.

(ii) Secondly, the district authorities could not produce a copy of the 1910 Bharatpur-Alwar agreement on which they had relied in issuing the notice to TBS. The only relevant document that could be produced by them was a barely legible copy of an apportionment award by a colonial official at the turn of the century which said that the waters of the Ruparel river be divided on a 55-45 basis between Bharatpur and Alwar districts. There was no provision in the award, which could desist Alwar to build a *johad* in the catchment area of the *johad*.

The citizens' report strongly recommended the construction of the *johad* at Lava ka Baas for its immense beneficial impacts on the economy and ecology of the upstream and downstream villages (Swaminathan, et.al. 2001).

The then Chief Minister of Rajasthan assured the Citizens' Committee members that he would carefully consider the recommendations of the committee. The *johad* at Lava Ka Baas was not broken and it still exists.

### **IGNORANCE IS BLISS**

It is still difficult to reverse the famous statement of Gokhale since it has become a proverb, a cultural idiom, on its own right. Moreover, the image of Rajasthan in the Bengali mind derives from 'Sonar Kella' and 'Rup Kanwar' or at best Todd's Rajasthan. As of today, there is no discussion or assessment of Rajendra Singh's

pioneer work on water harvesting in the literature produced by Bengali intellectuals in the recent period. The recently published anthology (*Jaler Nana Katha*, 2005) on water by Paschim Banga Vigyan Mancha is a case in point. It contains an article on the utility of rainwater harvesting. The article described the different methods of rainwater harvesting with diagrams. There is no mention of any effort of rainwater harvesting in India or in West Bengal. Another Bengali book (*Bhumi Jal*) written by a noted radical Bengali intellectual Jaya Mitra described in a popular language the stories of rainwater harvesting almost all over India. But it also does not mention the remarkable achievements made by TBS in Alwar although it described *johads* and similar structures in different regions of India. In another small book (*Jal: Proti Photaya Munapha*, 2004) written by a journalist of *Ganasakti*, the CPI(M) daily organ, one finds a detailed description of recent struggles of people against water privatization in Bolivia—the book is dedicated to the ‘People of Bolivia’—The book in its chapter on the water crisis in India contains a table showing the eight drought prone provinces of India, which lists Rajasthan having 31 districts out of 32 as being affected by severe water scarcity. There is not a single sentence in the whole book on the remarkable struggle of the people of Alwar to reestablish community rights over water resources led by the TBS. The same is true of the recent Pamphlet on the problem of food security and water written by Probodh Panda, a CPI MP from West Midnapore. In the pamphlet (*The Problem of Food Security & Water*) the MP, who is also a member of the Parliamentary Committee on water, described how the corporate sector is hijacking nature’s most valuable resource in various ways and he ended his article with a clarion call for struggle by the toiling masses to ensure food security and access to drinking water. Suffice it to say that Mr Panda’s pamphlet also does not provide any instance from Alwar where the non-violent fight for water by the people has set an example. The absence of Rajendra Singh and his marvelous work in organizing the villagers at the grass roots toward water self-sufficiency in the Leftist intellectual and political circles are quite conspicuous. The reason probably lies in Rajendra’s commitment to Gandhism. The post-Independence little Gandhi is still a marginal figure or nobody in Leftist narrative.

Rainwater harvesting efforts have, however begun in West Bengal and it is still a donor driven government agenda executed from the top, not from the bottom. Recently, with huge funding from the Central Government under the Rastriya Sam Vikas Yojna (RSVY) Scheme, rainwater harvesting tanks are being excavated in the drought prone districts of West Bengal. This writer has some personal field level experience of observing some of those recently excavated tanks in the Binpur-II block (now a stronghold of the Maoists) of the Jhargram Sub-division in Paschim Medinipur district. It is tempting to narrate the experience of two such recently excavated rainwater harvesting tanks in a mouza village named Sankhabhanga about 20kms from Belpahari block Headquarters on the way towards the Dhalbhumgarh district of the Jharkhand state.

Both these rainwater harvesting tanks are being dug at a high elevation and there is hardly any water in those tanks. About five lakh rupees have been spent under the RSVY Scheme to dig up the 50 ft X 30ft X 12ft tanks at Sankhabhanga which is inhabited by poor Santal, Munda and a few Lodha families for their

economic upliftment. The villagers got daily wages in the excavation work and now some of the relatively better off families are now thinking of growing fish in the tank if water level increases in the tank. But since the tanks are excavated on a high elevation there is hardly any chance that the tanks would be able to retain rainwater. After enquiry with the engineers of the concerned department of the district on the choice of the site for these tanks it was learnt that under RSVY scheme it is mandatory to excavate such tanks on land voluntarily donated by scheduled tribe or scheduled caste families to ensure better participation by the villagers. The engineers frankly admitted that usually one donates the worst type of land for tanks, which would be used for communal purposes in future and add with it the fact that quality of land normally possessed by the ST and SC families are far inferior than those owned by the higher castes in the villages. Moreover, the engineers admitted "We had to excavate those tanks within the 2004-2005 financial year"! Thanks to the participatory approach in rainwater harvesting innovated by the Central Government and their timely application by the CPM-led WB State government.

Will the communists learn any lesson from Rajendra Singh and his non-violent struggle for the development of the rural proletarians through rainwater harvesting vis-a-vis community participation? □□□