

Memories of that day....

I was sitting there scribbling a poem in my diary under the shade of a nice big tree close to Cycle *bhau*'s house in Ruighar village, in Maharashtra. Now, if you are wondering which tree I was sitting under...don't ask me, because I'll never be able to tell you!

Okay, back to what I was saying. I was sitting close to Cycle (yes, that was his real name!) *bhau*'s house and I had been staying with his family for the past two days. What was giving my poem 'food for thought' was the hot '*nagli chi bhakri*' (a roti made out of a local foodgrain called *nagli*) which Cycle *bhau*'s wife had prepared.

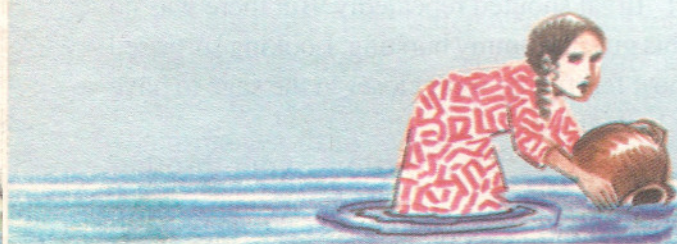
I finished the poem and put away the notebook in my bag. Just then my eyes caught sight of Jaya *tai* and her daughter following the '*paivat*' (a foot trail) to the nearby river. A total of four pots between the two of them was an indication that they were heading for the river to collect water for their cooking, drinking, and washing. I decided to walk along with them, as I needed to digest all that *nagli* I had packed into my stomach.

As I was walking with them, I thought of my home and my life in Delhi. How simple it is for me to open the tap and get all the water I want. People in this

village have to walk all the way to the river to get this basic need. I also started speculating on how the people of this village set apart and purify the water they would use for cooking and drinking. Was it safe to use the river water for all purposes? There were a bundle of questions in my head.

By the time I had finished doing all this big thinking, we had reached the river, and Jaya *tai*'s daughter began filling water from the river. But Jaya *tai* was not there with her daughter. She was doing something else...she was digging a hole!

That's when I noticed these things... the many water holes all along the riverbed, just like the one which Jaya *tai* was digging. All of them between 20-30 feet from the river, approximately. My curiosity finally burst out in words and I asked Jaya *tai* what she was up to. She very simply told me that she was digging the hole to get drinking water. Watching her more carefully made me understand the process. A hole is dug along the riverbed till one reaches the water source and then water is filled up. This water was visibly cleaner from what Jaya *tai*'s daughter had filled up from that part of the river which she could access. Maybe that is why the



Forests act like a giant sponge and help to catch the rain that falls on our country. And then this water slowly drips onto the ground, and goes into underground water storages, like giant natural tanks. When forests are cut down, especially on hill slopes, the rainwater simply gushes down into rivers, and causes floods. And because it has not been gently guided into the ground, the groundwater also begins to decrease. The result is that in summer, there is not enough water any more! Floods on one hand, and droughts on the other, are now common across India, because we have destroyed more than half of our natural forests. Stopping this is only possible by regenerating or replanting our forests!

- Ashish Kothari

villagers considered it more suitable for drinking and cooking purposes.

I had never seen anything like this before. Why did all the people from this village have to do this? Why not just dig a well and get the water? Wouldn't that be much simpler? But, then, maybe that was not possible. Maybe, further away from the river and closer to Cycle *bhau's* house in the village, one had to dig a really deep well to reach the water level. Perhaps there had been water in the village wells earlier which had now dried up, because all the trees in the forest around the village had been cut. It is so important for trees to be there for the water in the ground, I reflected. Trees do not let the rainwater just flow away. They allow for it to sink deep into the ground year after year.

Yes, maybe this was the case! I started putting incidents together one by one. I had seen that there was hardly any forest left around the village. Cycle *bhau's* mother had told me how she had to walk longer distances these days to reach the forest area and how the *karvand* (a local fruit) trees in the forest had vanished.

I never did confirm any of this! I quietly returned and sat under that big tree and closed my eyes...and just wished that Ruighar..the village where I was staying and which was Cycle *bhau's* home, get all its trees back... soon.

- Kanchi Kohli

Courtesy: *The National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) and Kalpavriksh*

