

Karnataka: Tradition to the rescue

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In Hassan, Kalyanis are being rejuvenated to get water for the parched district

When she saw that her district, Hassan, was listed among the 16 permanent drought-prone districts of the state by the Central drought study committee, writer and social worker Rupa Hassan was dismayed. Rupa, who hails from Mysuru and settled in Hassan post-marriage, could not fathom how a green district that has Sakaleshpur of the Western Ghats as its border was going dry.

Rupa, who has been working for the welfare of women, children, environment and education in the district, pored over the issue and decided to do something about it. "I was disturbed, but I realised there was no point in making loud speeches or writing a series of articles. The change has to happen on the ground."

Her research and data she collected from the government department showed that in the last few years up to March 2017, at least 200 farmers had committed suicide in the district and water crisis was the main reason for it. "I researched on ground water, met environmentalists like Shivananda Kalave and read articles by Shree Padre. My uncle S Jitendra Kumar is a ground water expert and they all suggested we should desilt and rejuvenate the traditional kalyanis and tanks of Hassan," she said.

Rupa's biggest inspiration was when she read about the Paani Foundation in Maharashtra. She formed a group of like-minded people, checked Paani Foundation's website and saw how they were working. On April 19 last year, she held a special screening of the documentary, 'The battle against drought'. Following this, Hasiru Bhoomi Prathishtana was formed with 19 trustees, led by RP Venkatesh Murthy, editor, Janatha Madhyama- a local daily. This led to the rejuvenation of at least 28 Kalyanis and more than four tanks in one year. "We received support from Dr SL Nagaraj, assistant commissioner Hassan, who gave his office space to hold meetings. Researcher Dr Ramesh, an expert in ground water and seismology, helped us understand more about Kalyanis and water sources. In our first attempt to rejuvenate about three Kalyanis at Doddakondagola saw at least 300 people participating. It was a grand success. We realised that most kalyanis were not used for more than a decade and most had been turned into dumping yards. For the inauguration of this movement last May, we also roped in actor Chethan," she said.

As they got more people involved, the volunteers tried to gather funds. For de-silting of tanks, machinery is used. They will work on this project till May-end (before monsoon). Impressed by their work, Karnataka State Council for Science and Technology has offered funds to rejuvenate a tank in Shantigram. During monsoon they encourage people to adopt rainwater harvesting. Last August, they also undertook tree plantation for one week.

Modus operandi

Youth from the area are encouraged to rejuvenate a Kalyani. Every Sunday is dedicated for the cause. They leave by about 7.30 am from the office of the Assistant Commissioner and spend the whole day on field. On an average, at least 80 people are on the field. They clean till about 11 am, after which they take a break. "The rejuvenation of tanks and kalyanis has helped in changing the landscape in a big way. The tanks from eight taluks of the district including Channarayapatna, Sakaleshpur, Arkalgood and other places are still full of water and have invited fish, frogs, snakes birds and cattle. Corporates have also come forward to help," Rupa said.

KALYANIS UNEARTHED

Kalyanis are traditional water tanks, used to store rainwater. These are ponds paved with stones on the banks and gradually sloping towards the centre. Kalyanis constructed near temples are called Pushkaranis. They act as a storage reservoir to supply water. These ponds help to recharge the wells in and around the area. Currently, most of the kalyanis are in a state of neglect. In Karnataka kalyanis are found in Tumakuru, Hassan and Bagalkot. While the government believes that there are 253 Kalyanis in Hassan, activists and volunteers feel that the district should have more than 1000 Kalyanis.

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