

In the driest Rajasthan

My name is Vishwanath Srikanthaiah. I am with a small group which has started called the Rainwater Club. We work on preliminary rainwater harvesting, that is to collect rain when it falls from the roof, on the roof, on the ground, anywhere, and put it to productive use. That is my job.

In the driest Rajasthan or Gujarat, the desert areas of India, if you go to a friend's house or a relative's house, the first thing they offer you is water. That is to say that the most precious thing that I have is for you.

So, that is the thought that comes and it does not come from a very selfish kind of a mentality, but it connects. If I give you water, you will give me water and we both will be well and one must go to these areas to see how water is treated with reverence because it is such a precious gift.

I want that the rivers, the lakes, and the tanks of our state should be crystal clear, should be pure and there should be no contamination.

They should be flowing again with good, clean water so that children can dive and have a swim, fishes can survive, biodiversity can flourish. That is my belief.

Life is a network.

We need to clearly accept that man or human kind cannot survive alone in this planet. The well being of all the biodiversity is critical to the functioning of human beings. So, we need to be concerned as much about insects, birds, and fishes as we are about ourselves, and if they are taken care of, automatically, we are taken care of. That is my belief.

In general, to look at water as the fundamental essence of life and to treat it with respect and to treat it with respect ecologically, understand the fact that without water, there cannot be life on earth.

The interest in what started from my frequent visits to villages and towns and cities when I would go round and observe that children and women especially were facing a big problem with accessing water. In summer times, they had to walk a long distance. Even if they accessed water, they had very little quantity of it, and the quality of the water was invariably bad and this was all across India. I think that one should take up a work which would help these women and children and communities in some way so that they could find solutions to their problems.

That was to me the first reason and the only reason why I want to get involved.

Well, I just give one example of the fight because I cannot detail out this big picture. It is a large campus.

There are 5800 villages in Karnataka, that is the state which have excess fluoride in the water, and people are drinking this fluoride contaminated water.

One solution which the government propagated after a long time was the building of defloridation machines.

Now, there is a recent report that of the 100 that were installed, close to 60 are not functioning, and people continue to drink fluoride contaminated water whereas right now, we have a solution .

In a year, you need 7300 liters of good, fluoride-free water. You could just pick the water from the rooftop because rainwater is fluoride free, treat it, store it, and use it for the whole year, and people are doing that and are showing that it can be done. But that venture is not being pursued adequately.

So, my fight is to ensure that these 5800 villages get rooftop rainwater harvesting and get fluoride free water so that they do not suffer from dental fluorosis and skeletal fluorosis and all the problems with fluoride which is associated.

That is one example of the fight.

It is a question of obsession, not asking work, there is a link and empathy of people with nature that cannot be explained.

If you put a bowl of water out on the terrace or on the road, 32 different kinds of birds come and drink water from it, 3 beehive colonies come and take water from it. If you put a rainwater tank in a house, a woman need not be concerned about water for 25 days if that rainwater tank is full, 2500 liters of water to that woman takes away stress and worry for 25 days.

She does not have to worry that I have to go back, I do not know when the water will come, I have to store the water, what will I do for breakfast, so many worries.

That joy, now I can go to, I think, a 1000 villages in Karnataka and 1000 families in these villages will call me in the house.

I was looking also at water in cities, I am going to see in that a huge problem of availability that our water bodies were disappearing, that our lakes and tanks were getting filled with sewage, that our rivers were getting polluted.

So, the question there is to see how knowledge, how awareness, and how action can help solve this particular natural resource, which I believe is absolutely the most critical natural resource for determining India's development, growth, poverty alleviation in the future.

So, that is the work and it has taken me to sanitation where one is trying to provide people with toilets which are productive, not toilets which are polluting, but where the human waste can be used as a fertilizer in a protocol which is safe and which is ecologically acceptable and which does very well for crops to grow and that has been one area of work .

And at the household level also working on reusing what we call waste water, treating it a bit, and growing things, for example like rice on the rooftop which is one of the things that one has started.

In cities, the provision of water is an institutional responsibility. It is the responsibility of the government because you need large infrastructure to deliver, and that big establishment does not work efficiently, effectively, and does not listen to people's voices easily.

So, there you have to use things like the right to information and get information out from the government about money being invested, about corruption for example.

I would wish that wherever there is a scarcity of water either in terms of quality or quantity, everyone of these houses should have a rooftop rainwater harvesting system and to take care of the waste water coming out from these houses, every house should have an ecological sanitation system. That, to me is heavy and there should not be a drop of waste water going outside a house. There should not be any need for any other water except rainwater falling on the house as the source of water

Each part of India has its own tradition with water. Tremendous, there is a lot of stories about Water .You go to the hills of the northeast. You go to the deserts of Rajasthan. You go to the mountain of the Himalayas or you go down south. Every place, there is a different story with water. There is a different interaction with water. We need to take that local knowledge, fit it into the modern context and we both work together. We need to work on that a lot more.

Like you read the religious texts now, the spiritual texts here, anywhere, not just Indian or global, you find this concern of the web of life very clear there. It is not just about human beings or anything. Here, we are faced with 2 challenges and this is the interesting thing about India. We need to sort of address our poverty issue and economic growth issue as well as the natural resource management issue. So, 2 countries only are doing that at a remarkable scale, China and India, and both of them are quite ancient civilizations. How are they coping with modernity? What are they doing about modernity? What does it mean to people in cities, but what does it actually mean to women in totally different answers that they are giving to the problem, and therefore, people are not worried too much about the future. People are almost worried about the immediate need as much and it is only a select few who are worried about the future. So,

how do you factor in immediate actions which will also impact the future positively, not negatively? How do you bring that knowledge, that discussion into the domain, the community?

For me, the passion is water because I see rainwater, for example, falling on everybody's head. There is nobody in the world on whose head at one point of time rainwater has not fallen or on whose roof rainwater does not fall. So, everybody in the world can be part of the solution by picking that rainwater, filtering it, catching it, and using it. Why is not everybody doing it? Why is there still a problem with water?

This surprises me, with all the intellect, the knowledge, the wisdom that we have.

I admire the beauty of water. Look at how wonderful the rain is. Somewhere in the oceans, the sun is heating up the water. It is getting up as steam, there is the wind pushing it as cloud, comes over land, and especially in India, you know, monsoon is a life itself. Without monsoon and without the rains in India, there is no life. If you go to North India, everybody looks out for the first clouds to bring rain. There is a poetry there. There is a big force working, and there is a joy in that force to appreciate it. It is not enough to appreciate the rains as it falls. You need to put it to some use for mankind. So, you need to get involved with it, and it is not just function, it is not civil engineering; it is more to it than civil engineering and lots more. For me, I collect water from the rivers of the world. I have brought it from Amazon, the Nile, you name it, any lake in China, ground water. I also work on historical devices which have worked around water. Now gone from India, virtually gone, existing in a few places. Why is it that something which served you for 4000 years can disappear in front of your eyes in 25 years? This concerns me. So, I work on it to passion that water is not just about rainwater harvesting or one particular issue. It is about the entire life force that water is. I think that water is... in fact, you tell me, why water and why not air or why not carbon dioxide, I cannot tell you.