

ANSWER'S blowin' in the wind



MEG Sappers searching for a body during floods at Agaram Lake in Bangalore.

Photo KPN

BANGALORE MATTERS



ROHINI NILEKANI

BANGALORE citizens are making their displeasure known loud and clear. Our quality of life is deteriorating and if government cannot do anything, we will. We will file public interest litigations, we will refuse to pay taxes, we will protest. We will be heard.

The politicisation of the people is all to the good in the long run. Interestingly though, the voices of the elected representatives of the city - the Corporators, the MLAs and the MPs have been largely missing in the general din. Which reflects the true state of affairs in this hapless metropo-

In all the crises that have overtaken the city, one that looms grey and large is the effect of excess rain. Overflowing lakes, tanks and drains have almost made us forget that other and worse crisis that often affects the city - water scarcity.

When rainfall is inadequate, the water supply dries up alarmingly. And then begins a whole

parade of woes. This may quite easily happen next year. So did we plan for that by capturing this year's rain? Not at all. Apparently the city can manage neither plenty nor scarcity.

Yet, as far as collecting rainwater goes, it is something Bangaloreans need not wait for government to do something about. Any one of us can capture rainwater through rooftop harvesting or other means.

It is the one safe, non-controversial, participatory and mutually beneficial act that all of can undertake as well meaning citizens. And one citizen, S. Vishwanath, of the Rainwater Club has been working overtime advocating rainwater harvesting for the past ten years.

The Rainwater Club is a virtual forum where all interested people gather to share thoughts and work towards popularising water conservation and especially rainwater harvesting. A most unusual organisation it may be, but its founder, Vishwanath has built a formidable reputation as a domain expert in water. His passion is rainwater harvesting. He has studied practices from around the world and developed low cost-effective designs to suit vari-

ous clients; from a slum dweller with a tiny roof to an entrepreneur with large factories. And, of course, his own home, where he lives with his wife and ecology architect Chitra, is a showcase of every water conservation technique known to man and a virtual museum for water-saving devices and models.

"When you collect water on your roof or on your site, you begin to feel part of the solution instead of part of the problem,"

he says. If all of us captured rain for the nine or so months when Bangalore receives rain, we could reduce the need to pump water from the Cauvery in increasing amounts each year. We could also prevent the flooding nightmare that we witnessed this year in the city. And we would help recharge the ground water as well.

In fact, Vishwanath surmises

that we could do without Cauvery water altogether if rainwater was prevented from running off.

"A 30/50 sq ft site receives an average of 1,50,000 (one and a half lakh) litres of rain in a normal year," he says. So imagine how much water the 8,50,000 households in the city could collect and store.

Just thirty years ago, we were self sufficient in water. Today, the situation is such that even the

Today, the situation is such that even the mighty Cauvery is not enough to slake the thirst of this city

mighty Cauvery is not enough to slake the thirst of this city. More than thirty percent of Bangalore's water usage comes from borewells. Dug deeper and deeper in the ground. Worse, there is no regulation of ground water in the state. And tankers ply regularly to provide expensive water to those who the BWSSB leaves out. More often than not, these are the urban poor

There is almost no piped water supply and no sewerage in slums, in which 15-20% of the city population lives. But everyone needs water. For drinking, washing, cooking. So how do people get it? They all pay private contractors to provide them this basic commodity. They buy as much as they can when they can. At a rate that can be 1000 times higher than that paid by regular clients of the BWSSB. Many buy water on a daily basis, depending on their wage earnings.

We can easily, quickly and cheaply change all that. The Rainwater Club has already initiated rooftop rainwater harvesting in the Rayapuram slum. People who came forward to make initial investments in their water security are now very happy. Rooftop harvesting is simple to implement and provides precious, safe water - good enough to drink.

So let's do something for ourselves and for the city, even before government makes it mandatory. Let's turn back the Cauvery.

How simple it seems. In this case, it really is.

Rohini Nilekani is chairperson of Akshara Foundation