It's back to the grassroots for techies who are giving up their plum jobs for a noble cause — water conservation

NIRANJAN KAGGERE

The story of a young engineer from NASA, who gave up his high profile job to change the lives of villagers in India in the Bollywood blockbuster ‘Swades’ was motivating. But it was on the silver screen after all. Bangalore techies are now taking this type of inspirational actions to a different level altogether.

These members of the IT community are showing that they are not enamoured with high-paying jobs, swanky offices and high-end gadgets. They are going down to grassroots and joining hands to save the city and teach Bangaloreans about the conservation of water and water bodies.

The India Water Portal (www.indiawaterportal.org) launched a few months ago is an open, inclusive, web-based platform for sharing, water management knowledge amongst practitioners and the general public. It aims to draw on the rich experience of water-sector experts, package their knowledge and add value to it through technology, and disseminate it to a larger audience, both online and offline, say its creators.

Sharada Prasad, a former employee of Infosys and now a project officer at the internet portal said, "The crisis in water is very real. At the Water Portal you can find various kinds of information related to water. There are slideshows on how to construct rainwater harvesting systems for your house or recharge groundwater. We have case studies of successes from around the country. You can see what minister has been asking what questions in the Parliament about water."

About his personal motivation, he says, "Interacting with local people, understanding their social and economic problems and working with them towards developing a sustainable solution excites me more than interacting with global people to understand their business problems and proposing a technology solution."

The portal is not an independent venture but an initiative of ‘Arghyam’, a charitable trust founded by Rohini Nilekani in 2001. The Water Portal is a free, public website envisages sharing information between government, working NGOs and academia. It uses latest technologies such as GIS and virtual community tools to project the required data bank for the field workers.

Sunita Nadhamuni, CEO of Arghyam, has been guiding the evolution of the portal from the early days. She says: "There is an asymmetry in knowledge and information where not everyone has access to what they need, to make sensible and informed decisions. We want the portal to correct that."

Working far away from home, on IT projects which seemed disconnected from problems people faced on the ground, led her into volunteering. "Through that, I had the opportunity to interact with many inspiring NGO and development sector leaders. Slowly, the urge to do something meaningful became too strong to ignore and I made the switch to the social sector."

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