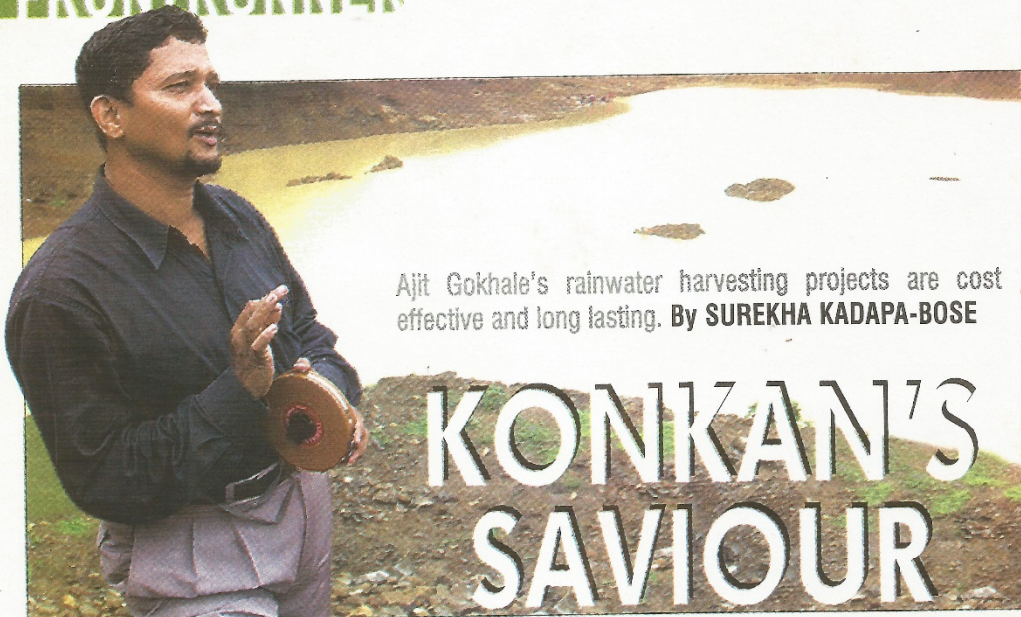


FRONT RUNNER



Ajit Gokhale's rainwater harvesting projects are cost effective and long lasting. **By SUREKHA KADAPA-BOSE**

KONKAN'S SAVIOUR

Giving back to nature what is its own made Dr Ajit Gokhale quit his job at Ion Exchange and get involved in urban /rural rainwater harvesting, wasteland and bio-diversity improvement and eco tourism projects that will determine the future of the planet. Averse to being addressed as a technocrat he explains, "I would say I am technically sound for I know the behaviour, chemistry and biology of water besides air, soil and biodiversity. In fact, I am able to perceive what is going wrong with these elements and what is needed to make them 'really healthy'."

So far he has provided consultancy to Non Governmental Organisations (NGO) on 65 rainwater harvesting projects in the villages in the Konkan. The project commenced four years back. "By now 45 villages have become self sufficient in their water needs while remaining are in the process. Additionally 20 villages are eager to participate in similar projects," says Dr Gokhale of Natural Solutions. The Konkan is known for its slopping land and shallow soil below which lies hard rock. During the

monsoon, the soil cannot retain water that fills the wells and overflows. As a result, underground water lasts for just a few months and women and children have to scout for drinking water as far as up to seven kilometres through the ups and downs of the slopes during the summers. Being a high rainfall region, not much attention has been paid to the Konkan under the drought relief programmes of the central or state governments.

Thanks to Dr Gokhale's pioneering participatory rainwater harvesting project in the high rainfall areas of Western Ghats, many villages today are self-sufficient and totally free from water tankers. He initiated the project along with SHARE (Sophia College Ex Students and Staff Association), a UTV-supported NGO, several corporates, Rotary Club donors and, most importantly, the shrandan of villagers in Raigad district. "What we have found is that villagers are very receptive to our initiatives and it has had a ripple effect on the neighbouring villages as well. And all this has happened without the support of government departments," says 38-year-old Dr

Gokhale. Nominated for the Salim Ali Young Naturalist Award in 1995, Dr Gokhale received his doctorate from Mumbai University for discovering and establishing the carnivorous mode of nutrition of a plant named *Martynia Annu L.*

A visiting faculty at Mumbai's TISS (Tata Institute of Social Sciences), he has handled several urban projects too. This includes treating daily 66,000 litres of waste water for flushing toilets and gardening needs in select housing societies located in Bandra, Trombay and Prabhadevi-based Euro Enviro Parivaar Park, rainwater harvesting at St Catherine's Home in Andhrei and lake rejuvenation at Uttan, near Bhayandar.

"City dwellers are not very open to the idea of rainwater harvesting as they can afford to buy water while waste water treatment in cooperative housing societies is a no-no issue as it is thought to be a waste of money which isn't true. Both are cost effective and one easily makes up for the money spent within two years," he points out. **56**