

Sambodh Foundation Brings Drinking Water for a Dalit village

Message from Swami Bodhananda

(Written during the stay at Guest House Cottage,
Raman Research Institute, Bangalore, 16 April 2007)



Drinking water is the primary need of humans. 70% of the world does not have access to safe drinking water. Water is the best guarantor of health and mental agility. Ensuring the availability of drinking water to all people in the world is the fundamental responsibility of authorities – local, national and international.

Only 2% of the available body of water in the world is good for drinking and most of it is locked up in the arctic and the Antarctic regions. World population is concentrated on the Equator and tropical regions where water is scarce. It is predicted that future wars will be fought not for gold, land or oil nor on religious and ideological issues, but for water. Water will be the scarcest commodity on earth as population increases and water sources dry up. An arbitration mechanism to resolve water disputes at local, national and international levels may be necessary in the not distant future if nations and communities have to live in peace.

These are the thoughts that pass through my mind as I write this message after the inauguration of Sambodh drinking water project at Suryagoan village, Sattal, in Nainital district in Uttarakhand, Himalayas. This tiny village perched on a hill overlooking a string of lakes is inhabited exclusively by Dalits, except for two Takur families living on the edge of the hill. There are 40 houses and 40 inhabitants in the village. Most of the houses are pukka, but tiny one or two room tenements. Families cook, eat, sleep, fall sick, convalesce, breed, grow old and die in those windowless soot-plastered tenements. 70% of the villagers suffer from one or other form of tuberculosis. Most of the men drink and abuse their women folk. Men have no permanent job or income. There is a primary school where all grades of children sit in the same classes and teachers rarely show up. The mid-day meal keep the children come to the teacher-less school.

When I went to this charming but pathetic village on the invitation of Alka and Naveen Budhraja I could hardly imagine the level of poverty in which these villagers lived. It was heart rending and totally unacceptable to our humanity and sensitivity. It was almost nauseating. I went round the village and visited every household and spoke to most of the people. They all unanimously pleaded that something must be done to make their lives less uncomfortable. Girls of school going age spent most of their time in fetching water from the spring that dry up in summer. Illiteracy among girl children and teenagers was appalling.

These poor people badly required drinking water and their pleas moved me and those who accompanied me. I came to Delhi and narrated the story to my devotees and friends. They were willing to help bring life-giving water to those hapless Dalit villagers. To raise funds for the water project, I followed the dictum of Kautilya, "like the bees collect nectar from flowers, collect funds from people without burdening them".

Thus the Kalasa scheme was conceived and introduced. Every willing person was given an earthen Kalasa, symbol of the fullness of Lord Ganesha, and initiated them to Ganesha Gayatri. Every day they were required to chant Ganesha Gayatri and put one rupee or more in the Kalasa. We assured them that their mantra money would be used exclusively for the drinking water project at Suryagoan. So far we have collected and invested 8 lakhs of rupees on the water project. One bore-well was dug and storage tank to store water near the well as well as the top of the hill was constructed. Motor to pump water was installed. Pipes were laid and standing taps were provided for clusters of 5 households.

Then it was a grand inauguration of the water project on 4th April. The whole village assembled in a beautifully done up shamiyana. The District Magistrate of Nainital, Ms Bupinder Kaur IAS, unveiled the memorial slab and I turned the tap. The water first hesitatingly and then joyously gushed out. I felt immeasurable joy. I got the key to the solution for India's fundamental problem of poverty: Micro charity and volunteerism. It is only through healthy and creative cooperation between local people, voluntary organisation and government agencies with dedicated leadership that we can solve our basic problem of rural poverty. Indeed small initiatives go a long way in lifting centuries old poverty and collective despair. I congratulate all those involved in the *bhagiratha yajna* of bringing water to thirsty people.

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PHOTOGRAPHS FROM SURYAGAON (2004-2006)

