

What monsoon means*

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There is one being-Indian-thing, which spans the urban or rural, rich and poor divide: our annual watch and wait for the monsoons. It begins every year, without a fail as heat climbs, and monsoons advance. The farmers wait desperately because they need the rain, at the right time, to sow their crops. Without this water, they cannot plant. The city managers wait because by the beginning of each monsoon period, the water reservoirs that feed cities are precariously low. They need the rain to replenish supply. All of us wait, in spite of our air-conditioned living, for the relief rain will bring to the swelter of the scorching heat and dust. This is perhaps the only time when the entire country is enjoined in its desperation. It cannot exhale till it rains.

But even as I write this, I think of three questions: one, if this phenomenon called the monsoons is so important in every Indian's life: How much do we really know about it? Do we know why it rains? Do we know that scientists are still squabbling about the definition of monsoon? The only one they have is seasonal winds, which have regular directions and they get flummoxed when this changes. Do we know that our monsoon is the most globalized or all of us? It is integrated and linked to the ocean current in the far away Pacific or the temperature of the Tibetan plateau, the Eurasian snow or even the freshwater content in the Bay of Bengal. Do we even know who the monsoon scientists are in India and how they are desperately learning to chase this unpredictable and variable creature better by each passing day? We don't. Not really. We have been taught some of the science in school, but never in real life. It is not part of the usable-knowledge, what we think we need to know to survive in our world of today. But we are wrong.

The grand old man of the Indian monsoon, the late P. R. Pisharoty, would have told you that this annual event brings us rain in just about 100 h in the 8765 h year, which means it is our challenge to manage it well. Environmentalist Anil Agarwal would have explained we need to understand the monsoon to understand how nature uses weak forces rather than concentrated forces to do its work. Just think: it takes a very tiny temperature differences to carry as much as 40,000 billion tonnes of water from the oceans and across thousands of miles to dump it as rainfall over India.

This lack of knowledge of nature's ways is at the core of the 'environmental crisis', he would say. Consider again: today we use concentrated energy sources like coal or oil that have created enormous problems like local air pollution and global climate change. If we understood the ways of nature, we would shift to weaker sources of energy, like solar or move to using rainfall, not wait till it is concentrated in rivers or in aquifers. 'Humans have come to rely much more on concentrated water sources like rivers and aquifers in the last 100 years. But the heavy use of these sources is leading to their overexploitation. In the 21st century, human beings will once again move to weaker water resource like rainfall', said Anil. In other words, the more we understand the monsoons of our lives, the more we will understand how to move from just unravelling nature to imitating its way and to build a way of development that is sustainable.

The second question, I have is how much do we know how to live without the monsoons? I am sure you have heard it said that very soon, we will be 'developed' and that would mean that we would no longer be 'dependent' on this crazy national obsession called the monsoon. Let's be very clear that this is not going to happen in a hurry. After some 60 odd years of Independence and after considerable investment in creating surface irrigation systems, the bulk of Indian agriculture remains rainfed. This

literally means that farmers wait to sow and plant and harvest on the mercies of this extremely capricious and undependable God. But this is not even the full picture. What is not said is that between 60% and 80% of the irrigated area is watered by groundwater, a resource, which needs the rain to recharge and refill its supply. This is why, every year, as the monsoon progresses, from Kerala to Kashmir, or Bengal to Rajasthan, hearts stop beating if it halts, slows or dies. The words low pressure and depressions are part of the Indian lexicon. The monsoon is and will remain India's true finance minister.

Therefore, I believe, instead of wanting to reduce dependence, we should celebrate our enjoyment with this rain creature. We should deepen our engagement with the monsoon. Our monsoon lexicon must expand so that we harvest the rain, every drop of it where and when it falls. This must be the national obsession, treasuring the value of each raindrop. We must build a water future based on decentralized systems – checkdams, lakes, ponds, wells, grasses and trees – everything that can slow the journey of rain to the oceans.

If we can do this, then we can also answer my third and most painful question. How should we live and celebrate the rain that falls in our cities and our fields? Today, we cry when it does not rain and we weep when it does as rain brings floods and disease in fields and water-car jams in cities. Just think of the devastating cycle of water stress to water flood we witness each year, without fail and with increasing ferocity. The only way to change is to begin to relearn the art of living with water that falls every year.

The monsoon is a part of each of us. Now we have to make it real.

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