



DR. SEKHAR RAGHAVAN
THE RAIN MAN

சென்னைப் பெருநகர் குடிநீர் வழங்கல் மற்றும் கழிவுநீர்க்கறிந்து வாரியம் Chennai Metropolitan Water Supply and Sewerage Board



Most of us who grew up in Chennai in the 1980s, remember severe water scarcity, and no running water in our taps! We had to wake up at the crack of dawn, and use the hand-pump to fill as many buckets as possible, during that measly half hour when a trickle of water would be let into our pipes, every alternate day.

Now, in contrast, even after a year of drought, the number of water lorries plying the streets are a fraction of what they were in the early 1990s. This is despite an ever growing population and more

and the city expanding outward at an alarming rate.

The person behind this change is Dr.Sekhar Raghavan.

On a hot May afternoon, we drove into a residential neighbourhood in Santhome, to visit the Rain Centre, and to meet Dr.Sekhar Raghavan. A cheerful, unassuming man, whose demeanour and down-to-earth manner gives no indication of the big influence he has been on alleviating the water troubles of the city.

The Rain Centre itself is full of posters and working models that explain the various projects that they have implemented as well as the way Rain Water Harvesting works. It's like walking into a very well thought out science fair.

Dr.Raghavan, is a Physicist who was born and brought up in Chennai. After years as a lecturer, then working as a marketing executive, and then at a socio-economic research institute, he finally found his calling in solving the water woes of Chennai city. He laughs about how he seemed to change

jobs every 10 years, like clockwork, till he set up the Rain Centre.

The story of Dr.Raghavan's successful implementation of Rain Water Harvesting, (RWH), is a story of perseverance and patience.

He has lived in the Besant Nagar area for most of his adult life, and just his observations from his own apartment window taught him the elements of Rain Water Harvesting. Besant Nagar had always had good ground water potential, he noticed, and there was never any water stagnation, because of the sandy beaches, and easy percolation of the water. Earlier, there were laws against construction of buildings higher than two floors, in the locality, and the ground water was adequate for everyone.

However, as the rules were relaxed and more developers realised that Besant Nagar had good ground water, they started building higher and higher buildings, with more paved area, leaving very little open area for the rain water to percolate into the ground.

The precious water flowed out into the streets, and down the drains! He says that this was when he realized that people needed to be sensitised about the importance of Rain Water Harvesting. If too much ground water was drawn out, so close to the sea, then the brackish water from the sea would come in and take the place of the fresh water. Once that happens, it is very hard to drive it back out. From 1995 to 1998, he would bicycle door to door, in his neighbourhood, to try and talk to residents about RWH. The trouble was that almost everywhere, the watchmen wouldn't let him in, or refuse to let him meet anyone in the building association.

After a frustrating three years of trying to talk to people, he finally got a break, when he approached the "Adyar Times" newspaper.



The editor of the newspaper was very helpful, and wrote a column, all about RWH. The article gave Dr. Raghavan's contact information, which led to some residents contacting him, and he was able to convince them about RWH, and its benefits. Simultaneously, as a parent at the KFI school, he approached the Principal, and convinced

him to write a letter to all the parents who lived in the nearby areas, and tell them about his idea. He was able to then convince some of them.

The next challenge was implementation. Those who were convinced, wanted Dr.Raghavan to help set up the RWH in their

buildings. So he sourced a team - masons, plumbers, and well diggers, got quotations from them, and set about implementing the RWH systems. Once a few apartments had implemented it, he convinced them to write about it, in the neighbourhood newspapers. Reading first person testimonials convinced more people about the benefits of RWH. In the year 2000, The Hindu decided to publish a series of articles, over 3 consecutive Sundays, about Rain Water Harvesting. Their reporter accompanied Dr.Raghavan, and tried to understand RWH. This detailed press coverage, with over half page dedicated each time to the topic, got even more people interested in it, and Dr.Raghavan was contacted by residents in other areas, to help them set up RWH systems. But this was still not enough.

Dr.Raghavan says that the big break came in 2001, when the AIADMK came into power with a manifesto that had prioritised Rain Water Harvesting as one of its main promises. It seemed to be something very important to the then Chief Minister, Ms.J.Jayalalitha. The C.M. appointed Dr.Shanta Sheila Nair, as the Municipal Administration and Water Supply Secretary. Dr.Raghavan was known to Dr.Sheila Nair from their school days. So when she formed a committee to implement Rain Water Harvesting, she made Dr.Raghavan a member of that committee. His experience and expertise, with the support from the Government made it possible to implement the system, all across the city and the state, over the next year. "When the government decides to do something, they can do it at a much larger scale." Every bus stand, government office, government school, and public space had posters and pamphlets on Rain Water Harvesting, compelling people to implement it, and it was rolled out across the state over just 13 months.

Meanwhile, a group of IIT Alumni living abroad, heard about his campaign, and wanted to get involved. They offered him seed money to start the Rain Centre,

at a model house, where people could come and get assistance, inputs, and information on RWH. They located a house in a residential area, for this, and set up the Akash Ganga Trust, to be able to receive the funds from abroad.

To help him set up this centre, he was assisted by the Centre for Science and Environment, Delhi. The Chairperson of that Trust was Dr. M.S.Swaminathan, who convinced the TamilNadu Chief Minister, Ms.J.Jayalalitha to come and inaugurate the Rain Centre, on 21st. August 2002. This led to wider publicity for the Rain Centre. The Rain Centre, Dr.Raghavan says, has three objectives: To create awareness about Rain Water Harvesting, to implement Rain Water Harvesting, and to carry out research and surveys. He excitedly demonstrates a small model at the centre, which shows the fall of rain, and how the water from various parts of the building is directed into storage sumps. Dr.Raghavan emphasises that there are only two ways in which we receive fresh water. Either through melting ice or through rain. In India, as most states depend on seasonal rain for their annual water supply, it increases the importance of harvesting that rain water. However, the support group for the Rain Centre has shrunk over the years. They now have just 3 or 4 employees, and a handful of volunteers. Contractors do the field work. It is presently sustained by the CSR initiatives by large companies who have funded the setting up of RWH in various Charitable Institutions like the Ramakrishna Mutt, and Cancer Institute.

After all the decades of perseverance, Dr.Raghavan has been recognised for his life changing work. He has been awarded the Ashoka Fellowship and the Harmony Silver Award, earlier. The sustained work, over the last 25 years and more, by Dr.Sekhar Raghavan, to help conserve such a precious resource, makes him a true Champion of Chennai.

- Kaveri Bharath