

I named my daughter Jal (An ironical juxtaposition faced in life)

June 21st, 2007

Dear Diary,

It is June and it is hot. Jal is celebrating her fifth birthday today. The thought that I have in mind today is something that was planted by a simple question that Jal asked me. It was her birthday and as loving parents, we had decided not to stop her from having a good time today. It is her day and we should allow her to do what she wants.

It is not that on other days we stop Jal from doing what she wants to but do make sure her creative energies are put to good use rather than being wasted away by running around and exerting herself unnecessarily. I feel this is the essence why we named her Jal, meaning water. We wish she will be as versatile as water, as resourceful as water, as effervescent as water. But while I appreciate the beauty of my daughter, I am also aware of the harsh irony that it is water only that remains the most vulnerable to some harsh threats that our Mother Earth is grappling with.

God! I wish Jal, my daughter, a happier life! I pray she lives up to the inherent meaning of her name and I wish the vulnerability that water is standing upfront with is resolved!

I must admit that Jal is very curious to know more about the world around her, the way I feel children should be. They are the ones who will inherit this world from us and need to be aware of what we are doing to it. I feel happy when Jal asks me these questions as that tells me my daughter is growing up alright.

Coming back to what happened in the afternoon. Jal came to me exhausted from the hot weather and the exertion.

Pa, I am thirsty. Can you give me some water?

I went into the kitchen to get her some water from the pot. There was not much of it as always. There is a water problem in our area – a drinking water problem to be precise.

Pa, I want some more, she said, drinking the glass I had given her in one quick gulp. It is fine if there is not any. I know we do not have much water to drink.

Jal, Ma will be here in some time. Come to me, my angel. How old is my little one now? Tell me, what do you want for your birthday? Jal was in my arms, visibly exhausted from her games with her friends and slept in my lap.

And, I started thinking. It is not just my little Jal who is thirsty (How much I dread to pen down this irony!). The animals are thirsty, the crops are thirsty and the land is thirsty. It has not rained for the last couple of years, the drought blamed by the meteorologists on the dreaded El Niño effect. That it has not rained is just one reason for the situation we find ourselves in today. The ponds are all dry, the wells have no water, the tube wells being installed have to be dig deeper to reach the water table. Jal does not know, maybe it is not important for her to know what El Niño is, maybe she does not know what the water table is, maybe she is not clear of the movement that is on. Why should my little one know that we do not even have enough water available to drink? And, it is not only the El Niño that is to blame for the situation we find ourselves in today. There is much more to it.

Our home is next to the big bottling plant of the cold-drink factory which was set up around five years back as part of the Government's development plans for the district. The company had come up with huge plans of developing the area, including becoming an active participant within the local community. There were talks of the company being a lucrative source of employment for the region's youth who otherwise move to the cities in search for opportunities. One problem though. The plant uses a lot of ground water for its operations and as a result of this, the water table has been plummeting every passing year. I get jitters; my daughter, Jal. Hope she is fine and blooming.

An NGO working on conservation of water that conducted research in the region in the last couple of years figured that if the present rate of ground water consumption continues and we do nothing for conserving water, it will not be long before there is nothing more of the natural resource left for us and for our children. To add to our woes, even though we can get water from the Nandini canal that flows next to the inhabitation, the neighbouring country has built a dam within 100 kilometres of the border and is not discharging water into the canal. Nandini, as a result, is dead.

The earlier world wars were fought for land. I see a third world war on water if things continue this way. A war to restore the security and happiness of my child? Or a war to control the existence of my child? Jal, your father is struggling with a sarcastic choice! The man who sells water came today. Did we ever imagine water would be sold, like a precious metal or an expensive stone? Can we visualise our children as commodities? Did we ever imagine our cherished dreams, our children to be put up in the sometimes bearish and sometimes bullish stocks? No, Jal, no!

“Water, water everywhere.” is what I thought should have been the scenario. Rather, we end up paying for most of our water needs. Water cannot be priced. A hundred rupees for a 20 litres can! Jal, can you forgive humanity for rendering your identity into a mere number?

The importance of a natural resource like water to the economic, political and social situation is explicitly visible here. The economy of the area was dependent on agriculture and electricity costs are increasing by the day because of the tube wells working overtime to pull water from the ever-declining water table. The political environment is charged up since there are rumours in the air that the sitting Member of Parliament was instrumental in bringing the plant to our area. Democracy, I hope, will prevail in the forthcoming elections. I am happy to be a citizen of a democratic state. At least, I have the right to vote and vote out non-performing leaders. I sincerely hope for change and I know it is not far. The social setting in the area has directly been affected as the unemployed agricultural labour whose irrigation facilities are no longer viable due to lack of water have moved to urban areas. The power factor that water is and the way the lack of it has affected our lives is testimony to the importance natural resources play. And, they should considering they are nature’s gift to us which needs to be conserved.

I have some fundamental rights that include the following –

- the right to equality
- the right to freedom
- the right against exploitation

I ask for the following additional rights –

- the right to equal distribution of natural resources
- the right to freedom in using of natural resources
- the right against exploitation of natural resources

I ask for the right to water. I ask for the security of my daughter, Jal.

I know I have fundamental duties as well including being responsible for my environment and for making sure I conserve our natural resources and pass the same to future generations. My little one, Jal, should have access to the same resources that we had. Will I be able to do it? Will our generation rise to the task of conserving our natural resources? Will we be able to live up to the expectations that our future generations have from us? I am feeling sleepy after the long day today. I am very much interested in completing this entry but it’s only half my interest. The other half is interested in dozing off after the busy day. I am feeling sleepy...

I am disturbed by the thunder outside. It is about to rain for the first time in three years. Is it pointing towards a better future? Will it be reality? Jal is sleeping peacefully on the bed next to my writing table, still dreaming away.

I have written Jal a limerick on her birthday –

*Jal, my little one, oh, my little hope,
Your question made me think*

*Do you have a drop to drink?
And now I know the link.*

*Water, water everywhere,
But, do we really care?*

*For my little one, I will make sure,
We have enough and pure*

*To pass on to our future,
Let's save our nature.*

June 21st, 2027

Dear Diary,

Jal's 25th birthday today, she was here taking time off her busy schedule working with an NGO on water issues. After completing her graduation in Sociology, she decided to set up her own NGO and decided that water conservation was her aim. In the last seven years that her NGO has been active in the region, change is evident. As first steps, I still remember my little girl talking to the community here about the importance of saving water. Her pointed questions to all of us regarding our responsibility of taking care of our natural resources helped us understand the gravity of the situation. Her efforts in bringing the government as a party to the conservation drive are still talked about in the neighbourhood. I think her experience of being at a place where there was never much water motivated her to take up this cause. I see in her an important example of how we citizens can, in partnership with the government and the corporate world help conserve our natural resources.

Jal has evolved!

That it has not been even one year without rains in the last many years has also helped our cause. All houses here have now proper water conservation measures installed. Water harvesting has been implemented as a policy and literally every drop of rain is channelled properly and is saved. The cold-drink factory did its bit as well. They installed a water treatment plant and started reusing water that previously they used to discharge into the canal.

Over the years, have things improved? Yes, they have. But, how? It has been a collective effort of the government, the company and the people of the area who have come together in the larger good of the community to take care of the problem. As I look at it now, I know, we will give our future generations not just a used up earth but one which has the resources as we got it from our parents. Jal's NGO played an important role in bringing all stakeholders together. Aren't our children stakeholders in the natural resources? They surely are.

The last general elections resulted in the Enviro National Party (ENP) coming to power. Democracy won when the incumbent was voted out in an election where environmental issues including the water scarcity dominated the political landscape. They have signed a treaty with the neighbouring country and now Nandini has water all through the year. With the local Member of Parliament's efforts, the soft drink company is more aware and concerned about its social responsibility than ever before.

It is a worldwide phenomena – there is collaboration about usage of our natural resources, be it water or forests. NGOs like the one that Jal works for have changed the way citizens and governments look at our natural resources. Human Development is dependent on how prudent we are in the usage of our natural

resources. I think the world is moving in the right direction. Natural resources are the power factor that they were envisioned to be. Our lives flow from the existence of these natural resources and I am so happy we have been successful in our endeavour. That it required the coming together of various stakeholders confirms the fact that collaboration is the way forward.

Jal came up to me and I asked her if she still remembered the conversation I had with her regarding water conservation some years back. She says she does and says that is what motivated her to take up this as a career. Jal's endeavours have made the dream of a secure environment with replenished natural resources no longer a dream but a reality.