

Listening to Waterman of Rajasthan and the Leftists of West Bengal: Narratives of Rainwater Harvesting¹

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Abstract

Among all the components of environment water has now become the most important for the local communities, policymakers, politicians, international funding agencies, multinational corporations, NGO activists, lawyers, governments and academicians. Never in the history of water the number of stakeholders were so numerous as of today who are equally vociferous and each one of them has constructed their own narrative on the management of nature's one of the most vital life support systems. In this paper a modest and preliminary attempt has been made to compare and contrast some contemporary narratives in the context of rainwater harvesting in India. Broadly, one narrative comes from the Alwar district of Rajasthan which has now become an international event, particularly after the winning of global awards by Rajendra Singh for the amazing grass root level works done by him. The Rajasthan narrative also contains sub-narratives of scientists and a citizen's group. The other narrative is derived from the texts which were constructed by the leftist intellectuals, activists and policymakers of the West Bengal state in India. The materials for these narratives around rainwater harvesting have been collected from various documentary sources like newspapers, journals, books and the author's anthropological fieldworks in some villages of Paschim(West) Medinipur district. The juxtaposition of these narratives and the final ethnographic encounter revealed the wide divergence between government action and grass root activism, because these narratives are not only constructed by their authors in the form of written texts and/or oral deliberations but they also reflected the material world managed by human beings and their ideologies.

'With your Ear to the Ground, Listen'...

Listening to the real life stories of Rajendra Singh (the Stockholm Water Prize winner of 2015)³ was like decoding a modern epic or myth. He is known as the 'Paniwale Baba' among the common people in Rajasthan and as 'Waterman' in the media. ('Pani' is a Hindi word which means water 'paniwale' means one who brings water). But 'Rajendra' or 'Rajinder' is different from any Sadhu or Baba ('Sadhu' or 'Baba' are again Hindi words meaning 'Godman') who has become important in the policy and political arena more than he is in the domain of religion and worship. Recently, in an interview published in the media on 28th March 2015, he has scathingly criticized the present right wing National Democratic Alliance supported Central Government of India led by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi for following the faulty 'contractor-driven democracy' and anti-people water policy of the previous United Progressive Alliance

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³ Rajendra Singh of India is named the 2015 Stockholm Water Prize Laureate, for his innovative water restoration efforts, improving water security in rural India, and for showing extraordinary courage and determination in his quest to improve the living conditions for those most in need. (<http://www.siwi.org/prizes/stockholmwaterprize/laureates/2015-2/>; <http://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-32002306>).

Government headed by Dr.Manmohan Singh, a Cambridge Tripos in Economics and D.Phil. from Oxford University. (Singh 2015). Waterman Rajendra has not built an *ashram* but organizing *Pani Pachayat* or Water Parliament in distant villages in Rajasthan to make people aware of the traditional water conservation wisdom Rajendra had won the Ramon Magsaysay award in 2001 for community leadership in involving people in small watershed management projects. (<http://rmaward.asia/awardees/singh-rajendra/>). He donated the award money (50,000 US Dollars) to Prayavaran Premi Puraskar Trust (Nature Lover Award Trust) in which he was one of the members. But these were his success stories. Let me move a little back in the recent past to know what the TBS and their Waterman had really done for bringing water to one of the most arid areas of India. In this paper, I will first present three narratives, viz. (i) narratives by scientists/technical persons, (ii) narrative constructed by a citizen's group and (iii) the narrative of Rajendra Singh himself on rainwater harvesting and its related activities and then juxtapose those narratives with my ethnographic encounter of rainwater harvesting in the West Bengal state of India. Let me begin with the narrative of the scientists.

Narrative 1: R.N. Athavale and G.D.Agarwal's Account

R.N. Athavale is a noted Geophysicist and Emeritus Scientist with the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research. He is a pioneer on the study of water harvesting structures with over forty years' of research experience in the field.

G. D. Agarwal is retired Professor and former head of the Civil Engineering Department of the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur.

Both Athavale and Agarwal visited Alwar area where the TBS has built Water Harvesting Structures (WHS) and studied them in detail considering the geological and engineering aspects of the water harvesting structures constructed by the TBS. We have collected this account from R.N. Athavale's recently published book "*Water Harvesting and Sustainable Supply in India*" (2003). Let me now turn to Athavale who began with the preliminaries.

Alwar, a district of Rajasthan state is located approximately 175 Km. SW of Delhi. The total area of the District is 8380 Sq.Km and the population in 1991 was 2.3 million. Most of the population lives in valleys...and is dependent on agriculture. The annual rainfall is 600mm. and of this about 80% is received during the four monsoon months of June to September... Water scarcity was at the root of all social and

economic ills. The area was once thickly covered with forest and vegetation but extensive deforestation since 1890 had led to soil erosion, increase in runoff and lowering of the groundwater table. Only 10% of the total agricultural land had supplemental irrigation. Many farms were left fallow, with the male members of the families migrating to cities for employment. The wells went dry in summer and women used to trek several kilometers every day to collect a pot of drinking water. (Athavale 2003).

Athavale then depicted how Rajendra Singh and his Tarun Bharat Sangh intervened in this grim situation of rural poverty and environmental degradation and transformed the whole scenario. In his words.

Volunteers of Tarun Bharat Sangh (Young India Forum), led by the secretary Mr. Rajendra Singh, came to this region in 1985 for rural development work. Discussions with the villagers convinced them that one crucial aspect of their work would have to be water harvesting.... They became aware of the traditional practice of construction of *johads*. *Johads* are micro-percolation tanks, which collect the seasonal runoff water and let it percolate underground. They may be constructed by building a barrier across an ephemeral stream or by excavation of a pond at a natural depression.

Athavale continued his narrative.

Villagers had given up the construction of *johads*... the practice of construction of *johads* was revived by the TBS volunteers. The work was carried out by common participation of the villagers at all levels. They were involved in preparing a map, designing the structure, determining the storage capacity and financing up to 70% of the total cost through local material and free labor. The entire work was planned and executed in each village by the *gram sabha*, a voluntarily elected body having a few women members. The *gram sabha* is different from the gram panchayat, which is the recognized administrative authority in the villages. The womenfolk also contributed at all stages of this activity in some cases even taking the initiative.” But what were the effects of the construction of the *johads*? Athavale continued the narrative in a factual manner: ‘Construction of a few *johads* in some villages led to a remarkable rise in the local water table and as result the movement spread over the region. At the end of 1997, about 3000 water harvesting structures (WHS) were constructed in about 650 villages in the region. The construction of *johads* was accompanied by other activities such as farm and contour bunding, construction of antcuts, check dams etc. and afforestation. The net result was soil and water conservation worked out on a watershed scale. This had a synergistic effect in raising the water table by several meters. The farmers started getting more yields because of the availability of supplemental irrigation and could grow two crops in a year in place of one. More land was brought under cultivation, more fodder was available and milk production increased by an order of magnitude. The drinking water wells became perennial and the womenfolk were saved the daily chore of fetching water from

distant locations. Migration of males to cities for labor stopped and there was a reverse flow of income to the villages. The per capita income has also gone up. The additional money is being used for essential but till now unaffordable items such as clothes, education and house repair.’(Ibid)

The most thrilling effect of rainwater harvesting in the Alwar district of Rajasthan was that the five ephemeral streams of the area, which flowed only during the monsoon months, became perennial. The five streams are Arvari, Ruparel, Sarasa, Bhagani-Tildeh and Jahajwali.

Athavale visited the Alwar area in December 1998 to study the work of TBS, Rajendra Singh wanted a scientific explanation of the phenomena of the rivers becoming perennial. Athavale’s explained in the following manner. The hilly terrain and the precipitation pattern were conducive to quick run off of a large percentage of the rainfall and although the water harvesting structures has not been able to substantially reduce the runoff but has been able to regulate it. Furthermore, the additional recharge caused by various WHS raised the water table. The crystal clear appearance and tranquil flow during December were sufficient to indicate that it was the groundwater, gently oozing from the riverbed, which had made the river perennial.

G.D. Agarwal carried out a more technical evaluation of the various WHS from the engineering point of view. He studied 166 WHS from 36 villages. They had a storage capacity ranging from 500 - 2000 m³/hectare. Athavale said

[Agarwal] found 36% of the structures had the right capacity although no prior calculations were done. Around 13% had the higher capacity than required while 22% had lower capacity. The small capacity is not a disadvantage as such structures were constructed in a series. The best aspect of these structures is that all of them have withstood the vagaries of monsoon for over a decade. Similar structures, constructed by the government departments, are more expensive and less durable. The statistics given by Agarwal are really amazing since the villagers and TBS volunteers did not have engineering expertise and the work was carried out based on traditional knowledge, experience and “gut” feeling. Agarwal found that the average cost of these constructions was Rs. 1.00 to Rs. 2.00/cubic meter of storage, which was much less than Govt. costs and an investment of Rs. 100/- in WHS gave an additional income of Rs. 400 per year to the village community in terms of increased yield of farm produce and fodder.(Ibid)

These are all about the narratives of the technical experts. I will now move into the narrative of the citizen’s group.

Narrative 2: ‘Every Drop of Water that is received through rain belongs to the Irrigation Department’

The construction of *johads* by TBS in Alwar raised an important issue regarding the ownership and management of natural water by the State and the civil society. The Waterman’s non-violent movement to catch rainwater was not an easygoing and smooth affair. Let us go straight into the incidents. On June 20, 2001, the TBS secretary received a notice from the Rajasthan irrigation Department saying that the earthen groundwater recharge structure, which it had helped to build in the village *Lava Ka Baas*, was both technically unsafe and illegal. TBS was given 15 days to remove the structure, failing which action would be taken under the Rajasthan Irrigation and Drainage Act, 1954.

The structure in question was a small earthen embankment over a narrow; almost triangular gorge, in a *nullah* (a narrow creek through which water passed). The total length was only about 225 meters and the average height 15.5 meters. It was built on the community grazing lands of the village. The village had only one hand pump for its entire human and animal population and the villagers invested Rs. 3 lakh (1496 US dollars approximately) of their own meager savings in building the structure. The rest of the funds – Rs. 5 lakh (7400 US dollars approximately) came from an industrialist in Churu district of Rajasthan who gave the money in memory of his mother. The work began in March 2001 and was completed by mid-June.

The Rajasthan state irrigation department conducted a technical study on the rainwater harvesting structure and in its report detailed the technical and legal problems with the structure. The report said that the structure would violate the 1910 agreement between Alwar and Bharatpur districts because in the agreement it was resolved that the monsoon water of the river should be divided on a 45: 55 percent ratio between Alwar and Bharatpur. Moreover, since the villagers did not seek permission from the department before the construction of the dam they had violated the state irrigation Act. (CSE 2001)

On July 1, 2001, the district administration decided to take action by breaking down the structure with the help of the police force. The TBS volunteers were also ready to sacrifice their lives to

protect the small dam. The key opposition leader and former Chief Minister of the State Bhairon Singh Shekhawat condemned the villagers' effort towards the construction of the dam. The then State Irrigation Minister of Rajasthan, Kamla Beniwal declared that every drop of rain belonged to the Government (Ibid.). Two years later, Ramaswamy Iyer, former Secretary, Ministry of Water Resources, Government of India cited this statement in his book as an example of the reassertion of the colonial legacy of the power of the *eminent domain* in the Irrigation Acts of India.(Iyer 2003:85). Meanwhile, a Delhi based environmental NGO, Center for Science and Environment led by Anil Agarwal and Sunita Narain appealed to the Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot to stop the district administration from demolishing the structure. The Chief Minister ordered the district administration not to break the structure but to direct the villagers to deepen the existing spillway of the structure to drain out the water. Meanwhile, the CSE formed a citizen's committee consisting of five eminent persons of the country to enquire into the matter through field visit and meetings with the villagers and the district administrative officials. The group comprised the following members:

Dr. MS Swaminathan, Agricultural Scientist

Dr. NC Saxena, Secretary Planning Commission, Govt. of India.

Dr. MC Chaturvedi, former founder Head of the Dept. of Civil Engineering, Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur and Professor Applied Mechanics Dept. Indian Institute of Technology Delhi.

Dr. G. Mohan Gopal, Director, National Law School of India, Bangalore.

Mr. Om Thanvi, editor Janasatta, New Delhi.

The work of the group was coordinated by CSE.

The report entitled *Technical, Legal and Administrative Issues Concerning the Johad in Lava Ka Baas* was published by CSE in July 2001. Let us have a look at the report.

In this lengthy report the experts observed that the notice served on TBS by the district administration had been prepared without looking into the technical and legal points. Among others the citizen's group raised two crucial points, which I reproduce here verbatim.

- (i) A *johad* is not a large dam as conventionally understood. It is a very small structure, which has developed evolutionally for the storage of water by the people using locally available materials. So the notice served on TBS is legally deficient because the Irrigation and Drainage Act, 1954 explicitly states that it

does not apply to minor irrigation structures. The worst it can do is to reduce the monsoon flow by a very slight amount but at the same time it would also increase the dry season flows in the river because of increased groundwater recharge.

- (ii) Secondly, the district authorities could not produce a copy of the 1910 Bharatpur-Alwar agreement on which they had relied in issuing the notice to TBS. The only relevant document that could be produced by them was a barely legible copy of an apportionment award by a colonial official at the turn of the century which said that the waters of the Ruparel river be divided on a 55-45 basis between Bharatpur and Alwar districts. There was no provision in the award, which could desist Alwar to build a *johad* in the catchment area.

The citizen's report strongly recommended the construction of the johad at Lava ka Baas for its immense beneficial impacts on the economy and ecology of the upstream and downstream villages.(Swaminathan, et.al. 2001)

The then Chief Minister of Rajasthan assured the Citizen's Committee members that he would carefully consider the recommendations of the committee. The *johad* at *Lava Ka Baas* was not broken and survived..

Narrative 3: 'People are like Five Fingers of the Hand'

On 21 January 2002 Rajendra Singh came to Vidyasagar University⁴ to deliver a lecture organized by its Gandhian Studies Centre. A short, bearded man clad in white kurta in his late forties was Rajendra Singh. He had a smiling face and immediately enthralled the audience in the lecture hall by his easy free flowing Hindi. Rajendra began his narrative with his praise of Mangulal – the old man of a village. Rajendra had a Master's degree and he left his government job at Meerut the mid-eighties to dedicate himself in rural development work. With his three friends he reached a village named *Kishori* in Alwar district and the villagers first suspected them as terrorists of Punjab another state of India. They started work by opening a school for the

⁴ Vidyasagar University in West Bengal was established by the state government in 1981 in the erstwhile district of Medinipur to pursue teaching and research in a non-traditional mode to cater to the needs of the local underprivileged groups of people.(<http://www.vidyasagar.ac.in/About/AboutUs.aspx>).

villagers to impart education and health consciousness among them. But there were hardly anyone to listen to Rajendra and his team simply because of the economic crises. There was no crop, no fodder and no water in the village. Rajendra and his friends thought to leave the village but they met Mangulal. After that everything changed. (Guha 2004) Mangu Lal took them to show the old and dead *johad* of the village and advised them to rebuild it with the help of small bunds.(Singh 2002b) Mangu Lal finally told Rajendra: 'Do not talk too much. Dig tanks and build *johads*. You will get results.'(Singh 2002a) The three other members of Rajendra's young Gandhian team including an engineer left the village. Rajendra stayed and by organizing the village youth built up *bunds* (small embankments) to arrest water in the *johad* and waited for rains. Rain came and water could be arrested and after sometime the villagers saw water in their wells, which used to remain dry for years. This news of *Kishori* village spread like a wild fire in the region and the idea of *Jal Swaraj*⁵ came into being in Alwar. When Rajendra ended his speech we were amazed. Then questions began. The answers of Rajendra were equally thrilling like his lecture. 'Did everything pass as smoothly as you describe?' 'Not at all' was Rajendra's immediate reply and he continued.

But Sirs, try to understand how, society really operates on the ground. 'Look at my hand. It has five fingers and each is different from the other. Society also has five different types of people. First, look at the small finger. Some people are like the small finger. They are few in number, their strength is also less. But they criticize any kind of work done by others doing nothing substantial by themselves. Next comes the ring finger. These people are opportunists; they never come forward to do anything. But when something is done they take the advantages. Their number is greater than the small fingers. One should be careful about them. Now look at the middle finger. They are the majority and are ordinary. They remain busy with their family. They do not want to get involved in matters outside the daily chore of life. But they are the hidden power of any society. They are like sleeping lions. Once awake, they make revolutions and they are honest. Next comes the first finger. These people are very upright and angry. They are very honest and criticize all kinds of corruption. But they have two problems. One, they do not want to start good work easily. Second, even when they start good work, they become extremists and may spoil the whole work. So one should also be very much cautious about them. But they are never corrupt. Lastly, we should look at our thumb. By pointing his own right thumb toward the ground Rajendra continued in his own style. These people are very few in number

⁵ *Swaraj* is both a Hindi and Bengali word which generally refer to self-governance or "self-rule", and was used synonymously with "home-rule" by Maharishi Dayanand Saraswati and later on by Mahatma Gandhi, but the word usually refers to Gandhi's concept for Indian independence from foreign domination. . (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swaraj>).Jal is an Indian word. In both Hindi and Bengali it means water.Rajendra Singh was inspired by Gandhi and by *Jal swaraj* he meant control of the common people in water management.

and they are honest, continue to do good work without any kind of propaganda. They never want to come to limelight. They have an inborn capacity to get hold of any good work firmly. But thumb like people have problems too. Very often they forge an alliance with the small finger and cannot do good work with consistency. The TBS always keeps this basic theme of human society whenever its volunteers go for work to build *johads* in the villages of Rajasthan. (Singh 2002b)

I now move on to the narratives of the Leftists of West Bengal on rainwater harvesting.

Narrative 4: Rainwater Harvesting in West Bengal: An ethnographic encounter

Narratives on rainwater harvesting in West Bengal may be viewed under the wider context of Bengali mindset which has grown over the colonial period during which the Bengalis took leadership in the nationalist freedom struggle of India. It was no accident that a famous political leader of Maharashtra, Gopal Krishna Gokhale once commented ‘What Bengal thinks today, India thinks tomorrow’. Recent historians and journalists however, looked at the famous statement of Gokhale⁶ in a critical manner. For example, the comments of Ram Chandra Guha. I quote him.

In the early years of the 20th century, Gopal Krishna Gokhale remarked that 'what Bengal thinks today, India thinks tomorrow'. The claim soon turned hollow as, in quick succession, the capital of British India shifted to New Delhi; Mahatma Gandhi assumed control of the national movement; and Bombay supplanted Calcutta as the financial hub of modern India. In later decades, Bengal and Bengalis collected a long series of laments as, in political and economic terms, they fell further behind other parts of the country. (Guha 2006).

Another commentator, a reputed senior Bengali journalist, Sumit Mitra wrote

Everybody says Bengal had a glorious past and it's a pity that the state has slid into mediocrity.... The ‘glorious past’ theory is embedded in the proliferation of British-owned industries and services in the early 20th century..... Gokhale’s saying, what Bengal thinks today India thinks tomorrow, now sounds like an old curse. Clever Bengalis can still seek shelter in India or abroad. (Mitra 2014).

⁶ Gopal Krishna Gokhale (1866 – 1915) was one of the social and political leaders during the Indian Independence Movement against the British Empire in India. In the early years of the 20th century, Gopal Krishna Gokhale remarked that 'what Bengal thinks today, India thinks tomorrow'. The claim soon turned hollow as, in quick succession, the capital of British India shifted to New Delhi; Mahatma Gandhi assumed control of the national movement; and Bombay supplanted Calcutta as the financial hub of modern India. In later decades, Bengal and Bengalis collected a long series of laments as, in political and economic terms, they fell further behind other parts of the country.

Despite the demystification of the superiority of Bengal, the popular image of Rajasthan in the mainstream Bengali mind during the long communist led government (1977-2011) could not accommodate, let alone applaud, the success of Rajendra Singh. Rajasthan was still popular among the Bengalis for its deserts, forts and historical monuments. Educated Bengalis visited Rajasthan to go back to the medieval period, ride on camels back in the deserts and saw the forts and participated in the local festivals. As of today, there was no discussion or assessment of Rajendra Singh's work on water harvesting in the literature produced by Bengali intellectuals in the recent period. The recently published anthology on water by Paschim Banga Vigyan Mancha (West Bengal Science Forum) was a case in point. It contained an article on the utility of rainwater harvesting. The article described the different methods of rainwater harvesting with diagrams. (Paschim Banga Vigyan Mancha 2005) There was no mention of any effort of rainwater harvesting in India or in West Bengal. In another book written by a noted radical Bengali intellectual the author described in a popular language the stories of rainwater harvesting almost all over India. But it also did not point out the remarkable achievements made by TBS in Alwar, although it mentioned *johads* and similar rainwater harvesting structures in different regions of India. (Mitra 2004) In a small book written by a journalist of *Ganasakti* [the official organ of the Communist Party of India (Marxist)] I found detailed description of the recent struggles of people against water privatization in Bolivia. In fact, the book was dedicated to the 'People of Bolivia'! (Dey 2004). In its chapter on the water crisis in India, the book contained a table showing the eight drought prone provinces of India, which listed Rajasthan having 31 districts out of 32 as being affected by severe water scarcity. There was not a single sentence in the whole book on the valiant struggles of the people of Alwar to reestablish community rights over water resources led by the TBS. The same was true of the recent political Pamphlet on the problem of food security and water written by Proboadh Panda, the then elected Member of Parliament(M.P.) of the Communist Party of India. In the pamphlet the M.P., who was also a member of the Parliamentary Committee on water, described how the corporate sector was hijacking the most valuable resource of nature in various mischievous ways and ended his article with a clarion call for struggle by the toiling masses to ensure food security and access to drinking water. (Panda Undated) Suffice it to say that Mr. Panda's pamphlet also did not provide any instance from Alwar where the fight for water by the people had already set an example. The absence of Rajendra Singh and his marvelous work in organizing the villagers at the grass

roots toward water self sufficiency in the Leftist Bengali intellectual and political narratives were quite conspicuous. The reason probably lay in Rajendra's commitment to Gandhism. The post-Independence little Gandhi was a marginal figure or nobody in Bengali Leftist narrative.

Rainwater harvesting efforts had however begun in West Bengal and it was still a donor driven government agenda executed from the top, not from the bottom. In a recent past, with huge funding from the Central Government under the Rastriya Sam Vikas Yojna (RSVY) Scheme, rainwater harvesting tanks were being excavated in the drought prone districts of West Bengal. I had some personal field level experience of observing some of those recently excavated tanks in the Binpur-II block (the lowest administrative unit in India) of the Jhargram Sub-division in Paschim (West) Medinipur district in connection with an impact assessment survey on the utilization of development inputs given by the government for the betterment of living conditions of one of the most marginalised tribal communities of West Bengal, the Lodhas. Let me narrate my own experience of two such recently excavated rainwater harvesting tanks in a mouza⁷ village named Sankhabhanga about 20kms. from Belpahari block Headquarters on the way towards the Dhalbhumgarh district of the Jharkhand state.

Both these rainwater harvesting tanks were being dug at a high elevation and there was hardly any water in those tanks. About 5 lakh rupees(7400 US dollars approximately) have been spent under the RSVY Scheme to dig up the 50 ft X 30ft X 12ft tanks at Sankhabanga which in inhabited by poor Santal, Munda and a few Lodha families for their economic upliftment. The villagers got daily wages in the excavation work and some of the relatively better off families were thinking of growing fish in the tank if water level increased in the tank. But since the tanks were excavated on a high elevation there was hardly any chance that the tanks would be able to retain rainwater (Guha 2006). After enquiry with the engineers of the concerned department of the district on the choice of the site for these tanks I came to know that under RSVY scheme it was mandatory to excavate such tanks on land voluntarily donated by scheduled tribe or scheduled caste families to ensure better participation by the villagers. The engineers frankly admitted that a family donated the worst type of land for tanks, which would be used for communal purposes in future and add with it the fact that the quality of land normally possessed by the ST and SC families happened to be far worse than those owned by the higher castes in the

⁷ Mouza is a Persian term for the smallest revenue collection unit which is still in use in the governmental land recording system in India.

villages. Moreover, the engineers admitted ‘We had to excavate those tanks within the 2004-2005 financial year’! Thanks to the participatory approach in rainwater harvesting innovated by the Central Government and their timely application by the state government in West Bengal. Should one learn any lesson from Rajendra Singh and works of TBS in rainwater harvesting vis-à-vis community participation in West Bengal and India from the above juxtaposition of the narratives?

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