Driving Toward a Solution for India’s Rivers

By SADHGURU, FOUNDER, ISHA FOUNDATION

MY ENGAGEMENT WITH nature is not as an ecologist or as an environmentalist. I am not a scientist of any kind. My engagement with nature is as a child. Right from my childhood, I have spent more time outdoors than indoors. From the age of 12 to 17, every day I swam in the Kaveri. And when I was 17, I sailed down the Kaveri from Bhagamandala to Mysore on four truck tubes and twelve bamboo. Even now it is difficult to keep me indoors!

My experience of rivers, of water and of nature is not by study, but simply by observation. I have spent weeks on end by myself in jungles, living off the jungle with no external support. There is nothing special in this. Every other creature in the world does this. I have never separated myself from nature. I see myself and everything else as just an element of that.

Soil & Water Are Not Commodities

Your body is just soil and water sitting here. Most people don’t get this point until you bury them. When we are buried, we understand that we are part of the soil. It is because we have some mobility right now that we can’t believe that we are part of the soil. If we were rooted like a tree, we would understand this very clearly. Like the soil, water is also not a commodity. It is life-making material. The human body is 72% water. You are a water body. And on this planet, rivers are the water bodies with which we have the closest relationship. But if you look at our rivers today, they have suffered drastic depletion. Many rivers that have been perennial for millions of years, are turning seasonal in just two generations. And they are going to deplete faster in the coming years. Some of the major rivers have shrunk by 60%. Rivers like Krishna and Kaveri do not touch the ocean for three-fourths of the year. The issue is not limited to a few rivers. Across the country, most of our rivers are drying up.

Many people in the country are in a certain mentality that status quo is the solution. Status quo is not a solution. Status quo means you are resigning yourself to your present predicament, whatever it is. When it comes to our rivers, our water bodies and our soil, you may think the situation is status quo, but nature doesn’t think so. As far as nature is concerned, a serious depletion of soil, water and other life-making material is happening.

In this country, before the 1950s, we had famines that killed in millions. When the horrid act of Adolf Hitler killing six million Jews was unfolding in Europe over a period of six to seven years, in just two and a half months, 3.5 million people were killed in the Bengal famine in 1943. For fifty years, we have avoided another famine. But now we are once again driving ourselves into the same place.

People may not die in such high numbers today, but there will definitely be a serious disruption of life. Once there is no water in the villages, you will have an exodus. You will have people camping in your city. In the streets, all over. If you try to do anything with them, they will get violent. The civil strife that we could be faced with in the next 30-40 years is immense.

This is not about trying to paint a doomsday picture. We are clearly driving in a certain direction, and if we don’t change our direction, we will inevitably go towards certain situations. In the last four years, our pulse import has gone up by seventeen percent.

We are a country which consumes a huge amount of pulses, but we are not able to grow them anymore because there is no water.

Most of these crops are rainwater irrigated, but the rain is not dependable anymore. There was a time when farmers used to know which day it will rain without any meteorological department, but today you have no clue when it will come, so how will you know when to plant?

Reviving Our Rivers

One fundamental reason for the depletion of our rivers is that there is not enough vegetation on the land. In order to feed rivers, the soil around them needs to be wet. Most of our rivers are forest-fed. When the land was covered by rainfall, precipitation gathered in the soil and fed the streams and rivers which then were in full flow.

If there is no forest, there will be no river after some time. This must be understood: people think that because of water there are trees. No, because of trees there is water. So our rivers need sufficient green cover all along their course.

But this is not going to happen with volunteer enthusiasm. You and me planting a few million trees is not going to do it either. We should have done that forty years ago. Now we need an enforceable policy which will determine how we should live around our water bodies. What we should do and what we should not do.

For this, we have come up with a draft policy recommendation put together by a panel of experts and scientists. The solution is that for a minimum of one kilometer on either side of the river and half kilometer for tributaries, we plant native, endemic vegetation.

Wherever it is government land, we create a forest in the entire area — not just restricted to a kilometer. Wherever it is farmer-owned land, there needs to be a shift to tree-based agriculture. This will also result in more than doubling farmers’ income.

If we implement this property in the next eight to ten years, you will see the flows in the river can go up by fifteen to twenty percent in the next 15 to 25 years. But if we wait for 15, 20, 25 years and then attempt to reverse the problem, it will take a very long time to turn around. This is not an activist talk, this is proper science.

This is a responsibility that we owe to the future generation. As a generation of people, we have caused the maximum damage. As a generation, even if we can’t fix everything, at least we must drive in the right direction towards what must be done.

As a step towards this, for 30 days from September 3 to October 2, we conducted the Rally for Rivers, where I personally drove across 16 states and over 3800 kilometers, with 142 experts across the country, to make a strong pitch for saving our rivers.

We have presented the draft River Revitalization Policy to the union government, state governments, various experts and the media. It is also available for public download and there is a three-month window during which we welcome all technical and scientific inputs to further strengthen the policy.

After this, there is a lot of work to turn this into a policy and put it on the ground. We will pursue this on various levels and try to support the government. Whenever they find loopholes and they don’t have the time or energy to fill in those loopholes, we will step in.

If we can arrive at a common policy and start the implementation, it will be a huge and successful step for the future of our nation and for the wellbeing of generations to come.

Note: This Rally Mumbai only for more information on the other city stops visit rallyforrivers.org and get involved! Rally for Rivers is a nationwide campaign to revitalise our rivers.