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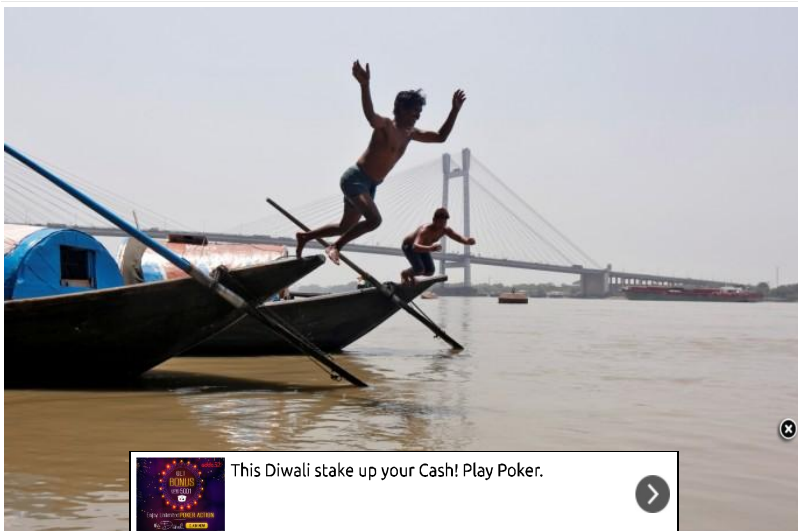
River rally: A good cause with many stumbling blocks

Covering 7,000 kms across 16 states and 22 cities of India, Rally for Rivers seeks the citizen's votes on a river restoration campaign.



Jayalakshmi K

September 28, 2017 10:30 IST



Reuters

Unlike the political rath yatras the country is familiar with, this time around it is a Mercedes yatra that is kicking up dust. Covering 7,000 kms across 16 states and 22 cities of India, this one seeks the citizen's votes on a river restoration campaign.

The 'river rally' spearheaded by Isha Foundation has seen excellent campaigning and marketing to win the support of the masses in a show of strength, aimed at pushing the government into a policy around rivers. Many thousands of missed calls have been recorded as public support for a river revitalisation policy that envisages building a tree cover on both the banks for a kilometre at least. Forest trees on government land, and fruit trees on farmers' land to support livelihoods, has been mooted as a way to keep the soil moist all through the year.

Cheering crowds have been welcoming Jaggi Vasudev aka Sadguru, the founder of Isha Foundation as he moved in the Mercedes from Kanyakumari to Mumbai, going ahead in coming days to finally arrive in the capital on October 2. The suave, popular godman has at times been taking to his mobike on the streets.

After the initial gung ho and publicity, the rally has slowly started gathering criticism from a few experts and media, at large. The 'hype' of planting trees to revive dried rivers, the symbolic missed call and blue T-shirts, the pollution from the Mercedes trail, the bigger issues with rivers that have been ignored, the list goes on.

Yes, many perennial rivers like Godavari run dry for many months and many like the Cauvery and Narmada have much less water than before. Yes, trees help keep the soil on the river banks moist and rejuvenate the river. But what kind of trees? Monocultures of

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damage, have you done hydrology studies on the entire stretch as also on the soil type?

Sand mining has harmed rivers more than anything else. Is the rally not concerned?

Finally, what about the people you will displace in the one kilometre stretch both sides? Who will compensate them? Who will fund the project?

To top it all is the confusion if the river restoration plan encompasses the controversial river linking. Reports quote Jaggi Vasudev both opposing and hailing the idea, while the Isha website has none showing river linking as a part of the rally.

Let us look at the main selling points of the rally. Jaggi Vasudev has in a very evocative video pointed to the state of many of our rivers. Noting that around "25% of India is turning into a desert," he goes on to say that by 2030, the country will only have 50% of the water we need for our survival.

Explaining how rainforests helped gather the precipitation into streams and rivers, Vasudev points to the need to keep the soil around the rivers wet. With much of the land being farmed, the tree cover has been lost and so also the "shade and constant replenishment through leaves and animal droppings". As a result the top layer of the soil leaches out and turns to sand over a period of time, he writes in the Isha blog. Hence, the simplest and most effective approach is to increase the tree coverage around the water bodies.

Mindful of the fact of farmers' livelihood comes the suggestion to grow fruit trees and earn an income.

While detractors have rushed to criticise an assumed monoculture, an Isha spokesperson clarified that the proposed solution includes grasslands, scrubs and wetlands and will be developed for specific rivers based on their ecology and social conditions.

Isha Foundation has been involved in planting, according to claims, over a million sapling in the Tamil Nadu in the last decade. Is the river rally another attempt to create some record in sense of planting, some wonder?

However, going by the stated fact that Isha Foundation has been in talks with scientists and lawmakers, including Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, in drawing the river policy recommendation, one can give it the benefit of doubt.

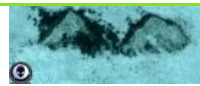
Coming to scientific validation, most of the criticism has come from assumptions about the scheme.

Studies have in fact shown the effectiveness of vegetation in the catchment area in retaining water in streams/rivers. One such is the study conducted by the CES team from IISc in the Western Ghats.

<http://wgbis.ces.iisc.ernet.in/energy/water/paper/Hydrological-Responses/index.html>

"Water bodies can retain water only if physical, chemical and biological integrity of the respective ecosystem are maintained. Physical integrity entails maintaining adequate land cover (of native vegetation) in the catchment," says Dr T V Ramachandra from CES. "Our study shows that the streams with at least 55 to 60% green cover of native species has retained the water for 12 months. Compared to this, streams / rivers with catchment dominated by mono culture (rubber, acacia, eucalyptus) retains the water only for 6-8 months while streams with degraded catchment has water only during the monsoon."

The chemical integrity would entail ensuring that only treated sewage or industrial effluents are let into the respective system, while maintaining biological integrity and helping aquatic life flourish would help in sustaining livelihood of people, he says. The IISc study shows a well managed wetland ecosystem provides goods to an extent of Rs 10,500/hectare/day compared to the polluted wetlands where it is Rs 20 per hectare per day.



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Actress Kareena Kapoor Khan shoots for Veere Di Wedding at Mumbai Airport.



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TOPICS

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indigenous species of vegetation in the catchment and preferably this should be a mix of herbs, shrubs and trees.

The Energy and Wetlands Group at CES was also responsible for growing a mini-forest in the research institution campus at Bangalore. The two hectare plot was afforested with 500 saplings of 49 Western Ghat species. Not only did it revive the groundwater table in the region from 150-170 feet to 10-15 feet, it has considerably reduced the temperature of the surroundings.

Incidentally, another godman, Ravi Shankar of the Art of Living has also been at river restoration. Work began in 2013 on a 460 sq km stretch of the Kumudvati river, a tributary of river Arkavathi that originates from Shivagange hills in Nelamangala taluk, west of Bangalore city. Volunteers of the organisation alongwith HAL staff worked in 280 odd villages of the region to spread awareness, revive local water bodies and get farmers to shift to horticultural plantations for water conservation. Finally, last year Hindustan Aeronautics Limited completed the Rs 4.77 crore Kumudvathi river rejuvenation project as part of its CSR activity. While many of the local water bodies have sprung to life since then, the success of the project a la revived river will be known after three seasons of rain.

A similar but bigger scale of things like the current river rally plans is definitely a good thing for the thirsty nation. Calling it as interference with nature and playing god is merely bickering. If, as humans we can destruct nature thoughtlessly, trying to reinstate rivers is only our responsibility, and nothing else.

Will farmers shift to horticultural plantations? Will the sand mafia be smothered? Before answering those troublesome questions, there is an important aspect to river restoration after physically reviving them. How do we sustain them?

The recent extreme rainfall witnessed in many Indian cities saw a lot of water go down the drain. Water that if harvested could serve the entire needs of a family for a year. Though rainwater harvesting is mandatory on paper, most houses in Bangalore still do not have the required facility in place. Many homes use Cauvery river water to clean their porches and cars. At a time when water disputes are the norm, and considering that the water is pumped from a 100 km away using a lot of energy, this misuse is criminal.

How many who stood holding the river rally pamphlets and donning blue T-shirts are conscientious users of water? How many are not guilty of throwing a tetrapack into a river at some picnic spot, or wasting water at home?

Assuming we are able to revive the rivers and keep them flowing all year around, what assurance that we won't defile it? That we won't slowly start encroaching its banks, hacking the trees, pilfering the sand, throwing muck into it, over-extracting water and more? A habit is difficult to change.

We have always found ways to circumvent and overlook the law. Will another river policy help?

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