

Open Letter to Satguru (and other “Hurry Babas”)

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Respected Sri. Satguru,

It is with much interest that I saw your “Rally for Rivers” program. I said, Wow, some religious leader, a “Guru” is thinking about ecology, environment and rivers and even has a definite proposal for reviving rivers, bringing back the disappearing ground water, preventing soil erosion, etc.etc. Next I saw a full page advertisement in TOI and noticed that your partners are the multinational companies. Next I saw that you have been allotted 400 acres in the new capital region of AP for the Satguru Foundation, for what purpose it is not clear. I also read the report on making checkdams in the Kutch region of Saurashtra and the benefits of that program for farmers and ecology.

This letter is not just about rally for rivers but expresses my concerns about how “development” is happening in this country. And how the Babas are all in it.

Leaving aside whether plantation of trees for one kilometer along the rivers is technically sound or not, I wish to bring to your notice two other aspects and I am sure you will give it due consideration.

- As you know there has been a lot of debate in recent years about land acquisition from farmers for non- agricultural purposes. Governments have been short circuiting due legal processes to acquire land from farmers and giving them to industry and the likes of you, for so called public purposes. Huge amount of land have been diverted in this manner with all kinds of promises- jobs, social and physical infrastructure facilities, etc.- which are never fulfilled. Displacement and lack of adequate compensation and rehabilitation is an old story, you have to see to believe what the oustees go through; but the scale of it has increased phenomenally in the recent years as the demands from industry, commerce and service sectors have grown. Huge chunks of land, in fact much more land than what is really needed for the purpose in hand is often acquired by the Government and passed on to the private parties, all in the name “developing” some project or the other.

I can understand that the industrialists and businessmen do this. But why should the spiritual leaders do the same? We, ordinary people, don't associate spiritual leaders with greed (much less with rape!), and exploitation. I find the Auroville now wants to expand its acreage and asking for funds. We already know about Baba Ramdev's ashram- empire. The more recent Dera Sacha is said to own 700 acres! Even educational institutions are demanding land of hundreds of acres! For an imaginary future! The capital region of Andhra Pradesh has, by circumventing the Act of 2013, dispossessed thousands of small farmers, tenant farmers, landless people and fisher-folks, with lots of promises for a rosy future, even as doubts have been expressed about the environmental suitability of the site and legal cases are pending in the courts.

The massive scale of every project and the great hurry to “develop” brings a bulldozing attitude, internalized and crystallized into an aptitude and habit (!) into every project, with a sense of self-righteousness bordering on arrogance, with little regard to what they are doing to ordinary people of this country or little regard to the technical soundness of their program. Every program has to be massive with partnership not with organizations like the Tarun Bharat Sangh which worked for a decade or two to revive a small river, but with millionaire businessmen; money flowing from, not ordinary people of this country, but the corporates who wield the millions. And all this would be done in the name of the poor people!

And then there is this hurry. Everybody seems to be in a hurry to develop, expand! In this great hurry to develop, they don't care if they are dispossessing the farmers and the poor people of their only asset, and means of income, namely a small piece of land, on which they grow crops to pacify their (hu)angry stomachs, atleast for part of the year, supplementing their incomes by laboring in other people's lands and other sectors. I am farming in the Chittoor district of Andhra Pradesh and I have personal experience of how the peasants have become beggars due to faulty policies of the government (central and state) - whether it is a matter of land acquisition to prices or providing basic incomes.

Nowadays there are no pilots, there are no independent evaluations, no conflict of interest. For instance your Foundation might have done wonderful work building checkdams in the Kutch region, but the person who wrote a report about it is also from the same Foundation! I heard a few years ago that pelicans and flamingoes and several other migratory birds have stopped coming to Gujarat lakes because of several reasons-pollution and indiscriminate construction, including indiscriminate construction of checkdams! I am wondering if this is also the case even in your rally for the rivers program. (Sir, I am getting ready for the brickbats from the trolls). As one of your critics said the real problem for rivers is pollution from sewerage and industry, sand mining, encroachments in the catchments, etc.etc. and afforestation is only one of the “polite” solutions; and even that may or may not be sound in all places.

As you know there are no short cuts in life. The real long term challenge is not to dispossess small farmers of their land and other assets, not to force them into growing trees through a policy of one size fit all but to organize them into viable (not profiteering) economic enterprises – (some kind of producer cooperatives); and to empower them with a political voice and participation, so that they can rightfully have a place of dignity in our society. This is what was aimed, for instance, in the case of women savings groups (the DWCRA program of self-help groups of women) in a few states with some success, whatever was the ruling party. Small groups of women have been federated into a pyramid structure with much handholding from the government, banks and NGOs. Apart from the savings, it gave the women the confidence to negotiate with the outside world including banks and bureaucracy, learn to handle money, and feel empowered within the family.

This is not to pour cold water on your yatra dream of mobilizing a large numbers of people for trees and rivers; Pl.do it. If I were you I would have called all the people who are already working on/for rivers, water issues and so on for a dialogue, put forward your proposal and test it out with them. I would have done the yatra with them. Then I would try the idea as a pilot project in one stretch along the Cauvery river. I am sure you will find hundred genuine problems you will have to deal with.

Earlier too such programs for social change have happened- Sewagram of Gandhi is a major example. Auroville is another. Dayalbagh. But they were at a scale which as local, small, and therefore fine tuned to local conditions, physical, social and cultural. Even then they had problems in replication. But nowadays every single idea, which has caught the imagination of the social, industrial or spiritual guru, has to be on a massive scale, done with bulldozer power, while the ordinary people have no other choice except to watch in awe and helplessness, left to their own devices to fend for themselves after losing their assets; (there is not much succor in other sectors as employment growth in the other sectors have been negative due to continuing recession in the world, and more so after demonetization in our country - another instance of hurried foot in the slush). Meanwhile the followers of these highflying industrial and spiritual gurus are playing the jalara, singing the bhajans of their gurus, trolling everyone who says anything different, abusing and even physically injuring them.

This is Sir, I humbly submit, "Development by Dispossession."

There is beautiful proverb in Telugu which you probably know: "The husband of Mrs. Hurry's is Mr. Delay." Allow me to remind you of another great saying, "The way to hell is paved with good intentions."

I am sure you will think about the views expressed above and do the needful.

Take care, I bless you to bless me, we are all in the same boat.

Yours sincerely,

Uma Shankari.

Contact the

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