

Industry as a stakeholder in revitalizing India's rivers

Water is a resource that has to be managed. Unfortunately, in the last few decades, we have not paid attention to this. We are destroying the nation's soil and water resources at such a rate that in 15-20 years' time, we will not be able to feed or quench the thirst of our—now 1.3 billion—people. It is to make the people of this nation conscious of this that over the last month, from 3 September to 2 October, we conducted a Rally for Rivers.

This was a nation-wide campaign to create awareness in the country that our rivers are depleting. I personally drove over 9,300km with 142 events across 16 states, to make a strong pitch for saving our rivers.

On 3 October, we presented a River Revitalization Policy Recommendation draft to the prime minister. This draft is now being distributed to the state governments, various experts, the media, and is also available for public download.

Essentially, most of our rivers are forest-fed. When the land was covered by rainforest, precipitation gathered in the soil and fed the streams and rivers that were then in full flow. But a large part of India now is farmed land, so if we want our rivers to flow, we need to ensure there is tree-cover for a minimum of 1 km on either side of the river.

In farmer-owned land, we must support farmers to shift to tree-based agriculture. Wherever there is government land, we create forests with endemic vegetation in the entire area—and not restricted to the 1km minimum.

This can happen effectively only if there is an enforceable policy that determines how we live around our water bodies, what we should do and what we should not do. The draft policy recommendation that we have presented details these aspects.

There was a phenomenal response to the rally. People from the media and others are telling me it was a landmark people's movement in post-independence India. People have given over 120 million missed calls so far. A missed call is your vote for river revitalization.

Revitalizing our rivers is going to take at least 20-25 years, which means four to five governments will come and go. If we want to keep all these governments focused on this work, the nation must give a resounding "Yes!" to river revitalization. A missed call is a means of doing that.

These last few weeks have been the awareness phase of the campaign. The next step is to sort out the legislative, legal and administrative challenges, and the complexities of implementation. We will pursue this on various levels and support the government where they need support.

We are also looking to set up modules to demonstrate how farmers' income can increase three to eight times by shifting to tree-based agriculture. We have already done this on a small scale but now we are working on large-scale modules across 50- or 100-km stretches of the rivers.

Industry plays a very important role in this and is an important stakeholder in river revitalization. Tree-based products such as fruits have a shorter shelf life, so industry must invest in value addition and in creating supply chains to make it viable for the farmer. Right now, the poor farmer invests in some crop and many a time loses his investment, goes into debt, and commits suicide.

Only if everything goes well does the industry come in. That is not the way it should be done. The industry must invest first so that a base price is guaranteed for a crop. Then the farmer can grow

the crop. We are also looking at how industry can invest in micro-irrigation so that it can be done profitably, reduce water usage and increase crop yield.

Private players can also play a role in tackling pollution. This is a major issue that our rivers are facing, but it is also one that we have the necessary technology to address. It just takes an appropriate system and the commitment to execute.

For example, the private sector can set up water treatment facilities, which are paid for by industry and citizens according to their sewage output, which can be metered. Just as electricity, water and gas are metered, sewage should be too. A public-private partnership system needs to be established and run sustainably and efficiently. The way the roads in our country have been developed in such a short span of time is a case in point to show that such initiatives are possible.

If we truly want to revitalize our rivers, it is very important that everyone participates. If we arrive at a common policy and start the implementation soon, it will be a huge and successful step for the future of our nation and for the well-being of generations to come.

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