

# Rally For Rivers

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A PEOPLES' MOVEMENT  
TO ADDRESS WATER SCARCITY AND CONFLICT

Yuri Jain  
RALLY FOR RIVERS, INITIATED BY ISHA FOUNDATION

It is indeed an honour to be in front of this august gathering. In this session, we would aim to demonstrate that the issues and recommendations of 'Blue Peace', and those of 'A matter for survival' - are being put into action in a mammoth-scale on-ground initiative called 'Rally For Rivers'. We will distill the various underlying principles and learnings that are unfolding in this initiative. And we aim to show that these learnings are globally relevant and can serve as a model for catalyzing on-ground change at large scale.

We live in an interconnected world - in fact a water-connected world. Nothing typifies our interconnection more than the borderless nature of water - the very stuff of life that makes up both three-fourths of the planet and three-fourths of the human body. Coming from that starting point, it is really unfortunate to note that we have taken the one thing that inextricably binds us all - and turned it into a source of division, conflict, and seemingly unending strife.

And yet, one need not despair at this unfortunate artefact of human creation. As Sadhguru, the Founder of Isha Foundation and the inspirational force behind the Rally for Rivers initiative, points out, there is no problem that can't be tackled with the power of an awakened human intelligence. This is especially so for an idea whose time has come - the idea that Water can transform from being a source of internecine conflict to becoming the cornerstone for peace and human well-being.

So let me start by defining the problem we were aiming to solve. South Asia is home to 25% of humanity. The major river systems of Ganges, Brahmaputra and the Indus are all shared between various countries. Further more, India is a world unto itself with 36 constituent political entities - governed by no less than 14 different political parties. And water in India is a 'concurrent cum state' subject - implying that decision-making is in the hands of individual states, and not the national government. This as you can see, is a recipe for continuous water strife and struggle.

What has made matters dramatically worse is that in the short span of the last seventy years, the per capita availability of water in India has declined by 70% - from 5177 cubic metres per capita in 1951 to about 1600 cubic metres per capita today. So India has transitioned from being a water surplus country to a water stressed one - in less than a century. It is estimated that all the major river systems have declined by an average 40% or more in these years. Many perennial rivers have turned seasonal, some don't reach the sea for many months of the year, and some have

totally dried up. The Water Resources Group has estimated that by 2030 India will have only half the water it needs.

In this context, water strife has become the unfortunate norm. Endless government commissions have sought to resolve the deadlocks between various states – but to little effect. As an example, take the conflict between two states – Tamil Nadu and Karnataka over the river Kaveri. The genesis of this modern day conflict can be traced back all the way to an 1892 agreement between the then prevalent Kingdom of Mysore, and the Madras Presidency. A century of negotiations, countless legislative and judicial interventions later, the problem remains largely unresolved.

Further, a telling commentary on this problem is that the vast majority of inter-government discussion, civil society effort, and media attention has focused on the shorter term issues of how to more equitably share the ‘available’ water - by way of river-linking, by way of dams, or by way of effective pollution control.

So this was the backdrop in which Sadhguru conceived of the Rally For Rivers initiative. He re-shaped the prevailing Water discourse in three fundamental ways:

- **Defining the real underlying problem**  
Firstly, virtually no one was talking about the precipitous dwindling supply of water - which obviously makes the task of securing water sharing agreements that much more difficult. So, Sadhguru focused on how to enhance water supply. If water supply increases everyone gains. It is apparent that aligning opposing sides behind this kind of win-win proposition is so much easier.
- **Focus on the solution, not just on the problem**  
Secondly, while everyone is quick to talk about the problem virtually no one was offering a solution - and a solution that is both technically effective, and has also been conceived of in an insightful and pragmatic way that takes full cognizance of the challenges relating to actually implementing proposed plans on the ground.
- **Sharp, succinct articulation of recommendation aligns everyone**  
Lastly, the nub of the solution for river revitalization was articulated in a succinct and sharp way – and this played a key role in aligning all

stakeholders. As an example, while the detailed technical recommendations of the Rally For Rivers were captured in a 760 page tome, the headline thought was simple - we need to plant trees for atleast one kilometer on either side of the entire length of the river beyond its floodplain mark. And this was to be done in two ways - where the land was privately owned we would persuade farmers to move to a more remunerative form of livelihood based on tree-based agriculture. And where the land was publicly owned we would do afforestation with appropriate endemic and biodiverse species.

Having described that, what I would now like to do is to distill some of the underlying principles that Sadhguru used to actually shape this mass movement.

1. ***Inclusive multi-stakeholder approach***

First and foremost, we need to recognise that a plan to substantially enhance water supply by planting hundreds of millions of trees cannot be done by any one entity. This requires a full scale peoples' movement with the active involvement of all stakeholders.

Consequently, the Rally for Rivers campaign sought to proactively bring on board all the central and state governments, the various NGOs, the youth, the public at large, and other stakeholders like corporates and media houses.

2. ***Gaining long-term government commitment in a democracy***

The second underlying principle was to recognize that in a political democracy with elections every five years, it is difficult for any government to take on initiatives involving large budgetary outlays, if the beneficial outcomes are going to come after a decade or two.

This is aggravated by the fact that for a developing country there are many pressing short-term developmental requirements that compete for resources with longer term environmental needs. So the only way these long-term environmental actions will be taken up, is we help equip the government with an explicit peoples' mandate to that effect. This is exactly what Sadhguru did. He created a public campaign that asked people, for the sake of their children, to seek change that would inevitably span many future governments. And he asked the people to express their mandate by casting a 'vote' for this change – eg. via the simple mechanism of giving a 'free missed call'. An

incredible 162 million people responded.

3. ***Getting Economics to catalyse, not hinder, Ecological benefits***

The third principle that Sadhguru pointed out was that in the context of a developing country any fight between 'economics' and the 'environment', will invariably be won by economics. So what we need to do is to create an initiative where we get economics to actually become the catalyst that brings about the desired environmental gains. The way in which Sadhguru sought to achieve this was to create an intervention model that would dramatically increase the incomes of these otherwise impoverished rural farmers by five fold - over the next ten years.

4. ***Creating an end-to-end holistic intervention***

The fourth underlying tenet was that to effectively tackle the water issue we would require an end-to-end holistic approach. And for doing this we would have to be prepared to get into many other seemingly unrelated areas of effort. Let me give you three examples of this:

i. ***Dramatically reducing water consumption by redefining agricultural practice***

More than 80% of the water consumption in India is by agriculture. Therefore one key part of addressing the water resource challenge was to re-invent agriculture with a dramatically lower water usage profile. This in turns involves bringing into play many new public policies and sub-initiatives - for example, those related to moving from cash-crops to tree based agriculture; and those relating to micro-irrigation.

ii. ***Agri-marketing linkages to create economic gains in a sustainable fashion***

Another example - the imperative of dramatically improving rural incomes implied looking at a whole gamut of things: eg. deciding how to aggregate farmers with small land holdings into a larger marketing organization; figuring out tieups with end-user industries to improve farmer incomes; and building rural infrastructure via public-private partnerships. Isha's own

on-ground experience with Farmer Producer Organisations played a vital part in helping shape the required public policy changes.

iii. ***Ensuring ecological sustainability of farm initiatives***

The last example - we also need to ensure that the gains for rural communities are sustainable in the long run. This in turn implied looking at the fundamentals of not only water, but also looking at soil fertility - and ensuring that the required steps are being taken to enhance the organic content of soil, and move in phases towards chemical-free agriculture.

5. ***Shaping a peoples' movement to drive deep-rooted and sustainable change***

The fifth major principle, relates to how to create a large-scale peoples' movement. Its pertinent to note that in recent times there have been few examples of large environmental movements that have actually made a significant dent on the original problem - especially so in a geography of the size and complexity of India. So how was this done?

One can discern five different thematic strands. Let me describe these in turn:

a. **Creating a technically robust recommendation**

First we needed to get the science and the technical recommendations in place. This involved getting together about twenty leading multi-disciplinary experts, and working to create a comprehensive set of technical recommendations.

b. **Mobilising the public - in an all-inclusive manner**

With the technical recommendations in place, we set into motion the task of mobilizing the country. Fundamentally this was possible only because of the leadership that Sadhguru provided – importantly underpinned by his public stature, charisma, and personal drive. As an example, Sadhguru himself drove 9300 kilometers from one end of the country to the other - doing over 150 public events in a span of just 30 days. The events were all celebratory in nature, involved no

finger-pointing, and were designed to be all-inclusive. As a consequence, he shared these event platforms not just with the people and the youth, but also with the government, and with politicians from across the political spectrum. Let me give you a specific example - Sadhguru brought farmers from the states of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka together on the banks of the contested river Kaveri to demonstrate that the approach of enhancing water supply was the key to unlock a 125-year-old conflict on sharing the waters of Kaveri.

**c. Volunteerism - the central spine of the movement**

As all of this was falling into place, we had to build the required peoples' capability that would become the central spine on which this entire movement would be pivoted. Sadhguru came up with the idea of creating a force of dedicated youth volunteers - young adults who were willing to look beyond the narrow confines of political and geographic affiliations and dedicate themselves to a common cause.

Sadhguru let out an impassioned call, and it was amazing to see how thousands of youth from across all the different states responded. An intensive six-month training program was then put together for the first group of 100 people - covering not only technical training but also giving them an in-depth exposure relating to important implementation and execution aspects. We call this ground-force 'Nadi Veeras' - ie. The 'Brave River Warriors'.

**d. Helping shaping government policies, and programs**

With this central spine of human capability in hand, the next steps were two-fold. We had to work with the central national government for creating all the enabling policy frameworks. And we also had to work with individual state governments who actually control on-ground program design and implementation. Both these tasks are now successfully in progress. The national government has issued an advisory to all state governments regarding the principles of river revitalization based on the recommendations of the Rally For Rivers. And at the state government level we now have memorandums of understanding in place for creating on-ground programs with six

different governments - those of Maharashtra, Karnataka, Punjab, Assam, Chattisgarh and Gujarat.

**e. Deep-rooted community involvement and trust building**

The last thematic strand relates to creating the necessary conducive conditions for local implementation. This involves building trust with the local communities, and addressing the needs and concerns of all constituents of the local milieu. One key way in which this is being done is to involve all the appropriate local stakeholders in various stages of program design and implementation. The other key aspect is to build strong linkages with local NGOs - and in fact, work through them.

So this is what we wanted to share with you. You will no doubt recognize many of these underlying principles as consistent with the tenets of Blue Peace. We believe that the Rally For Rivers approach, with its fundamentally all-inclusive character, will be useful in addressing many of the Water related challenges and hotspots in the world.

For us at the 'Rally for Rivers' water is not just a resource to be managed. It is the very stuff of life.

It is our lifeline.

It highlights the inter-connectedness of all beings.

And it shows how our planet sustains us all.

When that awareness comes, Peace will be but a natural by-product.

Thank you for your attention and time.