24th September 2019

Reg.: Concerns over your endorsement of ‘Cauvery Calling’ promoted by Isha Foundation, India

Dear Mr. DiCaprio,

You have taken enormous responsibility in playing a leading role in promoting rights of indigenous communities, protecting wildlife, case sensitively promoting conservation strategies, and, needless to state, pushing for clear action to tackle global warming. Your actions are globally influential and help boost, and immensely, positive and progressive efforts for human rights and the environment. Which, we are sure, you undertake with necessary and due caution. It appears to us, the *Coalition for Environmental Justice in India*, however, that you may not have been appropriately advised in supporting the ‘[Cauvery Calling’](https://www.ishaoutreach.org/en/cauvery-calling) campaign advanced by Jaggi Vasudev of [Isha Foundation](https://www.ishaoutreach.org/).

Cauvery, from its origins in the high mountains of Kodagu in Karnataka, is a river that drains a substantial part (over 81 000 sq. km.) of southern India. Without its life nurturing flows, livelihoods of millions of farmers and fisherfolk would collapse, and agriculture and cities would disintegrate into chaos. Besides, biodiversity, forests, grasslands and the massive deltaic region that this river nurtures would be devastated.

In recent decades, a slew of projects have been promoted by diverting the river’s waters with massive dams, to support water intensive agriculture, generate hydropower and bring water to ever expanding urban and industrial projects, all without informed and democratic decision making. Thereafter, the mostly untreated refuse water from cities and industries is drained back into the river, causing havoc to her life sustaining capacities – making stretches of the river amongst the most polluted in India. Yet, Cauvery’s waters are a critical resource to four southern states of India, and are being contested over intensely, resulting even in violent conflicts between peoples of the states of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Clearly, Cauvery needs all the help she can get now. In that sense, your support to rejuvenate Cauvery is very welcome.

However, the ‘Cauvery Calling’ campaign is not a programme that comprehends the river basin’s realities, and her future well being. It appears to be a programme that presents, rather simplistically, that the river can be saved by planting trees on banks of her streams, rivulets, tributaries and the floodplains of the river.

Planting trees is welcome, but only when it is done where needed, and by choosing appropriate species. It is a process that is best done consultatively, based on local needs, and sensitive to local ecological dynamics. Besides, such a programme must be undertaken with appropriate social action – ground up, involving constitutionally empowered Panchayats, and statutory Forest Rights Committees, Biodiversity Management Committees, Ward Committees, etc. Needless to add, tree planting is only one of the many *many* activities that are needed to rejuvenate the river; and tree planting alone won’t achieve the critical task of saving Cauvery. It is also important to note that even when tree planting is taken up in the most appropriate way, as described above, there is a critical need to stop mindless destruction of forests and watersheds of the Cauvery, which is taking place extensively across the rivers’ watersheds, all in the name of ‘development’.

The tree planting promoted by Isha Foundation, by inviting people to donate money to plant 2,420,000,000 trees, may appear incredibly attractive. But on deeper investigation it comes across as a method that promotes a monoculturist paradigm of landscape restoration which people of India have rejected long ago. Besides, such a programme could create unintended and unforeseen social and ecological consequences, as planting trees in certain regions (grasslands and floodplains for instance) could result in drying up of streams and rivulets, and destruction of wildlife habitats. Further, it can also lead to encroachments of the floodplains and riverbeds, as has happened at numerous places.

Isha Foundation has very low credibility in conforming with Indian laws protecting human rights and environment. No less an authority than the Comptroller and Auditor General of India, a constitutional body, has [reported](https://cag.gov.in/sites/default/files/audit_report_files/Report_No_7_of_2017_-_Economic_Sector_Government_of_Tamil_Nadu.pdf) that the foundation has built its headquarters into an elephant corridor and on [land belonging to Adivasis](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=2ahUKEwjilKua2OnkAhWw6nMBHd0fDxgQFjAAegQIABAB&url=https%3A%2F%2Fthewire.in%2Ffeatured%2Fisha-foundation-coimbatore-land-grabbing&usg=AOvVaw3XO5EJlah2XnsAHAv34BXr) (original inhabitants of India, who are indigenous communities). It is also noted that Mr. Jaggi Vasudev and Isha Foundation have often resorted to populist and simplistic methods on various public concerns, and thus aiding denigration of systematic and serious efforts necessary to address complex environmental and social justice causes.

As a matter of fact, a [Public Interest Litigation has already been filed](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=2ahUKEwjhjfbA2OnkAhU1g-YKHUYkAqEQFjAAegQIABAB&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.livelaw.in%2Fnews-updates%2Frestraint-jaggi-vasudevs-isha-foundation-cauvery-calling-project-148097&usg=AOvVaw31xBHKLJZ68jETdNiAMem0) in the Karnataka High Court against fund collection for ‘Cauvery Calling’. The [link you have shared](https://www.facebook.com/LeonardoDiCaprio/posts/10156285612532116) on your Facebook page of the Isha website reveals that the volume of money being gathered is over Rs. 10000 crores (US$ 1.5 billion). The implications of such massive funds being made available to a private foundation, particularly one that as a very weak, and rather dubious, record of compliance of human rights and environmental laws, is quite worrying. ‘Waterman of India’ Rajendra Singh has remarked that Jaggi Vasudev’s ‘Cauvery Calling’ is a campaign “[just to earn name and money](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=9&ved=2ahUKEwjfkqW_2enkAhXC4XMBHdYuDLMQFjAIegQIBRAB&url=https%3A%2F%2Fscroll.in%2Flatest%2F862029%2Fjaggi-vasudevs-rivers-campaign-meant-for-fame-power-money-says-indias-waterman-rajendra-singh&usg=AOvVaw0x3uMGYIlRJCM-FIvH6bpJ)”.

It is our considered view that you may have been poorly advised, or not have had the time to personally investigate the back ground of the promoters of ‘Cauvery Calling’, before you embraced the programme with this message on Facebook: *“India’s rivers are severely endangered with many of its smaller rivers vanishing. Join*[*Sadhguru*](https://www.facebook.com/sadhguru/?__tn__=K-R&eid=ARBBf0M4v_FIfjvqVfEXlbg0Ukyzqog2OtKQ4vp_P3LengizcrNfBUgtMtWVF82aisH9_00v55OKXp0H&fref=mentions&__xts__%5B0%5D=68.ARAvK_fPTJfDajsaRnNTYGlLgrvYKPJ5at4DdnlGzxgHFZkX4vZ0n3lRFW_PUqgARDxckTB1HINFSU1ewB1ZbwQuGsEGrYnhEhdJYKHAnPoR2vhdV2Fzjmi8lmzg5_hMFXP0Hk5-mU3-pNB5KiQiBWms7VnnYZuhVBGboX11mwtsltmO2TMfjxh3tm3Lt8Kk0s050NGz1wUrbGvNV_hs69QTBUFhn6Qs-Cx6Lr0CwEtuZAhjDeTGKFJWag9pMQwW7tNEHZaWZQ8iDTz14jETDJkMEYulgI7BX1ndl8IrwjNein4gKPgwS5CG3mwbRL-9-h6uH8PjILZwe44)*and the*[*Isha Foundation*](https://www.facebook.com/IshaUSA/?__tn__=K-R&eid=ARDks06GgtcSldPgXRuy8O6PbGWf9dMWkAuO-zkOcyw_dlJiAp2mDu3Eublszu6EUs08tZCarqD_Za4y&fref=mentions&__xts__%5B0%5D=68.ARAvK_fPTJfDajsaRnNTYGlLgrvYKPJ5at4DdnlGzxgHFZkX4vZ0n3lRFW_PUqgARDxckTB1HINFSU1ewB1ZbwQuGsEGrYnhEhdJYKHAnPoR2vhdV2Fzjmi8lmzg5_hMFXP0Hk5-mU3-pNB5KiQiBWms7VnnYZuhVBGboX11mwtsltmO2TMfjxh3tm3Lt8Kk0s050NGz1wUrbGvNV_hs69QTBUFhn6Qs-Cx6Lr0CwEtuZAhjDeTGKFJWag9pMQwW7tNEHZaWZQ8iDTz14jETDJkMEYulgI7BX1ndl8IrwjNein4gKPgwS5CG3mwbRL-9-h6uH8PjILZwe44)*in their fight to preserve the Cauvery River.”* Indeed the first part of your message is most welcome. However, we urge you to withdraw the second part of the message, as it amounts to promoting Isha Foundations ‘Cauvery Calling’. This is not a programme that will protect Cauvery, her forests, her biodiversity, her children, and her childrens’ children. It will certainly not save Cauvery. On the contrary, support for this kind of a campaign sets a very wrong precedent.

We invite you to the Cauvery basin so you may appreciate first-hand the kind of hard work essential to safeguard Cauvery for perpetuity. It will also be an opportunity to experience the deep humanisms intrinsic to peoples of the Cauvery basin, and a time to notice the amazing natural diversity that abounds her graceful spread across South India. We would like you to join our grassroots based, consultative, collective and networked efforts, to rejuvenate Cauvery. Meanwhile, we urge you to withdraw your call for support to ‘Cauvery Calling’ for reasons cited above.

Sd/-

Handed over by:

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On behalf of Coalition for Environmental Justice in India

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**Endorsed by:**

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All India Union of Forest Working People

All India Women’s Hawkers Federation

Alternative Law Forum Karnataka

Aruna Rodrigues, Anti-GMO Activist, Mhow

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South Asia Network of Dams, Rivers & People (SANDRP)

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