

24/01/2022

Dear John

We hope this letter finds you in a great start to the year 2022.

We are writing to you as Indian citizens working in Germany and who have more than 15 years of experience in the environment and development sector in India as well as internationally.

This particular letter is in the context of the speaker **Mr Jaggi Vasudev** or who calls himself Sadhguru, and who appears to be a prominent speaker in the Global Landscape Forum¹. In the world of influencers and celebrity value, we can understand the reasons why he is a chosen speaker at the global platform but having said that we have reasons for being concerned about his perennial presence at the Global Landscape Forum.

There are many prominent environmentalists and ecologists in India who have shared an outrage on many statements and policy positions released by the “Guru”. The very latest one being - Spiritual leader Sadhguru told citizens that "air pollution is not a reason to prevent kids from experiencing the joy of firecrackers". He, however, asked people supporting the ban to walk to their office for three days as a "sacrifice"².

Then there was the incident that took place at the London School of Economics where Sadhguru, delivered a talk at an event titled ‘*Youth and Truth: Unplug with Sadhguru*’. Later, he had a discussion with Bilal Bin Saqib, a Muslim student, during which he called the latter a “Taliban” and a “Talibani” and presented an off-the-cuff explanation after reasonable outrage³.

These may be some of the minor issues but there are bigger contentious issues that should particularly be of your concern.

#1) Isha Foundation is headquartered on a sprawling 150-acre campus in the foothills of the Velliangiri hills, sprawling 150-acre campus of 77 large and small structures. Built between 1994 and 2011 the campus is adjacent to the Bolampatty Reserve Forest, an elephant habitat in the

¹ <https://conference.globallandscapesforum.org/climate-2021/speaker/4d081f25-df20-ec11-981f-a085fcc5fc95>;
<https://conference.globallandscapesforum.org/climate-2021/session/77152b7f-cc24-ec11-981f-a085fcc5fc95>

² <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/let-children-burst-crackers-sadhguru-s-message-to-those-concerned-about-air-pollution-1872730-2021-11-03>

³ <https://thewire.in/world/sadhguru-lse-talibani-islamophobia>. Wire.in is a non profit news source led by several globally award winning journalists who have been awarded for speaking truth to power.
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Wire_\(India\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Wire_(India))

Nilgiris biosphere reserve, and along the hanikandi-Marudhamalai migration corridor of the pachyderms.

To quote “MS Parthipan, a forest ranger, too visited the Isha ashram in 2012. He found some of its lands fell on routes elephants used to move between Sadivayal and Thanikkandi. Since Isha had illegally erected buildings, walls and electric fences on these lands, elephants were forced to emerge from the forest between Semmedu and Narseepuram, trampling crops and attacking villagers”

“In 2017, after Isha had applied for HACA approval for constructions that they had already erected, H Basavraju, then the principal chief conservator, set up a committee to examine the submission. The committee found that Isha’s constructions were damaging to local wildlife and environment, and asked the district forest officer to recommend post-construction approval only if Isha made changes to the buildings, stopped using a few roads and agreed to not make any new construction within 100 meters of the forest reserve.”

The detailed investigation by NewsLaundry details all aspects of the Isha Foundation and how initiation of action has been diffused one way or the other. It also talks about the relentless campaign of an NGO and a tribal activist against the mighty guru.

This is detailed in the link below

<https://www.newsLaundry.com/2021/05/17/how-sadhguru-built-his-isha-empire-illegally>⁴

#2) The Velliangiri Hill Tribal Protection Society filed a plea, through P Muthammal (f), an Adivasi (indigenous) from a settlement in the area. To quote from the article below “ Muthammal pleaded that rising man-animal conflict, for which Isha’s illegal constructions were mainly to blame, had made the lives of Adivasis difficult. She also objected to the foundation’s 112-foot Adiyogi statue, noting that it had been built without necessary clearances”

<https://thewire.in/politics/isha-foundation-coimbatore-land-grabbing>

#3) That is not all and there is more - but one important one we think is worthy of mention is an investigative report on some of the tax unearthings of the foundation

<https://www.newsLaundry.com/2021/05/19/trick-of-the-trade-how-sadhgurus-isha-foundation-evades-paying-taxes>.

#4) The same article also refers to the Cauvery Calling project of Jaggi Vasudev- launched in September 2019 [to plant 242 crore \(around 24 million\) trees in the river basin](#), from its origin in Talacauvery, Karnataka, to Thiruvavur, Tamil Nadu, a stretch of 639 km. “The project has been openly rejected by a total of 95 civil society organizations and 18 individuals on grounds that it promotes a monocultural 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”.

⁴ NewsLaundry is an independent Indian media running on a subscription model
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/NewsLaundry>

There is also counter press from the Isha Foundation, but given our personal activist experience at the national level we trust the report of evidence-based independent news agencies and environmentalists, which is why we decided to reach out to your good judgement.

What we would like to know:

We genuinely want to know, how did it come about that a speaker such as Jaggi Vasudev was given a prominent place on an international platform repeatedly and if there has been due diligence conducted for the same.

The international platform presented to speakers becomes the circular argument or what one could call a “*Totschlag Argument*” on the international recognition they receive for the work they are “apparently doing”. One of the writers of the letter was present in one of the meetings, heard first hand how one big INGO expressing that it is a great way to get popular spiritual/religious gurus⁵ on board to get the nature conservation message across to millions and millions of people. This is not a bad thing per se but it should be an approach that is applied with a decent measure of caution and research - which we are not sure has happened here.

While it may not always be possible to account for the choice of speakers or one may not have all the information or has two or more versions - our one main question here is what is the due diligence policy for such forums and platforms followed while selecting speakers who are not experts in the sector or may have nothing measurable or substantial to share in terms of the conservation work they have done.

Our last following question is that given that we have shared these sources, we would be eager to know how you could address our concerns and where or with whom does the accountability lie?

In case that you need alternative and genuine names of those who walk the talk and genuinely come from local landscape movements or from the grassroots, we recommend some names who would genuinely fit the bill and names that are in sync with the principle of gender and social inclusion.

- a) **Medha Patkar:** Medha Patkar mobilized massive marches and peaceful protests against the construction of India’s Sardar Sarovar Dam, which displaced thousands of tribal peoples and submerged vast stretches of forests and farmland. Medha Patkar has been a central organizer and strategist for [Narmada Bachao Andolan \(NBA\)](#), a people’s movement organized to stop the construction of a series of dams planned for India’s largest westward flowing river, the Narmada. The Sarovar Dam is the keystone of the Narmada Valley Development Project, one of the world’s largest river development projects. Upon completion, Sardar Sarovar would submerge more than 37,000 hectares of forest and agricultural land. The dam and its associated canal system would also displace some 320,000 villagers, mostly from tribal communities, whose livelihoods

⁵ Or what we could caution as populist spiritual gurus.

depend on these natural resources. In 1985, Patkar began mobilizing massive marches and rallies against the project and, though the protests were peaceful, was repeatedly beaten and arrested by the police. She almost died during a 22-day hunger strike in 1991. Her story, her grit and her simplicity has inspired many of us working in the environment and social sector in India

- b) **Archana Soreng:** is an [environmental activist](#) belonging to the indigenous [Kharia Tribe](#) from Bihabandh Village of [Rajgangpur](#) in [Sundergarh, Odisha](#), India. She is one of the seven members of the United Nations Secretary General's Youth Advisory Group on Climate Change. She is experienced in advocacy and research and is working to document, preserve, and promote traditional knowledge and cultural practices of indigenous communities.
- c) **Sumaira Abdulali:** is an environmental activist focusing on sand mining and noise pollution. She is the founder of NGO Awaaz Foundation. Sand mining, which has now become an issue of global concern, was first reported by her to the authorities after she noticed sand being illegally mined from Kihim Beach in 2004, where she was physically attacked during a sand mining site inspection. Thereafter, she convened an NGO movement for protection of public-interest activists, 'Movement against Intimidation, Threat and Revenge against Activists' (MITRA) and filed the first public interest litigation against sand mining, resulting in policy change at State and national level. She helped bring sand mining to notice worldwide by participating in documentary films and awareness campaigns and contributing to print, radio and television news.
- d) **Jadav Molai Payeng:** is an environmental activist and forestry worker from Majuli, popularly known as the Forest Man of India. Over the course of several decades, he has planted and tended trees on a sandbar of the river Brahmaputra turning it into a forest reserve. The forest, called Molai forest after him, is located near Kokilamukh of Jorhat, Assam, India and encompasses an area of about 1,360 acres / 550 hectares.
- e) **Marimuthu Yoganathan:** is a genuine environment enthusiast who has dedicated over 28 years towards planting 6000 trees saplings year after year. This, by trekking the expanse of a state as large as TamilNadu; by visiting and taking classes (through projector) almost 3743 University, College, Schools and Industries, to raise environmental awareness. And, if this isn't special enough, consider how despite earning a modest bus conductor's salary, Yoganathan has consistently worked towards this larger cause.

We look forward to your response

Sincerely

Diya Deb and Tasneem Balasinorwala

Power^{South}

Berlin, Germany