

Namaskaram

We would like to respond to your article “Can Isha’s Cauvery Calling Campaign Actually Save the Cauvery?”

We thank Professor Bhaskar Sinha for accurately representing the rationale and the intent of Cauvery Calling. As he rightly points out, Cauvery Calling is a “step towards marrying ecology with modern plantation economics.” Only if the farmer gains financially from the proposition will tree planting become a sustainable activity. When farmers move from water-intensive monocrops and embrace crop diversification, they de-risk themselves significantly. They are no longer at the mercy of fluctuating markets and the vagaries of nature which can destroy them financially if their single crop fails.

We completely agree with Ms. Mahesh’s opening remarks that several solutions are needed to conserve and rejuvenate river Cauvery. We welcome all these solutions. Isha has chosen agroforestry as one of the solutions because this is where our expertise lies. Cauvery Calling is not an experiment; we are scaling a proven model. We have successfully worked with 69,760 farmers over 18 years to prove the agroforestry model on ground in Tamil Nadu. These farmers’ incomes have risen anywhere between 3 and 8 times in 5-7 years. Their farmlands also have healthier soil and more abundant water besides better quality and quantity of yield from intercropped species.

Cauvery Calling has never claimed that it will plant trees on either side of the Cauvery. From the launch of the project, we have clearly stated that saplings will be planted by farmers in the river basin on their own farmlands for economic gain. Farmers will only partially adopt agroforestry while they continue to grow their legacy crop(s). Native species will be planted by farmers on their land across the cultivable area in the Cauvery basin's districts. Presence of tree cover on the land increases the water sequestration capacity of soil thus reducing the incidences of flood, ensuring the water is retained in the soil and is slowly released to the river over a longer period sustaining its flow.

Regarding restrictive laws that prevent felling, transport and sale of timber trees, several organizations including Isha have been advocating for years with the central government to have these restrictions relaxed. In 2018, the Ministry of Environment, Forests & Climate change (MoEFCC) issued a pan-India Transit Permit for 10 species advising state governments to release these species for plantation, harvest, transit and sale. Most of these species have already been exempted by the Tamil Nadu government. The Government of Karnataka has expressed willingness to relax restrictive laws and make them more farmer-friendly to promote agroforestry.

Cauvery Calling offers a wide range of species for plantation - and the choice of what specifically to plant is entirely in the farmers’ hands. Cauvery Calling offers an agroforestry model to the farmer. It is up to the farmer to decide whether he wants to accept it or not, and how much and what kind of species he wants to plant.

India is the third largest importer of illegally logged timber in the world, a study by the International Union of Forest Research Organizations (IUFRO) shows. With an annual import value of over Rs 40 billion, the country accounts for close to 10 percent of the global illegal wood trade, sourced from felling and converting natural forests. By encouraging farmers to cultivate timber on their lands, not

only will the country save billions of rupees annually which will supplement our farmers' income, we will also reduce pressure on forest landscapes in India and elsewhere around the world.

We are recommending farmers to plant native species (based on economics) and not exotic ones. We are holding several intensive awareness drives on the benefits of native species. However, we cannot compel farmers to choose a particular species against another. The final decision of what to plant on their lands lie with the farmers.

*Ms. Mahesh says, "Even if we set aside the environment for a moment, the economics of tree-harvesting could pose a risk to coffee-growing farmers. Trees have different growth rates. If the rotational cycle between planting fresh saplings and harvesting viable trees aren't perfectly in sync, there could be too many or too few trees on a farmer's plantation for a given period of time. Adequate exposure to sunlight is vital for proper coffee yield."*

The Cauvery Calling initiative will impact the entire Cauvery basin area of 83,000 sq. km. which includes Kodagu region. Considering the uniqueness of the Kodagu region, we have had these discussions with some prominent people in Kodagu and the plantation models will be suitably different from the rest of the basin area. We would like to reiterate that this is a grassroots movement and the primary stakeholders of the project are farmers. We are working on ground closely with farmers in both Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Our teams on the ground are working with state governments, village panchayats, farmers, FPOs, and local industries among other stakeholders – this may not be an effort visible to the public eye; however, it is happening. The assumption that we are embarking on such a massive project without the necessary homework or the expertise to back us is incorrect. As an organization that has been running several massive social outreach projects in education, health, tree-based agriculture, rural development and ecology for nearly two decades, we are fully aware of what it takes to operationalize a project on ground.

Mr. Leo Saldanha is mistaken in arriving at a figure of Rs. 10,000 crore to be raised by Isha Outreach, by simplistically multiplying Rs 42 with 2.42 billion trees. 2.42 billion additional trees in the basin districts is the aspirational target for all who care for the well-being of Cauvery. Ours is a catalytic role - and there are many other key stakeholders including the government. Contributions to this effort therefore can come in one of many different forms - including in-kind sapling production and direct on-ground activity by other partners. It is equally wrong for Mr. Saldanha to assert, without any evidence, that heads of international agencies like UNCCD have backed Cauvery Calling without any verification, and that State Governments are spending public money without any due diligence. While we fully appreciate the watchdog role that civil society organisations play in the scrutiny of public expenditure, it is unethical to create a fog of suspicion in the absence of any substantive finding. The distressed Cauvery deserves much better.

Agroforestry is the one of the most efficient sustainable solutions at a global scale and Cauvery Calling is a large scale model of that.

We are accountable for our actions not just to farmers, donors and the community at large but to state governments, the central government and the international bodies that back us. We consider this a huge responsibility and a privilege to work on a project that has the potential to globally impact billions of lives.

We will be happy to engage with you in constructive dialogue and invite you to visit local farmlands in Tamil Nadu where we have been working on ground to prove this model for nearly two decades.