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Project GreenHands – Compensating the Earth

April 8, 2009 by Makur Jain

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In 2005, drawing extensively on community involvement and large-scale volunteer participation, *Project GreenHands* planted more than 25,000 trees in tsunami-devastated coastal areas of Tamil Nadu. In 2006, PGH volunteers planted 856,000 trees in just three days, securing the project a place in the Guinness World Book of Records. By the end of the 2008 planting season, PGH had planted a total of 7.1 million trees and introduced a newly designed model of agro-forestry among the farmer community. The Project's current aim is to inspire and support the citizens of Tamil Nadu to plant an astonishing total of 114 million trees statewide by the year 2010, adding 30% more to the existing level of green cover in Tamil Nadu.

Isha Foundation, founded in 1992, is an entirely volunteer-run, international, nonprofit organisation dedicated to cultivating human potential. The Foundation is a human service organisation that recognizes the possibility of each person to empower another — restoring global community through inspiration and individual transformation.

Makur Jain is a BPGL contributing writer living in India. She interviewed Sadhguru, the founder of *Isha Foundation*, which supports *Project GreenHands* (PGH).

BPGL: Sadhguru ji, what are the benefits of humans connecting to the natural world that surrounds us?

SADHGURU: Human well-being and environmental care are not two different things. There is nobody who isn't concerned about human well-being or the well-being of a life. It is just the scale and scope that varies from person to person. Anybody can understand that he needs to take care of the very environment in which he lives. Taking care of well-being, human well-being, does not just mean eating well. One has to take care of everything that concerns our lives. Is there anything on this planet that doesn't concern your life? Whatever happens to this planet happens to you.

So when we talk of well-being, it is not just about taking care of your physical body. You take care of the very body of the earth because your body is just a part of that. Without taking care of the atmosphere and the ecological situation around us, how can we live well? This whole idea of "something is human, and ecology is something different," is a very distorted and polarized idea of life.

We need to understand that everything that you produce, buy, and use in your life is something that you are digging up from the planet. Every little bit, whether it's a safety pin or a car or a machine, you are only digging it up from this planet. It's not an endless planet. It is a limited planet. We can use it to a certain extent, and right now we are gobbling it up at a tremendous pace. If there is no compensatory activity on the same scale as we exploit whatever we use on this planet, then we have a recipe for disaster.

When this is so, as we go into this economic possibility, if we have any sense, we need to somehow regulate it ourselves. If human sense doesn't prevail, then nature will take its own course of action to correct the imbalances. But that's going to be very painful for human beings when nature takes this action.



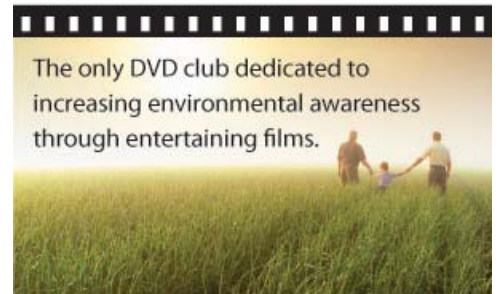
Villagers tend trees planted by Project GreenHands. Photo: Project GreenHands

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So, one of the simplest ways to prevent or to reverse this process is that we bring back sufficient green cover. The aim of Isha's Project Green Hands is to bring back 30 percent green cover, at least, in Tamil Nadu, a state in southern India, to start with.

Right now, there is a phenomenal response to the project. Unfortunately, this is happening not because of our love for nature or life around us; it is only because of survival instincts. We realize that if we have to survive, we have to take care of a few things. But now, at least, with the fear of disaster and the instinct of survival, people are beginning to do something.

If you really want to bring about well-being, an important thing is that you don't think of trees and plants and life around you as just another means to enhance your life. You should see and respect them as life; it's very important. Biologically, it is said that trees don't bleed like you, so they are not related to you. See, relationships with family and friends are arbitrary and often inconstant. But every moment of your life, what trees exhale we inhale, what we exhale they inhale. This is a constant transaction. There is a very intimate bond between a human being and plant life. This is a constant relationship that nobody can afford to break or live without. So our closest relative is plant life. If one experiences that, there would be a deep sense of love and involvement with plant life.

Whatever you may be doing, you must plant trees, because you can't live without oxygen or food or water. In the Indian culture there are temples for trees, people worship trees; it's a very common practice. It is not a question of a custom. It came from a certain experience and understanding. It is a certain depth of experience and understanding — you understand that whatever nurtures your life is worth worshipping. So, because people understood that trees are very much a part of nurturing their lives, they worshipped them. Every village had a tree that was worshiped at one time. Now, we have become so insensitive that we have removed all that.

It is not about nurturing nature. You don't have to nurture nature; it is nature that nurtures you. We think we nurture nature, but we're only destroying and misusing nature, so we must take compensatory action.

What needs to happen — what *is* happening — is too little. Much more needs to happen, because the rate at which we are exploiting the resources of this planet is too high. Unless we really do the necessary compensatory acts, we aren't going to find a solution. So this is the choice that all of us have to make, every generation of people has this choice that you are either a part of the problem or part of a solution. I think as a generation, if we have any sense, if we can pitch in for the solution, it will be a sensible way to live, a more intelligent way to exist on this planet.

BPGL: Have you noticed that the act of planting trees creates community among people to coordinate the effort? If so, are those connections and relationships maintained?

SADHGURU: The process of creating community spirit has to be initiated before the tree planting happens, otherwise the project will quickly find its limitation, as it so often does in many tree-planting projects. Over the past 25 years, at Isha, we have developed a unique way of approaching a rural community through Isha Yoga Programs and Community Games. It revives the spirit of the community and creates the necessary momentum among stakeholders to undertake a community project on a large scale and for the long term. A tree-planting project helps to gather the community around a project that makes sense for each participating group, organisation, or individual. In the long run, activities of post-planting maintenance, livelihood opportunities, other natural resources management, etc., will reinforce and increase the relationships among stakeholders.



The goal is to bring back green cover to Tamil Nadu. Photo: Project GreenHands

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BPGL: What have been the latest initiatives since 2007?

SADHGURU: By the end of the 2008 planting season, we planted a total of 7.1 million trees and introduced a newly designed model of agro-forestry among the farmer community. Project GreenHands has gained significant support from national and international corporations such as Suzlon Energy Ltd, Yves Rocher Group, EADS, TTK Ltd etc.

BPGL: How do you maintain and care for



Volunteers attend training in their communities. Photo: Project GreenHands

those millions of trees?

SADHGURU: To create a sustainable green cover, the trees become the responsibility of the tree planters, with the support and

supervision of PGH field teams and **volunteers**. In each location where we initiate planting, PGH ensures that a sufficient number of Isha volunteers are on the ground to support the project implementation and ensure the follow up of post-planting activities.

BPGL: What are the greatest problems and challenges you face in the coming year?

SADHGURU: On the social level, the greatest challenge is to transform awareness campaigns into an urge for action. That is why at Project GreenHands, our work starts by exposing the villagers to tools that will help individuals to reach a higher level of consciousness. Only then can major implementation happen.

At the project level, the challenge is to raise the necessary resources to implement the project in a short time span, in order to create an environmental impact and reverse the process of degradation of **natural resources**. Tree planting projects need to raise labour, land, and funds simultaneously. Thanks to 25 years of work among the rural community of the state of Tamil Nadu, Isha can raise millions of **volunteers** and access their land. Labour and land represent about 70 percent of the resources needed for the project. The need for cash (the remaining 30 percent of resources needed) to fund the production of the saplings, the logistics of the project, and its management is the limiting factor of expansion today.

BPGL: How do you measure the results of your success and impact?

SADHGURU: The result is measured in terms of increase in the state green cover, participation of the community and of strategic partners. Year after year, PGH conducts research studies and pilot programs to improve the monitoring of the project and assessment of its social impact. For example, in 2008, a partnership with **Planet Action** — the not-for-profit initiative of Spot Image — was initiated to look at the use of satellite imagery and GIS to monitor the development of the green cover over years.

BPGL: Are there models of similar projects being done in other countries?

SADHGURU: There are hundreds of tree planting projects around the world; but so far we have not identified any other initiatives like this that are carrying out any tree planting projects at such a scale through the mobilization of the entire community.

BPGL: Are there plans for planting other types of plants, shrubs, flowers, or food-bearing plants, such as fruit trees or vegetables?

SADHGURU: Apart from timber, trees can provide flowers, fruits and vegetables, spices, medicine, fodder for livestock. We adjust our tree selection according to the planting context; for example, medicinal, fodder, and spice are promoted through our agro-forestry model on farmland; whereas fruit and vegetable trees are promoted in residential areas. In 2009, we will expand the planting of fruit trees on a larger scale by combining the **nutrition** campaign run by Isha Outreach's health division with the distribution of free fruit trees for households.

BPGL: How do you determine which trees to plant in a certain area? Is there research that goes into determining this?

SADHGURU: Botany, cultivation of trees, and management of forest are areas where knowledge has been accumulated for a very long time. PGH has an advisory board including botanists, forestry and **organic** farming experts, and forestry colleges. We also get support from international experts and organisations that have experience in tree



The project depends on volunteers. Photo: Project GreenHands

planting in many different **ecosystems** all over the world.

BPGL: What advice would you have for communities to duplicate your efforts in their area?

SADHGURU: The capacity of mobilisation of the community and a strong large scale involvement at a grass roots level are key factors for the success of organisations wanting to duplicate such projects. This can be achieved over years or through the establishment of a strong committed network of existing organisations.

We have found success comes through this holistic approach to environmental restoration. We promote strategies for the sustainable use and management of the land, which are rooted in the rural culture. The result is environmental and socioeconomic **sustainability**. Through its activities, Project GreenHands aims to inspire people around the world to appreciate the true value of trees and the vital role that they play within human environments.

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