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When R Ashwin, Sadhguru Caught Up On “Cricket, Corona and Cauvery”

Cricketer R Ashwin engaged with Sadhguru on a range of subjects - from talking about Sadhguru's favorite sport, to life post COVID-19, Cauvery Calling, soil degradation, FPOs and farmer suicides. Here are the interesting bits from the absorbing hour-long conversation.

5 June 2020, Coimbatore: On the eve of World Environment Day, India’s off-spinner Ravichandran Ashwin sat down for an absorbing conversation with Sadhguru, Founder, Isha Foundation that had surprisingly little to do with cricket and a lot to do with the environment. The interaction was a part of Isha’s “In Conversation with the Mystic” series. Ashwin couldn’t resist asking whether Sadhguru preferred hockey or cricket to which Sadhguru confessed that he found hockey more exciting “because you are always on your feet and doing something”. From golf to frisbee, Formula One to football, Sadhguru is not only known for his keen interest in all sports but for an uncanny ability to excel in whatever game he chooses.

Ashwin, who began by asking Sadhguru what direction people should take while dealing with the COVID – 19 pandemic, wondered how in the age of technology and information, the world was sideswiped by the outbreak. Sadhguru pegged it down mainly to “the concentration of population” and global air travel.

The cricketer who has been a vocal champion of the environment, wanted to know how far Cauvery Calling has progressed. Launched last September by Sadhguru, Cauvery Calling is a movement to revitalize river Cauvery by enabling 50 lakh farmers in the river

basin to plant trees for economic gain on their own farmlands. Ashwin's curiosity prompted Sadhguru to speak at length and in detail about the project that aims to put one third of the river basin under shade with 242 crore trees which will sequester 9 to 12 trillion litres of water in the river basin, augmenting the river's source flow and impacting food and water security of 84 million people.

"One significant thing is the Karnataka government has announced a subsidy of Rs 125 for every tree" Sadhguru began. "For somebody who encourages (another) to plant a tree, he gets five rupees. So now, we're training youth to be agents of change; they can take this up like a part time profession (where) they meet the farmers in the local area, talk to them, encourage them, so both will benefit. This monsoon, we were to go full on but we've slowed down (due to the pandemic). In Karnataka, we're planting about 70-72 lakh saplings, farmers have (already) booked them," Sadhguru said.

Speaking about the worrying soil situation globally, Sadhguru, who earlier in the evening had delivered a video message at the Global Landscape Forum's GLF Bonn Digital 2020, said, "Right now, the UNCCD (United Nation's Convention to Combat Desertification) is very concerned about India because our soil is dying. Tamil Nadu and southern India are largely considered blessed because we have nearly 18 to 20 ft of top soil which is a fantastic thing. This is the reason why agriculture has been on here for 12,000 years or so," Sadhguru asserted and said that unchecked deforestation without replacing trees and trading cattle for tractors on the farm have damaged the once rich soil. "42% of Tamil Nadu's land is considered fallow," Sadhguru said.

Isha's Cauvery Calling promotes tree-based agriculture on private farmlands. This will bring economic prosperity to farmers, increase organic content in the soil with tree litter and animal waste and enhance the soil's capacity to absorb water, storing it underground, thus recharging water tables and revitalizing water bodies, including rivers.

Ashwin also expressed concern over farmer suicides and asked whether it was time for the educated class to send their children into farming and establish it as a lucrative profession at par with engineering and medicine. "100% yes," said Sadhguru and revealed that informal survey by Isha had found that less than 2% of the farmers wanted their children to go into farming.

“Because the farmer looks illiterate people think it’s some silly thing (to grow food); it is not. (farming) is a very complex and a very time sensitive operation. Because the guy looks undernourished and badly dressed, we think it’s something not important. You and I are eating only because of him. We are managing to provide food for 1.4 billion people without any major food imports. (For thousands of years) the farmer has done a fantastic job with no great technology, only with traditional knowledge,” said Sadhguru and added that unless farming is subject to economies of scale, it would continue to be a loss-making proposition. “We have the state’s best run FPO, an organization of about 1,000 farmers,” he explained. “We’re seeing how to scale this to 50,000 farmers.” To demonstrate the effectiveness of FPOs, Isha has hired youth just to negotiate a better price for farm produce. “Just with negotiation, their income has gone up 300% - simple negotiation and timing the sale of the produce,” Sadhguru emphasized.

Sadhguru stated that India’s latitudinal spread from Kanyakumari to Kashmir gives us the advantage of growing, all year round, every variety of crop that can be grown in the world. This advantage coupled with a population where 65% knows “the magic of turning mud into food can make us the Breadbasket of the World,” he said. He also revealed that he was advocating with the Prime Minister for abolishing income tax on FPO earnings. “If you’re an individual farmer, (no matter how much you earn), no tax for you. If you’re part of an FPO, you have to pay 30% tax. I appealed to the Prime Minister,” said Sadhguru and confirmed that the PM had relaxed the rule and FPOs could now earn up to Rs 100 crore without being taxed. “Now I’m pushing why 100 crore limit?” he said, speaking about his advocacy efforts. Sadhguru declared, “If farming has to survive in this country, you cannot give teachings, you cannot run agricultural institutions. All you have to do is make it lucrative. If it’s lucrative, it will survive.”

Ashwin, who listened in rapt attention as Sadhguru spoke, said he had been looking forward to this conversation. Sadhguru had recently spoken to P V Sindhu, India’s ace shuttler and earlier to Nico Rosberg, the Formula One champion. Ever since the lockdown was announced, Sadhguru has interacted with several groups from industry bodies, business leadership and realty to medical professionals, sanitation workers, academicians and celebrities.

Today, on World Environment Day, Isha will screen a live conversation between the Hon'ble Minister of Jal Shakti, Shri. Gajendra Singh Shekhawat and Sadhguru at 7 p.m. as part of the ongoing 'In Conversation with the Mystic' series. The event will be streamed on YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

If you would like to know more about this, please write to mediarelations@ishafoundation.org.