

RITZ people

The YOGI with a difference

Is Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev a yogi, mystic or spiritual leader? RITZ understands more about the yogi with a difference

Photographs: Prakash



He's the founder of the Isha Foundation, which functions through 150 centres worldwide, from Japan and Malaysia to Europe and the USA. He leads 250,000 volunteers, initiating a multitude of activities right from meditation to rural rejuvenation. Meet Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev, a man who hardly fits into the mould of a traditional 'guru', especially when he is initiating Inner Engineering sessions on one hand, and speaking at the World Economic Forum at Davos on the other!

He was on one of his flying visits to Chennai recently when RITZ caught up with him for a tete-a-tete. "I am here to address a group of civil servants and conduct a week long programme for them" he tells us, smiling benignly. Explaining the reason behind such a programme he says, "Administration is a complex reality and several factors could take a toll on the well being of officials. It is important for people in such positions of authority, administering the fate of millions, to be peaceful within themselves, in order to better face their external reality. The entire department functions well if a top officer handles his duties with aplomb."

Jaggi Vasudev clarifies that spirituality is not to be mistaken for morality. "Strengthening your spiritual core means being more effective in handling daily situations in life. The smallest thing no longer breaks you up like before" he says.

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The Isha Foundation runs various programmes right from reaching out to over 1000 villages in Tamilnadu with free mobile health clinics and revitalising the spirit of the rural population through libraries, yogashalas, gyms and playgrounds to the Vanashree Eco Centre which aims at nurturing 100,000 tree saplings of 10 species in South India. While the Isha Inner Freedom programme is aimed at prisoners and the Isha Craft programme hones rural skills, Isha Home School in the Velliangiri mountains aims at providing quality education in a home-like environment. So is Jaggi Vasudev a yogi, mystic, a humanitarian, or a spiritual leader? A question difficult to answer indeed!

Though there is a strong spiritual content in his messages, transmitting inner sciences of universal appeal, he is also a practical man who strongly believes that the masses must be fed and clothed and taught to enjoy the prosperity the world has to offer, in order to attain lasting happiness. "India is going through an economic boom like never before. This is because of two factors, the fact that we speak good English and that we are computer literate. With these twin merits we can capitalise on this boom, which will ensure better lives for large masses of people. But 70% of the population lives in rural areas and in order to reach this vast human resource pool, we have to bring English and computer education to them. We plan to implement this in every taluk of TN by 2007," he discloses.

How can the common man do his bit to better the lot of his countrymen, we ask him. "If each well-to-do Indian teaches English to at least three children, it can be a great beginning. He can thus help to equip them for a brighter future," says he.

Jaggi Vasudev resides near Coimbatore where his Foundation is headquartered. But he has travelled all over the country, from his birthplace Mysore. Why did he choose Coimbatore, we are curious to know. "I didn't choose the place, it chose me!" he smiles. "Ever since I was a child I dreamt of living close to a mountain peak very like the one I would often see in my mind's eye. When I was 16, I started looking for this peak and travelled all over the Western Ghats and from Goa to Kanyakumari looking for it. After five searches between ages 17 and 25, I found it finally! It was in the Velliangiri hills. I bought this land and started teaching my spiritual message there. It was never part of my initial plan to set up an organisation but when the followers became more, I consecrated a Dhyanalangam and in 1993 the Isha Foundation was established," he recollects for us in a rare moment of reflection.

A message for the Indian masses? "For the first time in thousands of years, we are faced with a unique opportunity," he stresses. "We can move a whole mass of people from one level of economic



status to another, if we handle it right. I am often asked whether I support capitalism! But I am only seeing an opportunity; somehow we must utilise it and not miss the bus of mass prosperity", he says.

Isn't he afraid that India would go the way of the West in this constant and close interaction with the rest of the world? "A considerable amount of aping the West is already happening. Because of the economic success of those countries, we think that their culture and values too are worth emulating. But as we become successful ourselves, our own local culture and ethos will slowly become stronger. The upward or downward economic movement of any country has an impact on the popularity of its culture and following", he signs off. © Rinku Gupta