

Service For Swachhata

In the run up to the third anniversary of the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) on Gandhi Jayanti, the prime minister called for an accelerated, nation-wide campaign termed Swachhata Hi Seva, from September 15 to October 2. He made an appeal to all Indians to put in a burst of energy during this 18-day period by way of shramdan for swachhata, and thereby give a fillip to the SBM's efforts to achieve an open defecation free (ODF) and Clean India by October 2, 2019, the 150th birth anniversary of [Mahatma Gandhi](#).

After the PM launched the ambitious five-year SBM programme in October 2014, the accelerated strategy adopted to achieve this goal was a distinct departure from the drip-drip approach which the country had followed till then. In the three years since the SBM was launched, significant progress has been made, with rural sanitation coverage increasing from 39 per cent to 70 per cent. As many as 250 million people, almost equal to the population of Indonesia, have stopped defecating in the open since the SBM began. Usage of the toilets built is over 90 per cent, according to a survey by the Quality Council of India. Good progress is also being made in urban areas.

But every successful time-bound programme needs to be fuelled by spurts of momentum to take it to the next level. The SBM is presently at an inflection point. Now is the time for a momentum shift to make everyone rededicate themselves to the cause of cleanliness. The prime minister's call for Swachhata Hi Seva in the fortnight running upto Gandhi Jayanti has been met with an unprecedented response and has the potential to push sanitation and cleanliness over the tipping point to a self-sustaining trajectory.

The President of India administered the Swachhata Hi Seva pledge to all Indians on September 15 at an event in rural Kanpur. Since then, we have seen mass mobilisation for swachhata like we have never seen before. In the past two weeks, over 2.5 crore people have participated in the movement across the country through some form of shramdan. People have come together and cleaned public places like bus stands, railway stations, parks, monuments and places of historical and cultural importance. People also helped to construct twin-pit toilets for those who were unable to do so themselves.

Through the fortnight, and especially on September 17, seva diwas, several cabinet ministers, chief ministers, state ministers, MPs, MLAs and sarpanches offered shramdan. The vice president too joined an ODF declaration event in Karnataka on September 26. The PM himself offered shramdan for the construction of a twin-pit toilet in a village in his parliamentary constituency Varanasi on September 23, setting an example for every Indian.

Movie stars, sports personalities, corporates, artists and faith leaders have offered shramdan in different parts of urban and rural India. The Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation, along with the Indian Railways, also did its bit by participating in a cleanliness drive at the Nizamuddin Railway Station. Perhaps the most inspirational contribution to the Swachhata Hi Seva movement came from the officers and jawans of the Indian Army at the Siachen glacier, who carried out a cleanliness drive at the world's highest battleground.

Schoolchildren and youth groups like the NCC, NSS and Nehru Yuvak Kendra have led the movement. Young people have come out in large numbers and taken swachhata pledges, held cleanliness drives, swachhata rallies and have written essays, drawn paintings and short films on Swachh Bharat. A whopping 2.6 crore essays and three crore paintings on the theme of swachhata for the national Swachh Bharat competition were received through the Department of School Education. Three lakh short films were also received, mainly from NCC cadets.

The Swachhata Hi Seva campaign has re-invigorated the spirit of swachhata in everyone's heart, harking back to the moment the PM announced the mission from the ramparts of the Red Fort on August 15, 2014. It has already succeeded in making SBM a true jan andolan. The fortnight concludes today, the third anniversary of the SBM, with the giving away of the National Swachh Bharat Awards by the PM. Stellar contributions to Swachhata Hi Seva will also be recognised.

There are still two years to go before the Swachh Bharat Mission concludes. Let us all build on the immense momentum and energy generated by crores of Indians during the Swachhata Hi Seva fortnight and continue to make our individual contributions, however small, towards a clean India.

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