

# THE WORLD COMES TO APPRAISE SWACHH BHARAT

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Study tour: President Ram Nath Kovind posing with Ministers from various countries at the Mahatma Gandhi International Sanitation Convention in New Delhi on Saturday. APManish Swarup

Political leadership and government financing, as well as the sparking of a people's movement, are key elements of the Swachh Bharat story, Indian leaders told international delegates looking to learn from India's sanitation successes at the Mahatma Gandhi International Sanitation Convention here on Saturday.

"This is the role of good political leadership. It doesn't merely decide on a programme, but it throws its entire political weight — weight of its politics, its policies, its finances — behind the decision. And that is what happened," said Finance Minister Arun Jaitley, addressing delegates from 68 countries at the event, including many from developing nations.

In response to a question from Malawi Health Minister Atupele Muluzi, the Minister said the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi ensured that Swachh Bharat was a government-wide initiative. It did not have a fractured mandate.

The Swachh Bharat Abhiyan-Grameen claims to have increased the percentage of the rural population with access to toilets from 39% in 2014 to almost 95% today. Overall, 503 districts and 24 States have been declared open defecation-free. About \$20 billion have been allocated to the programme, Sanitation Secretary Parameswaran Iyer said.

"It never used to be fashionable to talk about sanitation in our countries, so it is important when your Prime Minister talks to the nation about it," said Kevin Rudd, former Prime Minister of Australia and currently chair of Sanitation and Water for All, a UN-related body. "In 2015, when the Sustainable Development Goals were announced, it was estimated that the world needed an additional annual expenditure of \$114 billion to meet the sanitation-related goal. Today, the additional expenditure is only \$35 billion."

President Ram Nath Kovind, who inaugurated the event, harked back to the leadership example of Mahatma Gandhi, who not only fought for political independence but also valued human freedom in terms of everyday access to sanitation facilities. "India is striving to eliminate open defecation in its entirety by October 2, 2019. This is the best 150th birthday gift we can give to Gandhiji," he said.

The delegates left on Saturday evening for a "Gandhi Trail" trip to Gujarat, where they will visit the Sabarmati Ashram and see Swachh Bharat at work on the ground in Punsari village.

## CAG's reality check

The visit comes just a week after the Comptroller and Auditor-General picked holes in Gujarat's ODF status, with a report showing that 29% of homes in the sample villages did not, in fact, have access to toilets. "The Gujarat government is looking into that report. There is no connection to the trip," Mr. Iyer told presspersons on the eve of the Convention.

"In comparison to 2014, where have you reached in 2018? It is pretty good. Have you reached heaven yet? No. Are there holes in heaven? Yes. This is what I call political reality. India is not

the only country in the world where politicians occasionally overstate their achievements,” Mr. Rudd told *The Hindu* when asked about the CAG’s findings.

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