

Water and Sanitation: We are the solution

By Vikas Jha

“We are the solution,” the theme of the *Swachh Bharat* (clean India) Summit 2017 hosted at Rishikesh by Global Interfaith Wash Alliance, appropriately summed up the ideas and practices discussed at the gathering. The main emphasis of the summit was to motivate all those working on social issues to develop solutions for water and sanitation (WASH) issues. Faith leaders, community leaders, NGO teams, and government officers enlightened participants with their best solutions for solving major WASH problems in their areas.



Swami Vigyananand, a social activist of Fatehpur district, Uttar Pradesh, shared how local activists and district administration revived 46 km Sasur Khaderi 2 rivulet by engaging 4,000 workers for over a month. The revival of a dead river ended a water shortage in the forty-two villages through which the river flowed. The story of Kalavati, a passionate fifty-year-old women mason from Kanpur slums was equally remarkable. She went house to house, collected funds, and helped in the construction of toilets in 2,000 households. Joe Madiath of Gram Vikas, Orissa, showed how community members pooled resources to construct toilets, bathing rooms, and community constructed water tanks for clean drinking water. His project focused on creating equitable financial and institutional mechanisms to ensure that all families have access to water and sanitation facilities. Gram Vikas has brought these changes to 1,200 villages of Orissa. All these activists have been able to accomplish these efforts due to tremendous commitment and the ability to activate gram panchayats, local community leaders, and government to be involved in WASH initiatives at the local level.

Actions of a cadre of 1,000 *swachhta senanis* (sanitation ambassadors) in Nuh district of Haryana is an exemplar of community action making Swachh Bharat Mission a peoples’ movement. Motivated and trained by Sehgal Foundation, the *senanis* are organizing community meetings, door-to- door visits, rallies, and school campaigns for construction of toilets and bringing behavioral changes to

villagers' sanitation practices. Nearly 209 campaigns, rallies, school campaigns and community meetings has resulted in construction of 5000 toilets and effort for *swachh gaon* (clean village) in Nuh district.

Another remarkable example of "We are the solution" is a people-led approach to making Nadia district, West Bengal, open defecation free (ODF). Dr. P. B. Salim, a top district level officer, led the process of change using a four-pronged approach that was adopted in Nadia: generate demand, manage supply, monitor and evaluate, and mobilize resources. The result was the construction of 360,000 toilets in 1.5 years and 99 percent usage. Nadia was declared the first ODF district in India on April 30, 2015. Dr. Salim led another monumental effort on sanitation in Gangasagar *mela* (fair), West Bengal. The Gangasagar fair and pilgrimage are held annually on Sagar Island, the southernmost tip in the Ganges Delta atop the Bay of Bengal. The mela, which is visited by two million people every year, was made open defecation free with the construction of 18,000 public toilets. Three thousand "green" volunteers and sadhus played a critical role in making behavior change to sanitation practices, resulting in a clean mela and 99 percent people using toilets.



These remarkable solutions share some common principles: start the process of change on a small scale and do not wait for others to begin change; engage the community, religious, and political leaders in the process; and involve government for scaling up. The presence of Shri K. K. Paul, governor of Uttarakhand; Trivendra Singh Rawat, chief minister of Uttarakhand; Prakash Pant, minister of Finance, Uttarakhand; Swami Chidanand Saraswati,

founder/chairman of India Heritage Research Foundation; Chief Jathedar of Akal Takt; Father Paul V Moonjelyji, Caritas International; and film actors, Hema Malini and Vivek Oberoi, provided tremendous support for the sanitation movement.

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