

Guest Editorial

Time for a WASH: United Drive for a Cleaner, Greener World

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In the remote corners of East Champaran, Bihar, a quiet but powerful revolution is taking shape, led by adolescent girls from the Musahar community, a group historically marginalized and ostracized. These girls, once unaware of the importance of personal hygiene, now stand at the forefront of change, spreading awareness about cleanliness, not just for themselves but for their entire community. They have learned that cleanliness begins at home, with the self, and that its ripple effects can transform neighborhoods and villages. Thanks to regular sessions conducted by CRY and our partners, around 350 girls are challenging age-old neglect and isolation while instilling in their families and elders a renewed sense of pride in maintaining clean and green surroundings.

What these young change-makers are doing mirrors a growing awareness across the length and breadth of India — cleanliness is not just a personal habit, but a shared responsibility. And it aligns well with the government's Swachhta Hi Seva campaign, which aims to create a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment for all, while also promoting a sense of social responsibility and community service.

From the neighboring Vaishali district comes another example of how small steps can lead to big changes, and the clear plan is to train them young. At two Anganwadis in Ismailpur village, children between the ages of 3-6 are being taught simple but crucial habits like washing hands before meals and maintaining personal hygiene. And at those very sessions, their parents are learning how to keep their homes and surroundings clean. This intergenerational dialogue on cleanliness fosters a sense of ownership over their environment and nurtures a healthier, more vibrant community.

Across the border, in Patharpratima, West Bengal, the Green Scout initiative started in 2021 has grown into a full-fledged campaign for environmental stewardship. Around 317 young Green Scouts, with support from CRY's partner Kaajla Janakalyan Samiti, have become local champions in the drive to boost waste management, plastic reduction, and tree planting. From their backyards to public spaces, their efforts to plant trees have added to the green cover and made waste segregation and disposal a norm within their community. Their clean-up drives and tree-planting efforts align perfectly with the Swachhta Hi Seva campaign's goals, illustrating how environmental consciousness and cleanliness go hand in hand.

Further down south, in Koraput, Odisha, community clean-up drives have become regular, spearheaded by adolescents and most importantly, with active participation from the Gaon Kalyan Samiti. While numerous hand-wash demonstrations have been held in the past, it is now time to put theory into action – “hand-wash stations” have been installed at the Village Health and Nutrition Day (VHND) locations to ensure that people practice what they have learned. Awareness is spreading, slowly but steadily!

What makes these stories particularly inspiring is not just the scale of impact, but the involvement of young people — girls and boys who are actively reshaping the narrative for their communities. Through their efforts, concepts like WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene), waste management, and sustainability are no longer abstract terms. They are living realities, embodied in everyday actions that not only improve individual health and well-being but also elevate community standards.

At CRY, we believe that the key to sustainable change lies in empowering communities, particularly the youth, to take ownership of their future. When communities feel responsible for their surroundings and are equipped with the knowledge to maintain hygiene, manage waste, and protect their green spaces, the transformation is lasting and impactful.

These local efforts are a testament to the power of collective action. Civil society groups like us play a pivotal role in embedding the spirit of cleanliness, hygiene, and sustainability into the fabric of communities. Thereafter, the emphasis is always on supporting and sustaining these initiatives, bridging gaps, and building capacities where they are needed most. But the true credit goes to the communities themselves — the children, the parents, and the local leaders who are embracing these changes wholeheartedly.

As we continue to work towards the goal of a cleaner and greener world, it's important to recognize that cleanliness, hygiene, and environmental protection must be viewed as essential rights for all, not privileges for a few. The more we support and encourage community-led initiatives, the closer we get to building a healthier, greener, and more inclusive India.

Together, we can ensure that the winds of change continue to blow strong—from the remote hamlets of Bihar to the coastal villages of West Bengal, and tribal heartlands of Odisha and indeed across the miles of the country—and that these young leaders continue to inspire future generations to uphold the values of cleanliness, sustainability, and shared responsibility.

