

Villages in Maharashtra enjoy the benefits of a campaign that lays stress on cleanliness, self-reliance and community-sharing, ideas that were popularised by the legendary social reformer Gadge Baba.



Houses that were given a fresh coat of paint as part of the cleanliness campaign.



Public spaces become the responsibility of citizens.

The Gram Swachata Abhiyan received a remarkable response and has since 2000 become an annual event in Maharashtra. This year, 27,636 of the State's 42,000 villages participated in the campaign, which has created public assets worth Rs.500 crores without any contributions from the government. Money, labour and materials were provided by the community. Womens' groups, youth groups, cooperatives and gram panchayats were involved in the programme, whose objective is to arouse a spirit of competition and thereby achieve 'Prosperity through Cleanliness'.

The campaign relied on the teachings of Gadge Baba and, instead of offering funds to the residents of village, it introduced a system of incentives. The three cleanest villages would win prizes of Rs.25 lakhs, Rs.15 lakhs and Rs.10 lakhs each. The villages then decide how to spend the money. It is usually used to further some community cause since village leaders are aware that the district administration could take the money back if the village dropped its standards.

The winners are decided on the basis of 11 criteria, ranging from drinking water (its quality, the performance of local water committees, and so on) to personal hygiene (habits of children, analyses of anganwadi reports, and so on) to the use of unconventional energy sources.

The campaign was structured in such a manner that the competition itself lasted about 240 days because of the many rounds of judging that had to be completed. The process of judging starts at the gram panchayat level and proceeds to the block level and the district level.

Sulekha Kumbhare, Minister for Water Supply and Sanitation, said that the womens' groups "came together irrespective of caste or religion because they wanted their village to be Number One in the State." She recalled the unforgettable scene in Tunga village — mandir, masjid and church — was painted pink. The people decided to convey the message of national integration and chose pink as the most neutral colour." However, according to Kumbhare, it was Phulsare village which stood second, that really exemplified the motto of the Gadge Baba campaign. A tribal village in the northern tribal constituency of Nandurbar, Phulsare is something of a model village. Says Kumbhare: "For the last 25 years there has been no police complaint lodged. The women have always been very active here. They had an amazingly efficient water recycling system in which domestic water is reused in agriculture. All the children go to school and no alcohol is consumed in the village. Each house had its own toilet — something very unusual in a tribal community."

Perhaps the most stimulating aspect of the campaign is the self-reliance it has generated among the people. As an official in the Water and Sanitation Department said: "At least the people won't have to wait for development to come to them. They can create their own future."