

Pilgrims pledge to keep Sabarimala clean

During the three months when it is swamped with about 15 million pilgrims, 125 tons of waste is generated at Sabarimala located in a highly sensitive biosphere. With no system to dispose it, both the temple surroundings and the Pampa river basin are awash with rubbish dumped by the devout — this includes ritual dhotis left behind after the journey is over and, of course, mounds of plastic bags.

To stem this ecological disaster a campaign was started four years ago, the Punyam Poonkavanam project at Sabarimala. It has now spread to six more states. How it works is this: pilgrims usually set off for the pilgrimage by seeking blessings at local temples. These temples now instruct pilgrims to remain conscious of the damage they can cause by dumping waste at Sabarimala. Up until now only temples in Kerala ran this "responsible and conscious pilgrimage" awareness campaign, it has now been picked up by temples outside the state as well. The project also runs a Whatsapp group.

Venkata Raman Reddy is a busy lawyer at the Andhra high court, but over the last three months he has been busy setting up 13 centres of the project across his state. There are others like him across India participating in the project begun by P Vijayan, chief co-ordinator, Punyam Poonkavanam, and DIG, Intelligence in the state police.

"In Sabarimala everyone is equal and it was unfair to make one swami (pilgrim) pick up the waste left by another," says Vijayan. The message to not litter is first conveyed to the guruswamis who lead the pilgrims in a group.

In November an awareness seminar was held in Chennai for the team leaders. "Pilgrims left plastic and other waste behind mainly because they were ignorant of the impact of their negligence. One way to connect with them was to instil the idea of cleanliness in their devotion to the shrine," says Shaji Sugunan, DySP and co-ordinator of the project. There are seven steps, 'sapthakarma', that the pilgrim is expected to adhere to on the journey to ensure that he does not cause pollution during the journey.

One of the key pollutants in Sabarimala is plastic. The pilgrims carry with them a sacred bundle called the irumudi kettu. It contains a variety of articles required for worship, a lot of them wrapped in plastic. This is something the project is trying to work on. "Rose water in plastic bottles is one component of the bundle but nobody knows that it is actually not needed for worship. We are trying to make its use minimal and also ensure that nothing from the bundle is left behind that has plastic in it," says Renjith R Nair, an industrialist and project co-ordinator in Telangana.

In Andhra Pradesh, which sends out 35% of pilgrims to Sabarimala, the project plans to run awareness campaigns over FM and All India Radio. Already 50,000 pamphlets are being distributed across the state. Similar efforts are on in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Delhi and Maharashtra.

As the pilgrimage season begins, the tantri, the chief priest at the shrine, starts the day by picking up waste in the temple precinct. Every morning at 9am hundreds gather at shrine and head out in three batches to clean up the area. Businessmen, judges and bureaucrats rub shoulders with shudhi sena (army of cleaners] for 2-3 hours as part of the mission.

"This is a rare sight. Earlier few knew about the shudhi sena. Now it's cleaners feel dignified about what they do because they do it as equals along with people from various walks of life," says Vijayan.