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An Indian Ocean plastic-free Campaign to clean up coasts speaks of commitment to restoring marine health

LAST MONTH, I had the privilege of representing India at the high-level UN Ocean Conference in Lisbon, Portugal, where India assured the world community that under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, it is committed to protecting at least 30 per cent of "our" lands, waters and oceans, and thus adhere to its commitment of 30X30 by 2030 in a mission mode. The ministers, delegates and representatives from more than 130 countries were told that we are there at the UN forum to present before the world the PM's vision for the conservation and sustenance of oceans and their resources.

India is part of the High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People, which was initiated at the "One Planet Summit" in Paris in January 2021, to promote an international agreement to protect at least 30 per cent of the world's land and ocean by 2030. India also offered to provide science and innovation-based solutions for the implementation of SDG-Goal 14 through partnerships and environmentally-friendly solutions at the World Ocean Summit. Goal 14 calls for the conservation and sustainable use of the oceans, seas, and marine resources.

Now, after the declarations at the UN high-level meeting, it is time to walk the talk. Therefore, barely a week after the UN Ocean Conference, India announced that it will undertake a massive coastal clean-up drive that will cover 75 beaches across the country – there will be 75 volunteers for every kilometre of the coastline. A 75-day-long awareness campaign, "Swachh Sagar, Surakshit Sagar" has been launched on July 5. It will culminate on International Coastal Clean-up Day on

September 17. It will be the first-of-its-kind and possibly the world's longest-running coastal clean-up campaign with the most number of people participating in it. The participation of the common people will convey the message of "Swachh Sagar, Surakshit Sagar" for the prosperity of not only coastal areas but other parts of the country as well.

It is pertinent to mention that in March this year, I had said in the Lok Sabha that single-use plastics contribute to over 50 per cent of marine litter, as per the pan-India coastal monitoring and beach clean-up activities are undertaken by the National Centre for Coastal Research (NCCR), Chennai, from 2018 to 2021. The 'Beach Litter Survey' has further revealed that the maximum litter accumulation occurs on the backshore than in the inter-tidal zone. Moreover, urban beaches have higher accumulation rates than rural beaches. Samples from coastal water, sediment, beach, and biota were analysed for micro/meso/macro plastics pollution. An increase in the abundance of microplastics was observed along India's east coast during the monsoon. The stations closer to the river mouth in particular had higher numbers of microplastic concentrations. Several other studies have highlighted the harmful effects of litter, especially plastics, on marine biodiversity, ecosystems, fisheries, human health and the economy. Usually, waste from land-based sources makes up the major share of marine litter.

In his very first Independence Day address as prime minister, Narendra Modi gave India the "Swachh Bharat Abhiyan", which made the country ODF (Open Defecation Free). Similarly,

after starting his second term as PM in 2019, his first address from the ramparts of the Red Fort addressed another major Swachhata issue – single-use plastic. He said, "Remembering revered Bapu, we should move out of home collecting single-use plastic from homes, streets, chowks, and drains. Municipalities, Municipal corporations, Gram Panchayat should make arrangements to collect single-use plastic." PM Modi then asked us: "Can we take the first big step on October 2 towards making India free from single-use plastic"? He also requested start-ups, technicians and entrepreneurs to see what could be done to recycle this plastic and at the same time, he urged the people to promote jute and cloth bags.

In line with the clarion call given by PM Modi to phase out single-use plastic items by 2022, the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change notified the Plastic Waste Management Amendment Rules, 2021, on August 12, 2021. On June 21, the Ministry announced that India will ban the manufacture, import, stocking, distribution, sale and use of identified single-use plastic items, which have low utility and high littering potential, across the country from July 1.

These domestic measures are part of international obligations as India, as a signatory of the UN "Coastal Clean Seas" campaign, has adopted and undertaken activities that have direct relevance to the "Swachh Bharat" vision to prevent pollution from both land-based and offshore activities, in line with Sustainable Development Goal 14. Its target 14.1 seeks to "prevent and significantly reduce marine pollution of all kinds, in particular from land-based

activities, including marine debris and nutrient pollution" by 2025.

The "International Coastal Clean-up Day" is observed globally on the third Saturday of September, every year. On September 17, the government, along with other voluntary organisations and local people will run the "Swachh Sagar, Surakshit Sagar" campaign along India's entire coastline. This year's event also coincides with the celebrations of Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav. Efforts will be undertaken to collect scientific data and information on various matrices of marine litter. The target of the drive is to remove 1,500 tonnes of garbage from the coast, which will be a huge relief for marine life and the people staying in coastal areas.

This campaign will include the Ministry of Earth Sciences (MoES), Ministry of Environment Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC), National Service Scheme (NSS), Indian Coast Guard, National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), Seema Jagran Manch, SFD, Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), Paryavaran Sanrakshan Gatividhi (PSC), along with other social organisations and educational institutions.

A mobile app, "Eco Mitram", has been launched to spread awareness about the campaign and facilitate the registration of volunteers.

There is also a firm belief that through this campaign, a mass behavioural change among the masses will take place by raising awareness about how plastic usage is destroying our marine life.

The writer is a Union minister