

CLEAN AND GREEN - GANGASAGAR MELA

- **Background**

Sagar Island also known as Gangasagar is a large island with an area of around 300 km². It has 43 villages and a population of over 1,67,000. This island is famous for Hindu Pilgrimage Gangasagar mela. The pilgrimage is held for almost a week around the Makarsankranti. The expected population for the fair 2016 was around 1.5 million.

The Gangasagar festival and pilgrimage is held every year on Sagar Island's southern tip, where the mighty Ganga enters the Bay of Bengal. Every year on the day of Makar Sankranti (14 or 15 January), hundreds of thousands of Hindus take a holy dip at the confluence. Around 1.5 million pilgrims visited Gangasagar mela in 2016.

As the number of pilgrims increased over the years, the pressures of the large gathering began to leave their impact on the environment. By the late 20th century the Gangasagar mela gained a reputation for being dirty and ridden with foul stench that came from the human excreta on the beaches and other areas on the mela ground.

In 2016, under the leadership of the District Magistrate of South 24 Parganas District, efforts were focused on driving a social movement for the elimination of open defecation in the district as well as the Mela ground. The Gangasagar Mela provided an excellent opportunity to engage and influence pilgrims, who came from across India, on water, sanitation and hygiene practices, and specifically on stopping open defecation throughout the mela. The mela provided a platform with a huge potential to create awareness and motivate changes in attitudes around key WASH behaviours, particularly open defecation. This year the mela was different as the government focused on cleaning up the mela by putting restrictions on open defecation, on littering the premises and on the open use of plastic less than 40 microns. To achieve this, there were 10,000 toilets, 7,000 large dustbins on the mela ground, as well as 3,000 cleaning staff and 2,000 volunteers, who sensitised pilgrims on the use of toilets and bins.

Undertaking this huge effort needed the support of and coordination with several departments and organisations – UNICEF provided support with branding, communication and training volunteers, who guided pilgrims to the toilets while NGOs mobilised the 2,000 plus volunteers.

The Panchayat of Sagar block played another key role in making the mela clean and green. It mobilised the 3,000 plus Nirmal Bandhus, responsible for keeping the toilets cleaning, guiding users with buckets and water and clearing the garbage from 7,000 dustbins.

- **Location, Date**

Gangasagar (South 24 Parganas, West Bengal), 2015-16

- **Areas**

Rural/Gangasagar Mela

- **Stage/Scale**

- **Objective of the assignment**

The main objective was to ensure the Gangasagar Mela of 2016 to be free of open defecation with restrictions on the use of plastic.

- **What was done**

The district administration, led by Dr P.B. Salim, IAS, began planning for a clean and green mela as early as July 2015. Subsequently, in a meeting UNICEF and Global Interfaith WASH Alliance also pledged their support to the district administration in making Gangasagar 2016 a clean and green mela followed by an NGO level and stakeholder consultations was held to finalise the strategy. A series of follow-up meetings was held subsequently at different strategic locations with Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) members, government officials and NGO representatives.

- **Impact**

The Gangasagar Mela was an excellent example of advanced preparation with clarity on types of departments to be involved, roles of the departments, etc. and assessment of exact need and requirement of resources to achieve the requirements of a Clean and Green Gangasagar Mela. All the planning and preparation to make the mela clean and green worked very well on the ground for three main reasons – effective public announcement, close watch and sensitisation by volunteers and the cleaning job by Nirmal Bandhus.

- **Challenges and Issues**

- The challenge to transform the mela into a clean and green one was enormous. Reaching the mela is itself a big challenge under normal circumstances as it is located on an island. The arrangements were made for transportation to a ferry point, cross the creek that divides the island from the mainland and from there transports people to the mela ground, which is by the sea. The distance between the disembarkation point and the mela ground is about 5 km. Crossing the creek to reach the island again was not easy because low tides between 2 pm and 6 pm prevented any movement of water traffic.
- Another challenge was the campaigning for an open defecation free mela where the crowd comes from diverse backgrounds- linguistically and culturally, with extreme diverse habits.

- **Innovation**

- There was universal coverage of toilets in all residential accommodation, transit points, buffer zones and halting stations. The toilets were numbered and a roster or cleaners was available to monitor cleaning operations. Nearly 10,000 permanent and semi-permanent toilets were built on the mela ground and 2,000 plus toilets were installed at transit points and buffer zones, with water available 24 hours. All toilets were coloured yellow and had a flag marker on top so that they could be spotted easily from a distance.
- In addition, all hotels, dharamshalas and lodges were instructed to ensure the availability of toilets on a 1:20 ratio. Besides this, to manage garbage, 7000 yellow coloured dustbins were placed and solid waste management units were established in two locations for recycling. Additionally one cleaning staff was deployed for every 10 toilets; Najardari committee, 15000 volunteers from NCC and renowned NGOs were

engaged to ensure best practices against open defecation. Plastic/thermacol cups were completely ban and paper cups were encouraged

- Outdoor Campaign through Billboards/Leaflets/Hoardings in vernacular as well as Hindi was used. 140 CCTV cameras were installed at all locations of mela ground.



• Lessons learnt

The key elements to the success were:

- Strong political will and leadership: At the institutional level, the district administration, backed by the proactive leadership of Dr Salim, was instrumental in conceiving and rolling out of the programme on a mission mode. The block also had achieved ODF status prior to the mela i.e. on 7th January 2016.
- Clear roles and responsibilities: Different departments were set with clear roles and responsibilities that include construction, cleaning & maintenance and monitoring.
- Convergence: The success for Clean and Green Mela was framed on the convergence of all the stakeholders that includes the Panchayat of Sagar Island, NGOs and the district administration of South 24 Parganas. All three pooled resources and together erected 180 pilgrim shed and 12000 permanent and semi-permanent toilets on the mela ground as well as transit points.
- Mobilisation: Mobilisation through innovative communication strategies was one of the key ingredients for Green & Clean Mela. Information, sensitization and guidance on toilet use were the mool mantra. Messages were conveyed using hoardings, public announcements, LED TV and through volunteers and nirmal bandhus.
- Supply chain: The programme's focus was not only on mobilisation but also providing infrastructure for usage. Added to this were 10000 toilets on the mela ground and thousands of nirmal bandhus, who worked on day and night shifts for cleaning. There was ample water and buckets available as well as 7000 dustbins were also present.

• Financials

Not Available

• Implementer Contact Persons

- District Magistrate, South 24 Parganas

• Sources and References

- Government of West Bengal
- District Magistrate, South 24 Parganas