



GREENING INDIA'S HOLI DAYS

Holi – the festival of colours – is a popular spring celebration in India, when people light bonfires and go around throwing coloured powder and water at each other, even though the powder often stings the eyes. Prithvi Innovations, a Clean Up the World member in India, has been working to ensure that the country's festival fever does not turn into an environmental flop. It also connects tradition and modernity in promoting education for sustainability.

Religion and tradition are intertwined in every aspect of life in India. Being a multicultural and multi-religious society, the country celebrates holidays and festivals of various faiths and groups throughout the year.

In late March or early April each year, tonnes of coloured powder are produced to fuel the growing Holi market. Unfortunately, the vivid colours of the powder are often produced with toxic chemicals, which can damage people's health and contaminate rivers and groundwater sources. For instance, the highly toxic mercury sulphide is used in red colour making.



Bright but harmful – Holi powder

Anuradha Kumar Gupta, a teacher, community leader and founder of a NGO called Prithvi Innovations, was wondering how to keep the fun in the celebrations while ensuring their sustainability.

As a first step, she and an eminent Indian scientist Dr V.P. Kapoor encouraged 600 students

with powder made with flower dyes – promoting the idea of a 'Herbal Holi'.



Anuradha Kumar Gupta

Similarly, during the festival of lights of Diwali celebrated by bursting thousands of crackers, Gupta sought to reduce the levels of chemical and noise pollution and channel the money going into buying fireworks in longer-lasting sources of joy for poor kids, such as books and clothes. She also urged students and parents to use water wisely during the celebrations.

"We designed a survey for schoolchildren and their families entitled 'Are you water smart?'. It came as a big surprise to students that their pre-survey estimates of the average water consumption per person (10-25 litres) was so much below the actual average daily consumption: around 120-160 litres. They were shocked to learn that water used for flushing the toilet per person per day alone can be as high as 35 litres," says Gupta.

Annual per capita water availability in India has been on the decline over the past 60 years.

In 1947, it amounted to 6,000 cubic meters, twenty years later it became 2,500 cubic meters, and is projected to decline to just 750 cubic meters by 2025. The country has also been in the grips of a severe drought over the recent years.

Prithvi Innovations involves Lucknow students in rainwater harvesting, a form of water management practiced in India since antiquity. "Our ancestors harvested the rain drop directly from rooftops and community lands, storing it in artificial wells. But this ancient art has often been neglected since the 19th century. The water crisis we are facing today urges us to rediscover traditional practices," explains Gupta.

She also believes the idea of education for sustainability is nothing new. "Education for sustainable development has deep roots in Indian history. Since Vedic times, Indian religion and culture in its diverse forms has proposed, practiced and preached this idea as it is understood today. One finds several instances in our holy scriptures stressing education for sustainability from a very young age.





Prithvi Innovations works with students in Lucknow, India

Its basic values and underlying principles were taught at home, and were later nurtured by the gurus," Gupta points out.

However, she believes that in spite of India's deep-rooted ideas of sustainability, modern day teachers may sometimes view them as a foreign concept. That's why it is important to make sustainability ideas their own alongside other crucial values such as respect for cultural diversity, gender equality and human rights.

"Our working model of education for sustainable development enables students to grow and develop physically, spiritually, intellectually, culturally, economically and environmentally, too, so that they flourish in whatever socio-economic context they find themselves in," she says.

Putting theory into practice, Gupta organises year-round activities as part of the Clean Up the World campaign. She and her students collect, recycle and resale what others might consider as 'junk'. She has also initiated planting of medicinal herbs in four schools – promoting another Indian tradition of homeopathy that is more than three thousand years old and on which millions of people worldwide rely.

In 2005, Prithvi Innovations organised a week-long workshop, during which students learned about environmental and health issues, and also came up with a list of actions on how to improve their city.

And are all these activities making a difference? According to Gupta, the results are cleaner and greener campuses, enthusiastic and alert students and much more.

"Students' consumption patterns have changed, water saving at schools and at home is taking place, and waste is being recycled and reused," she says.

Raksha Bandhan is another very important festival in India, which celebrates the relationship between brothers and sisters. The festival is marked by the tying of a *rakhi*, or holy thread by the sister on the wrist of her brother. The brother in return offers a gift to his sister and vows to look after her.

Rakhis are not necessarily given to brothers by birth only; any male can be "adopted" as a brother by tying a rakhi to show solidarity and kinship, as was done during the Indian independence movement.

"On the occasion of Raksha Bandhan we set out to encourage 500 students to take a pledge to save the biodiversity around them."

"Girls made beautiful rakhis out of their used CDs and other materials and when around tying them to trees, plants and animal houses in their school campus as a mark of their commitment to respect, love and care for the diversity of plants and animals around us," says Gupta.



And of course in India there's always an occasion for a song, so Lucknow volunteers invented this one for their clean up campaign:

*"Leave it to us...
If creativity is in your mind and
concern is in your heart,
Join us in celebrations!
Let your actions matter,
Let your voice be heard,
After all, you are the future of
the world!
Leave it to us – we will make
the Earth smile."*



Leave it to us, say Lucknow children

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