

“Sisters and brothers,

I am very pleased to join all of you to inaugurate the National Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) Conclave highlighting a subject of paramount importance in our country. In many Indian languages the word, water is associated with ‘*jeevan*, which means life’. We often say ‘*Jal hi Jeevan hai*’ .... ‘Water is Life’. Our forefathers saw the underlying truth behind this statement centuries ago—we have therefore, for millennia, worshipped life-giving rivers across the length and breadth of this vast country.

Friends,

As we all agree, an adequate amount of safe drinking water for every rural household is a basic necessity. Under the UN-Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs-6), ‘Clean water and sanitation for all’ is a global commitment that most countries have made. In India, we have made considerable progress in providing adequate quantities to many villages. Plans are afoot to augment the supply and ensure adequate safe water for every household. This basic necessity is absolutely essential for the overall healthy living of people, both in urban as well as rural areas. Undoubtedly, there is a need to fast-track progress in this regard and bestow greater attention to all aspects relating to providing water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities.

Importantly, we not only need to ensure water supply but make available safe water for drinking purposes. In this context, I appreciate the initiative of the Government of India and all those involved in WASH campaign, including the NGOs in this gigantic mission.

As a matter of fact, a significant amount of civil engineering work is involved in providing water and sanitation. The department concerned is rightly called ‘Public Health Engineering Department’—a term which highlights the importance of ‘public health.’ This is in sync with the approach that basic amenities like safe drinking water and sanitation play a critical role in preventing diseases and contributing towards the overall well-being of people.

Viewed from this perspective, *SDG-6 on Water and Sanitation* is closely related to *SDG-3*, which is about *Good Health and Well-being*. This is something unique about WASH. The progress we make in this sector has a cascading impact on many other development indicators.

A WHO study conducted in 2018 noted that good sanitation can save more than one lakh lives on an annual basis – year after year. Another study has revealed that groundwater sources in villages with poor sanitation practice are, on average, 11 times more likely to be contaminated. There is a great need to create awareness on this crucial aspect among people.

While Indian culture and way of life have always attached importance to observing hygienic practices, the COVID-19 pandemic, ironically, has brought to fore the critical role of washing hands and observing hygiene. With sustained efforts, the Covid pandemic curve is flattening, but people should not lower their guard. They should continue with the practice of washing hands frequently which has now become an integral part of our everyday lives, seen collectively, on an unprecedented scale, thanks to heightened awareness.

In this context, I would like to stress the importance of ensuring safe water, sanitation and hygienic practices at every school and anganwadi centre. Children should grow up in an environment that is healthy – physically and emotionally. Preventive health care measures must begin from anganwadis and primary schools.

Dear sisters and brothers,

We also need to consciously focus on ‘responsible production and consumption’, and curb the habit of indiscriminate disposal of waste of any kind. SDG-11 is about ‘*Responsible Production and Consumption*’, and SDG-12 is about ‘*Sustainable Communities*’. These two are closely interlinked and sustainability solely depends on responsible behaviour by all of us. These are important actionable areas and I am confident that this conclave will bestow adequate attention on them.

I am happy to note that the focus of this three-day conclave is on ‘*advancing water, sanitation and hygiene at Panchayats*’. Taking forward WASH agenda to Gram Panchayats is critical as they are at the core of rural water supply. At the same time, it is equally important to ensure *institutional strengthening of the Panchayats* for effective service delivery to the last mile. This is a key aspect of governance which I always emphasise—efficient last mile delivery of services be it rural water supply, health care services, education, agriculture or other sectors—holds the key to fast-tracking all-round development.

With rural water supply networks getting expanded across the country and with the plan to provide piped water supply to villages, there is bound to be a positive spinoff. There will be a huge demand for plumbers, electricians, people trained in chlorination of water and those who can attend to repairs and leakages in pipelines. Perhaps, we should look at the manner in which local governments in some of the Scandinavian countries manage skill requirements at the level of counties. We can expand and apply some of these hub-and-spokes models, as they are described, employed by Denmark and Sweden, where possible, to the Indian context. In such a model, there is skilled manpower available to attend to any breakdown and maintenance works to cover many areas, including ones without such trained manpower.

Providing safe drinking water and sanitation to every rural household is a massive task, given the size of this country and the varied nature of terrain. Yet, as a nation, we need to ensure that every household gets all the basic facilities – the most essential of them being WASH related. This can be realised only if a vast array of players join hands with singular focus and determination.

In conclusion, I would like to add that I am sure this National WASH Conclave 2022, organised by the National Institute of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (NIRDPR), Hyderabad in association with the Ministry of Jal Shakti, Ministry of Panchayati Raj, UNICEF and other development partners will provide the much needed momentum to WASH campaign.”