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Rameshwaram cleanup drive makes quiet and steady progress

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CHENNAI: Ganga has Modi & team, but it's the NGO drive that is doing the cleanup... for South's temple town Rameshwaram. Even before the Centre embarked on an ambitious programme to clean up the Ganga, temple town Rameshwaram in the south had decided that it needed a clean break from its polluting ways on its own.

Located on Tamil Nadu's southern coastline, Rameshwaram is one of the holiest places for Hindus and receives about 1.5 crore pilgrims and tourists every year, resulting in the degeneration of the environment and ecological balance around the area. But earlier this year a group led by non-governmental organisation Vivekananda Kendra began work to clean and transform Rameshwaram through what it calls the "Green Rameshwaram Project". The plan was set rolling in January by former president APJ Abdul Kalam.

"It all started with cleaning the water bodies (or 'theerthams' as they are called) in and around the famous Ramanatha Swamy temple. They were almost ruined and we revived those," said G Vasudeo, secretary of Vivekananda Kendra's Natural Resources Development Project.

"Then with this success, we decided to take up the cleaning of the entire town." A detailed report is being prepared but a rough estimate shows the project will require about Rs 250 crore, says Vivekananda Kendra. It plans to rope in like-minded individual donors and corporate donors for the cause. The project will address issues such as archaeology, history, marine biodiversity, solid waste management, ecotourism, and beautification, among other things.

The Vivekananda Kendra has tied up with organisations, such as Brahmos Aerospace to help in solar electrification of some hamlets in Dhanushkodi, the southernmost tip of the island. The team is also exploring ways of working with IIT-Madras for help in the use of certain technologies.

"We have had initial rounds of discussions with the Kendra and we would be working with them in areas such as clean transport, non-conventional use of energy and atmospheric pollution control," said S Gopalakrishnan, project consultant at The Rural Technology Action Group, IIT-M. The dumping of waste such as plastic items into the sea has been one of the main factors for the depletion of fish in the surrounding areas, forcing fishermen to move further away from the coast for their catch.

"The dumping of sewage into the sea has even made the courts to say that taking a dip in it is a health hazard. But people come here all the way to wash away their sins in these holy waters," said Aravindan Neelakantan, a volunteer with the Vivekananda Kendra. He said water bodies in Rameshwaram have been scientifically built centuries ago and excellent examples of rainwater harvesting. "We are just trying to revive these. It is astonishing to find freshwater in these water bodies given that we are surrounded by saline water," he says.



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