Dandi March- 2005: Sanitary arrangements en route

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From March 12, 2005 to April 5, 2005, the historic Dandi March was re-enacted to apprise the new generation of this extraordinary campaign to breach the salt tax under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. The National Sanitation & Environment Improvement Foundation (NASA) undertook the responsibility of attending to the sanitation and to the provision of mobile toilet facilities. The author, who is the executive chairman of the organisation, gives an account of how NASA provided sanitation facilities to the marchers all along the route from Sabarmati to Dandi.

Re-enacted Dandi March took place on the same route as Mahatma Gandhi had followed, covering 240 miles in 26 days. The Indian National Congress seized this opportunity and helped Tushar Gandhi all throughout the route for making preparations for food for four hundred to five hundred persons per day and for their stay and drinking water en route by providing for hundred tents. There were more than fifty overseas participants, who had to be provided with decent sanitation facilities and bath. How to arrange such facilities was a big question worrying Mr. Tushar Gandhi. He sent a message to NASA Foundation, a voluntary organization working in Gujarat and Maharashtra in public sanitation by constructing community toilet with bath facilities at various places and by maintaining them round the clock.

Mr. Tushar Gandhi contacted NASA Foundation in the first week of February and requested it to arrange all kinds of sanitation and bath facilities on a daily basis at every overnight halt of Dandi marchers. NASA Foundation accepted this difficult task and found solution by providing prefab toilet and bath from molded plastic material. Such kinds of materials were used by NASA Foundation two years back during the great earthquake of Kutch. Hence, workers of NASA Foundation were familiar with handling such units, and they prepared a system of installing such facilities at every halt of March by forming four groups. One group of twelve persons, called an advance group, went in advance to the next halt and dug a channel 8-10 feet deep and 100-150 feet long. A group of twelve workers took 8 to 10 hours for preparing such a trench on which the molded plastic toilets and bath used to be placed for the use of Dandi marchers. The second group was assigned to install such units on the trenches prepared near the residential tents of the marchers. The third group worked to dismantle such units and transfer the same in two or three trucks to the next halt. The fourth group was to clean the whole place after the marcher left the place. Thereafter all units of toilet & bath were being moved to next destination.

Such an arrangement was made, put to practice and was found to be highly successful. All marchers, including foreigners, found the facilities very clean and usable. They greatly appreciated such facilities, because they all knew that in the
whole route of Dandi march there were many villages where there were no fixed latrines and bathing facilities.

I am extremely happy in reporting that all ground workers of NASA Foundation worked tirelessly and built all facilities. Most of them had to remain awake for the whole night, helping all marchers who normally reached the destination in the evening. All marchers (more than 300), were provided warm water for bath in the evening when they reached their destination after 10 to 15 miles of long walk.

This was the silent work, but most basic to all marchers to help them to maintain their health appropriately.

NASA Foundation contributed directly and indirectly to focus the spirit of marchers, thus making the re-enactment of Dandi March successful and rewarding.

Acceptance of unused challenge was the beginning of a new face of NASA Foundation. It was a new experience for the participants of the march of getting clean sanitation facilities throughout the route, in remote villages of Gujarat, where still 40% of households do not yet have individual toilets. We are thankful to God and to the spirit of Mahatma Gandhi for giving us such a spirit and strength for doing our bit.

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