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Swasth Bharat Yatra begins in six Indian locations on World Food Day

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E-paper

On the occasion of World Food Day recently, the Swasth Bharat Yatra got underway simultaneously in six locations across India - Leh (Jammu and Kashmir), Panaji (Goa), Thiruvananthapuram (Kerala), Puducherry, Ranchi (Jharkhand) and Agartala (Tripura). The kick-off event was a prabhat pheri at all these locations with people from a wide cross-section of society including children, NCC cadets, NSS volunteers, etc. participating. After day-long activities in these cities, 150 volunteer-cyclists (at least 25 from each location), along with a convoy of vehicles for education, awareness and safety would be flagged off from these remote locations. After cycling for over 100 days and covering about 2,000 locations, the Eat Right Convoys, along with the cyclists, will reach New Delhi in the last week of January, where a massive outreach programme is planned in Delhi and the National Capital Region (NCR).

Altogether, about 7,500 cyclists are expected to participate and they together will cover a distance of over 18,000km. They will cycle about 50km or more moving from one city to another in a relay format. Thousands of other cyclists are likely to join for shorter distances and lakhs of people will directly participate in various activities, including prabhat pheris across the country. This would not only mobilise the masses, but also create a large pool of local community champions to sustain the movement. Along with this, Eat Right melas, Eat Right conventions and a national poster competition are planned with a view to amplify and deepen engagement with various stakeholders, particularly with our young people.

Continuing its unstinted efforts to ensure safe and wholesome food for every citizen of the country, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), under the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare at the Centre and the food safety commissioners at the state level, is leading a massive mobilisation drive through the largest ever pan-India cycle rally, the Swasth Bharat Yatra. Driven by passion and a clear vision, the mission of Swasth Bharat Yatra is to connect a country of 130 crore citizens physically and in thought, bringing alive Mahatma Gandhi's dream of a healthier India to commemorate his 150th birth anniversary.

This yatra aims to build awareness around food safety, combating food adulteration and healthy diets to make this a household habit and culture. FSSAI has dispatched specially-fabricated Eat Right mobile units to all the six locations and Food Safety on Wheels, a mobile food testing unit as a part of the convoy. Several VIPs kick-started the Swasth Bharat Yatra at different locations. Ranchandra Chandravanshi and K K Shailja, state health ministers started it in Ranchi and Thiruvananthapuram, respectively. The chief executive counsellor of Ladakh started the yatra in Leh, the commissioner and mission director, National Health Mission (NHM) in Agartala and the collector in Puducherry.

The events witnessed huge enthusiasm among the local citizens and the media. The first batch of cyclists has been flagged off from these places to begin its journey towards Delhi. In keeping with the philosophy and spirit of the Swasth Bharat Yatra as a people's movement, it was led by school students, NCC and NSS cadets and other partners. Students and volunteers made a strong pitch for promoting right eating habits, pointing to the alarming increase in food related lifestyle diseases. They urged everyone to join the movement by inculcating right eating habits and invited volunteers to register as cyclists via the Swasth Bharat Yatra portal. In Delhi, this occasion was marked by a special press conference addressed by students from different schools.

Calling them Eat Right Champions, the students addressed the media in a highly engaging and interactive format. They explained the scale and scope of the outreach activities and the key messages of Eat Right India movement and Swasth Bharat Yatra. They hoped that young people, in the spirit of solidarity, across the country would join the Swasth Bharat Yatra to make a difference to the way its citizens eat. The young Eat Right Champions accepted the fact that they often eat driven by convenience and impulse rather than nourishment and good health.

They recognised the fact that due to unsafe food and poor diets, people around the world today face numerous health challenges. They showed serious concern about the fact that six of the top ten risk factors for burden of disease in India are food-related.

On one hand, the problem of chronic hunger continues unabated and diets of most people lack essential vitamins and minerals, and on the other, overweight and obesity are on the rise. Unsafe food and poor diets result in foodborne illnesses, wasting and stunting, the growing incidence of diabetes and cardiovascular diseases. This calls for urgent action, particularly by young people, so that everyone is mindful of what to eat, how to eat and when to eat.

They also appreciated the fact that the Government of India was committed to the cause of malnutrition through measures such as the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS), covering approximately 80 crore people; the POSHAN Abhiyaan; the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), covering approximately 9.83 crore mothers and children, and the Mid-Day Meal (MDM) Scheme, covering approximately 10.03 crore children to improve nutrition outcomes in the country. The collective financial outlay of TPDS, ICDS and MDM together, for the financial year (FY) 2018-19 is about Rs 2 lakh crore.

However, they were concerned that despite numerous programmes and policies being operational in the country, still 19.6 crore people are chronically undernourished, 38.4 per cent of children below the age of five years are stunted, 21 per cent are wasted and 35.7 per cent are underweight. Over 50 per cent of women of reproductive age group (i.e. between 15 and 49 years) are anaemic and prevalence of anaemia among men is 22.7 per cent.

Realising that good nutrition is critical to good health as well as the growth and development of the nation the students understood the importance of the Eat Right India movement. They also remarked how the Eat Right India movement is focused on preventive healthcare as per the National Health Policy 2017 and is at the heart of the government's flagship programmes like the Ayushman Bharat Yojana, POSHAN Abhiyaan, Anaemia Mukh Bharat and Swachh Bharat Mission. They thanked the government for their continued efforts towards addressing issues of under nutrition and malnutrition in the country, particularly among the vulnerable sections of the society, adding that more efforts were required to engage, excite and enable people to eat right. They thanked the food businesses, who have shown courage and conviction to reformulate their food products and provide healthier options to them so that they can gradually reduce their intake of salt, sugar and fat content and eliminate trans-fats altogether and make India trans-fat free by 2022-India@75. Understanding that repeatedly heating and using cooking oil can lead to the formation of trans-fats and other harmful elements that are hazardous to health, they appreciated the efforts of the all the stakeholders involved in reusing used cooking oil to make biodiesel instead not only as a healthy but an environmentally safe practice.

They also thanked food businesses that have begun to fortify edible oil and milk voluntarily in the open market, which amounts to almost 47 per cent of packaged oil and 21 per cent of packaged milk. Fortification is being promoted by notification of standards for five staples (wheat flour, rice, oil, milk and salt), +F logo for easy identification by consumers and technical support to states for ICDS and MDM programmes to adopt fortified food products. The students acknowledged FSSAI's efforts to raise the bar of food safety and promote healthy diets in the country. To engage, excite and enable citizens to eat right, FSSAI has developed powerful, holistic messages on personal and surrounding hygiene, detecting adulteration, eating a balanced diet and avoiding foods high in fat, sugar and salt (HFSS).

Simple, scientifically-accurate material has been co-created with domain experts such as guidance booklets like The Pink Book for home kitchens, The Yellow Books for schools, The DART Book for testing adulteration, etc. National-level resource persons and health and wellness coordinators have been trained to disseminate these messages widely. Consumer guidance notes to educate consumers and address common misconceptions are also released regularly. They also referred to FSSAI's unique Food Safety Training and Certification (FoSTaC) programme that trains and certifies food safety supervisors on each food business premise.

Over 50,000 food supervisors have been trained under FoSTaC in just one year, thus building capacity of food businesses to ensure compliance towards food safety. The students appreciated the Eat Right Toolkit that been developed for Health and Wellness Centres under Ayushman Bharat Yojana, to ensure that these messages reach the grassroots level, with interesting activities and training aids to train ASHA, ANM and other frontline health workers to carry the message to every household.

In keeping with Gandhiji's strong belief in involving the local community in social movements, one of the key outcomes of the mass outreach through the Swasth Bharat Yatra would be the creation of local champions for Eat Right India.

These local champions would be empowered to drive change through simple, powerful messages on safe and healthy eating, creating a grassroots movement with a deep foundation in the heart of the community. The true strength of the Eat Right India Movement and the Swasth Bharat Yatra lies in its networks and partnerships. The Movement, by its very design, is based on active participation of all stakeholders-consumers; producers; central and state governments; professional associations like the Indian Medical Association, the Association of Food Scientists and Technologists etc; civil society organisations; leaders and peers in the local community; frontline health workers etc, all of whom have a role in the yatra and the movement.

The awareness that food safety and unhealthy diets are a compelling and real public health problem today is expected to lead to action by all these stakeholders on a long-term basis, thereby creating a sustainable ecosystem for safe and wholesome food. Gandhiji's life and his message have contemporary relevance and are of great value even today. This is also true about his views on food and nutrition, where key decisions on what to eat, how to eat and when to eat are taken by individuals and not the government.

As an extraordinary leader, Gandhiji stirred popular imagination of the time and unleashed the power of ordinary people, inspiring all women and men in the country towards a unifying goal of freedom from the British Empire. Faced with multiple public health challenges, the country needs a mass movement that could once again stir popular imagination.

While several activities are planned at the national level this year, next year, events and outreach activities will be organised by the states and Union Territories (UTs) to reach out to various stakeholders and the citizens up to the district and sub-district level. This would give further momentum, enhance outreach and ensure sustainability of the movement. The Eat Right movement is a truly collaborative movement with participation of various Central and state government departments, members of the local community, professional associations, civil society, industry associations and all businesses, small and big.

The Eat Right movement is completely aligned with Prime Minister Narendra Modi's vision that all programmes associated with the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi should be designed around the theme of Karyanjali – Gandhi in action. The Eat Right movement and the Swasth Bharat Yatra are planned to reach the masses, which are the real engines of change. This is expected to trigger a mass, one-of-a-kind public health movement in India that would fundamentally transform the way India eats.