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Indian spiritual leaders go green

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NEW DELHI: Indian spiritual sects are using their wide reach to promote green causes, using the fact that preservation of natural elements is at the country's spiritual core.

Less than a week ago, nearly 1,000 Buddhist monks, nuns and followers set off on a 400-km spiritual trek from Kardang in Lahaul Valley in Himachal Pradesh to Leh in Ladakh across five high Himalayan passes to promote protection of environment and sustainable lifestyles in the region.

The 40-day trek is to say no to plastic bags, a major pollutant in the fragile ecological zone.

The trekkers, led by the head of the 800-year-old Tibetan Drukpa Buddhist sect, Gyalwang Drukpa, will distribute canvas bags to more than 100,000 villagers along the way as a symbolic gesture to shun plastic bags and switch to carry-bags made of cloth and other eco-friendly material.

The marchers will also raise funds - \$30 per km - to spread education and sustainable eco-friendly lifestyle awareness in the Himalayan villages.

"This year, we wanted to promote something that purges pollution. Since plastic litter is one of the major eco-concerns in the region, we decided to teach the villagers healthy alternatives. We are in the wheel of a revolution and the way to carry it forward is to lead a clean life.

"Thousands of disciples who visit my monastery in Hemis in Ladakh every year from Europe and Japan requested that we do something in a sustained manner to turn the wheel of revolution so that more people can identify with the spiritual movement and can make their lives better," Gyalwang Drukpa, the head of the sect, said on telephone from Manali before flagging off the march.

The sect has also been given land along the Indus river on the way to Ladakh to create new woodlands by planting trees.

The trekkers will also champion the cause of "balanced education for children of the Himalayas" for sustainable livelihoods at the Drukpa sect's eco-friendly "Druk White Lotus School" in Ladakh that has won international acclaim as the best green school building in Asia.

"We want more children to study in our school and learn to lead balanced lives without losing touch with their culture and environment," the spiritual leader said.

"A clean environment is the cornerstone of a clean, healthy and strong India," says Ramdev, co-founder of the Patanjali Yog Peeth near Hardwar.

Ramdev is leading a campaign to clean the Ganga from its source in Gangotri to Ganga Sagar where it drains into the Bay of Bengal. He is working under the banner of Ganga Raksha Manch.

"The government has granted the Ganga national heritage status after our efforts for almost a year," the seer said. Ramdev, along with representatives of at least 25 religious organisations, is also opposing unplanned industrialisation along the river.

The Ganga - the ninth longest river in the world - is contaminated almost throughout its 2,500-km course. The campaign has managed to mobilise nearly 700,000 youths at the district level.

The cause has helped the Patanjali Yog Peeth identify itself to potential new disciples, especially the youths living in the villages along the Ganga, sources in the organisation said. "Most villages have Patanjali yoga and fitness cells," he said.

Protection of environment and mitigating the effects of global warming also tops the agenda of spiritual guru Sri Sri Ravi Shankar of the Art of Living, which has a global following.

"The only way to check environment pollution is to spread awareness. Many people in this world live without the knowledge of climate. They are immune even to changes in the cycle of seasons. They have to be educated," Sri Sri said.

The seer, who hosted a national environment summit in his retreat in 2008, has been campaigning against global warming and agri-pollution by promoting "organic farming", plantations and traditional farm technologies.

Youngsters identify with the campaign, says the guru, whose Art of Living Foundation headquarters on the outskirts of Bangalore is a model for sustainable ecological conservation and traditional farming.

Mystic and yoga expert Jaggi Vasudev, head of the Isha Foundation, a spiritual organisation in Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu, is known as a global tree planter.

His foundation entered the Guinness Book of World Records in 2006 for an eco-conservation campaign, "Project Greenhand", which has planted 7.5 million trees in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. Most of the foundation's members are young professionals.

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