

Asia Pacific Ministerial Conference

The Asia Pacific Ministerial Conference is a significant regional event that brings together ministers, policymakers, and stakeholders from across the Asia-Pacific region to address pressing issues and foster collaboration. This conference is instrumental in shaping regional policies and strategies, given the Asia-Pacific's dynamic economic and geopolitical landscape.

The Asia Pacific Ministerial Conference is designed to facilitate dialogue and cooperation among member states on various issues including economic development, environmental sustainability, security, and social progress. The conference aims to promote mutual understanding and develop actionable strategies to address challenges faced by the region. It often serves as a platform for discussing and aligning regional priorities with global agendas.

Economic issues are central to the conference, with discussions focusing on strategies to enhance economic growth, trade, and investment across the region. The conference often highlights the need for greater economic integration and cooperation to leverage the region's collective strengths and address economic disparities.

Given the region's vulnerability to climate change and environmental degradation, sustainability is a major theme. The conference addresses issues such as climate action, natural resource management, and disaster resilience, emphasizing the need for coordinated regional responses to environmental challenges. Security concerns, including regional conflicts, terrorism, and maritime security, are also key topics. The conference provides a platform for dialogue on enhancing regional security frameworks and building trust among nations to ensure peace and stability. Social issues such as health, education, and inequality are discussed to promote inclusive growth. The conference often explores ways to improve social welfare systems and ensure equitable access to opportunities for all citizens. The Asia Pacific Ministerial Conference typically results in a series of agreements, recommendations, and action plans aimed at addressing the discussed issues. These outcomes help guide regional policies and initiatives, fostering a collaborative approach to solving shared problems. The conference also strengthens diplomatic ties and enhances regional cooperation by providing a structured forum for dialogue.

Maternity Leave For Private Sector Female Employees

■ K.V. SEETHARAMAIAH

Rajasthan High Court has held that female employees in private sector are also entitled for 180 days maternity leave (Minakshi Chaudhary v.Rajasthan State Road Transport Corporation and anr.). The court has urged for an amendment to labour rules so that female employees in private and unorganized sectors are also given 180 days of maternity leave as called for under a 2017 amendment to the Maternity Benefit Act. A direction to this has been reportedly issued by the Rajasthan High Court to the central government and the Rajasthan government. This observation by the court is in response to a petition filed by a woman stating that the maternity leave granted to her was limited to 90 days by the Rajasthan State Road Transport Corporation (RSRTC). The petitioner sought to enhance her maternity leave to 180 days. The court has rightly termed the Regulation 74 of the RSRTC Employees Service Regulations, 1965 as discriminatory and violated a woman's fundamental rights under Articles 14 and 21 of the Constitution. The court has invoked the Supreme Court's judgment in the case of Municipal Corporation of Delhi v. Female Workers (Muster Roll) and Anr. Noting that the case extended the equitable right to maternity benefits to all women employees in both the organized and unorganized sectors regardless of the type of their employment, the Rajasthan High Court amply made it clear that the rule governing maternity leave benefits should not be discriminatory. It is clear that the court has taken note of the discrimination not only in terms of the number of days of maternity leave granted but also the maternity leave not granted by the unorganized sectors. There are various rules and regulations which are not implemented in letter and spirit. Justice has become the property of only those who can afford to move the courts, incur money, time and energy expenditure. Those who cannot afford to move the court suffer silently. It is not enough if the laws are enacted. More important than enacting the laws is to observe if the laws are being implemented in letter and spirit. If the benefits of laws are not percolated to the needy, the very rules and regulations become redundant. There are many obnoxious rules in private sectors. The employees cannot question them in private sectors for fear of losing the job. Because there is no job security in private sectors. Private school managements are niggardly at sanctioning the leave to the teaching and non-teaching staff. A teacher going on leave on the day preceding or succeeding Sunday or any other notified holiday is going to lose the salary for both the days. This rule is cruel in nature. The Labour department should insist the private sectors to notify the rules binding on the staff. The Labour Department should also get the copy of the rules so that if any complaint about the violation of rules is lodged in the Labour Department, it can take appropriate action against the management of the private sectors. In many private sector organizations, the woman employees proceeding on maternity leave will do so at the risk of losing the job. The anomalies in the private sectors have to be removed so that the employees working in private sectors should not feel that they are not lucky to get a government job. Job security is most important. If the fear of losing the job at the drop of a hat or if problem of the senior employees harassing the junior or newly appointed employees is removed, half the unemployment problem can be solved. Labour Laws must address the problem of the exploitation of the employees by the private management. Employees in private sector must have the privilege of facilities available in government departments and employees in government departments or public sector must have the same work culture as in private sector. If these two important issues are resolved, the nation will be on the path of rapid progress by the service rendered by the employees. Quantum of work in private sectors is too high considering the salary paid to the employees. But it is exactly its opposite in the public sectors or the government departments. It may not be exactly less work and more pay in government departments. More work is extracted from the sincere and honest employees in government departments. Those who do not show much interest in the office work are let loose. What Chanakya says is correct. He says "straight trees are cut first and the honest employees are screwed first". Employees in private sectors can be happy if the conditions of service are more or less the same between private sector and government department employees. Better service conditions are to be stipulated and employee-friendly rules and regulations in private sectors are made to be on par with the rules and regulations in government departments and public sectors. Maternity leave benefits both in private companies and government departments should be the same as directed by the Supreme Court and Rajasthan High Court.

Hydroponics Farming in Times of Rapid Urbanisation

■ DR. BANARSI LAL

In 1950 the total population of world was 2.6 billion with 800 million in urban centres and 1.8 billion in rural areas. After 100 years e.i. by 2050 we expect 9.2 billion inhabitants with 6.3 billion living in urban areas and only 2.9 billion remaining in the countryside. There is dire need to concentrate on urban environment and food security for the growing population especially in urban areas. Urban agriculture is coming in lime-light in the recent years. This has been felt because of (1) Physical and psychological in- and out-door relaxation for urban people (2) For improving the urban areas environment and (3) For food, income security and provide the fresh vegetables round the year for urban dwellers. Hydroponic technique can mitigate all these problems. Hydroponics technique reduces the water needs and cultivation space for plants growth, produces organic vegetables and helps to check the environmental contamination. Now many people are coming forward for urban hydroponics for physical and psychological in and out door relaxation. In arid climate it can increase humidity and lower the temperature. It further can help to reduce the discharge of net CO2 because plants use CO2 for photosynthesis. Hydroponic gardens are raised vertically as there is less space in the urban areas. Hydroponics can help to clean and green the urban areas and thus offer green zones for micro-climate changes. Thus, urban areas dwellers can enjoy such green areas, enhancing the community self-esteem and stimulating community livelihood. Green cities are always demanded by the people and hydroponics can play a pivotal role in greening the cities. Keeping the climate change and food security in view urban agriculture needs the highest attention. Urbanisation needs to be connected with the innovative techniques in agriculture. Urban agriculture can help to produce the food for the city dwellers by utilizing the empty lots, along roadsides, on rooftops and by vertical farming. If done properly it can improve the environment of urban areas thus making urban areas

■ G L KHAJURIA

THE Union territory of Jammu & Kashmir is beset with a land of the Gods and Goddesses in the greater part of Himalayan and sub-Himalayan region of the Indian land scape. Mal Mata Sukrala Devi occupies its unique and prominent place of devotion and revelation. The Devi Maa Sukrala is also most reverentially addressed as JagatJanani, Rajarajswari Mata where devotees Throng in thousand to have holy darshan, pay obeisance for blessings. Sukrala or Sukral is a small village located in Billawar in district Kathua. The spot is located amidst dense chirpinres forest intermingled with other borad - leaved trees, bushes, shrubs and herbs. The village is located aside river Naaj where a big slab of rock of historic time exist which is having an engraving of Lord Hanuman which is regularly besmeared on every Tuesday and Sunday both by the locals as well as the outsiders who throng over this sacred spot. Sukrala Mata shrine is reachable by road around 80 Kms from Jammu and about 30 kms from district headquarter. It is situated at a height of about 4000 ft from mean sea level (MSL) and commands an idyllic view of mountains and cliffs all around of the vicinity of the Shakti shrine. Both the roads from Jammu and Kathua are well metalled and are conveniently approachable by regular buses, private or hired vehicles. The sacred shrine from other destination, Like Bani Basohli and other areasof the country are also reachable through these routes. Through legends and historical record, the name of Sukrala is derived from Sharikalaya,the abode of Sharika which though, of course is another revered name of Mata Sharda. The historical records reflect the narration as to the origin of the sacred

Swachha Bharat Mission's gains include better health

■ VINOD K PAUL

Sanitation is a fundamentalpublic health intervention. Sanitation reduces the risk of water-borne diseases such as diarrhea, cholera, typhoid, hepatitis, worm infestations, malabsorption, and as also, malnutrition. A World Health Organization (WHO) study in 2012 estimated that for every US\$ invested in sanitation, there was a return of US\$ 5.5 in lower health costs, more productivity and fewer premature deaths. Sanitation in India has a deep-rooted history, tracing back to the Indus valley civilization where scientific methods for toilet construction and waste management were practiced. Our scriptures say, i.e. in a pure body, lies a pure mind, and in a pure mind lies true knowledge. Despite this rich legacy, India's journey towards comprehensive sanitation coverage has been fraught with challenges. By the time of the 1981 census, a mere 1% of rural households had access to toilets. This paved the way for the launch of sanitation programmesby government of India - the Central Rural Sanitation Programme, the Total Sanitation Campaign, and the Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan. These initiatives pushed the rural sanitation coverage to 39%. India accounted for almost 60% of the world's open defecation load with over 50 crore people practicingopen defecation. Our women were caught between attending to basic needs in darkness, and maintaining their dignity and safety. It was in this backdrop that the Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi launched the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) in2014 with the goal to make rural India Open Defecation Free (ODF) in five years. Bharat achieved this milestone on 2nd October 2019, the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi.In five momentous years,

good places to live in. Hydroponics can prove an innovation especially in the urban areas and provides a far more sustainable and appropriate solution. There are different hydroponics systems, for the large scale they are quite sophisticated, capital intensive and require high technical knowledge. Simple hydroponics can be utilized by the low-resource poor urban population living under poverty. By using the hydroponics technique city dwellers can produce the fresh organic vegetables within a short period and this can help to keep them fit. Many countries have introduced hydroponics technique in their urban and semi-urban areas for quality vegetables production.Hydroponics addresses most of the issues related to assured supply of vegetables in the urban areas.

Hydroponics is the buzzword now-a -day. Many people do not know much about the hydroponics. But the fact is that it is one of the most fastly growing agricultural industries across the globe. The word hydroponics has been derived from the two Greek words "hydro" and "ponos" means working with water. Simply hydroponics can be defined as an art or science of growing plants in water or in an inert growing medium that is enriched with all the necessary nutrients required for the optimum growth of plants. Hydroponic has been developed from the Latin America. In 1978 hydroponic pioneer Dr.Howard Resh published the book on Hydroponics Food Production. People across the globe are now thinking for hydroponics because of lack of fertile farm land and water. Home gardeners can grow the fresh organic vegetables in their balconies of their homes by using the hydroponics technique throughout the year. Plants focus more on growth and it produces more leaves, vegetables and fruits in hydroponic system as the plants get right nutrition, at right time, in right proportion. Many questions arise in the mind when we discuss on hydroponics as we grow the crops in the soilless culture under this system. When we grow plants in water; won't the root rot? This is totally a misconception. Generally plants rot in the stagnant

spot of Mata Sukrala Devi. The story goes that used to live a renowned saint at Basohli who had received his education in Kashmir and Kashi there he visited many shrines including those of Shri Amarnath ji, Sharda, Hari Partvati etc. He was a strong devotee of Gods and Goddesses. During his arduousenace and devotion, the mother goddess was very pleased and so he had holy dream. When asked by Mata ji as to what he wanted. The devotee prayed that he wants that she should be at his place so that with locals can be relieved of the pains and agony and are blessed by her Shakti. Mataji granted him the boon that she will appear at the time of his grandson and so the devotee disclosed to the locals. The devoted Brahmin had number of sons amongst whom two most pious and learned were by name Amolak Ram and Mahadev Shiv Nandan. They preferred and adopted Billawar and Basohli as their residence.

Exactly in the time of Mahadev (Shiv Nandan), a shila (stone slab) miraculously started emerging out from a spring at Sukrala. The people of the area eftsoonly started realizing the prophecy of the grandfather as had earlier been disclosed. They (the inhabitants) accepted it as an emblem of the goddess and as such started worshipping it regularly. With the passage of time, a prince from Chamba by name Madho Singh exiled by his elder brother was wandering desperately and reached Sukral area. The story further goes that Sukrala village was having dense forest with abundant wild animals and birds, the prince started hunting wild animals and birds but with the passing days, the prince fell seriously ill.

Despite application of all treatments, the prince could never be recovered. Ultimately, as suggested by the locals, he approached

water that is devoid of water:The oxygen present in the water is called as the dissolved oxygen. Roots do not rot in the hydroponics as the water is circulated in the system. In Hydroponics system plants get balanced water and nutrition and this system saves about 80 per cent of water. In hydroponics system, plants are grown without soil so there are least chances of insects-pests and diseases in the crop. The crop is uniformly grown as each plant gets equal nutrition and water. There is no need of crop rotation in the hydroponic system as the same crop can be grown repeatedly. Plants get high quality nutrition in this system so plants growth is more as compared to the open cultivation. Waste areas can be utilized for the hydroponics as the crops are grown in the soil-less culture. Hydroponics makes the agriculture possible even in the impossible areas.

Hydroponics is a progressive technique well adapted to vertical farming thus unleashing the scope for utilizing vertical space in urban locale.In order to grow the hydroponics one needs to have the hydroponics system. There are two types of hydroponics system. One is water based system in which the plants are grown in the water as the medium and soilless system in which the plants are grown in an inert substrate such as the perlite, coco coir, gravel etc. Nutrient Film Technique (NFT) is a very popular system that belongs to the hydroculture category of growing plants. In this system plants are grown in the channel usually made of plastic that allows nutrients solution to flow through it. The oxygen is not depleted in the system and nutrition solution is always flown in the system. This system is very effective to grow the leafy vegetables and herbs. Many firms provide readymade kits and nutrient solution for large scale farming under hydroponics. Deep Water Culture is another important growing system in which a shallow pond or pool is used to float lightweight thermocol or polystyrene in which the holes are drilled. These holes hold the net cups along with the plants. This method of farming is very simple and efficient in space usage. In this system inert substrate is used in place of soil as a growing

Shiv Nandan who had a good spiritual reputation and so he asked one of the devotee (Chila in local parlance) of the goddess by name Hira Thakur to dance (locally spoken as Chauki) and when the devotee (disciple of goddess got into trance (a Shakti dance), He was asked to let know the malady of the prince Madho Singh. As a result, the disciple stated that goddess was very annoyed as the prince had hunted many animals and birds of the forest. Further, the disciple told the prince that he would not recover unless a temple of the goddess is built with material from Chamba.

The exiled prince was perplexed as how he could manage to build the temple of Mata for he was ill and for away from Chamba, his native place. He expressed his inability to both Shiv Nandan and Hira Thakur. But the dancing devotee (disciple) replied exiled prince to proceed Chamba immediately and nothing on towardness would come in his way by the grace of the Shakti of Mal Mata.

A few days later, the prince was well and after vowing before Mal Mata footed towards Chamba,while waying towards the desired destination, he came to know enroute, about the demise of his brother who had exiled him. Reaching Chamba, all the inhabitants of the vicinityembraced the prince and accepted him as the ruling prince. In due course of time, the prince became obsessed with the routine care taking and administration of his kingdom and in the process, he forgot the promise he had made before Sukrala Mata to build a temple there. One night, when the prince was comfortably sleeping, he felled down from the bed and remembered the promise he had made before Mal Mata and so as such he resolved to make good the promise.

On the next day, the prince started for Sukral with a large entourage carrying all

medium of plants. The substrate contains the water; nutrition and it provides the support to the plants. The water is given either manually as in case of hobby or by automated drip irrigation in case of commercial level of hydroponic system. Leafy green vegetables, salads and herbs can be grown by this system of hydroponics. The cost of the hydroponic unit depends on the choice of the system and type of green house. It ranges between Rs.75, 000 to 1.2 crore. Many firms provide the end-to-end solution, farm design, installations and farm operations. Many agricultural universities have established the demonstrations units of hydroponics across the nation

In hydroponics there is no problem of weeds. Diseases and insects-pests are also minimized by using the hydroponic technique. Hydroponics plants are healthier with more vigour. Plants under hydroponics technique grow faster and yield an earlier harvest. Hydroponics technique require less space and roots need not to be spread. Water can be reused in hydroponics and thus water can be saved.

Hydroponics farming is increasing across the globe and people are showing keen interest in this innovative technology. Commercial level of leafy crops such as spinach, lettuce, Swiss chard, mint, thyme etc. can be grown under hydroponics. Tomatoes, capsicum, cucumber, strawberry etc. can also be grown through this system of farming. As this system of farming has gained momentum in India, we may see new changes in the hydroponics system in the future. The agricultural scientists are creating awareness and imparting trainings on hydroponics to the beginners. The hydroponics system can be very useful to produce the organic vegetables especially in the urban and semi-urban areas. KVK, Reasi has also established hydroponics unit at its campus and many people are showing keen interest in this innovative technique of farming.Hydroponics represents a pivotal shift towards more efficient and resilient farming practices.

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short of building material. The temple was as such constructed and an image of Mahishsurmardini was installed in the spacious temple Chamber in later stages a temple was constructed by Raja Brajraj Singh, son of Ranjit Singh Dev around 1755 AD and so such the promise made by the prince redeemed. Later on lot of springs and baolies were constructed in and around the temple complex.

Mal Mata Sukrala Devi is very benign goddess who fulfills the wishes of his true devotees. According to a popular belief, all wishes to the extent of the birth of child, securing Job for livelihood and for the curing of chronic diseases are fulfilled by the shrine Shakti of Mal Mata.

The images of Mata Jiis a Shila (Piece of rock). It is seated on a brass lion with a silver mounted head. And in its backdrop is a figure of Mahishasurmardini (Maa Durga) standing on Mahishasur. The goddess is chaturbhujia, the goddess with four arms with a sword in one of her hands. The eyes are of silver inlaid with dark vermilion.

Lord Vishnu is shown reeling under the hoods of Sheshing with Maa Lakshmi pressing lords lotus-like feel. From the navel spring a lotus, on which is seated a four headed Brahma and a five - faced Shiva and the lord Ganesh. There are two images of the lion in front of the temple complex. Mal Mata Sukrala Devi is an important Shrine being revered and venerated by almost all over the state, particularly being a Kul Devi. The devotee across the state also visit this sacred Shrine of Shakti around the year, particularly during Navratras on both occasions. There are huge Bhandaras and langars arranged by the locals and other devotees and the social activists.

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mortality rate (IMR) and under-5 mortality rates (U5MR). The authors document a strong association between increasing toilet access and declining child mortality. Results from the study imply that for every 10 percentage point increase in district level access to toilets following SBM corresponded to a reduction in district level IMR by 0.9 points and U5MR by 1.1 points on the average. There is further evidence of a threshold effect wherein the district level toilet coverage of 30% (and above) corresponded to a reduction of 5.3 points in the IMR and 6.8 points in the U5MR per thousand live births.The authors estimate that toilet access at-scale due to SBM contributed toward averting 60,000 - 70,000 infant deaths annually.

However, it must be pointed out that this is not the only impact study which sheds light on the transformative role played by SBM. According to WHO (2018), SBM averted over 300,000 diarrheal deaths between 2014 and 2019. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (2017) reported that there were 37%lower cases of wasting among children in ODF areas compared to non-ODF villages,validatinghow sanitation positively impacts childhood nutrition. The incidence of diarrhea in children was lower by almost one third in the ODF villages. In a study in 2017, UNICEF estimated that 93% of women felt safer after having a toilet at home, reflecting the role of SBM in enhancing the safety and dignity of women. Additionally, economic analyses in the study showed that each household in ODF villages saved approximately INR 50,000 annually on reduced healthcare costs plus economic value of saved lives and time savings.

Given the link between sanitation and health, public health gains from SBM are inevitable. What we have from the recent study is a robust quantification of child survival improvements

attributable to toilet access. Sanitation transformation on a national scale will surely have impact in reducing water-borne infections among adults as well, as also possibly on reducing the burden of antimicrobial resistance. Sustained effects on childhood stunting and development are also assumed. ICMR and academia should undertake objective studies on these dimensions of SBM.

The Swachh Bharat Mission is an exemplar of what can be achieved through dedication, collaboration, planning, brilliant execution, and relentless janandolan. The 4P mantra of SBM-political will, public finance, partnerships, and public participation-along with persuasion, has been instrumental in the program's success and outreach. This 'strategy package' is a template for other social transformation missions in the country and beyond.

As we strive toward a Viksit Bharat @ 2047, we need to emerge as global leaders in sanitation and cleanliness, the commitment to sustaining behavioral change, ensuring continued use of the constructed toilets and integrating advanced waste management solutions should remain unwavering. Cleanliness must become a shared value, one that is owned and practiced by us all.

The mission celebrates its 10th anniversary next month on the Gandhi Jayanti. A decade of SBM has yielded unprecedented gains - clean environment, women's dignity and safety, ease of living, household savings and a culture of hygiene aligned with our tradition. Now we also seea robust evidence of SBM on improving public health and in saving lives.

Success of this noble mission is indeed a matter of pride for every Indian. (The writer is a Member of NITI Aayog)

