

Cultural factors make green nudge feasible

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Opinion

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GOVIND SINGH | New Delhi | August 30, 2024 2:07 am

The Environmental Ministry recently launched a web portal to invite ideas for its Mission LiFE initiative. LiFE or Lifestyle for Environment is an India-led global movement for promoting behavioural change towards proplanet action. Mission LiFE was launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on 1 November 2021 as a mass movement for “mindful and deliberate

utilization, instead of mindless and destructive consumption.” Through this mission, the Environment Ministry aims to make 80 per cent of villages and urban local bodies in India eco-friendly by 2028. Mission LiFE focuses on the use of green nudging to motivate citizens for adopting sustainable living practices.

Green nudging can play a significant role in preserving the environment. Green nudge is a behavioural science concept for encouraging individuals and corporations to make eco-friendly decisions. The individual or company has full freedom while making decisions, but the options are structured in such a way that there is a high probability of making pro-environmental decisions. Some examples of green nudging include placing recycling bins in more visible locations than conventional ones to promote segregation, setting energy-saving mode as the default option in electronic devices (users have to opt-out if they don't want to use them) and designating preferred parking spots for electric vehicles.

Green nudging originates from the nudge theory developed by economist and Nobel laureate Richard Thaler. Nudging helps individuals and corporations in decision making by allowing them to have some guidance during decision making. It subtly guides people's choices in a predictable way without eliminating non-preferred choices or restricting their freedom of choice. In this way, green nudging urges individuals and corporations to adopt green practices without interfering in their lifestyle or internal management.

The success of green nudging, of course, depends on the sense of responsibility felt by the individual or corporation towards the planet. Heightened environmental awareness contributes to higher probability of adopting green choices by people when they are nudged. Green nudging, as a tool for environmental protection, therefore has greater promise in India since environmental harmony is implicit in the customs and traditions of India. The centuries old, rich Indian culture is replete with practices promoting conservation and sustainable living. Ancient Indian texts and teachings reverberate the interconnectedness of life and the importance of living in harmony with nature.

These include concepts like live and let others live which promote the principles of co-existence, sustainability and respect for all living beings. The Rigveda, one of the oldest known scriptures, includes hymns celebrating trees as sacred and essential to life. Other religious beliefs in the Indian subcontinent describe trees as living entities with spiritual significance; several tree species are associated with various deities. These traditional values remain deeply embedded in us and resurface when we are encouraged to plant trees.

The recent “Ek ped maa ke naam” (plant one tree as a tribute to your mother) campaign launched by the Prime Minister has already nudged lakhs of citizens to plant trees. Earth, water and wildlife are all considered sacred in India and various religious, cultural and traditional beliefs and practices constantly remind us of the need to protect them. Harvest

festivals for thanking the earth are celebrated across India albeit under different names. India is one of the few countries where rivers are considered sacred. Urbanisation and industrial growth adds considerable pressure on rivers and other water bodies.

However, many festivals and traditional practices require bathing in these rivers and nudge us to inquire about river health. One such festival, Chatth Puja, requires performing rituals on the riverbanks and has played a key role in highlighting river pollution in the media. Regulatory nudges in the form of subsidies and tax benefits for industries and municipalities that invest in cleaner technologies must be adopted for the sake of river purification. Forests are considered holy and revered in many parts of the county as sacred groves by the local people. Wildlife too is considered sacred and killing animals, when it becomes absolutely necessary, is often followed by repentance.

This acts as a nudge to co-exist in harmony with wildlife. Festivals like Naag Panchmi urge the worship of some of the deadliest of snakes during specific times in the year when digging of the earth is also a taboo. This period coincides with the monsoon season when rising water levels push the snakes out of their underground burrows. Festivals like these, interwoven with religious and cultural fervour, have gone a long way to nudge people toward protection and preservation of environment and biodiversity. Green nudging is an excellent tool for environmental protection since it focuses on voluntary adoption rather than regulatory compliance. It has been part and parcel of Indian culture and its global adoption will have a profound impact towards making a sustainable planet.

(The writer is associate professor at Jindal School of Environment & Sustainability, O.P. Jindal Global University, Haryana, India.)

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