

# KANWAD MELA

*July to August 2023*





# **ABOUT THE** Annual Kanwad Yatra & Neelkanth Mahadev Temple

## **Neelkanth Mahadev Temple**

Neelkanth Mahadev Temple is dedicated to Lord Shiva, who is known as Neelkanth, literally meaning the blue-throated one. It is a much-visited temple in Rishikesh, Uttarakhand, frequented throughout the year. The temple is an example of stunning architecture and stands at a height of 926 m on top of the Manikut hill across the National River Ganga, in the dense and lush Rajaji National Park. It is surrounded by the valleys of Manikoot, Brahmakoot, and Vishnukoot and is located at the confluence of the rivers Pankaja and Madhumati.

The mythological story from which the temple derives its name has great spiritual significance. The story shows Lord Shiva's divine example of courage and sacrifice as he drank and dissolved poison and held it within his throat (turning it blue), so that the nectar of immortality could immerge for the welfare of all. Hence, pilgrims flock from across the nation and around the world to have Darshan and feel the vibrations of this spiritual energy, where He actually meditated, so that they too, with His grace, can dissolve the poison in their lives and discover the nectar.

## **The Kanwad Yatra**

The Kanwad Yatra is a annual festival celebrated with great pomp and grandeur in this temple during the Hindu month Shrawan Mas, the sacred time of monsoon. Kanwad actually refers to two ended bamboo pole filled with pitchers on both sides. Devotees sling this on their shoulder after filling the pitchers with Ganga Jal and then start their Kanwad Yatra walking by foot, often overcoming many difficulties, obstacles and performing great penance, from Haridwar / Rishikesh. Countless devotees wearing saffron t-shirt and shorts walk bare foot for miles singing bhajans, chanting mantras, shouting slogans such as 'Bole Bum Bum.' The partake in this yatra with full faith that Lord Shiva will bless and fulfil their desired wish.

During this Yatra, devotees arrive in lakhs and Government, along with NGO's, Ashrams and institutions, arranges facilities such as drinking water , washrooms, medicines etc to facilitate the pilgrimage.



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## 1. A CLEEN AND GREEN BEGINNING

Every year the Kanwad Yatra begins just after Guru Purnima in early July, however this year we had the special blessing of having HH Pujya Swami Chidanand Saraswati Ji join the District Magistrate of Pauri Garhwal Dr. Ashish Kumar Chauhan Ji in planting the first phase of a special 'Sacred Rudraksh Van' (Van meaning forest) afforestation initiative at Kothar village near Neelkanth Mahadev Temple on Yoga Day the 21st June, 2023. On this occasion, Social Behavior Change Specialist UNICEF India Ms. Shalini Prasad Ji, villagers, volunteers, Rishikumars and others joined together for this special greening drive, setting the vision and mission of the Kanwad Yatra to be clean, green and serene.

During the drive, it was pledged that 1000 Rudraksh saplings would be planted during the course of the Shrawan Mas. In addition, a special Amrit Sarovar (watershed) Project for the wildlife and elephants living in Rajaji National Park was also proposed and discussed by Pujya Swamiji.





## 2. AN INTEGRATED APPROACH & INAUGURATION

Parmarth Niketan was proud to host the first District Meeting of police personnel with all the relevant departments, officers, presided by the Hon'ble District Magistrate Dr Ashish Chauhan Ji, Hon'ble SSP Smt Shweta Choubhey Ji, Hon'ble SDMs and many other respected officials the day following Guru Purnima (4th July).

The meeting was an integrated approach to bring all departments together on one platform in ensuring a smooth, seamless and successful Kanwad Mela. Traffic control, provision of basic facilities, infrastructural support as well as many other important points were discussed. The Hon'ble DM lauded the support and efforts of organisations and ashrams like Parmarth Niketan to welcome and serve the pilgrims of the Kanwad Yatra. After the meeting, he also visited the Harpic World Toilet College at Parmarth Niketan and was happy to learn about the work being done to train and empower Safai Karamcharis (sanitation workers).





### 3. BEGINNING OF THE SERVICE INITIATIVES

Thereafter the Kanwad Mela 2023 service initiatives at the Parmarth Camp was formally inaugurated by the Hon'ble DM Dr.Ashish Chauhan Ji was welcomed by Sushri Ganga Nandini Ji, Director of Projects, Global Interfaith WASH Alliance and many other dedicated doctors and sevaks for a symbolic lamp lighting ceremony.

This year our services were made possible by the seamless collaboration between the Global Interfaith WASH Alliance together with Parmarth Niketan, with the generous support of Bajaj Allianz, in association with National Health Mission, the Harpic World Toilet College, Divine Shakti Foundation and Ganga Action Parivar.

A record-breaking turnout of almost 40 million devotees from all corners of the country visited Uttarakhand during just this time of the Kanwad Mela!



## 4. SERVICE INITIATIVES & IMPACT AT A GLANCE



**Nearly 40 Million pilgrims**

*Came to Uttarakhand during this years Kanwad Yatra*



**Over 250,000 litres of clean drinking water across 10 Jal Mandirs**

*Provided clean drinking water stations set up by GIWA's team at every 300 meters along the Neelkanth route.*



**More than 20,000 Kanwadiyas**

*Were provided free medical support and care.*



**100 Hoardings, Signage and Public Service Announcements**

*Conveyed essential messages related to cleanliness, environmental conservation, with reminders to keep the Kanwad Yatra clean and green.*



**More than a dozen Yoga & Meditation Classes**

*Were conducted alongside the interventions to allow for rest and relaxation to the Kanwadiyas along the long route.*



**More than 1,100 Rudraksha and Tulsi Saplings Distributed/Planted**

*The Kanwad Yatra pilgrims (better known as Kanwadiyas) were encouraged to do their own tree plantation and take this green message back with them to their home!*



**Nearly 800 Kanwadiyas directly inspired by our Awareness Programmes**

*Puppet Shows, Awareness programmes and more were organised by Volunteers, Rishikumars of Parmarth Niketan everyday to raise awareness about Water, Sanitation, Hygiene, Environment, Ganga and Himalayas, with nearly 500 Kanwadiyas taking the Swachh Kanwad pledge to become Swachhta Ambassadors!*



**More than 25 Dustbins provided and managed**

*To collect plastic, litre and trash along the route and around Parmarth Niketan Ashram to ensure the cleanliness of the Neelkanth Yatra Marg.*



**25 Volunteers, 50 Rishikumars and more**

*Conducted a Cleanliness Rally with Rishikumars and Yatris to raise awareness about Swacchta, harmful effects of Single Use Plastic and necessity to keep the environment clean.*





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# HIGHLIGHTS

## 5. FREE MEDICAL CAMP

The dedicated team of sevaks organised a free medical camp, providing essential healthcare services to the devotees undertaking the Kanwad Yatra. With love and compassion, they attended to a staggering number of over 20,000 patients during the nearly twenty day medical camp.

A wide range of medical issues, including physical fatigue, injuries, fever, cough, and skin allergies were addressed, ensuring the pilgrim's physical well-being, enabling them to complete their sacred journey with ease and comfort.



## 6. AWARENESS CAMPAIGN

The Kanwad Mela 2023 witnessed a comprehensive awareness campaign focused on environmental conservation. Engaging puppet shows, pledge taking ceremonies and hand hygiene sessions effectively conveyed the message of Swachh Kanwad, urging the devotees to keep the environment clean and reduce the impact of single-use plastic.

Over 800 Kanwadis were inspired by the puppet shows, whilst more than 500 Kanwadis took the Swachh Kanwad pledge. This collective effort aimed to safeguard the sacred Ganga and her tributaries, fostering a sense of responsibility among the pilgrims towards the environment.



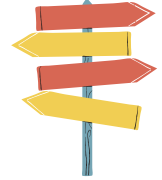
## 7. YOGA & MEDITATION SESSIONS



Amidst the bustling atmosphere of the Kanwad Mela, yoga and meditation sessions provided moments of peace and tranquility. Led by experienced yoga teachers, the sessions focused on yoga postures, breathing techniques, and meditation practices, offering pilgrims an opportunity to restore their limbs whilst rejuvenating their bodies and minds. These sessions enabled the Kanwadiyas to prepare themselves spiritually and physically to arrive at their destination and to find solace and inner strength during their arduous journey.



## 8. HOARDINGS & SIGNAGES



More than 100 strategically placed hoardings and signages conveyed essential messages related to cleanliness, environmental conservation, and the significance of the Kanwad Yatra. These visually impactful displays served as constant reminders, inspiring the pilgrims to be responsible custodians of nature. The well-organised signages facilitated way finding and provided essential information, ensuring a smooth and organised flow of the pilgrimage. A special selfie point was set up near the medical camp which was enjoyed by the Yatris.

## 9. JAL MANDIR & DUSTBINS



To cater to the basic needs of the pilgrims, 10 Jal Mandirs (water stations) were established at various points along the Kanwad Yatra route, at every 300 metres. A dedicated team of sevaks diligently refilled the water stations four times daily, each holding over 500 litres of potable water, resulting in the provision of more than 252,000 litres of clean drinking water to Kanwadis at these water stations, enabling pilgrims to stay hydrated and combat the impact of summer heat and humidity during the yatra.



## 10. CLEANLINESS RALLY &

## DISTRIBUTION OF TULSI SAPLINGS



Acharyas and Rishikumars conducted a cleanliness rally on Neelkanth Marg, spreading the message of cleanliness to the Kanwadis, emphasizing the importance of sanitation, health, and social well-being. Additionally, 100 Tulsi saplings were distributed, which are a sacred plant for Hindus. The saplings were distributed to the Kanwadiyas (pilgrims of the Kanwad Yatra), encouraging them to plant more trees and advocate for environmental conservation in their communities.



## 11. HARELA PARV - GREEN FESTIVAL



Harela is a Hindu festival celebrated in Uttarakhand and in some regions of Himachal Pradesh during the time of Shravan Mas. Harela means 'Day of Green', and the agriculture-based communities in the region consider it highly auspicious, as it marks the beginning of the sowing cycle in their fields. Harela Parv is celebrated for a good harvest and prosperity and farmers sow in their fields and many plant trees near their homes on this day.

Hence as a tribute to Harela, all the volunteers of DSF, GIWA and Rishikumars of Parmarth Gurukul together planted Rudraksh and many other saplings in diverse locations along the Neelkanth Mahadev Route as they rallied together in their commitment to keep these regions clean and green for all.



## 12. SHRAVAN SHIVRATRI

This year the Shrawan Mas Kanwad Yatra saw it's peak days in the first twenty days of July, but the tithi (lunar day) as per the Hindu Calendar was actually until the 31st August, 2023 (Raksha Bandhan), making it one of the longest Shrawan Mas in the past few years. It is at this time that devotees of Lord Shiva worship and observe fasts, especially on Monday (Somwar) which are believed to be the day of the week where we are especially able to receive the energy of Shiva. Thereby devotees especially pray during this time for the grace of Mahadev and Maa Parvati to be upon them.

Hence, in addition to our seva initiatives, we also organised special Ganga Aarti every evening, inspiring pledges and awareness through the example of faith based action and the medium of devotion. Parmarth hosted free and regular bhandaras, Kathas and meals for all Rishikumars, pilgrims and devotees within the Ashram campus. Parmarth also hosted a special open and free Shrawan Shivratri celebrated in person and online, graced by Pujya Swamiji and Sadhviji who joined from America, where at the feet of Lord Shiva in Rishikesh hundreds of devotees partook in the Rudra Abhishek in a very powerful prayer ceremony.





## 13. RECORD FLOODS RAIN

Upon Pujya Swamiji's return from abroad this year at the end of July, He sought the blessings of Maa Ganga and Lord Shiva and inspired countless activities and service initiatives to provide relief and free support services to the Himalayan regions devastated by the monsoon floods.



On the 15th of August, the River Ganga rose to unprecedented height which became viral on news media, illustrating the wrath and the power of Mother Nature, further intensifying our messaging to keep our sacred soil and our environment protected through mitigating climate change and ensuring environmental sustainability. Our schools and gurukuls celebrated a special week-long green Independence Day campaign 'Meri Mitti, Mera Desh' (My Soil, My Country). Our schools also gave the message of environmental protection by celebrating 'Vriksha Bandhan' during Raksha Bandhan. Raksha Bandhan is a beautiful occasion which illuminates the true love between brother and sister and also enriches the value of brotherhood/sisterhood among all people. By symbolically tying rakhis to trees in addition to our wrists, we also pledged to protect all of the Mother Nature, which of course in turn protects us.

## 14. TESTIMONIALS



"Participating in the Kanwad Mela 2023 was an unforgettable experience. The free medical camp and yoga sessions provided much-needed support and rejuvenation during the journey."

– **RAHUL VERMA**

"The Kanwad Mela 2023 was extraordinary, with an impactful awareness campaign on environmental conservation. The puppet shows were engaging and conveyed the significance of preserving our sacred River Ganga. I am grateful for the Jal Mandirs that provided clean drinking water facility. "

– **MEENA DEVI**



"I like how they create different ways to raise awareness about the harmful affects of single use plastic and importance of water"

– **SHEKAR**

"As a senior citizen now, I am very happy to see young people doing seva for the poor and our country. I am very touched by Pujyaswamiji and Parmarth Niketan's work towards environment and humanity."

– **RAM PRASHAD**



## 14. TESTIMONIALS



"This is the first time I participate in Kanwad Yatra. I love this experience and I am very satisfied that I don't have to search for anything as drinking water and toilets were near by and path was maintained very clean."

– **JAI SINGH**

"As I was walking barefoot, I got some injuries and I was very relieved when I saw this Medical Camp. The Doctors and Nursing Staff were very kind. They cleaned my wounds, dressed it and also gave me pain relievers after which I feel very good. Thank you very much."

– **DEEPAK**



"Swamiji & Parmarth have done an amazing service this Kanwad Yatra by inaugurating this Medical Camp. This seva is an example for our country's values and culture."

– **BABA**

"I am a local resident staying in Swargashram. This annual Kanwad Yatra festival is always a joy for us but it also leaves many trash which was always a disturbance for us. Dustbins provided by GIWA has changed this a lot and now there is very less garbage and I am very happy."

– **ANIL**



## 15. DEEPEST GRATITUDE



Special gratitude to our Hon'ble Governor of Uttarakhand Lt Gen Gurmit Singh Ji and Hon'ble Chief Minister of Uttarakhand Shri Pushkar Singh Dhama Ji who provided their leadership and vision during this time. Pujya Swamiji met with them both in June to discuss the critical and vital importance of working together to protect our Himalayan State. We had the joy of welcoming the Hon'ble Governor to Parmarth in early August where he met with our Safai Karamcharis (sanitation workers) of the Harpic World Toilet College and learned about the initiative which is transforming lives by training sanitation workers, ensuring dignity and improved sanitation practices.



## 16. HONOURING OFFICIALS IN AARTI

At the conclusion of the peak season of the Kanwad Yatra, Pujya Swami Chidanand Saraswati Ji especially honored all the police officers who worked under the leadership of Senior Superintendent of Police, Pauri Garhwal, Smt Shweta Choubey Ji and provided security and assistance to the Kanwariyas.

Pujya Swamiji appreciated the dedicated officers who served the Kanwariyas day and night, in scorching heat and heavy rain. He blessed them with sacred Rudraksh mala and saplings. Everyone together participated in the Gangaji Ki Aarti and took an oath to protect Ganga, Himalayas and our precious environment. All of them were provided saatvik dinner and lauded by all.



## 17. GRATITUDE FOR OUR TEAM

The success of Kanwad Mela 2023 was made possible by the blessings of Pujya Swami Chidanand Saraswati Ji, the President of Parmarth Niketan Ashram, Pujya Sadhvi Bhagawati Saraswati Ji, President of Divine Shakti Foundation, the inspiration behind these service initiatives.

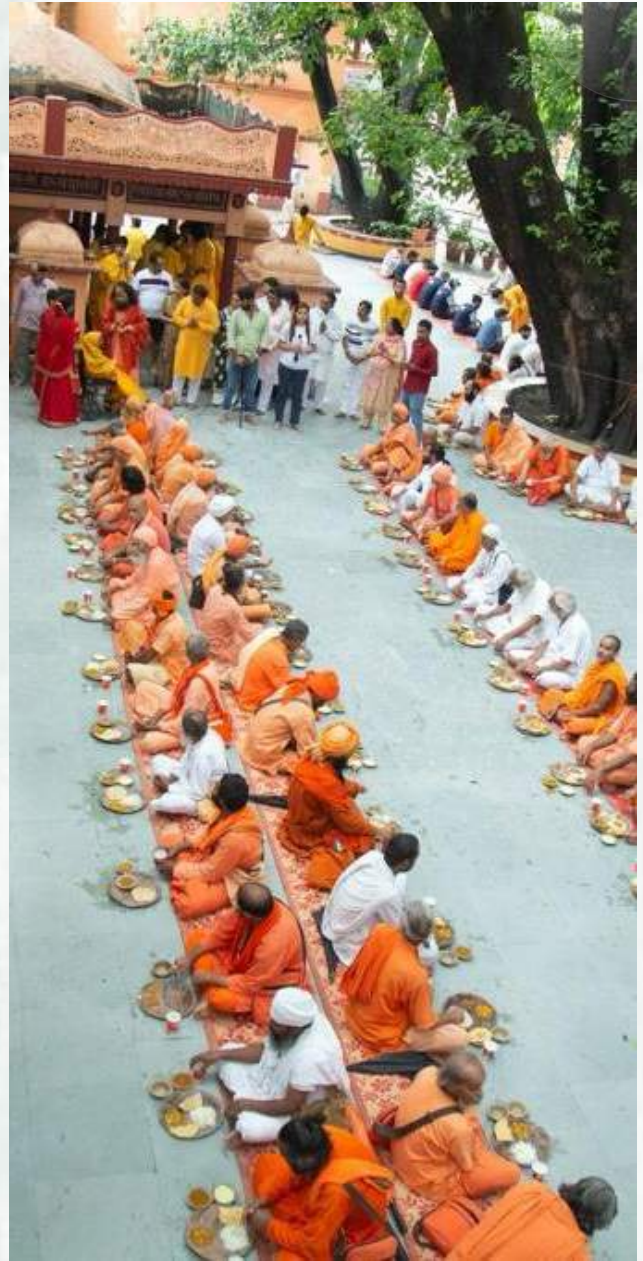
Deepest gratitude for the generous donation and support by the Bajaj Allianz General Insurance Co Ltd, their contributions greatly aided our efforts and we look forward to working together again to serve in an even greater capacity in the future.

Much appreciation for our ongoing partnership and work with the Harpic World Toilet College which also came forward during this time to spread the message of sanitation and hygiene as a critical necessity for a clean and green festival.

Our efforts would not have been possible without the unwavering commitment of countless doctors, sevaks, volunteers, and individuals coming together to support this noble endeavour, filled with the spirit of service as sadhana - work as worship.

Special thanks also to the Parmarth Gurukul Rishikumars and Acharyas who performed the engaging puppet shows, joined us on our rallies and supported in countless many way. In conclusion, the Kanwad Mela 2023 was a memorable celebration of devotion and service, uniting spirituality with social responsibility and environmental conservation, utilising the power of faith and service to be the change we wish to see in the world.







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