

A 500-year-old fort is the site of a new battle-to clean it up

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Bandu Dhotre and his team of volunteers at work in Chandrapur fort. Deepak Daware

FIVE MONTHS ago, a group of 10 men sporting white T-shirts and green fatigue trousers, and carrying brooms, choppers, chain-saws, spades and rock-climbing equipment, set out on a mission without precedent. They were out to clean a 500-year-old fort spread across 11 km. It was a formidable challenge: heaps of garbage rising up to four feet, trees with roots running deep into the 39 ramparts and walls, encroachments, and snakes and scorpions in its crevices. But today, a 6-km stretch of the Chandrapur fort in Maharashtra has been restored, in an effort that has been hailed by local officials and the archaeological department as a model. Called Chandrapur Killa Swachhata Abhiyan, and driven by Chandrapur-based Eco-Pro, the mission has involved students, government employees, shopkeepers, autorickshaw drivers and doctors in a team of about 75 volunteers working in turns from 5 am to 10 am. Says Bandu Dhotre, environment and wildlife activist, who is leading the drive, "It should take another about 3-4 months to clean the fort... people who dismissed the idea are now volunteering to help with tea, water, even snacks." Dhotre, who heads Eco-Pro, is an honorary wildlife warden of the Forest department, focusing on tigers and leopards caught in the man-animal conflict at the buffer zone of the Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve. "I feel the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan has largely remained a selfie mission with people's engagement not lasting beyond a few hours. Like cleanliness, heritage conservation has also remained neglected. So I thought we should combine the two. This was something everyone wanted to happen but had no idea about how to go about it," says Dhotre. As for the volunteers, he says, the white shirts symbolise cleanliness and the green trousers show that the mission is in military mode. "I wanted to join the Army but couldn't, so I choose to work in uniform," says the 38-year-old. The fort was built over 100 years, over six generations of tribal Gond kings. According to officials, work on the structure was started by Khandkya Ballarshah (1472-97) and ended during the regime of Dhundya Ramshah (1597-1622). The fort has witnessed many battles and takeovers, mainly involving the Bhonsles of Nagpur and the British.



A corner of the fort that is yet to be cleaned Deepak Daware

The clean-up is just over halfway through but has already grabbed attention, with Union MoS Home and Chandrapur MP Hansraj Ahir and Collector Ashutosh Salil assuring funds to fortify and beautify the site, and turn it into a tourist attraction. "The structure is broken at a few places, and the administration has proposed wooden bridges to facilitate a heritage walk along the ramp," says Dhotre. "I haven't seen another example of such a massive voluntary drive to clean up a heritage structure. Dhotre and his team deserve all the credit. To supplement their effort, we plan to build a

protection wall along the entire stretch to prevent further encroachment. The Chandrapur municipal corporation will regularly undertake cleaning to make the change permanent. We will also seek help from institutes like IIT and Nagpur's VNIT for engineering solutions to traffic congestion at various gates of the fort due to the huge growth of the city outside the walled structure," says Collector Saliil. The archaeology department describes the clean-up as a "movement". "Monuments are sites prone to the vagaries of nature and human intervention, positive and negative. Hence, preventive conservation has to be carried out, which can be done both by the department and the community. In Chandrapur, the initiative of Eco-Pro, Dhotre and his team has turned this into a movement by involving the local community and creating awareness. They have proposed a heritage walk, which we support as the custodian of the monument. Similar practices are prevalent in Europe and they create attachment to heritage upkeep among local communities," says N Taher, superintending archaeologist. First published by The Indian Express