

The lone warrior who saved the wetlands of Kolkata

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This is my first meeting with Dr. Dhrubajyoti Ghosh. He is dressed casually in stylish khakis, a crisp checkered shirt and is comfortably seated in his chair. He smiles tenderly, introduces himself as an engineer who has forgotten engineering but is a practising ecologist who has much to learn. His salt and pepper hair, taut skin and lean body does not give away his age but I understand that Ghosh recently turned 70.

Fondly addressed as Dhruva Da (brother Dhruva) in native language Bengali, Ghosh single-handedly champions conservation of Kolkata's wetlands that border the erstwhile capital of British-India. His untiring efforts led to the wetlands receiving the [Ramsar](#) status in 2002 and Ghosh being listed among UN Global 500 Laureates.

At first, he is reluctant to talk to me, looks at me with cynicism of an ecologist who has been trained to scan corporations and individuals with caution. Through the interview, Ghosh is sombre, rational and very articulate. However, in my conversation with Ghosh later, after the interview, outdoors, over cups of coffee, I discover a charming gentleman and conversationalist who enjoys soaking in the sun.

He leads the interview by saying that he wants me to particularly talk about an important issue with my readers – Cognitive Apartheid. I feel a bit embarrassed, less intellectual, as I am not sure what it means but he is quick to enlighten, “We have stopped acknowledging traditional wisdom and the people who have acquired this wisdom from their forefathers and from their own experiences by working closely with nature”. He quips further that modern society, individuals and science has been callously dismissive about knowledge that farmers and fisher-folk have. He commends the fish farmers, who designed the East Kolkata wetlands. “They are an ‘underprivileged’, ‘uneducated’ and ‘non-literate’ congregation of natural ecologists but have helped bio-scientists unlearn their non-scientific beliefs about wastewater being a pollutant”, he proudly adds.

In further conversations, I realize, how true that is and why young Ghosh, three decades ago, was inspired to voice the plight of Kolkata's eastern wetlands. **Saving these wetlands is the most important step towards balancing ecology, livelihoods and sanitation needs of an ‘Ecologically Subsidized City’, a term he coined and one that has caught the attention of ecologists world over.**

In 1981, incidentally the year I was born, the West Bengal government asks the young environmental officer Ghosh to conduct a study on Kolkata's wastewater. The city, like any other in the world, produces sewage, but surprisingly, unlike others, does not have a sewage treatment plant. So, what happens to the water? To understand, Ghosh does what most high profile government officers perhaps will not do. He starts walking along the sewage lines to understand where they lead him. **His curiosity takes him to parts of the city that received no credit for being the kidneys of this bustling cultural city – The eastern wetlands.**

Kolkata is located between two rivers – the Hoogly and the Kulti. The Hoogly brings water to the city and Kulti is an exit for all the sewage. What Ghosh saw as a young engineer was nature's boundless endowment to Kolkata. **The 61-kilometre-long framework of drainage line spread in 12500 hectares, can treat 750 million litres of waste every day.**

As we proceed further in our conversations, I ask more questions regarding science and contribution of the wetlands. Ghosh patiently explains that the sunshine break the nutrient-rich water and within a few days of detention the organic pollution is eliminated. This supports the ecosystem for algae and fish to thrive. **For the uninitiated, fish is staple food in every quintessential Bengali home and the wetlands provide about 10,000 tons of fresh fish per year to fish-loving Bengali homes.** The wastewater is also diverted in paddy fields and patches where fresh vegetables grow on the fertile banks of the canals. A good 50% vegetables arrive fresh, in cycles and rickshaws, to the city from these wetlands. On the other hand, a city like Bengaluru imports fruits and vegetables from neighbouring villages in Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu which increases the cost of these vegetables significantly. Thanks to Kolkata's geographical and natural ecosystem, it is the most 'Ecologically Subsidized City' in India. **If Kolkata loses these wetlands, it loses this subsidy.** Ghosh articulates two world views – one – that waste water is a pollutant, and another – that considers waste water, a nutrient. He lets me stay with this thought for a while before sharing more.

Historically, the wetlands were low-lying swamps and rivers leading to the Bay of Bengal. During the British Raj, a foreign educated Bengali engineer channelised Kolkata's wastewater from city to the then drying wetlands. For the last 70 years, local fishermen have been using this wastewater to farm fish, grow paddy and vegetables. **This stable ecosystem provides livelihood to 20,000 people. There could be no better synergy of nature and humanity to preserve ecology and make perfect economic sense for dependent communities and a city.**

Thanks to the wetlands, Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) saves an estimated cost of 600 crores. Therefore, Ghosh highlights, that the government needs to own the preservation of the wetlands. However, neither do the wetlands receive any support nor is there any acknowledgement of its front runners – Ghosh and the community.

I ask Ghosh, how does he steer his way through the complex bureaucratic and political system. In response, I receive an interesting story that turned the fate of the wetlands. Ghosh once convinces West Bengal's then Chief Minister (CM) Jyotibasus to accompany him on a trip to the wetlands. To demonstrate the contribution and efficiency of this remarkable wetland ecosystem, Ghosh takes a glass of water from a pond and drinks it. The prudent CM, visibly impressed, decides to maintain the wetlands and rejects plans of an expensive energy consuming water treatment plant. The battle is not over, in the early 1990s, the West Bengal government suffers immense identity crises. In its pursuit to be viewed as pro-development, it plans to build a high-rise world trade centre in the wetlands. Ghosh is swift in advising the opposition, led by an NGO, PUBLIC (People United for Better Living in Calcutta), to oppose the plans and the matter goes to court. **Late Umesh Chandra Banerjee, then judge, visits the wetlands after which Kolkata's high court delivers its verdict in 1992 declaring wetlands critical for fishing and farming activities.**

Through the years, Ghosh continues to lobby international conservationists, including members of the Ramsar Convention, which designates globally important wetlands. **In 2002, Kolkata's wetlands receive Ramsar status and make its place on the global map.** There is one hurdle despite the highpoint – The Ramsar status makes local government responsible to draft management plan for its wetlands within six months of its designation. It has been 14 years since, there is no management plan for Kolkata's

wetlands, not even a sign board that acknowledges the presence of these 'natural kidneys'. **The land sharks are silently encroaching these spaces and promising uninformed customers a new life overlooking the shallow wetlands and of beautiful sunset evenings from their balconies.** A part of what is now, the Salt Lake City, the economic and social hub of this growing metropolitan. Present day Salt Lake City is dotted with large malls, IT parks and housing colonies that are result of the massive real estate boom. **The government too is conspicuously silent as the partnerships with real-estate is critical for elections and their existence in power.**