



A matter of shame for the city

THE fairyland-like PC Chandra Gardens in the Eastern Bypass is the frontispiece for the Dhapa solid waste dumping ground, which is a part of the East Kolkata Wetlands, a Ramsar site and West Bengal's only wetland of international importance. It is also the world's largest wetlands located on the edge of the city, providing a natural biological treatment of sewage and waste recycling facility and doubling as a fishery and massive vegetable garden.

The average Kolkatan chooses to ignore this rather magical natural resource; an expanse of blue and green that serves as the city's kidneys, as it were, and puts on the menu of the resident cheaper fish and vegetables throughout the year. No one discusses the fate of the more than 50 waterbodies, the Dhapa *jheels*, which host farming families, some for more than three generations. The Kolkata Municipal Corporation does little to give them tenancy rights, which is something that delights the realty sector that has been eating into the wetlands. Dr Dhruvajyoti Ghosh, a UN Global 500 laureate has spent almost a lifetime working for the conservation of this treasure. Excerpts from an interview:

It has been about 12 years since the East Kolkata Wetlands received Ramsar recognition as a wetland of international importance for its wise use criterion. How is it that the city ignores this treasure and the realtors continue to usurp territory?

Primarily because most Kolkatans are sparsely informed about the East Calcutta Wetlands. One only started talking about the area when the map of the designated boundary of the Ramsar site was first published in 1985, titled, "East Calcutta Wetlands and Waste Recycling Region". This included the Dhapa *jheels* and the dedicated fishponds, the *bheris* as they are locally known. This was the region

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Signature SUMPTUOSITY

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that was protected by the Justice Umesh Chandra Banerjee judgment in 1992 (in the public interest litigation filed by People United for Better Living In Calcutta, an NGO) stopping the change of land use and the filling up of waterbodies. The judgment upheld that the 12,500-hectare waste recycling region map drawn in 1985 should be protected and prohibited any conversion of wetland without the court's permission.

Were there areas in which the administration was proactive?

In 1986, the Institute of Wetland Management and Ecological Design was set up by the West Bengal government. This was the earliest institute in Asia dedicated to wetland conservation and research. Thereafter, the department of environment put in a lot of effort to get the wetlands declared a Ramsar site in 2002. Despite all this, the wetlands have not gained constituency in the city/state. Where is the thumping presence of a demanding citizenry? No better than it has been with many other cases in the country. Forty years ago wetland conversion was a rare occurrence; today it is systematic and rampant.

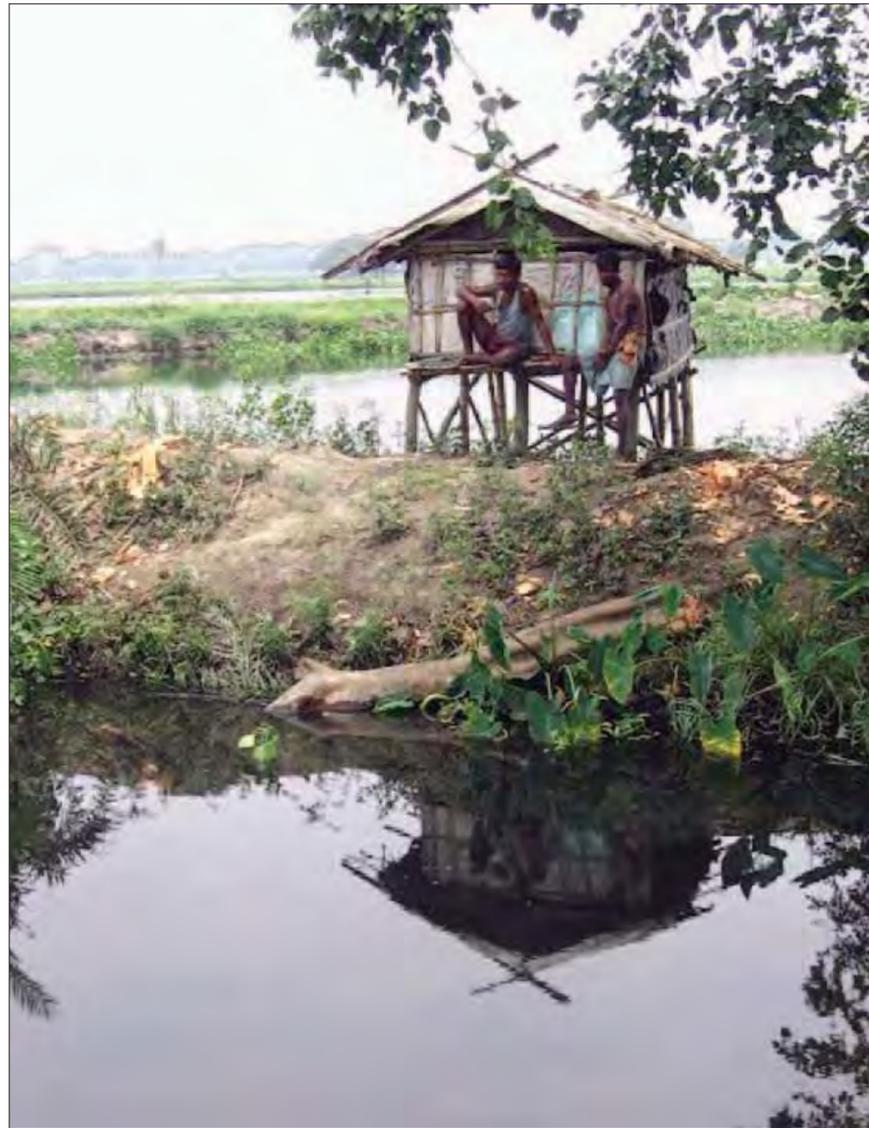
Even the northern parts of the wetlands that were deemed to be secure are slipping into the grip of realtors...

I am particularly saddened by the fate of the *Harbare bheri*, which belonged to the late Premtosh Ghosh, a high priest of sewage-fed fisheries and my teacher. After his death, the *bheri* was being looked after by a trusted manager. Some time ago, he called me to see if I could help him hand over the fishery to a realtor. Hopefully, it will not take place in my lifetime.

The inclusion as a Ramsar site has made little difference; the administration

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continues to be indifferent. Is this because of lack of groundwork to ensure that Ramsar conditionalities were respected?

Not really. A detailed and reliable

database for the wise use of wetland practices essentially around the requirement of Ramsar guidelines had been set up. This baseline document was published in 1997. The process of reaching the 264 *bberis* at the time of the survey (apart from the 50-odd Dhapa *jbeels*) was an intense one, involving great

learning for all of us. In the course of the survey, the locals, farmers, managers and some panchayat functionaries were deeply engaged with the research team. This was an outstanding benchmark project. More importantly, there was a commonality of purpose. The participatory initiative did indeed create the



bedrock for any conservation programme on such sensitive tracks. It became clear that conservation research is primarily a grassroots exercise.

What were the stories that you uncovered around the great innovations that the wetlands represent?

It all began with an inquiry into the early ecological history of the region and how the origin of the sewage-fed fisheries came about in two stages. The large waterbodies or *bberis*, as they are called (between 20 to more than 200 acres), started pisciculture around 1929. Bidhu Bhusan Ghosh, a fish producer, made this great beginning of growing fish in sewage, as has been mentioned in a number of publications since 1987. Even before that, though on a smaller scale, Bhabanath Sen acquired a square mile of Dhapa area to grow vegetables and fish using city sewage and garbage around the turn of the last century. He created the trademark longitudinal waterbodies between mounds of garbage, where he grew fish and indeed laid the foundations to sewage-fed fishery in city sewage. I have not come across any report describing such sewage-grown fish anywhere in the world prior to this.

Does this practice of co-recycling continue today? The average Kolkatan knows little save the fact that villagers stack cauliflower flowers on the dust track by the Eastern Bypass for interested motorists to stop and buy.

This is actually a matter of shame for the city. Bhabanath Sen created an outstanding example of recycling with garbage dumped in longitudinal strips interspaced by elongated waterbodies. All these waterbodies were linked to receive wastewater from the adjacent canal that carried the city's waste flowing into the *jbeels*. The wastewater was detained for three weeks before being used to irrigate agriculture or grow fish. Unfortunately, the Kolkata Municipal Corporation never instituted any study of this outstanding co-recycling practice. Even the report of the National Environmental Engineering Research Institute on the Railway carriage system for disposal of solid waste in Dhapa ignored this co-recycling practice.

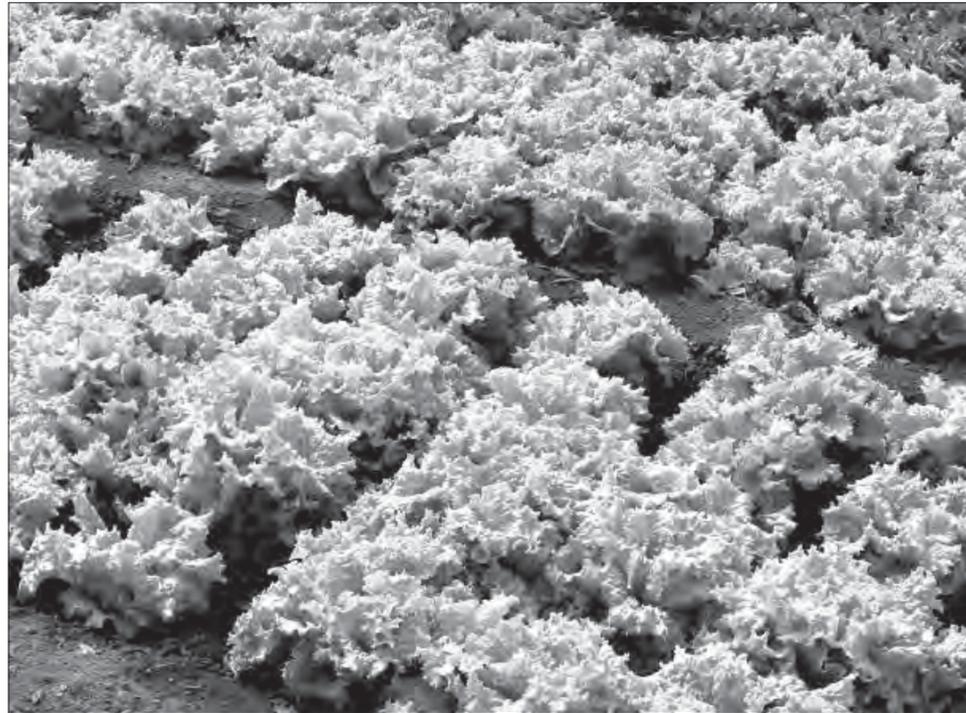
Many of these *jbeels* were been filled up even after 1992 although they were included in the demarcated conservation boundary stated earlier. Today, the system of interconnecting drainage lines reaching the *jbeels* has collapsed and gradually this outstanding part of Kolkata's history has faded into oblivion.

Is there any reliable information on the tenurial status of the Dhapa farmers?

This is yet another of those uncomfortable aspects of the purported glory of this global showpiece! Some are third-generation farmers but have never enjoyed any formal right on the land they tilled or till. Neither in Bhabanath Sen's time nor thereafter under the KMC since the 1970s have they owned the property. We had identified 2,490 farming plots cultivated in Dhapa along with the name of the occupier farmer spread out in nine villages within the Dhapa area. This was done to ease the task of

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This was a survey with which I was involved as joint director, State Planning Board, in 1986. The report was given to the late Kamal Bose, then mayor of the corporation, whose comment was that there was no need for him to accept the advice of a consultant. For him, the State Planning Board was a consultancy organisation!

What about the state's farmer organisations? Have they never said anything?

Dhapa was within the Kolkata municipal area and a farmers' organisation can only include those who live in panchayat areas on its rolls. So these farmers were left hanging in no man's land and will continue to remain so. It is difficult to change things in their favour.

Let us come back to the bigger picture. Conservation initiatives in the East Kolkata Wetlands have been going on for more than three decades. Where do you think we are losing out?

Two unequal sides are con-

fronting each other. On the one hand, the inadequate conservation initiatives are feeble. On the other, the lobby or the pack of real estate promoters (big names included) is far more hard-working, intensely opportunistic and closer to the powers-that-be. More often than not they get an indication that the wrong side of the law is not necessarily risk-prone as long as rent-seekers are kept happy.

Look at it from another perspective. Why should a landowner in this area not want to sell his land? He is comprehensively denied rightful returns from his land by a negative administration that does not even allow him possession of the title deeds to his

land. If he tries to run the fishery, he is starved of wastewater. Every moment the farmers, many without provable rights to occupy and carry out fishery, are being tempted to give up their occupation in exchange for a promised sum of money, which they never get. They have little means to fight the deception. The panchayat functionaries can get away by saying that they are unaware of the legal provisions and were only facilitating development by allowing the filling up of the fishery.

The only reason that the fisheries are not converted into real estate marvels is essentially because the builders are doing things at their own pace. They are

allowing a lag phase. Waterbodies are quietly walled up and left like that or are filled slowly. The calculated slackness is to ensure that not many flats remain unsold. This is the genesis of the conversion futurescape of the East Kolkata Wetlands. Yet there are a few who will continue to be optimistic.

Do you think the issue of land tenure is the biggest stumbling block as far as any permanent conservation of the wetlands is concerned?

Yes, I do; the improperly defined status of the land tenure is the root problem. Many of these waterbodies are not privately owned because of land ceiling

rules. The surplus land should be with the government. Local farmers should get *patta* rights from the vested land. This has hardly happened in this area. Now the entire land question rests upon the lackadaisical handling of the authorities concerned. The predictable outcome has been that the wetlands are a happy hunting ground for unscrupulous realtors. A well-intentioned authority can take this up and clean the debris.

How might the authorities begin cleaning the mess?

To begin with simple things, a number (at least 10) of very distinct and powerful signboards (as those that are seen on our highways), will have to be erected in sensitive places. They should name all the *mouzas* within the East Kolkata Wetlands and proclaim that these comprise a Ramsar Wetland Area, where no waterbody can be filled up. This, I think, is a simple but firm beginning. There should be much more discussion about the wetlands in

the media, particularly the Bengali print media and even in popular news channels.

Any other thoughts? One is aware of your continued optimism about the wetlands.

Taking schoolchildren out to the wetlands. Public does this work seriously but we need many more relentless campaigners. There is a line of caution, though. Students should not be taken to customised and decked-up fisheries. They must see and understand where the challenge lies. That is the way to begin the learning process. After all, we still have this ecosystem alive – though it is decaying, and fast.