

India Climate Dialogue

Recycling works — Kolkata wetlands oldest proof

Dhrubajyoti Ghosh , 23.05.16

The waste recyclers in the wetlands of Kolkata are an increasingly neglected community who provide an useful and eco-friendly service without any recognition or support from the authorities



The waste recyclers of Kolkata wetlands need recognition for their efforts. (Photo by Dhrubajyoti Ghosh)

The extensive wetlands on the eastern fringes of Kolkata are unique in the world for several reasons. Besides supplying a significant portion of the metro city's vegetables and fish, and providing an outlet for the annual flooding the city undergoes every rainy season, the wetlands also serve the extremely useful function of treating and recycling sewage and solid waste.

On March 22 this year, [Toxic Links](#), a New Delhi-based non-profit working on solid waste management, released their introductory report on solid waste recycling practices in Kolkata. It was a quick listing of things that happen around the reasonably big enterprise of the city's waste recycling. The work is a good beginning for a city which has more than a dozen studies in solid waste management, but most of them carefully avoid mentioning solid waste recycling on the ground.

Surprisingly, the Toxic Link researchers omitted the role and significance of waste pickers of Kolkata and the description of the century old dumpsite better known as Dhapa. These vanguards of solid waste recycling need to be brought to the forefront. They are the bedrock of a large sub-structure of solid waste recycling and reuse, working for the city's manufacturing units for many decades.

Circular economy

There is another provocation for writing about waste pickers. We are in the midst of a new turn in the global ordering of economic models. We have started learning about circular economy. Circular economy is the latest currency in the development paradigm promoted by Ellen MacArthur Foundation and formulated by McKinsey and Co, a consultancy firm. In this version of food for thought for the future of the global economic order, a major driving force is the task of recycling.

However, none of the pages of the two volumes that delineate the theoretical underpinning made any mention of the traditional recycling practices visible in umpteen local economies in many parts of the world. In this brief account, I will discuss one of the oldest of such waste recycling practices that can still be traced within the tapestry of local manufacturing units of Kolkata. It is one of the least discussed, researched and intellectually attended phenomena of Kolkata's urban life and history.

Heritage of co-recycling

The year 1879 marked the beginning of a formal initiative of using the city waste of Kolkata for urban agriculture. Within a few decades, this initiative flourished into an outstanding co-recycling ecosystem where treated wastewater was used for irrigating the garbage substrate. Thus a splendid cycle of yearlong agriculture was set in place. Since 1967, one of the most unimaginative sagas of municipal assault demolished this outstanding heritage of co-recycling.

Today the system of co-recycling city waste to grow vegetables and fish hardly exists in the form and shape created and innovated since the turn of the 19th century. Can discourses on circular economy turn the attention of municipal authorities towards its healthy revival? There is still time for a course correction.

Along with the Dhapa farmers, another group of local villagers engaged themselves in collecting reusable goods from the city garbage after dumping. Theirs was an important role to convert the mixed garbage to a compostable one. Today, about 6,000 waste pickers from about 25 villages regularly collect reusable goods at the dumpsite. A major shift has been the overwhelming dominance of plastic goods in the city waste, so much so that sizeable plots of agricultural lands have been converted into informal or unauthorised units of preliminary processing of collected plastic debris.

Interestingly, a survey carried out on Dhapa by an agency set up by Environmental Protection Agency of the United States could only count 200 of them and labelled them vandals. This untrue observation went uncontested by the municipal authorities.

Cognitive apartheid

It cannot be for nothing that we know so little about such a basic urban infrastructure so relevant in modern times where sustainability experts never lose any opportunity to discuss recycling. The British colonialists did put their best foot forward. The Dhapa Square Mile was one among only three other Crown Grants, parcels of land that remained tax-free at the discretion of the empire. The other two were the Kalighat Temple area and the Murshidabad Nawab's Khasmahal (palace) in northern Bengal.

The second great step was to find out and engage the most outstanding change maker in this part of the world, who succeeded in establishing the practice of urban waste recycling scientifically. This stalwart, about whom we know so little, was Bhabanath Sen. To go into the life and knowledge of Sen remains an excellent pasture for the study of the city's ecological history. This work has missed the focus of the learned. I call this attitude cognitive apartheid, which flows through the bloodstream of a comprador psyche. We are taking time to reappear as neutral intellectual minds.

Politics of desertion

Towards the end of the 1970s, ostensibly as an act of pro-farmer jingoism, the age-old contract with the Sen family for growing vegetables on the Dhapa Square Mile was discontinued. More than anything else, a few thousand farmers lost their identity altogether. Since 1985, this author has been trying to understand the co-recycling practice, which was still thriving during that time in spite of marginal institutional support.

The fact that the farmers had no right to till prompted me to come up with a formal census of the farmers who were active upon the Dhapa Square Mile. This work was carried out in my capacity as the Joint Director of the State Planning Board, Government of West Bengal. When the report was submitted to the Mayor of Kolkata, he said he had no obligation to act upon a consultant's report. It did not matter if in this case a senior employee of the state government did the work. The enumeration has faded into oblivion and there is little chance to revive the issue of rightful identity for the custodians of this unique knowledge of co-recycling urban waste.

Gruesome innovation

Overlooked by the municipal authorities or the state's pollution control board is the increasing presence of hemispherical cauldrons boiling leather waste increasingly appearing upon the agricultural fields adjacent to Dhapa. These huge cauldrons are the most prominently visible examples of environmental destruction, debasement of governance and defeat of community voice.



A cauldron to boil leather waste at an illegal unit (Photo by Dhrubajyoti Ghosh)

It took a lot of persuasion after a worker at these illegal units agreed to tell me what he does in one of such cauldrons. He earns INR 250 (USD 3.72) a day. There's no paperwork, no job description, no appointment letter and no health insurance. If he falls into the hearth just because his feet may slip as he is working upon a slender wooden beam to stir the boiling froth of hide turnings, no voice will be raised.

The boiled output from the cauldron is then spread over barren fields which were previously used for growing vegetables, allowing toxins like chromium to perennially damage excellent agricultural lands. Only 20 years have changed a heaven into an inferno, unchallenged.

History can always conceal surprises. With the advent of the new discoveries on circular economy, Kolkata's waste pickers, the local knowledge and practices in co-recycling may have a chance to come back. The frontiersmen of urban waste recycling may get recognised for their foundational activities, which sustain the city's manufacturing units and provide a global tutorial for ecosystem management.

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