

Save and Sustain the East Kolkata Wetlands

Citizens' Statement

March 1, 2017

Alarm bells

The East Kolkata Wetlands (Management and Conservation) Act 2006 has been recently amended to make the environment minister the Chairperson of the East Kolkata Wetlands Management Authority (EKWMA). According to news releases in the media, the new Chairperson of the authority created to protect this internationally recognised and judicially protected unique environmental heritage has declared that the government wishes to utilize the vacant land in the EKW. This latest declaration regarding the East Kolkata Wetlands (EKW) by the environment minister-cum-housing minister-cum-Mayor of Kolkata has sent alarm bells ringing among environmental activists and other concerned citizens.

The historical context of the alarm

Concerned citizens and knowledgeable people are incapable of viewing the statement as less than alarming because it comes in the context of a long train of terrible legal violations. Protected by several judgements, declared a Ramsar site in 2002, and having a separate act dedicated to its conservation, the EKW would seem to be one of best legally protected wetlands cluster in the country. However, as is now well known, encroachments on these wetlands have been underway over decades, with the full knowledge of the authorities and in flagrant violation of law. The EKW Management Authority has the dubious distinction of being the only statutory authority in this country that has been headed by the Chief Secretary of the State but whose hundreds of FIRs are ignored by the police. In fact, the mass filling-up of water bodies within the East Kolkata Wetlands area and turning them into real estate violates judicial direction of not changing land use and should be viewed as a major scam. Further, the Authority's incumbent Chairperson, months before he acquired this chair, is on record expressing his intention of utilizing the EKW land for purposes prohibited under law and also legally regularizing the constructions in the area, most of which are illegal. No wonder, over decades, the same misfortune has been visiting other, less discussed, wetlands in the state.

There is another peril for the East Kolkata Wetlands. During the last many years, the supply of wastewater (the lifeblood of this particular ecosystem and for whose wise use these wetlands have earned international recognition) has been deliberately reduced, threatening this ecosystem and the communities dependent on it. Equally alarming is the fact that not allowing these wetlands to treat our sewage properly, leads to the latter going out to pollute the estuarine waters of the Sundarbans area.

The heritage and resource being destroyed

Spread over some 12,500 hectares, the EKW is an amazing community-based system of waste treatment and recovery of resources as food. Arguably, it is the world's oldest community-run waste management and resource-recovery system. Its practices of ecological management evolved long before the principles underlying them were recognized and found their way, haltingly, into academic environmental awareness.

The EKW

- *Designated to treat sewage of Kolkata free of cost*
- *Renders hugely expensive conventional sewage treatment plant unnecessary*
- *Enables cheap production of enormous quantity of fish and vegetables*
- *Facilitates flood control*
- *Harbours a wide range of biodiversity*
- *Plays a vital role in sequestering atmospheric carbon*
- *Has a beneficial influence on the city's microclimate and promotes climate resilience*
- *Sustains a large wetland-dependent and waste recycling community*

It needs special mention that through its ecological-economic services, these wetlands naturally subsidize Kolkata. Moreover, by treating immense amounts of sewage, it protects the estuarine waters of the Sundarbans. Indeed, it would have been able to do that more effectively if all the sewage was allowed to be treated by it before flowing out into the estuarine streams.

The urgency

In the sad context of governmental indifference with respect to these amazing resources, the EKWMA's new Chairperson's statements are frightening. More alarming is the fact that this statement seems to be an integral part of efforts to justify and give legal sanctity to the multi-pronged attacks on these wetlands. What is urgent is a huge and many-sided civil society initiative, to unite and strengthen already existing endeavours to save these wetlands, which are vital to Kolkata. This press meet is a public expression of this broad-based citizen initiative mooted by the environment platform Sabuj Mancha.

We demand that

1. There must be no further encroachments within designated EKW area on any pretext.
2. All existing encroachments/violations (including those by highly polluting plastic recycling and leather-processing units) must be identified and appropriate legal action must be taken on an immediate basis to restore the original state of these wetlands.
3. The relevant departments of the State government, particularly the Environment Department, West Bengal Pollution Control Board, Fisheries Department, and Land and Land Reforms Department must discharge their statutory legal obligations in the East Kolkata Wetlands and ensure strict compliance of law.
4. Actions must be taken with respect to more than 200 FIRs lodged by the EKWMA in various police stations against violations in the wetland area and the offenders brought to book. Further, appropriate action must be taken against police officers who have been negligent in their duty in this respect.
5. The EKWMA should be held responsible and concerned persons should be made accountable for their failure to conserve the EKW as per law.
6. Appropriate and precipitate action must be taken with respect to other FIRs/complaints lodged by individuals/communities against wetland violations in the area. To enable prompt action, a 24x7 Emergency Help Line must be set up to enable citizens to lodge complaints.
7. A Judicial Commission headed by a Supreme Court or High Court Judge to inquire into and take appropriate action against all violations in the EKW area with respect to the High Court Judgment (dated 24.09.1992) on matter no. 2581 of 1992, subsequent judgments in various courts, and the East Kolkata Wetlands (Management and Conservation) Act, 2006.

8. The community rights of thousands of farmers, fisher folk, waste pickers and others traditionally dependent on these wetlands for livelihood must be given *effective legal recognition*.
9. Adequate supply of wastewater required for the fisheries must be ensured and all measures to do so, including necessary dredging of the canals, must be undertaken to sustain these fisheries and protect our estuarine and coastal waters from pollution load.
10. Display boards must be put up in Bengali and English at all appropriate points to indicate the boundaries of these internationally recognized wetlands, for general information and to warn off potential violators.
11. In addition to the EKW, the government must ensure the protection of all wetlands in the state in strict compliance with law.

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Concerned citizens including:

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