

A crusade to be proud of

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Our task must be to free ourselves by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature and its beauty. - Albert Einstein

Sefali Maity is 15-years-old and plans to plant 35,000 trees during her lifetime. To most, it may sound like a utopian dream, fanciful thinking of a teenager in a world that has perhaps unwittingly cast aside the thought of giving back to nature. Maity's words are filled with steadfastness though, her eyes have a spark so rare at her age



and in the world she resides in. She has already proved her resolve in her role as a “Green Rhinos Youth Leader”.

Maity is a resident of Maipith, one of the few remote villages with signs of settlement before the region merges with the deep and often misty Sunderbans. In this village, where the locals have known hardship as the only way of life, the students of Maity's school willingly agreed to donate Rs 2 each to buy seeds for saplings. It took them little time to recognise the fact that trees are integral to disaster reduction serving as wave breakers and carbon sinks. Youngsters like Maity are witness to how thousands are being forced to abandon their homes because of rising sea levels. What one often reads about on climate change has been staring them in the face. This year Maity had to shift to Gosaba, about 100 kilometres away, to pursue her studies but with a pledge to discharge what she feels is her “duty”— planting those 35,000 trees. One can only hope the world will be at her side and her passion is not lost in a possible unalterable pursuit for existence— before relocating she had managed to plant 100 saplings.

Maity isn't alone. The Association for Social and Environmental Development, an Indian non-profit organisation, with its office in Kolkata, is working with schools to create nature leaders. Through its Green Rhinos Programme, the ASED has funded 200 Green Rhinos like Maity. Another 1,400 have been created with donations from individuals throughout the globe.

Big ideas are usually simple. About 20 kilometres from Gosaba is the small town of Kultali. The premises of Debipur Karunamoyee Balika Vidyayatan were sloppily strewn with waste when Diti Mookherjee, chief executive officer, ASED, dropped by with her team. The students started cleaning up the garbage every two weeks as part of the project they had created during the Green Rhinos Leadership Training, emphasis being on the need for a clean and healthy ambience. The school undoubtedly became neat and immaculate in a couple of months, only with the unavoidable possibility of becoming grimy again. There was no place to discard the

refuse and garbage collection system was unheard of. Some persuasion from the ASED coupled with the students' eagerness for sanitation saw a part of the unspent funds being released by the authorities concerned. A concrete garbage pit was built. "When we visited again a few months later, the school that also houses a 40-student hostel was spotlessly clean. They had even built a second concrete pit and it now has separate pits for degradable and non-degradable waste", says a clearly impressed Mookherjee. The degradable waste is composted while the non-degradable one is burnt. And good ideas are often infectious. A neighbouring school that had been suffering a similar fate saw students knocking on the principal's door, with an appeal for a garbage pit.

Wherever possible, self help is the best option. It imparts a sense of belonging, feeling of responsibility, an urge to sustain the good work, whether it be buying seeds for saplings or cleaning up the school. That appears to be the doctrine by which the **ASED has been working through its Green Rhinos Programme**. A simple three step curriculum is followed – Learn, Plan, Do.

The programme identifies students who are keen on the conservation and nurture of nature, cleaning drives, spreading awareness and more. Articulated simply, it means giving back. It starts with a basic questionnaire on nature followed by a game – "A web of life" – where each participating student is given a card inscribed with a meaningful aspect of ecology, which they connect together to comprehend and appreciate how "all aspects of life are interconnected and have an effect on one another".

Students are then encouraged to plan their own projects after a basic training. Execution is left to such "youth nature leaders" called Green Rhinos, under the guidance and supervision of the ASED. These leaders assume "ownership" of the project that is so critical in its success, continuity and progression. Mookherjee affirms, "We are always there to help and guide but we encourage youngsters to create and then 'Do' with their own hands, which they have been. We are the facilitators of this process of connecting them with their own power. That, I must say, is our biggest achievement, inspiring the youth and mobilising their power".

Indeed, it is a remarkable feat, a triumph of the Sunderbans Green Rhinos, that 15,000 trees have been planted this year. Mookherjee is quick to acknowledge the support and contribution of **Tata Steel Processing and Distribution Limited and a modest local NGO, Baikunthapur Tarun Sangha, a community-based development support providing organisation that works "in the remotest coastal villages" of the Sunderbans. TSPDL and BTS are working together with the ASED in isolated areas of the global biosphere reserve, which is also a world heritage site.**

The little positivity perceived in these desolate areas emanates during the day when the residents' struggle for sustenance. All that sets with the sun when the entire region is cloaked in darkness save for the faint glint of kerosene lamps and a few scattered dwellings that have the luxury of solar-powered lights— generous gifts from their financially stable relatives in the city. Even if there is a remote future possibility of electricity reaching Kultali, in places like Patharpratima it appears to be an impossible dream.

Through its Solar Lights Project, the ASED has distributed solar lamps to make the lives of local people easier. "We have provided 1,600 solar lamps to individual students, solar lighting for a girls' school hostel with 40 students and sets of twin solar lights to eight government high school hostels and a coaching centre benefitting more than 400 students".

Kanai, a class XII student who loves his birthplace for its greenery and beauty, says smiling, “I used to study in the light from a kerosene lamp, so there was a lot of carbon monoxide that made my eyes burn and affected my health. After getting the solar lamp I can study longer and my health is not compromised anymore”. This sentiment echoes through the area. Money that used to be spent on expensive and limited kerosene could be set aside for other needs.

What has been a bumpy ride on the shoddy roads of the backward areas of the Sunderbans has been a tangled one in the metropolis of Kolkata. Mookherjee has visited a large number of schools, renowned and otherwise, in the city to convey her vision and disseminate the ASED’s plans. Though the projects and achievements have met with unanimous acclaim in all the institutions, things have not moved forward in a way one would have expected. Perhaps it is confusion about the laws and by-laws of a school’s strict regimen or perhaps it is uncertainty about the “Plan” and “Do” components, whereby the youngsters are emboldened to independently handle their chosen ventures, albeit under the ASED’s supervision along with school teachers, who opt for and receive mentoring. One might as well ask “Is the urban youth keen?” The answer appears to be “yes” but possibly a feeble one? The residents of Kolkata have applauded the efforts of many school children participating in clean city, green city or garbage-free city campaigns. Most of these have been one-off drives or perhaps organised once in a while.

In a populous city that has been expanding rapidly and perhaps recklessly, one cannot ignore the enterprise of the young students of Sarangabad Jajneshwari Pathshala Girls’ High School in Maheshtala. Mookherjee described it as “a positive unintended consequence” of her work. The students of the school, guided by their teachers, drew attention to the habitat of the endangered water monitor lizard found on the territory that came under threat of an upcoming housing complex.

The students had drawn maps of the existing physiography as well as the possible outcome if nothing was done. The ASED was quick to act on the issue, getting together with the department of environment and the housing company. Plans were reworked and preservation, assured. The Environment Clearance certificate stated that the habitat of the endangered lizard “needs to be protected and the residents made aware of the biodiversity of the area”.

A small yet deferential step by the authorities and the housing company entailed a huge victory for the youngsters—something almost unprecedented in the country. So there is fire in the belly of the urban youth, waiting to be tapped. Are we afraid to approach the unexplored territory called “nature” preferring instead our refuge in the humdrum of urban life?

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