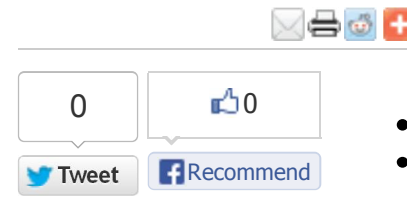


You are here: Home > Collections > **Hooghly**

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Mangroves sprout in Kolkata

Krishnendu Bandyopadhyay, TNN Dec 12, 2008, 12.51am IST



KOLKATA: You may call it sweet retribution of nature against urban sprawl. Mangrove trees, which grow only in the high-salt, low-oxygen soil of the Sunderbans, are sprouting new life on the banks of the Hooghly in Kolkata. And the now-rare Sundari tree may find new life and a new home.

If you go for a stroll at Millennium Park, keep an eye out for some strange looking fruits and weeds' on the riverbank. If you notice a strange, sweet smell, it's from the fruits of the chak keora trees, also known as the mangrove apple. And the weed that poke out of the mud are actually the breathing tubes of mangrove trees in the making.

The startling fact has amazed marine biologists, wildlife experts and botanists alike. Wildlife expert Pranabesh Sanyal first located nearly 132 such mangrove trees along the banks of the Hooghly, from Akra Santoshpur in South 24-Parganas to Uttarpara.

"I chanced upon the mangrove trees on the bank adjacent to Millennium Park a few months ago. I was thrilled. It was found to be *Sonneratia casuarina* or chak keora. I asked people of Sea Explorers' Institute to make a survey. They located at least 132 such trees of four species. Most of them are young, except the one near Millennium Park, which is five to six years old," said Sanyal.

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The growth of mangroves is a sign of increasing salinity in the Hooghly. This may pose a distant danger for the city. "But it can do immense good to the soil and environment. Mangrove trees can absorb more carbon dioxide than other trees and stop soil erosion. The mangroves on the bank of the Hooghly must be preserved," Sanyal added.

Botanical Survey of India's deputy director and principal investigator of the Lead Institute, Sundarban Biosphere Reserve, Dr H S Debnath was equally excited by the presence of mangrove trees in Kolkata. "Mangroves grow at the confluence of sweet and saline water. So there must be alarming increase of salinity in the Hooghly. During our study in Sunderbans, we found 28 parts per thousand at the river mouth. This is happening because the natural flow is being disturbed with people building bandhs (embankments) for aqua culture."

"This is a great opportunity to breathe fresh life into the sundari (*Heritiera fomes*) tree, which gave the Sunderbans its name but is now almost lost due to the rising salinity. Trees like golpara (*Nypa fruticans*) can also be revived," said Dr Debnath.

Well known marine biologist Professor Amalesh Chowdhury said: "We need an extensive study on such phenomena to find out why salinity is increasing. After the Farakka barrage was built, salinity was reduced substantially in the Hooghly with a steady discharge of fresh water. So, some animals and fishes disappeared from the river for ever. Now, with the increase in salinity, you may find sagar kusum or star fish, topshe and bhetki back in the Hooghly. These were in abundance in the Hooghly at one point of time.

On Thursday, TOI saw visitors at Millennium Park wondering about the "strange new plants" which are the mangrove's pneumatophores or breathing tubes. Pointing at a chak keora tree, Asim Mondal of the Sea Explorer Institute, said: "Just see how it stands apart from others. It looks robust and fresh while the other trees are drooping and grey due to pollution."