

Calcutta climate shield in mangrove

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April 3: Ganga Ghosh's carbon footprint would be smaller than a decimal fraction of the average urban dweller's contribution to climate change. But the impact of this unlettered Sunderbans homemaker's engagement in the climate battle counts as a giant step.

Ganga, a resident of Mathurakhand village on Gosaba island, is among 18,000 women playing a critical role in countering climate change by creating and regenerating mangrove forests across nearly 4,500 hectares in the Sunderbans.

The French-funded project driving this revolution has just had its efforts acknowledged on the website of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

Metro accompanied French consul general Damien Syed on a trip to the Sunderbans last week for a look at this first-of-its-kind project in India that aims to neutralise seven lakh tonnes of carbon dioxide in 20 years, based on an environment audit by Ernst & Young.

To put the numbers in perspective, India's per capita carbon emission is estimated to be 1.64 tonnes annually.

Mangrove forests, apart from consuming greenhouse gases that are responsible for global warming, are considered critical to controlling climate change in Calcutta and the rest of south Bengal. The mangroves also function as a bio-shield or buffer against high-intensity storms generated in the Sunderbans.

All kinds of mangrove species commonly available in the Sunderbans are being planted under the project. The signature species among these is, of course, the Sundari plant that is said to have inspired the name "Sunderbans".



A new mangrove forest in the Sunderbans; (left) French consul-general Damien Syed (in hat) speaks to a group of women associated with the project as Biswajit Roy Choudhury (centre) of Nature Environment and Wildlife Society looks on.

Pictures by Jayanta Basu

Ganga and her fellow climate soldiers in the Sunderbans have planted 16 million mangrove trees in less than seven years, supported by 12 France-based companies that are involved in a global initiative called Livelihoods Fund.

"Besides chasing the larger goal of sequestering carbon dioxide and building a bio-shield, this project is contributing immensely to the livelihood of thousands of women," said Biswajit Roy Choudhury of Nature Environment and Wildlife Society (NEWS), which is executing the project.

There are also dividends for neutralising carbon emissions under the "clean development mechanism" of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. This mechanism al-

lows organisations in one country to fund carbon sequestration programmes in other countries and show the benefits in terms of a cut in emissions.

"The women run our project. They collect seeds of mangrove species, rear them in nurseries and plant them. Once plantation is completed across a target area, many of these volunteers are engaged as mangrove stewards to ensure that the plants are not damaged," said Roy Choudhury.

The non-profit initiative also helps the local population in integrated farming so that they do not have to damage mangroves for economic gain. The project will run till 2020.

"I am extremely happy to see this sustainable livelihood project being run by NEWS

with financial assistance from French companies," consul general Syed told **Metro**.

"As you would know, the fight against climate change is a priority for France and we want to mobilise the international community to implement the Paris Agreement (on climate change)," he said.

According to researchers associated with the project, mangroves have been created or regenerated in about 183 villages spread across the development blocks of Basanti, Gosaba, Sagar, Kultali, Jaynagar 1 and 2, Mathurapur, Patharpratima and Kakdwip.

Nilanjan Ghosh, an ecological economist associated with the Observer Research Foundation, said: "Such mega-scale plantation would be of immense ecological value to this pristine area."

