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PK Das

P.K. Das is popularly known as an Architect-Activist. With an extremely strong emphasis on participatory planning, he hopes to integrate architecture and democracy to bring about desired social changes in the country.

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Know ecosystem services?

How many people know what ecosystem services mean? Maybe none, with a miniscule exception, among those with whom I work and engage on every day basis in Mumbai. These people include, politicians, middle- and upper-class citizens, slum dwellers, workers, activists, journalists, educators, historians, sociologists, economists, engineers, architects, planners and municipal and government officials. We engage in a substantially wide range of matters that affect our daily lives, consuming our time and energy; open spaces, gardens, beaches, waterfronts, creeks, wetlands, mangroves, forests, trees, quality of life and environment and housing, and a host of other urban development issues- transportation, city planning and so on, human rights and law included.

We make strong claims at TNOC about the importance of ecosystems. But how should a poor person in a slum care of these against basic deficits in safe water, housing, and human rights?

Therefore, the challenge is, as I understand, first introducing the very idea of ecological services into our dialogue, relating them with other rights and thereafter building popular movements for claiming and reclaiming access by all to ecosystem services. Let me confess, here in Indian cities, we are far from it. I live and work in Mumbai, a city of twelve million people, the financial and trading capital of India. Real estate prices here are amongst the highest in the world; while over 50% of its population—six million people—live in slums. Services and infrastructure in the slums and the city, are probably the worst among big cities anywhere.

Interestingly, Mumbai has a long history of a number of significant social and political movements: struggles of the discriminated Dalit people led by Dr. Ambedkar, unionization of

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rights, human rights and important environmental battles, thereby influencing the city and the country.

Mumbai is also unique in terms of the extent of its rich and varied natural areas and assets. Forests including a 100 km² national park within the city, hills, creeks, wetlands, mangroves, beaches, rivers, lakes, together covering an area of 240 km² that constitute 50% of the total area of the city.

Tragically, development of the city, historically, has been directed with just one single dominating motive, that is to boost real estate business, with volumes of mindless construction as a measure of success, thereby turning the city into a speculative investment heaven by the rich and influential people. As a result, natural areas have been abused and misused, turning them into dumping grounds, both physically and metaphorically. Destruction of these areas has been rampant with irreversible environmental consequences. Even an account of these rich natural assets of the city have not been mapped or documented sufficiently. The preparation of successive Development Plans by the city Municipal Corporation every 15-20 years have ignored them as being integral to the planning process. Over the years, large parts of these areas have been landfilled in order to promote real estate projects. Currently, the government is pushing for development of the saltpan areas (parts of the wetlands that have been used since the 1940s to produce salt) for promoting affordable housing schemes. Similarly, large parts of the national park are being de-reserved for construction of roads, transportation depots and similarly other projects.

It is in such a complex context of socio-political history and unsustainable urbanization that is being pursued by the governments in Mumbai, indeed across India, that we have to dwell upon the subject of ecological services.

As *The Nature of Cities*, of which I am a part, makes strong claims about the critical value of nature and ecosystems, my concern is how can various people's movements in the city successfully include this issue into their agenda and popularize them as being integral to questions of resilience and sustainability. Such an effort would mean going beyond their

how can we champion the benefits of green to be true and real? How can we consciously evaluate those services that already exist, but of which we are not particularly aware, while simultaneously furthering new ones?

Can The Nature of Cities prepare, to begin with, a short campaign leaflet, brochure and posters for public understanding? Various movements here can then use them or appropriately modify them to spread the message and conduct public discussions. Governments will be forced to look into these concerns once there is growing public understanding of the significance of ecosystems services and their rights of access.