

A LITTLE GOES A LONG WAY.....

“We are responsible for what we are, and whatever we wish ourselves to be, we have the power to make ourselves. If what we are now has been the result of our own past actions, it certainly follows that whatever we wish to be in future can be produced by our present actions; so we have to know how to act.”

Swami Vivekananda –Indian Spiritual leader of the Hindu religion (Vedanta). Founder of the Ramakrishna Order of Monks

Today Kolkata is aspiring to become a Mega city. However, growing up is a very painful task and in this case, it is visible on the streets of my city! The major Indian cities can be well compared to oasis of successful endeavours in a desert of deprivation and helplessness. The same trend is witnessed all over the world in developing and some under-developed countries as well. The results too are the same around the globe –mass migration from villages to cities resulting in slums, pollution, unhygienic conditions and security problems. To combat these problems on a permanent basis much needs to be done at a macro level. These things are proposed and discussed by renowned people and government heads on a daily basis, and hence they are out of the reach of a common Indian youth like me. However, there is much that I can do and I have done. A nation goes down not because of the actions of the corrupt people but the inactions of the good ones! Why don't we take a stand? We are not helpless, but yes it is inconvenient. As long as the youth take convenience to conviction the nation will go downhill.

I. The City of Joy: Its opportunities and challenges!

Kolkata, formerly called Calcutta, came into existence with the coming of the British East India Company and eventually became the Capital of British India. Therefore, as a city, Kolkata has a rich heritage and a cosmopolitan culture. Its numerous palatial buildings, with British Imperial architecture, have earned the city the title of 'City of Palaces'. Due to its fame as the center of trade and commerce in British India, immigrants from all over the world came and settled in this city, thereby contributing to its rich cosmopolitan culture. Volumes of books have been written on the glorious years of this city; much better than I can ever express with my limited abilities.

Ever since the turn of the millennium the state of West Bengal (Kolkata is its capital) has been on an aggressive drive for industrialization and also the IT Industry. Many transnational and national companies are setting up its factories and establishments in this state. Kolkata being a port city is also being considered as the gateway to South-East Asia. If India wants to take advantage of the South-East Asian 'miracles' it must develop Kolkata, for its strategic location. It's fast growing industries are attracting people from all over India and also the world, and the city is growing at a rapid pace. Numerous flyovers, subways are being constructed; also roads are being broadened for its rapidly increasing traffic.

Such developments are always good for a city, provided they are in a planned way. Here lie the challenges that the people of Kolkata are facing.

According to a survey in 2004, the road space in Kolkata, in comparison with its population density, was only 6%, while its 23% in Delhi and 17% in Chennai.ⁱ Although, the number of vehicles have increased dramatically over these years the road space has hardly increased by a few percentage. As a result, footpaths are being shortened and numerous trees are being felled to broaden the roads. In front of my school, the road had tall and beautiful trees on either side, which also provided us shelter from the terrible Kolkata summer. Unfortunately, all were chopped down in the name of development!

This simply doesn't make any sense to me. At a time when the pollution of the city is at a dangerous level, how can the civic authorities cut down trees that too in an area which has a number of schools? It is said that the ideal count of Suspended Particulate Matter (SPM) and Respiratory Particulate Matter (RPM) should not exceed 140 and 60 respectively. However, Kolkata's average SPM count is 211 and RPM count is 105. During traffic congestion, which is quite normal as all the nearby schools begin and end around same time, this count can be double the city's average during busy hours!

According to a survey, there is a direct link between air pollution and the probability of lung cancer. Calcutta, with an approximate population of 16 million, is ahead of all Indian cities when it comes to lung cancer at 18.4 cases per 100,000 people - much ahead of the widely publicized pollution in Delhi, which is at 13.34 cases per 100,000. Anybody who travels in the city, especially children, face this risk!

II. Kolkata and the City of my dreams: Let's compare!

“The best reason for having dreams is that in dreams no reasons are necessary.”

Ashleigh Brilliant, English Author.

However, with the harsh realities of the world all around us, our dreams have also adapted to its surroundings. Our dreams cannot be one of fantasy –an episode from Jetsons! –it has to be realistic.

I dream of a city with fresh air, water and soil.

How does it feel to know that the air you are inhaling every moment is not giving you life, but taking the life out of you –it's slowly poisoning you? A recent report said that some 70% of people in Kolkata suffer from respiratory disorders. The traffic police being the worst affected, police stations across the city are being equipped with oxygen devices to help the policemen after their duty. But doctors admit that it is too late as the pollutants are deeply lodged in their lungs! Its not the policemen alone, even I travel a lot everyday. I have to go to university and attend to other responsibilities. Majority of us cannot afford oxygen treatment everyday, so what do we do?

I dream of greenery across the city, there should be more trees and parks to offset the pollution. But the main pollutants –the vehicles –should be dealt with strongly. The public transportation system should be drastically improved. We need environment friendly modes of mass transport like the trains, subways, LRTs. Currently, we have a single subway line running North-South; we urgently need another running East-West, with LRTs covering the rest of the city. Apart from this, the loop train and other local trains should be revived and made more efficient. This will help commuters from nearby towns and help decongest the city. The trams, a part of our heritage, should also be revived. The Pollution Control Board should be given more autonomy, and they should enforce the ban on polluting vehicles. All buses and taxis should be allowed to run on streets only if they have converted to LPG.

I dream of a city without the unhygienic slums.

The slums of Kolkata, about one-third of the population live in slums, can be best described as rat holes of the city. I dream of low cost housing complexes for the slum dwellers on the outskirts of the city. All existing slum dwellers should be given a small flat with the basic necessities like

electricity, water, gas and with necessary safety precautions. To avoid land costs, such Government sponsored housing project can be build on the outskirts of the city. The Howard Roarks (of *The Fountainhead*) of the world have shown that such projects are feasible. Having providing them such houses, we should proceed to find them adequate employment. There are lots more which can be said in this regard.

I dream of a city with no child labour and adequate number of public schools for poor kids.

It is stupid to assume that those kids working in the tea stalls outside KFCs and MacDonaldds will bear all injustice silently. There will be agitations and violent protests from those sections of the society that are feeling left out of the process of wealth creation that is happening in the country. Unless we evolve steps to create a more equal society, our much-hyped demographic dividend could well turn into a demographic disaster –as can be realized with the increasing number of anti-social activities in the city!

III. Kolkata and I...

“We need men who can dream of things that never were, and ask why not.”

-George B. Shaw

After I entered high school, my throat infections became quite regular as a result of which it became difficult for me to enjoy my school life. The doctor told my parents that it is a common infection and went on to explain that the dust particles suspended in the atmosphere enters through our nose and mouth to settle in the throat. This resulted in my frequent throat problems. The doctor's assurance did satisfy me but I had to wear a mask sometimes during heavy traffic also I started to gurgle every night, an activity which continues till date to avoid major throat infections. Very soon the mask started irritating me thanks to my school friends' comments. Realizing this, my class teacher explained to the class the benefits of wearing a mask. In her lecture, she blamed the high pollution in the city for this deadly situation. She even went on to quote her brother-in-law, "I have to be on the streets most of the time and with this pollution I would eventually develop lung cancer anyway, so why should I quit smoking?" Now I feel she should have avoided the smoking part in it to bring out the point, but it is very interesting to note how helpless the people of my city feel about this problem!

The Nature Club in my school was quite dormant till then, with only 20 members, but I decided to join it to get access to its Nature based magazines and journals. Seeing my interest in these issues, the teacher coordinator of the Club encouraged me to organize a nature-based event. Till then I was quite an introvert and had no leadership skills. Not wanting to turn down the teacher's request, a couple of us organized a small Sit and Draw Competition on Earth Day, with nature as the theme. We were very surprised to see the turnout on the day of the event and to be honest every unprepared for it. You should learn from your mistakes and so did we; with more ambition and a bit larger workforce we decided to repair and paint the walls of the huge Park Circus *Maidan* (a huge park) in front of my school. We were not able to raise enough money from the students for all the four walls, so we decided to go ahead with the one facing us.

In India, due to lack of public toilets, men don't hesitate to urinate on the walls. I know it sounds gross, but this is a fact. So after having repaired the wall, to prevent its misuse (and to reduce the cost of painting!), we decided to paint the wall ourselves with various cartoons each containing a nature based social message. I must say the paintings were beautiful. Impressed by our initiative, the nearby schools decided to join in and very soon all the walls were repaired and painted!

Realizing the benefits of having more volunteers, we invited the Nature Clubs of the other city schools to work together, so that we could raise more funds and have more volunteers. The idea worked and very soon we formed **the Nature Clubs' Council with around a dozen schools**.

Water logging on the streets is a major problem in Kolkata. Sometimes during monsoons the entire city comes to a standstill due to widespread flood. A report in the newspaper held the plastic bags the main culprit, as these non-biodegradable items clog the drains. Further investigation by the municipal authorities confirmed this. Some city environmentalists' were petitioning the municipal authorities to ban the widespread use of the poisonous plastic bags in the city; the toxic materials remain in the soil for years. Due to their efforts, the High Court issued a directive to ban plastic bags from 10 most important areas, including popular picnic spots like Alipore Zoo and Victoria Memorial, of the city. Thousands of people visit these places each day! However, as in all such Indian cases, the ban was widely flouted. From the Nature Clubs' Council, we decided to form groups and went to each of these places with banners and placards to make people aware of the ban and explaining to the general public the reason for this ban. Thanks to the support of our respective schools and the city's media, our prolonged campaign paid off and the security guards of all the 10 places were ordered not to allow people with plastic bags.

Every project is a learning experience. We realized the power of media and we felt it was very important to educate people on nature-related issues. For this reason, a couple of us from my school's nature club conceptualized and launched the **city's first Nature based newsletter for the school students** –we believe if you educate the child he will educate his family as well. It was an instant hit. We realized how effective creative education through graphics, games, real-life reports and articles is. Very soon we made it available to dozens of other schools. **New Leaf** became a separate organization in itself, with its editors, dozens of school reporters and with a department to arrange for sponsors as well!

Half way through my tenure as the President of my school's Nature Club, I faced a then unique problem –a financial problem! Till then, all school clubs used to run from the contributions of its members and other school students. Due to our numerous activities, from campaigning against the pollution of East Kolkata Wetlands (a Ramsar Site) to beautification of Park Street (the most popular road in Kolkata), the school was also funding us. Even with contributions from our now 250 members and the small funds from school, we were unable to meet the expenses of our projects which were already Rs.20000 (around \$500).

This was the first time any school club was facing such a situation so we had to think of a unique solution. We approached *The Times of India* with a list of three big projects, under the umbrella of **Environment Consciousness Campaign (ECC)**, that we had planned for June' 04. We explained to them that we need corporate sponsor to fund these projects but a corporate would only fund it if it gets publicity out of it, hence we wanted the newspaper to come up with such an arrangement. *The Times of India* understood our problem and appreciated our work, and got us funds from companies like Indian Oil, in the month long campaign which was started by the Mayor himself on the **World Environment Day**. The campaign had three main events –a seminar on the role of public in our Green Movement, planting of saplings and dustbins in a park and an Anti-Plastic bag rally in the city. The campaign also involved local celebrities (thanks to *The Times of India* again) and received widespread publicity. We were happy to be appreciated by the general public and they promised to do their part as well.

One thing leads to the other. The chance meeting with the Mayor gave us another idea to ensure the movement among the schools receives greater participation from the general public and the civic authorities. We drew up a proposal for **Mayor's Nature Club Council**.

Needless to say, in developing countries corruption in public administrative bodies is probably the biggest problem. Youth all around the globe, as gathered from last year's World Bank Essay Competition, are doing much on their part to reduce corruption. Our proposal was that an active, efficient and well-functioning student body like our existing Nature Clubs' Council should be given more power, in the form of funds and easy-to-obtain permissions from the Municipal Corporation, for expanding their area of operation. The Mayor himself should become the Chairman of the Council, and dozens of other schools should be invited to become a part of it. With so many more student volunteers and major beautification projects all over the city, the general public are bound to realize their civic responsibilities and we can guarantee a cleaner, greener city and also proper utilization of funds (the account books for our various projects were always open to anyone for review)! I am sure students, we considered ourselves as good examples, can do much to change the face of the city given the responsibility. We also suggested having an Advisory Council, with eminent citizens of the city and NGO representatives on it, to direct and oversee the work of the Council.

The idea made much progress and the then Mayor promised to consider it seriously in a few months time. Unfortunately, the then Mayor lost the Municipal elections that followed soon after. Although I am out of school now, most of us as alumni continue to review the progress made on this. We have realized that our proposal is being rejected by some bureaucrats in the Municipal Corporation, for reasons clear to all of us! Hopefully, something will be worked out soon, if the current Mayor decides to look into it seriously.

Here I would also like to say, that the same model for Mayor's Nature/Student Council can be followed in cities all over the world—an efficient student organization of passionate, hardworking students determined to improve their cities under the supervision of the Mayor himself! Put in creative ideas like corporate sponsorship for environment-friendly projects, media sponsorship for publicity and awareness among general public, and you will certainly see the dreams of the youth for their city materializing in your city itself!

I would also like to add, that **powerful organizations like the World Bank, have much to do in this regard.** They can hold seminars in cities to inspire the school students to come together and form such a council and also help them with funds. At the same time they can convince the Municipal Authorities to take the suggestions of this Students' Council seriously. Personally, I

feel that the prize money of this essay also should be given to the respective organizations and not the individuals.

A little goes a long way!

Mega projects and corporate sponsors came after two years of us starting our work. Initially we too used to feel how can a small event like picking up plastic bags from the Victoria grounds or cleaning the zoo make much of a difference in this world? Are we just wasting our time? Now when I see a thousand students together (as against the 20 when we started) doing it, and thousands of people being affected by it and promising the school children to do their part too, I KNOW it was worth it!

Based on my experiences and the various projects that our Nature Clubs did, I have drawn up a list of small projects that a small group of students, or even an individual, can start off with. Always remember: "**A little goes a long way**". A small and seemingly insignificant act that you commit will inspire others to join you, and the chain spreads. Most students want to do something for the society, however and unfortunately, most of them are a bit lazy or is confused as to what to do. You can be rest assured that once they see a friend doing it, even they are bound to join in to do their part. Sometimes even I was surprised to see my friends, who hate to wake up earlier than 9 am on a Sunday, requesting the morning walkers of the Rabindra Sarobar (a huge lake in the heart of the city) to hand in their plastic bags –all active and happy even at 6 am! What do you think is the reason these normal school students willingly sacrifice their rare leisure time? The desire to do something for their society. And when the elderly witness this desire –to see the generation X that they so often complain about, so concerned about the social issues –they too take make a promise to themselves to do their part!

The list of small projects to start with: -

- ✓ Writing to the editor of a local newspaper about a specific problem
- ✓ Organizing a Sit n Draw competition / one act play in the school to draw attention of fellow school friends to join your cause
- ✓ Cleaning (like picking up waste materials and dropping them to the dustbin) of school premises or outside school to inspire your friends
- ✓ Repairing a public wall and then painting it with social messages and cartoons
- ✓ Planting dustbins and saplings in nearby parks; taking care of the saplings.

- ✓ Organizing No-Horn campaigns in front of schools and hospitals
- ✓ Distributing leaflets and explaining to vehicle owners the harmful effect of their emission
- ✓ Organizing Anti-Plastic Bags campaigns; Go green –Use jute, cloth bags.
- ✓ Educating the general public at picnic spots or important places about using dustbins – please do not litter. What image of your city will the visitors have?

That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind.

-Neil Armstrong

Will our Green movement be limited to a few schools and a few students?

Certainly not. As the snowball starts rolling it becomes bigger and bigger. What started among a few schools and students will soon spread to all the 300 schools in Kolkata and beyond. The strength certainly lies in numbers; please allow me to illustrate this point clearly. From among the 300 schools, even if 10 students per school are dedicated towards working for the city (a gross underestimate!) we will have an army of 3000 students always doing some project somewhere in the city. Even if the rest of the students in the school do not join the movement, they will certainly be positively affected by it; they will develop a sense of responsibility towards cleanliness of the city. We may not be the 100% population of the city, but we certainly are the 100% future of the city –and majority of the population in India are below the age of 25! There are around 2000-3000 students studying in each school; which means a minimum of 600,000 students being influenced by the Green Movement. Let's go a step further. Do you think a student who is witnessing the hard work being put in by his classmates to keep the city clean will allow his family to litter/pollute the city? Even if we assume 3 members per family of the students (again a gross underestimate) we will have an incredible number of 1.8 million people being directly/indirectly influenced by our Green Movement –more than 10% of the city!

Helen Keller was once asked, “*What's worse than not having eyesight?*” Her reply was, “*having eyesight with no vision!*” **Mayor's Nature/Student Council** is a sure way to deal with the dangerous levels of pollution that the cities around the globe are facing, and also address the issues of Global Warming. If you are ready to wait for eternity hoping things will become better –Good luck to you. I love my city –Kolkata.

To echo John Lennon “*people say I am a dreamer but I am not the only one...hope someday you join us and the world will be one*” –against pollution!

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ⁱ Business Line. Monday, September 06, 2004