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City's first urban forest turns into a dump yard

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Kolkata: The thick canopy of green along Mayo Road from the Park Street flyover is a sight of joy. But Kolkata's first urban forest, along the Mayo Road and JL Nehru Road stretch, is now unkempt with garbage dumped, plastic packets strewn all over and uprooted tree trunks lying unattended. "Successive reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) suggests Kolkata's vulnerability and the necessity of such urban forests to mitigate the impact of climate change. It is sad that we have converted it into a dump yard. People too have not voiced their concerns," said Ajay Mittal, director, Climate Change, India and South Asia, Earth Day Network.

The urban forest — named Shaal-Mahul-Piyal — was developed on Metro junk yard adjacent to Manohar Das Tarag in 2004 and funded by Hooghly River Bridge Commissioners (HRBC) as a compensation for felling nearly 1,500 trees to erect five flyovers. "The climate change narratives did not come yet and people were still unaware of the impact of air pollution. But they understood the need of green cover and the forest was meant to give a visual relief to the all-pervasive concrete jungle . The place could have been a biodiversity hotspot," said a retired officer of the urban recreational forestry (URF) wing.

In last 18 years, the place has grown into a thick forest, despite loss of trees during cyclones. "The uprooted trunks are still lying inside. The authorities could have turned it into a haven for nature lovers and students identifying floras. Instead, people indulge in drug abuse, street dwellers defecate and passersby urinate," said Bonani Kakkar of People United for Better Living in Calcutta. "Urban forestry plays an important role in addressing environmental problems, including those related to erosion control, noise and air pollution abatement, wastewater management, watershed protection, glare, reflection and traffic control," said Chirag Dhara, a climate physicist.