

## Changing mindsets through guerrilla gardening

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Besides being called the 'City of Joy', Kolkata, the capital of the east Indian state of West Bengal, has recently been labelled as one of the most [polluted](#) cities in the country.

In the midst of the concrete jungle however, in the southern part of the city, lies a surprise — a lush green forest patch which stands in the place of a dump yard.

Over the past decade or so, Mantu Hait, a city-based lawyer, has spruced up a kilometre-long stretch of a barren, dump yard to shelter 25000 trees spanning 150 plus species through [guerilla gardening](#). Guerilla gardening is a technique where a significant amount of seeds are planted together at one place and left to get water from rain. Usually, when you don't have legal rights to use the land for a particular type of plantation, this process is applied, Hait said.

"After a decade long trial and error, this gardening effort finally worked out," 44-year-old Hait told Mongabay-India about the stretch near New Alipore station. This one-kilometre stretch is owned by the Kolkata Port Trust and the railways reportedly have a shared space in between.

### Pledge to keep the greens

Hait, a resident of Alipore was always drawn towards nature. During his childhood, he spent time in this patch which then, was green. But as Hait would discover years later, the greenery was disappearing with rapid urbanisation.

"I was away from home studying and when I came back (to Kolkata) in 2010, I was extremely disappointed seeing the area's degraded greenery. Illegal construction had mushroomed around this place in just 4-5 years. Waste from the neighbouring residential areas was lying everywhere. It broke my heart and I knew I had to do something about it," he told Mongabay-India.

Hait was in his mid-twenties when he resolved to plant trees and revive the green patch. The motive was strong and clear but the method wasn't. He tried different procedures but nothing was working out. "I would plant some 100 saplings and only one or two would survive. It was very frustrating at times," he said.

### Getting it right

After several failed attempts he explored the technique of guerrilla tree plantation. As soon as he was sure about the method, Hait reached out to Kolkata Port Trust to make sure there were no obstacles in his way. "I wrote to the Kolkata Port Trust authority as this area belongs to them. I explained to them how I planned to restore the ecological balance in the

area. However, they never responded,” he said. “They never formally approved it but they did not stop me either.”

Summer of 2011 was the season when Hait decided to start guerrilla gardening. The seeds sown in the summer soaked in the monsoon rainfall and slowly Hait’s efforts bore fruit. He pumped in Rs. 1000 for 100 plants.



Along the way, Hait garnered support from different conservation societies and NGOs that work for environmental restoration. “Organisations such as Prakriti Sansad, Nature Mate, Alipore Environment Society and wildlife activists pitched in and helped me with strategies of tree plantation to improve the habitat for mammals and for migratory birds,” Hait acknowledged.

Following plantation of Asoka and eucalyptus, Hait selected fruit species such as mango, lemon, guava, tamarind as well as nut plant species. “So now this area is home to at least 5 different species of birds like parrots, woodpecker, Alexandrine parakeet, Indian myna, house sparrows. Mammals like mongooses, golden jackals also call this revived patch home,” he said. “Butterflies also thrive in this corridor, particularly in late monsoon and early winter, due to the nectar-producing plants,” beamed Hait.

### **Citizens taking interest in the process**

Once the impact of guerrilla gardening became evident, a number of residents in the neighbourhood offered help to maintain the land.

According to Hait, the trees which have been planted along the railway tracks are looked after by civil society members or representatives from different residential societies.

City-based environmentalist Subhash Dutta said maintenance drives may be required for the patch to remain green in the future.

“As far as sustainability is concerned, in barren spaces like the one taken up by Mantu Hait, guerrilla gardening is probably one of the best technique that one could think of. Going ahead he might need to carry out a few maintenance drives in the area and also intervene

with a couple of new type of tree plants – which should be enough to keep it as green in the future as it is right now,” Dutta told Mongabay-India.

“If he can encourage more people from the surrounding residential area to come forward and take spontaneous part in gardening, his initiative would definitely live long,” he added.

However, the slice of green is battling a suite of new threats from pollution and illegal tree felling, claims Hait. “A packaging material recycling factory has popped up in the vicinity which is causing direct contamination of soil and water,” he added.



Green patch along the railway track. Photo by Satwik Paul.

“We keep a strict watch on the tree cutting but last year around March-April at least 200 trees were felled by the Kolkata Port Trust itself,” he said. Hait claims the Trust has never responded to his mails.

Since the land is owned by them, they have also started building a fence along the rail tracks in the vicinity of the restored green stretch, he said. Hait knows that he would not be able to do anything if entry to the corridor is barred by the authorities. “What I can do is make sure is to instill the idea of nature restoration in civil society so that this mammoth task is taken care of by hundreds and thousands of Mantu Hait.”

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