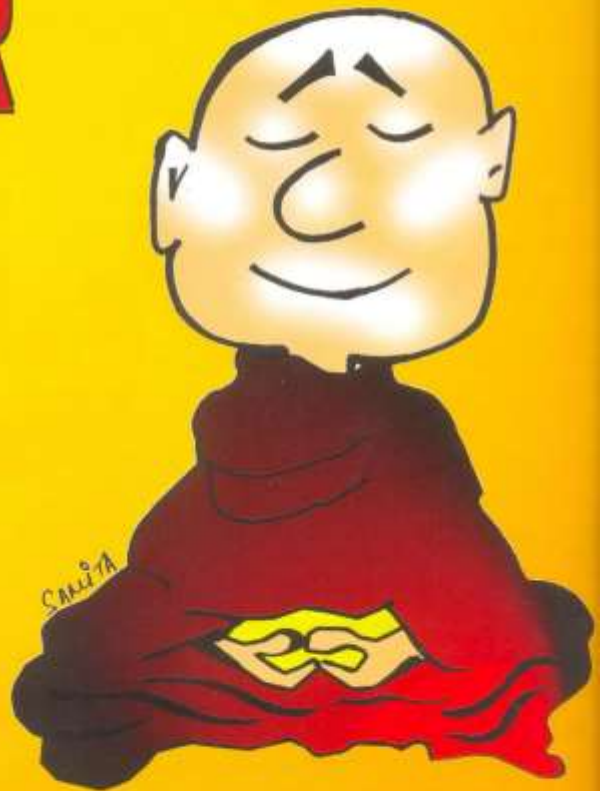


Civil Society

IDEAS FOR THE NEW DECADE

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'Think eco-systems to save the Ganga'

Civil Society News

Kolkata

FEW government engineers have risked their careers to stand up for what is ecologically right as Dr Dhrubajyoti Ghosh has done. For two decades, while employed by the West Bengal government, he worked to save the wetlands and sewage-fed fisheries on the eastern fringes of Kolkata. In the process he angered politicians and developers, but the remarkable wetlands that survive today owe their existence to Dr Ghosh's tireless scientific crusade and the international recognition that it brought.

Dr Ghosh is Regional Vice Chair, Commission on Ecosystem Management, IUCN. He spends much of his time in rural Bengal working with communities on promoting sustainable practices. In this interview he calls for a new community-based approach to saving the Ganga from the huge load of chemicals that it carries because of the run-off from agricultural fields.

Dr Ghosh's solution is decentralised landscape management, which is distinct from the Ganga Action Plan's emphasis on treatment plants and collection of waste at single points.

Exactly how serious is the problem of agricultural pollution in the Ganga?

It is serious. If we do not act now the situation will lead to one of the worst assaults on the lives of humans, plants and the animal kingdom and adversely affect climate uncertainties. That the matter brooks no delay is what we learn from a global report of an International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development (IAASTD) released in 2008.

Fifty-eight countries and 400 experts participated in this mega project which was initiated in 2002 by the World Bank and Food and Agricultural Organisation. The United Nations Environmental Programme opened the first plenary meeting in 2004. The report mentions that 'emphasis on increasing yields and productivity of agriculture has in some cases had negative consequences on environmental sustainability'. The report has recorded the impact of pesticide pollution globally.

A major emphasis has been to say no to the 'business-as-usual' approach to managing agriculture. Interestingly, the Indian media has more or less avoided discussing this historical report perhaps not to disturb the remarkably peaceful world of the agro-chemical industry.

You have suggested landscape management. Could you explain?

I think mere technological solutions cannot reduce pollution, be it from a point source or from a non-point source. It is essential to take the participation

of the community and their knowledge system into account. It is time that planners appreciated the paradigm shift in development strategies.

My suggestion to take up a Landscape Management Action Plan is partly based on the findings of the global report on IAASTD. It says that many of the challenges facing agriculture currently and in future will require more innovative and integrated applications of existing knowledge, science and technology (formal, traditional and community-based), as well as new approaches for agricultural and natural resource management.

A Landscape Management Action Plan advocates an ecosystem approach. It is adaptive and puts faith in the self-organisation capability of the community. In recent times, the most important landscape based initiative is the collaborative initiative of UNESCO, UNEP and the Ministry of Environment, Japan, which has been termed the

'Many of the challenges facing agriculture will require more innovative and integrated applications of existing knowledge, science and technology'.

'Satoyama Initiative'. The objective of this landscape programme aims to benefit biodiversity conservation and human well-being.

A similar initiative in India by the Ministry of Environment within the fold of the Ganga Action Plan (GAP) will be very desirable. Within the Ganga Basin the primary problem is the loss and damage to human life due to agricultural pollution. Lots of biodiversity, which is definitely taking place can be attended to as soon as the application of agrochemicals is sufficiently reduced. Therefore within the Ganga basin, a Landscape Management and Action Plan will have a focus on reducing agricultural pollution.

Would farmers be interested?

I do not know about states other than West Bengal. In West Bengal, where I have been visiting villages for more than a decade on this issue, I find only recently farmers are searching for alternatives. The euphoria of chemical agriculture is gradually disappearing.

Who will implement such a plan?

Ideally, the villagers or more pointedly farmers will implement the plan. If farmers apply fertilizers



Dr Dhrubajyoti Ghosh

and pesticides improperly, it will be for them to do it properly. At this point they will need profound knowledge support. They will have to be persuasively oriented to appreciate and adopt a different kind of agriculture (which their forefathers knew much better) with gradually diminishing dose of agrochemicals. From 'far from organic' agriculture, they will move towards 'nearly organic' practice.

This country has sufficient demonstration of good practices to ensure sustainability in agriculture. What we now need is the willingness to change. Here again, it would be best if this willingness comes from the farmers. If not, the farmers' inability to visualise the forest behind the trees will have to be explained to them. This is the interface where the lead has to come from the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF).

Who will train the farmers?

Successful models of good agricultural practices will act as tutorial eco-systems for the farmers. These tutorial eco-systems will not only train them with best practices but also help them to calculate the long-term economics of growing low-pesticide low-fertilizer practices using sufficient organic manures.

Young agricultural scientists are showing keen interest in rationalising agriculture using an ecosystem approach. I have visited such privately owned agricultural farms which enjoy the knowledge support of young scientists where no fertilizer and pesticides are added. They do not however enjoy sufficient establishment support and this is where the change has to come. The MoEF can allocate funds to set up large numbers of such tutorial ecosystems and training arrangements to promote an ecosystem approach to agriculture and rural landuse management.

Would you expect GAP to fund this project?

Industrial pollution is reduced by MoEF. So is municipal pollution. By the same coin agricultural pollution or for that matter non-point source pollution can also be reduced by the MoEF under the Ganga Action Plan to start with.