Greying Kolkata's green cover in free fall

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KOLKATA: Hacking of full-grown trees without compensatory plantation has been the order of the day in the city. It has left a yawning gap between demand and supply and has been the biggest contribution to Kolkata's graying landscape. And now, a recent satellite picture analysis has revealed that Kolkata's green cover has dipped to an extremely unhealthy 4.79%, an indicator to the damage that is gradually going out of hands. The minimum requirement for an Indian city is 15%.

According to the National Commission on Urbanization, open spaces in Kolkata have been vanishing fast as well. Less than 1% of city space now remains vacant. Compared to Kolkata, the green cover in Delhi (19.09%) and Mumbai (18%) is much higher whereas the national average stands at 19.49%.

Hacking a big tree can never be compensated. "So the compensatory plantation hardly matches environmental loss we suffer with every felling tree. This is why we always practice and recommend transplantation rather than uprooting of trees. This was what we did at the time of expansion of CIT Road," said Ravi Menon, managing trustee of India Trees Foundation.

In last five-six years, trees have been mercilessly felled to make way for construction of flyovers and other infrastructure projects. "The rule we follow is planting five saplings against felling of a full-grown tree. But that hardly helps. Five trees would take more than 15 years to compensate the loss. Moreover, the survival rate — at 40% — in compensatory plantation is very low. So the damage could never be compensated," said green activist Subhas Dutta.

In most case, plantation is shoddy and bereft of basic norms. A tree is doomed for a premature death when the area around it is concretized. "In Kolkata, more than 9,000 full-grown trees were uprooted, pushing up the carbon count by an alarming 11 lakh kg per year," said auto emission expert Somendra Mohan Ghosh. Around 95 lakh tonnes of carbon is generated in Kolkata from vehicular emission.

The loss of greenery has also dealt a body blow to biodiversity. Compensatory plantation may help to maintain overall greenery to some extent but the loss of biodiversity is permanent, an expert said.

A research conducted by Netaji Subhas Bose Open University at Ward Nos. 19 and 20 corroborated the findings of the National Commission on Urbanization. The study, which covered 111 roads in these two wards, also set the alarm bell ringing.

According to data, Ward 19 has 42% and Ward 20 has 58% vegetation area but a sharp drop in vegetation density increased environmental risks like pollution and global warming.