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Park BACK From The BRINK

Schoolkids take lead in giving new lease of life to neglected Victoria Square

TIMES NEWS NETWORK

Asprawling pond in a posh Camac Street locality, which was being slow-poisoned to death due to sheer negligence of the civic body and apathy of locals, has been resuscitated by school students and executives working in the neighbourhood. The rejuvenated Victoria Square, with a freshly laid jogging track, was thrown open to public on Saturday morning.

Till last May though, the square was a rubbish dump with water hyacinth covering the pond and people throwing waste over the wall that kept the waterbody and peripheral greenery hidden from view. It had even turned into a den of antisocials.

TOI had, in an article titled 'Waterbodies Walled Out' (published on December 16, 2008), drawn the attention of readers to the plight of Victoria Square. Bonani Kakkar of the NGO PUBLIC was among those who thought something could be done to bring it back to use.

Kakkar and others were trying to chalk out a course of action with nature clubs of neighbouring schools when Aila lashed the city on May 25, 2009. It left Victoria Square absolutely devastated, uprooting trees in the square and driving the rubbish into the pond.

"The square was in a complete mess. It was shocking that 14,000 sq ft of prime property in an upmarket locality like Camac Street was languishing in such a terrible state when it should have been the biggest asset of the neighbourhood. When we mooted the idea of cleaning the park at nature clubs in schools, they instantly agreed to join the effort," said Kakkar.

The mammoth task began on the last Environment Day, June 5. Members of the green clubs at La Martinere School for Boys, La Martinere School for Girls, Modern High School, Frank Anthony Public School, Loreto House and Pratt Memorial chalked out a strategy under the guidance of Kakkar and began work on weekends. Students from Birla High and St James' also chipped in.

"I often passed the area and whenever I saw the wall, I would wonder what lies beyond it. I never guessed that there was a huge waterbody tucked behind the four walls. It was very frustrating to learn that the square has been lying neglected for a decade and a half. Though my crucial Plus-II examinations are only months away, I didn't think twice about getting engaged in the clean-up drive and be a part of the conservation and restoration team," said La Martinere for Boys student Nandan Pugalia.

Modern High School Class XI student Kanika Nuwal recalled the zest with which students would turn up every Saturday — occasionally even on Sundays — to clean the rubbish that had piled up along the periphery. "We all worked voluntarily without being prompted by teachers. I was proud to be a part of the team that restored the square," she said.

Watching the young students at work, executives of Lafarge, too, joined the initiative, giving a boost to community partnership as did Sandip Chatterjee and his colleagues from Park Nursing Home. Claire Mukherjee, an Irish artist who was in the city last year and learned about the efforts, helped students conceptualize graffiti on the walls. Jane Fosterling, a Melbourne-based landscape architect, has similarly agreed to help with the landscaping of the square when she comes down this summer.

The students have cleaned up much of the water but there's still some help required from KMC's parks and squares

officials to not only clean the water properly but also remove encroachment by KMC staff as well as outsiders.

On its part, KMC demolished the wall adjoining Albert Road and put in place an iron fence instead. However, the wall that shuts out the waterbody from Victoria Terrace is yet to be torn down and replaced by a fence. "We used some KEIP funds to do a part of the fence. Once we manage to get some more funds allocated, we will do the other section," chief engineer Debasish Chakraborty said.

The project involved several innovative ideas mooted by the students. Setting up the joggers' track around the pond was one of them. The other was to use tree trunks that the storm had felled to create benches around the waterbody. The students also put their heads together to create a charter

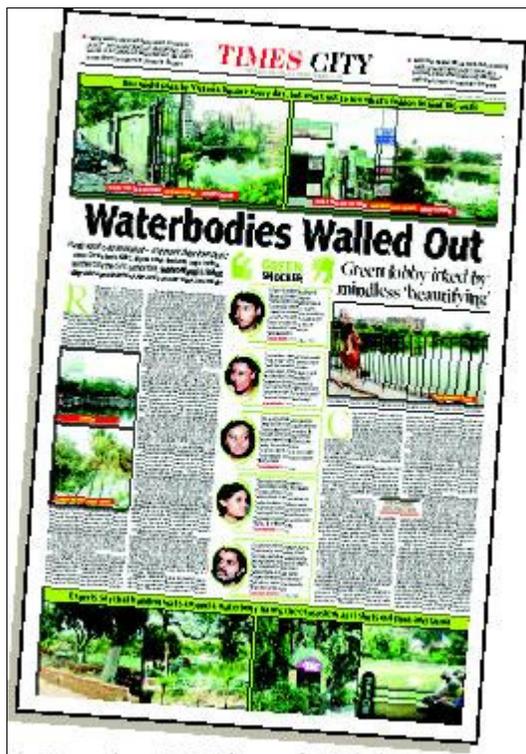
of rules for the square.

"There was a conscious effort to not rope in any major corporate body so that the essential free character of the square was maintained. The park will be open from 6 am to 6 pm and will encourage a range of activities including jogging, yoga and angling," Kakkar said.

Formally inaugurating the refurbished square, mayor Bikash Ranjan Bhattacharya welcomed the citizens' initiative and felt they could lead to reclamation of other parks that were in neglect. "Let us get over the mindset that assets created through public money need to be looked after by only government bodies. Instead, let there be a sense of joint ownership when it comes to public spaces," he said.



1 & 2 The devastation brought about by Aila and students busy in undoing some of the damage; 3 & 4 As it stands now, it is difficult to believe that it's the same park. mayor Bikash Bhattacharya plants a sapling while inaugurating the park on Saturday



The December 16, 2008 issue of TOI that had drawn readers' plight about the issue