

EVOLUTION, CHARACTERISTICS AND UTILISATION OF WETLANDS IN THE
SOUTHERN PART OF NADIA DISTRICT, WEST BENGAL

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Abstract

The Southern Part of Nadia District of West Bengal comprises of Santipur, Ranaghat – I & II, Chakdah, Kalyani and Haringhata. The entire study area lies within the *moribund* sector of the Ganga Delta where all the rivers are stagnated and consequently there had been quite vigorous oscillations of these rivers resulting in a large number of wetlands (*bils*) lying scattered all over the area. The main objective of the present study has been to make an effort to discuss and analyse the evolution and characteristics of these wetlands. The present work is based on detailed analysis of topographical maps and satellite images of the last hundred years as well as intensive field study. The study reveals that the number of *bils* has reduced from 17 to 11 within a span of about 50 years mainly due to reclamation of land. The areas of the existing ones have also changed significantly. From the wetlands of the study area, 42 species of angiosperms and 2 species of pteridophytes were observed which are locally used for various purposes. Of these plants, 30 species have excellent medicinal properties. The people of the study area are highly involved in the cultivation and utilization of these plants. Apart from the cultivation of medicinal plants, the wetlands are largely used for fishing purposes. Beyond its potential usefulness, there is a more fundamental reason for a study of society's impact on the economy of the wetland, which is an issue usually neglected within the scientific community due to its complexity.

Key words: *moribund*, wetlands, *bils*, angiosperms, pteridophytes

Introduction

Wetlands are generally highly productive ecosystems, providing various important benefits to the environment. A significant part of rural communities manage their sustenance from harvesting wetland products. If the potentialities of wetlands are assessed properly, they can act as potential sources of alternative livelihood so that the over dependency on agriculture can be minimised to a greater extent.

The study area Southern Part of Nadia District (SPND) extends from 22°47'33'' to 23°20' N latitudes and 87°19'32'' and 88°45'27'' E longitudes covering an area of 1132.30 km² with a total population of 15,79,450 (Census, 2011). The river Bhagirathi-Hooghly forms the western boundary which has separated the area from Burdwan and Hooghly districts. In the south and south-east the area is bounded by North 24-Parganas District, in the east by Bangladesh and in the north by Krishnagar and Hanskhali Police Stations of Nadia District. The area consists of 5 Community Development Blocks *viz.* Santipur (analogous to Santipur P.S.), Ranaghat – I & Ranaghat – II (together forming the Ranaghat P.S.), Chakdah (comprising of Kalyani & Chakdah P.S.) and Haringhata (analogous to Haringhata P.S.).

Being located in the moribund deltaic part, the area presents a picturesque configuration with palaeochannels, meander scars, *bils*, ox-bow lakes, swamps, marshes, *etc.* The general elevation of the study area ranges from 6 metres to 30 metres (Bagchi and Mukherjee, 1978). The high elevated areas are nothing but the natural levees which are located scatteredly with the