

1. Introduction

World Soil Day is an annual observance on December 5, aimed at raising awareness about the crucial role soil plays in sustaining life on Earth. Soil health is vital for food security, climate regulation, and biodiversity preservation. However, global soil degradation—caused by deforestation, unsustainable practices, and climate change—threatens ecosystems and human livelihoods. This observance is a call to action for individuals, organizations, and governments to prioritize soil conservation.

In this context, the Bengal Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BCC&I) organized an impactful celebration of *World Soil Day 2024* in the Sundarbans region of West Bengal. The event was designed to intertwine environmental restoration with livelihood generation, providing a holistic approach to sustainable development. The initiative carried out under the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) framework, emphasized community empowerment while addressing critical environmental challenges.



2. Background of World Soil Day

World Soil Day celebrates the legacy of King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand, a strong proponent of sustainable soil management. Soil is an irreplaceable natural resource, integral to food production, water filtration, and climate regulation. However, nearly 33% of the world's soil has already been degraded, threatening ecosystems and communities. The day serves as a global platform to raise awareness, advocate for sustainable practices, and galvanize collective action against soil erosion, pollution, and degradation.

In this spirit, the Bengal Chamber organized a series of activities in Ganga Sagar, combining ecological restoration with economic upliftment, embodying the theme of sustainable soil management.

Objectives of the Celebration

The Bengal Chamber's World Soil Day 2024 initiative had three primary objectives:

- **To Promote Soil Health:** Highlighting the importance of soil conservation in combating environmental challenges such as coastal erosion and biodiversity loss.
- **To Generating Livelihoods:** Integrating economic empowerment through community engagement and skill development.
- **To Build Capacity:** Enhancing the employability of the local population through structured training, assessment, and certification under the NSDC framework.



3. Key Activities

Sapling Plantation Drive

The highlight of the Soil Day was an extensive sapling plantation drive conducted in Ganga Sagar.

- **Location:** Ganga Sagar, Sundarbans
- **Participants:** 320 local residents actively engaged in the initiative.
- **Saplings Planted:** A total of **32,000 saplings** are aimed at restoring soil health, preventing erosion, and enhancing biodiversity.

Supporters: Sponsored by **Indofil Industries Limited, Vikram Solar Limited, Rene India, ANIL KRISHNA STEEL PVT LTD, Somani Apparels, Bidhan Chandra Krishi Vishwavidyalaya, PEERLESS HOSPITAL** and many individuals.

- **Wage Distribution:** Each participant received one day's wage, aligning with the dual objective of providing immediate economic relief and fostering environmental stewardship.

The plantation drive was not just an environmental effort but also a community-driven initiative to promote awareness about the critical need for sustainable soil management. Speaking on the occasion, **Swapan Pradhan**, Vice President of the Sagar Panchayat Samiti, commended the Bengal Chamber for its innovative approach, blending environmental and socio-economic progress.



Mangrove Plantation Project

The Bengal Chamber has also been engaged in a massive mangrove plantation project, which serves as a long-term strategy for coastal protection and climate resilience.

- **Saplings Planted:** 1 lakh mangrove saplings have already been planted in the Sundarbans region as part of the Chamber's climate initiatives.
- **Participants Engaged:** Over 800 individuals were involved in this project.
- **Economic Impact:** Workers earned ₹325 per day for five days, resulting in a total wage distribution of ₹14 lakh.

Mangroves play a crucial role in mitigating coastal erosion, enhancing biodiversity, and acting as natural carbon sinks. This initiative is a symbol of the Chamber's commitment to addressing climate challenges through practical and inclusive measures.

Skill Development and Certification

A critical component of the celebration was the focus on capacity building under the NSDC framework.

- **Training Programs:** Locals were trained in plantation techniques, mangrove nursery management, and sustainable environmental practices.
- **Certification:** Upon completion of training, participants underwent assessments and received official certifications, significantly boosting their employability.
- **Future Opportunities:** The skills acquired will empower participants to secure sustainable livelihoods in the long term.

Impact of the Celebration

Mangrove Plantation Project: Addressing Long-Term Ecological Challenges

The Bengal Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BCC&I) has implemented a comprehensive mangrove plantation project in the Sundarbans, an initiative that underscores its commitment to environmental sustainability and community welfare. This project is a vital part of the Chamber's Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, aimed at addressing critical ecological challenges while providing economic opportunities to the local population.

Key Highlights of the Project

- **Saplings Planted:** A total of **1 lakh mangrove saplings** were planted across the Sundarbans, a region highly susceptible to climate change impacts, particularly coastal erosion and rising sea levels. Mangroves play a crucial role in stabilizing the shoreline, preventing soil erosion, and acting as natural buffers against cyclones and storm surges.
- **Participants Engaged:** The project involved the active participation of over **800 local residents**, who were directly engaged in the plantation work. This inclusive approach not only ensures effective implementation but also creates a sense of ownership and responsibility among the community.
- **Economic Impact:** Each participant was paid ₹325 per day for five days, resulting in a total wage distribution of **₹14 lakh**. This financial support provided immediate economic relief to families in a region where livelihood opportunities are often limited.

Ecological Significance

The mangrove plantation project is pivotal in:

- **Combating Coastal Erosion:** By stabilizing the shoreline, mangroves prevent the loss of land and protect human settlements from the encroaching sea.
- **Enhancing Biodiversity:** Mangroves serve as habitats for a wide range of aquatic and terrestrial species, supporting the region's rich biodiversity.
- **Mitigating Climate Change:** Mangroves are known for their exceptional carbon-sequestration abilities, capturing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and acting as critical carbon sinks.

This large-scale initiative is a forward-thinking response to the unique environmental vulnerabilities of the Sundarbans, ensuring long-term ecological resilience and sustainability.

Training and Certification: Building Sustainable Skills for the Future

To complement its plantation efforts, the Bengal Chamber has leveraged the **National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC)** framework to provide structured training programs for the local population. This initiative is designed to enhance employability and equip individuals with skills that contribute to both personal and community development.



Skill Development Programs

The training programs focus on imparting practical knowledge and techniques related to:

- **Plantation Techniques:** Participants learn scientific methods for planting and nurturing saplings to ensure high survival rates and sustainable growth.
- **Nursery Management:** Skills in setting up and managing mangrove nurseries are taught, enabling locals to create a steady source of income through sapling cultivation.
- **Sustainable Environmental Practices:** Participants are educated on the importance of conserving natural resources and adopting eco-friendly methods in their daily lives and work.

Certification and Assessment

After completing the training, participants undergo a thorough assessment to evaluate their understanding and proficiency in the acquired skills. Successful candidates are awarded **official certifications** under the NSDC framework, which serve as a testament to their expertise.

Impact of Certification

- **Enhanced Employability:** The certification provides participants with a credible qualification, making them eligible for a wider range of employment opportunities in environmental projects and beyond.
- **Pathways to Entrepreneurship:** The knowledge gained enables individuals to start their small-scale nurseries or engage in plantation-related businesses, fostering self-reliance.
- **Sustainable Community Development:** With a skilled and certified workforce, the local community is better equipped to implement and sustain environmental conservation projects in the long term.



Conclusion

The Bengal Chamber of Commerce and Industry's *World Soil Day 2024* celebration was a resounding success, serving as a model for integrating environmental conservation with livelihood generation. The initiative exemplifies how corporate social responsibility can be a powerful tool for addressing pressing environmental and socio-economic challenges.

Through its innovative programs, the Chamber has demonstrated a deep commitment to fostering a greener, more sustainable future while empowering vulnerable communities. As the planted saplings grow, they stand as a symbol of resilience, hope, and the potential of collaborative efforts in building a sustainable tomorrow.



Glimpse of the programme





