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Hospital made of bottles in tiger land

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GOSABA: Remote Gosaba — infamous for its village of women widowed by man-eaters — will now be on the global map for an entirely different reason. It will have Asia's first hospital built entirely of sand-filled plastic bottles and fishing nets instead of brick and iron rods.

If you dined in any Kolkata restaurant in the last year, the bottle you left behind after your meal is now holding up the hospital walls. The 30-bed facility is nearly complete and will be inaugurated on October 15. It will be a life-saver for the Sunderbans, large parts of which are still inaccessible, and where scores die from snakebite, crocodile attacks and tiger attacks. Kolkata is 135km from Gosaba and it takes several hours from remote areas like, say Sudhanyakhalai or Jamespur, to reach a good hospital, as the victim has to be first brought by boat. This hospital will specialize in treating animal attack victims and will shave many hours off an arduous journey.

Built by Goa-based NGO Samarpan, not a single brick or iron rod has been used in its construction. Engineer and architect Patrick San Francesco hit upon the idea of using sand-filled plastic bottles held together by nylon fishing nets. Once the bottles are laid in a pattern, masons plaster them over with cement. This has not only made construction faster but also cut costs because it is extremely expensive to transport bricks and iron rods to Sunderbans.

This is the first hospital in Asia built in such an eco-friendly manner, said Samarpan coordinator Manisha Sobhoajan. Most of the bottles were procured from restaurants in Kolkata at Rs 6.50 per bottle, she said. "Had bricks been used instead, each would have cost us Rs 14. We have used fishing nets to build the roof of the hospital. This helped reduce construction cost by 60%," said Manisha, adding that Francesco also advised against using bricks and iron rods since they would corrode easily in the saline conditions of the Sunderbans.

Built on a seven-and-half-cottah plot in Gosaba's Bijoyanagar Island, the hospital has three single-storey buildings. One of them

houses a two-bed ICU and its administrative block. Four wards, one each to treat tiger, crocodile and snakebite victims and general patients will be spread across the two other buildings.

In the first phase, the hospital will start functioning with 10 doctors. It will have an OPD on board two boats that will serve as mobile medical camps. To start with, these boats will visit the islands of Ramgopalpur and Hetalberia in Gosaba.

Manisha and Sangeeta Ganeriwalla thought of building a hospital on visiting Sunderbans after Cyclone Aila devastated it in 2009. Samarpan has projects in education and healthcare elsewhere in the country. "The hospital will be run entirely on charity and will offer free treatment to all islanders. There is a desperate need for such a hospital in the island," said Manisha.

Forest officials have cheered the initiative. "Sundarban Tiger Reserve (STR) has been organizing medical camps for people living on the fringes of forests in association with Samarpan. Free medicines are distributed at these camps. Once this hospital opens, it will be of great service to people living in the remote islands of the Sunderbans," said STR deputy field director K S Mankar.