

SHRINKING GREEN COVER

A desperate tree-hug

Its once cherished green cover reduced to less than 3% in multiple city hubs, Bengaluru is staring at one final, fearsome cut: Felling of over 8,500 trees for questionable road-widening projects

RASHEED KAPPAN

and boost public transport?

Go Green! Imagine, it was once a thoroughly out-of-place slogan in a city that had steadfastly opted to 'stay green' for decades. But today, as 8,561 trees face the axe, when Bengaluru's vegetation cover has dropped to less than 3% in multiple development hubs, a desperate fight is on to preserve its last green dots!

Ready to axe trees in their wooded thousands, the Karnataka Road Development Corporation Limited (KRDC) has an excuse: Road-widening. But does current and projected traffic data on the identified roads justify an approach that mostly suits only private traffic? Does it not run counter to a plan to reduce private transport

Shrunk vegetation cover

But before dwelling deeper into those critical questions, here's what a recent study has revealed about the once-green Bengaluru: Built-up areas, both residential and commercial, have shrunk vegetation cover in Bengaluru South Region (BSR) from 55.17% in 1973 to just 2.66% in 2017.

In Peenya Industrial Estate (PIE), the decline in tree-cover has been even more alarming. Between 1973 and 2017, it dropped from 70.22% to 2.11%. The joint study by Dr T V Ramachandra from the Indian Institute of Science and three other researchers also revealed a similar pattern in Whitefield.

Interpreting the findings, the research-

ers were clear: That unplanned development had wreaked havoc with the city's biophysical environment, affecting public health, polluting its water bodies, causing biodiversity loss and triggering drastic changes in the local climate. The warning is dire and urgent: Change course now, or perish.

Public consultation

But these signals of impending disaster seem to have been completely lost on the agencies concerned. Projects that require tree-felling on massive scales are planned, passed and readied for execution. Public consultations, if at all they are held, are reduced to a farce.

Yet, unfazed by the lost battles of past years, multiple citizen groups and envi-

ronmentalists in the city have intensified their fight to save the trees. Their petitions before the Karnataka High Court have led to a strong directive to the government.

Tree census

A tree census, a definite count of all trees in Bengaluru, is at the heart of the latest legal battle. Violating the Court's direction to conduct the tree census for entire Bengaluru, including its urban and rural districts, the count was limited to the boundaries of the Bruhath Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP). Its order of April 22, 2019 is clear about this.

Now, consider this: KRDC's road-widening plan would mean a total of 1,758 trees axed on the Budigere Cross - Kempegowda International Airport route, 869 trees on the Nelamangala-Madure road, 1,593 trees on the Madhure-Devanahalli road, 3,637 on the Anekal-Hoskote route, 520 on the Bannerghatta-Anekal route and 184 trees on the Bidadi-Jigani road.

Panel powers stripped

These are effectively outside the BBMP limits and a limited tree census will have no effect on the KRDC plan. To make it all worse, the Forest Department stripped a High Court-monitored expert committee, tasked with filtering applications for infrastructure-related tree-felling, from having any say outside the Palike limits.

The Court, now hearing a public interest litigation (PIL) filed by Dattatraya T Devare from the Bangalore Environment Trust (BET), has pulled up the government, seeking an explanation.

It observed: "As the State Government has unilaterally passed the order dated 16th January, 2020, the State Government must file an affidavit and explain the conduct of passing such an order without seeking the leave of this Court. Prima facie, it appears to us that every authority is out to defy the orders of this Court."

The PIL was intended to ensure that the functions of the Tree Authority and Tree Officers are strictly in accordance with the Karnataka Preservation of Trees Act, 1976 and the Karnataka Preservation of Trees Rules, 1977.

Roadside tree counts

Beyond issues with jurisdiction, a tree census announced after a deal between the BBMP and the Wood Institute has been problematic. A veteran environmentalist explains, "By enumerating only roadside trees, their attitude is showing at every stage. The Tree Act requires the enumeration of all trees, not just roadside ones."

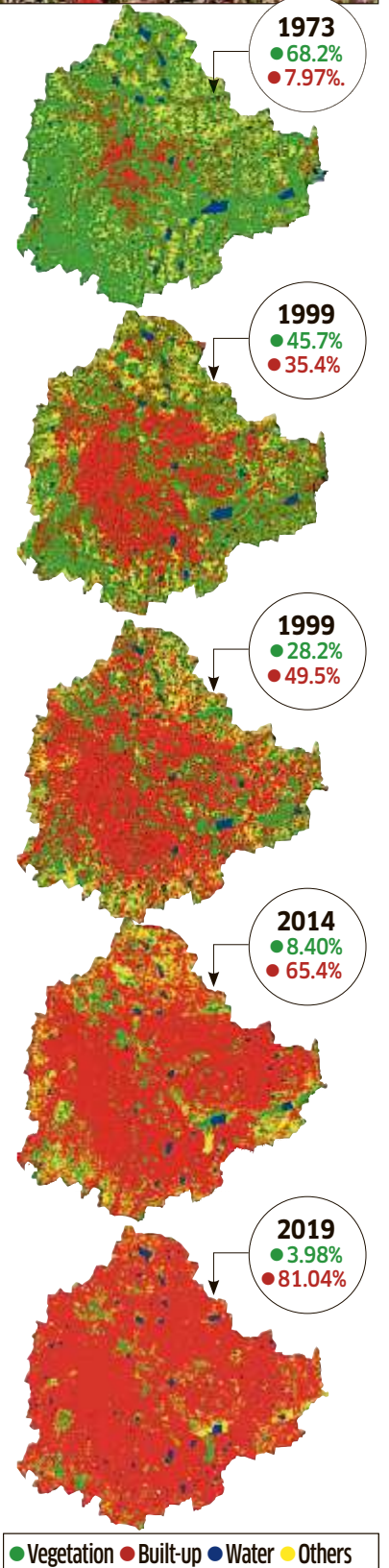
Questioning the rationale for road-widening, he says the current levels of traffic on the identified routes are so low that they do not warrant such projects at all. "The Feasibility Report of the project shows a future rate of growth of vehicles that is totally against the stated objective of boosting public transport."

Even within the BBMP limits, trouble looms large over the trees. The immediate concern is a tender process commenced by the Palike to widen the Ballari and Jayamahall Roads. These projects require the felling of an estimated 450 trees, most of them fully grown and with wide canopies.

Violating orders

Questioning the process, the Heritage Beku group contends that any action on the project before completion of the tree census would be akin to violating the Court's directions. The Court had ruled that a tree should be felled only after exhausting all other alternatives.

Public consultation / hearing has been mandated for projects where 50 trees or more are marked for felling. Ecologist Harini Nagendra notes how civic agencies have circumvented this by sorting the trees



DH ILLUSTRATION/PRAKASH S

PEOPLESPEAK

Let fully-grown trees be part of widened road's 'tree median'

SETHULEKSHMI M S

Sustainable development has been a debatable topic over the years starting from the 1992 Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit. Bengaluru, with its depleting tree cover, has also been a hotbed of development debates with its environment in sharp focus.

The Metro second phase, the highway projects and road-widening may all see thousands of trees face the axe. Protests by environmentalists and citizen activists, project delays and climate changes are all part of a debate now getting amplified. *DH* takes a closer look.

"Considering how the climate is changing, it is very vital that a metro city like Bengaluru focuses on development that co-exists with nature. When we say 'Don't cut trees' it is not that we don't want development. Actually it should go side by side," notes Anika Eliz Baby, a BA student from St. Joseph's College.

If development is inevitable, "try to use trees innovatively at walkways or build flyovers where trees are not affected. If you are driving a bike under a tree, the temperature is much cooler

compared to a road without trees. That indicates the need to grow more trees," adds Anika.

Trees should be replanted. "And this requires close monitoring by the officials. The government should also make people more aware as many don't really care. When trees are cut people will say 'it is sad' and move on."

Yashaswini Sharma, an architect from Esthétique, notes: "It is deeply disappointing that the BMRCL and other road expansion projects have proposed to axe thousands of trees in Bengaluru even as the city is reeling from the effect of highest temperature in 150 years. Adding lanes hasn't helped in reduction of traffic density. It has, in fact, encouraged addition of vehicles onto the roads."

She suggests that if road widening is required at all, the fully-grown trees can be part of a tree median. "Roads with multiple lanes with no tree cover are uncomfortable for driving too. Mature trees sequester lot more carbin dioxide and they hold together ecosystems. We are able to breathe because of trees," reasons Yashaswini.

Aswin Ravikumar, who works in

a financial firm and stays in HSR Layout, takes a different view. He says, "Bengaluru traffic is hectic and we need metro to tackle it. Trees should not be an

obstacle for development purposes. It is better to transplant or replant the trees."

In the words of S N Ramajaneya, a shopkeeper from Yeshwanthpur, "There

are a lot of changes in the environment. The city's cool climate changed as half of the city lost its green cover. Places like Shivajinagar, Jayanagar and MG

road lost many trees. This trend will be dangerous for the future."

"Development at the cost of environment is not real development. Real development takes into account sustainability and places large emphasis on environment. Cutting of trees for road-widening and other such so called development projects harms our ecosystem, escalating global warming," says Indumathi S, an assistant professor at St. Joseph's Evening College. Born and brought up in Bengaluru, Nithin K T is today a 25-year-old based in J P Nagar.

This is how he sees the change: "I have seen the sad demise of this city's nature. There were times when people enjoyed the cold climate of the city and were willing to head outside any time of the day. But things have drastically changed."

The only effort at greening that Nithin noticed till date are those plants hung against the Metro pillars in a few locations.

"I don't know if people will ever relive and experience those streets of old that had huge trees with spectacular orange flowers which made city walks memorable," he notes.



ANIKA ELIZ BABY
BA, St. Joseph's College
Considering how the climate is changing, it is very vital that a metro city like Bengaluru focuses on development that co-exists with nature. When we say 'Don't cut trees' it is not that we don't want development. Actually it should go side by side.



S N RAMAJANEYA
Shopkeeper, Yeshwanthpur
There are a lot of changes in the environment. The city's cool climate changed as half of the city lost its green cover. Places such as Shivajinagar, Jayanagar and MG road lost many trees. This trend will be dangerous for the future.



NITHINK T
Resident, J P Nagar
I have seen the sad demise of this city's nature. There were times when people enjoyed the cold climate of the city and were willing to head outside any time of the day. But things have drastically changed.



INDUMATHI S
Asst professor, SJEC
Development at the cost of environment is not real development. It should take into account sustainability and prioritise the environment. Cutting of trees for road-widening and other projects escalates global warming.