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Greying green lands

Subhash Chandra N S

Vegetable growers in and around the City are selling off their farmlands to real estate barons, triggering shortage and price escalation

Bangalore, the erstwhile green city, had every reason to be proud of its home-grown vegetables. The variety was rich enough to immensely boost that pride. No longer. In recent years, the prices of greens have shot up so much that cost stabilisation is nowhere in sight.

The harried, clueless consumers are asking a million questions. But the answers aren't far away: Increasing urban sprawl depleting the green feeder zones around the City, disappearing lakes, delayed pre-monsoon showers, and the depleting groundwater table. Sadly, nothing has been done to arrest the unbridled, scary development.

Barely 12 years ago, the City sourced its greens and vegetables from its feeder zones. Despite the depleting water level, lakes recharged the water table and kept the farmers going. The City's demand of about 3,000 tonnes of vegetables

per day was met by employing various techniques such as drip irrigation. But with the City's economy changing drastically, the trend shifted from agriculture to real estate. Arid land meant for cultivation was converted to either residential layouts or industries.

Years of this unchecked growth has put Bangalore in a tight spot. The City's markets are struggling to meet the growing demand and sell at affordable prices. As the Horticulture Producers Co-operative Marketing and Processing Society (Hopcoms), agriculture scientists and horticulture officers confirm the year-to-year vegetable prices have increased three to four times in the past five years. This year, it is creating new records.

For instance, the price of tomato has touched Rs 31 per kilogram. French beans sell at Rs 45 a kg on an average. Prices of brinjal (both white and black), cabbage, capsicum, carrot, cucumber and okra have witnessed a drastic increase in price, pinching the pockets of even the middle class and upper middle class.

According to B V Chikkanna, president, Hopcoms, rapid urbanisation around Bangalore district, mainly in Anekal, Devanahalli, Bidadi, Ramanagaram and Hoskote, has severely reduced vegetable cultivation leading to decreased production this year. "Farmers do not have the land or water to grow vegetables due to groundwater depletion and delayed pre-monsoon showers. There is a dearth of labourers, mainly unskilled workers, who prefer to work in the City than in farms," he explains.

Gone are the days when Bangaloreans got their vegetables from nearby places such as Kolar and Whitefield, says Mohammed Idrees Choudary, general secretary, Russel Market Traders' Association. Areas within a radius of 100 km around the City have almost stopped growing vegetables. "Very few cultivators are left now in remote pockets. The meagre number of cultivators cannot meet the growing demand of the City. Even the vegetables they send to the City are bought by five-star hotels as first preference," he says.

Parvez Ahmed, secretary, Vegetable Traders' Association, says the City's demand is met by cultivators from distant locations. "We get our vegetables from Hyderabad, Ooty, Mumbai, Pune, Hyderabad. We used to get the best varieties of ridge gourd, okra, chow-chow, beans and carrot right here once. Carrot sourced from the Bangalore Rural district was the best.

It was so tasty that people preferred them to make sweet (halwa). Now, the carrot we get from Tamil Nadu is so insipid. Bangalore's own varieties of brinjal and tomato and even those from Kolar have vanished," he notes.

Pattern change

Experts blame the non-availability of vegetables to the change in land-use patterns. Water resources are drying up. The IT sector has eaten into thousands of acres of agricultural land on Hosur Road, Electronics City, Whitefield and Varthur areas, directly or indirectly.

If thousands of acres of land have been given away to corporates, thrice that area have been converted into residential zones. Luxury apartments, villas and gated communities have mushroomed on the land which once grew vegetables and fruits to meet the City's needs. Venkatapura, Uppahalli near Hoskote, and Boodihala near Devanahalli are replete with gated communities and villa projects.

A study by T V Ramachandra, senior scientist, Energy and Wetland Research Centre, Centre for Ecological Sciences, the Indian Institute of Sciences, revealed that the built-up area in the City had increased by 466 per cent between 1973 and 2007. He says Varthur and Kolar are facing water crisis and agricultural lands have shrunk in places around Bangalore.

"Areas connecting Kanakapura, Anekal, Varthur and Hosur have lost agricultural lands. Kolar, which catered to the City's vegetable demands, and Varthur, which supplied vegetables like cabbage, carrot and beans to at least 15-20 per cent of the City's population, have turned in concrete jungles," he said.

"Once vegetables were cultivated in Varthur using sewage water. Even that is

gone now," Ramachandra points out. The groundwater level has dropped to almost 1,200 feet in Chikkaballapur, Kolar and Devanahalli region.

Devanahalli and Hoskote taluks, which catered to the City's vegetable needs for ages, have lost most of their land to industries and projects such as Bengaluru International Airport (BIA). If the government allocated over 15,000 acres to BIA, private residential layouts and road projects consumed twice that area. Several lakes and tanks which kept farms green are lost forever, and the water level has gone deeper.

In Hoskote, many farmers feel cultivation of vegetables cannot sustain their livelihood. "The labour cost is high, who wants to pay Rs 300 per day and cultivate. The factories set up here have increased the cost of livelihood. Even if we invest in it, we are not sure about the crop," reasons a farmer.

Citing the example of the early 2000s when potato seedlings failed to yield, Yelappa, a farmer from Ulsahalli in Kasaba hobli, says, "Even after cultivation, we are neither sure of the crops sustaining themselves nor is there a guarantee of getting a good price for the produce."

Farmlands sold

Most farmers see land conversion and sale of agricultural land as a way out. The soaring real estate price has made its impact on several villages of Hoskote as farmers are selling their patch of land to afford the luxury of urban life. The villages of Thimmasandra, Wabalpura, Bettahalli, Doddadenhalli, Jadigenhalli, Sulebele, Venkatapura have turned into concrete jungles. Abandoned lands, dried-up lakes are a common sight in many of these places.

The only silver lining seems to be some farmers in Devanahalli who want to continue with agriculture, taking it as a challenge. "Despite the loss of land to real estate and the international airport, there has been surprisingly an increase in agriculture activities. But the challenge here is water scarcity and depletion of groundwater.

It started in the mid-nineties. The water level dropped to 500 feet in the late nineties and it dipped further to 750 feet in the year 2000. Now, it has almost reached 1,000 feet in 2011. By 2015, the farmers of Devanahalli, Kolar and Chikkaballapur will have to migrate elsewhere," says Shivanapura Ramesh, a farmer from Devanahalli.

According to him, mainly government land and dryland used for Nilgiri plantation were given for the airport project. But he too sees the water crisis as a far bigger challenge. "There is a scarcity of rainfall by about 20 per cent since 1993 in this region. All our lakes are dry. Then where is the question of recharging groundwater," he wonders.

To make matters worse, the dry spell during this summer has made vegetables costlier for Bangaloreans. Narayana Gowda, Vice-Chancellor, University of Agriculture Sciences, Bangalore, notes: "We have the longest dry spell this year. Farmers in Kolar and parts of the Bangalore Rural district have declared crop holidays. Two-thirds of Kolar's tomato-growing area are gone."

"If there is no rainfall within the next 15 days, we will face severe drinking water crisis," he cautioned. "There is a need for change in the cropping pattern in places such as Kolar, which are not feasible for commercial crops. The other factors driving up the cost of vegetables and availability are non-availability of labour, increase in the cost of fertilisers, and the younger generation shying away from agriculture," he said.