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How green were our gullies !

Civic 360°

The largely unplanned growth of Bangalore has left hundreds of layouts without a single tree. This shocking loss of the green culture has left summers hotter, entire residential areas under a grey cloud and a city firmly lose its erstwhile garden splendour. The mindless felling of trees for infrastructure projects has only made things worse.

A boulevard is a walkers' joy. From time immemorial planting trees on either side of the road to give shade to travellers is considered a noble act. In modern times, Salumarada Thimmakka, who planted hundreds of trees by the roadside received worldwide accolade. Bangalore earned its famed name - the garden City - mainly due to its greenery.

However, sadly, in today's Bangalore, where layouts mushroom with little plan or foresight, trees are the first sacrifice. With roads getting narrower and encroachments an everyday affair, there is no space for the green cover. Now, if temperatures soar in these concrete jungles, should eyebrows rise?

Environmental experts are convinced the City is gradually turning into a desert. "The City's average temperature, as per our research, has increased by 3-4 degrees. This is because we have lost over 60 percent of the green cover in the City within a span of a few decades. If this continues, we will be badly affected," cautioned Dr T V Ramachandra, Scientist, Centre for Ecological Sciences (CES), Indian Institute of Science (IISc).

A study by the IISc and remote sensing data show the built-up area in the City has shot up by 465 percent. Within the last few years, thousands of trees have been cut down to make newer layouts to meet the requirement of the increasing population.

One look at the hundreds of revenue layouts now added to the Bruhat Bangalore Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) should convince one just why these studies matter. Several of these areas don't have a single tree. With hardly any space left outside the builtup areas within residential plots, a grey cloud perennially hangs over these layouts.

But the BBMP and the Bangalore Development Authority (BDA) aren't taken in by such dismal scenario. As a Palike tree officer puts it, "You should understand that we have planted over four lakh trees last year. We even have two lakh saplings ready for the next two years."

Does this sapling planting drive compensate for the loss of the green cover? Leo Saldhana, president of the Environment Support Group doesn't think so. "They have a fixed method of forming layouts which can be visible in all the newly formed layouts of Vishvesvaraya Layout, Anjanapura, Banashankari and even some old layouts. They just bulldoze the green cover and form layouts, instead the layouts can be formed retaining those trees," he pointed out.

S G Neginhal, former Deputy Conservator of Forests, an Indira Priyadarshini Vrukshamitra awardee, echoed Saldanha's views: "These development works have snatched the tree cover. A classic example is the Malleshwaram underpass, where my intervention stayed the axing of 90 trees out of 120 trees that were slated to be axed." He suggested that another narrow road could be constructed adjacent to the row of trees and 90 percent of the green cover could be saved this way.

New layouts without tree plantation is actually against the rules, at least on paper. Informed Dr. Ramachandra, "It is not that we do not have norms to preserve a green patch, because both Ministry for Environment and Forest (MOEF) and BDA have made over 30 percent green cover mandatory. The problem is in the implementation of the rules, where we are faltering."

The study unravelled the pattern of growth in Greater Bangalore and its implication on local climate and also on the natural resources, necessitating appropriate strategies for sustainable management.

The study of Land Surface Temperature (LST) conducted using modern tools such as remote sensing data, normalised difference in vegetation index (NDVI), showed that the increase in vehicular and industrial emissions, anthropogenic heat discharge due to energy consumption, increased land surface coverage by artificial materials with high capacities and conductivities were some of the key reasons that made the City boil.

Subhash Chandra N S

Plantation, a forgotten tradition

40,000 trees axed for roads

Tree plantation has been a tradition rooted in the City's history. It had all begun with Hyder Ali of Mysore inviting several experts, including the German Krumbigal 300 years ago to create a green cover at Lalbagh and other parts of the City. The successive rulers of Mysore emulated his efforts.

Environmentalist Leo Saldhana recalls their contributions, "The tree stretch along Lakshman Rau Park, where 300 trees are making way for a Metro Rail station, was created in 1956." The rain trees on Nrupathunga Road were planted following the directions of Mirza Ismail, erstwhile Diwan of Mysore in 1920s, he adds.

Interestingly, BBMP today feels that these old rain trees are a problem to the people during the monsoon. "Rain trees have been responsible for the damage caused to the City. Due to their huge crowns, they cannot sustain the heavy wind and we feel they should be replaced by indigenous trees which have smaller crowns," says a BBMP official.

Saldhana, says that the felling presently undertaken all over the City to form

layouts were not eco-friendly and were aimed at bulldozing and recovering timber value.

With over 40,000 trees already axed to construct 400 kms of roads in the City, Saldhana says that a sustainable method to construct roads along side the trees should be considered. "These roads can be used by two wheelers or cyclists," he feels.

Another environmentalist stresses the need to plant trees in the layouts before any work related to such areas begin. "Since the trees need to be nurtured for atleast three years, it will be greenery everywhere by the time the layout is ready. During 1982, when over 1.5 million trees were planted, we ensured survival of 90 percent of them by caring for them," he recalls.

S N S

Tree surgery as an alternative to felling

Tree surgery could be a sound alternative to felling fully grown trees to make way for infrastructure development. Experts feel this method, widely practised in the West and an idea gaining currency in India of late, could be applied in Bangalore as well.

State Horticulture Department Director, Dr. GK Vasanth Kumar says: "The practice of tree surgery has to be implemented in the City instead of randomly cutting down branches of the trees. Even footpaths and roads covering the roots of the tree are concreted without leaving breathing space around the tree, which is necessary."

Preserving trees through tree surgery requires investment and maintenance. Telescopic Pruner and Hand Saws are some of the tools used to maintain the trees. Vasanth Kumar informs that such maintenance requires a trained squad and experts in the field.

Green cover: An endangered concept

These methods are now a must considering the City's fast depleting green cover. Green cover along key roads, which was once taken for granted, is today an increasingly endangered concept.

Take for instance, the Koramangala -- Jakkasandra Main Road stretch upto St Johns Hospital. More than 30 huge trees were uprooted here for a road widening project, sounding the deathknell for the oxygen factories. MVK Anil Kumar, President, Federation of Residents Welfare Association, says, "The health of our youth and the coming generation is deteriorating because of the absence of greenery around them. We are all going to suffer in the long run".

Four huge trees were recently uprooted in HSR Layout and now the place looks deserted and haunted. "The place where the trees were located tells a brutal story. People cannot walk on these roads in summer as there is absolutely no shade," laments HSR Layout Resident Welfare Association President R S Murthy.

ST Bed Resident Welfare Association Secretary, BS Anantharam, says, "We have a department called Horticulture, but not much has been heard from them regarding planting of trees and spreading green belts."

Poornima Nataraj

Impressions

As many as 2,000 heritage trees have been sacrificed to make way for civic infrastructure in Bangalore. The Bruhat Bangalore Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) is walking the tight rope to maintain the delicate balance between greenery and development. For the trees, it seems like a losing battle. Here are some excerpts from a conversation with a Palike Tree Officer:

On the loss of greenery in the city...

With the Right to Way (RTW) in the City being very narrow, it is hard to save the trees particularly in the light of developmental projects being taken up in the city.

Our Palike Chief Engineer should answer why the entire road has been widened without space for even a footpath or trees.

On the Palike effort fizzling out in planting trees...

We had intended planting trees on empty spaces according to the Vastu Shastra, expecting the gates to be built towards the east. But when the land owner chops them for maximum utility of his land, we cannot do much. There are about one lakh migrant labourers in the city employed in various developmental projects, who fend off the biofuel provided by trees. They are the biggest threat to our plantation drive. While we provide "tree watchers" made of Bamboo, it is hard to protect them as they are stolen for biofuel by people.

On the efforts made by Palike to provide relief...

In 2008-09, we planted two lakh saplings across the city and another two lakh is earmarked for this financial year. Including the manure, tree watcher, tree officer and other maintenance costs, for a two year old sapling it is estimated that the BBMP spends Rs 120 per tree. The projected cost for each tree is placed at Rs 400 this financial year.

Sandeep Moudgal

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