

**MURKY WATERS | BENGALURU**

# Farming along polluted waters of the Vrishabhavathi

**K.C. Deepika**

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**Industrial effluents and plastic choke our river. Our future is increasingly looking bleak, say farmers who live along the course of the river**



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On a hot weekday afternoon, in Bannigere, two people are sitting on the bank of a small stream that runs through an agricultural field, and fishing in the grey waters. Behind them, a herd of goats is grazing as Chethan, 30, watches over them.

For most people familiar with the pollution that is choking the Vrishabhavathi river, it is hard to imagine going anywhere close to its waters. But for villages that the river flows through on the outskirts of Bengaluru, life goes on despite the river water losing its potability a few decades ago.

“The goats graze along the banks of the river and seem to not be affected by the water. Many people come here to fish. Earlier, they used to find big ones. But now, they find smaller ones. They have no problem eating it. I think they are used to it,” said Mr. Chethan, who decided to quit his job in Electronics City in Bengaluru after a year of long travel got to him and he decided to stay home and manage their goats. He remembers seeing the river during its better years when he was a child.

## Once a pristine river

Eighty-year-old Madhaiah, who joins in the conversation on his way home after work on the field, says he has seen the Vrishabhavathi run its full course – from providing drinking water to its present state – where multiple runs of cleaning up by sewage treatment plants cannot bring back the old days.

“We used to drink the water straight from the river. I have two acres of land and we used to grow watermelon among other things. Now I manage ragi with difficulty. It is at best enough for our consumption. My wife is unwell and I cannot afford to dig a borewell for irrigation,” he said.

Most farmers, along the course of the river, have similar stories to tell. At Erepalaya near Anchepalya, a pipe is letting out frothing water into a field. A little away is 32-year-old Puttananjaiah’s farm. He owns 15 acres and grows maize, ragi and some vegetables. “There is no water in the *kere* and the water from Vrishabhavathi cannot even be used for irrigation. I spent ₹4 lakh on getting a borewell dug up and I am managing to grow what I can with that water,” he said, as he was readying his field to plant baby corn. On to his right is an acre-and-a-half of bottlegourd vines. The gourds are ready to be harvested but find themselves on the ground instead, many run over by tractors. “Vegetable prices have crashed. I used to get ₹400 for a bag (around 30 fit into one). Now, they say it will fetch me ₹50. That does not even cover my transportation cost. So, I decided to let it rot here,” he says, visibly dismayed.

BENGALURU - KARNATAKA - 16/03/2020 : Farmers uses a pipe for letting out frothing water into a field, along the course of Vrishabhavathi river, at Erepanya near Anchipura, in Bidadi taluk, near Bengaluru. Illegal plastic segregation units segregated and burnt at Kambipura polluting the water and air, along the Vrishabhavathi river bed, a tributary of Arkavathy river, the erstwhile fresh water stream, today carry huge quantities of industrial, agricultural and domestic effluents from the western and southern part of Bangalore metropolis. On the Bangalore-Mysore Road, the Vrishabhavathi canal on the outskirts of Bangalore is a familiar sight. Photo: K Murali Kumar / THE HINDU

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Mr. Puttananjaiah says their future is increasingly looking bleak. “No one cares about farmers or nature. No one even visits us. Twenty years ago, we got water from the river. Now, industrial and plastic waste are

Plastic, chemical  
effluents  
continue to  
choke  
Vrishabhavathi

choking it. The same water goes into the ocean at some point. Where do we go next?" he asked.

Not far from his farm, behind the frothing waters of the Byramangala dam in Bidadi, work is on to construct a separate channel for treated water. Workers at the site said the canal will carry the treated water which can be used for irrigation purposes, and the rest will be let out. Tushar Girinath, Chairman, Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board (BWSSB), said 100 MLD of treated water from the Doddabele plant will be picked up in the canal, while the rest will be diverted and allowed to flow down.

Referring to the World Health Organisation's sanitation safety planning, a risk mitigation strategy to understand who is at risk, water conservationist S. Vishwanath said there are two categories here: consumers of these products, and the farmers and farm workers. Non-edible crops eliminate consumers from the risk category, while better cultivation practices such as drip irrigation puts farmers and farm workers at a lesser risk.

BENGALURU - KARNATAKA - 16/03/2020 : New Canal being built for the flow of treated water, by the side of Vrishabhavathi reservoir (Byramangala lake), at Byramangala, in Bidadi taluk, Ramanagara district. Vrishabhavathi river, a tributary of Arkavathy River, the erstwhile fresh water stream, today carry huge quantities of industrial, agricultural and domestic effluents from the western and southern part of Bangalore metropolis. On the Bangalore-Mysore Road, the Vrishabhavathi canal on the outskirts of Bangalore is a familiar sight. There is also a water treatment plant that was set up at a great cost just before Kengeri, in Bangalore. Photo: K Murali Kumar / THE HINDU

He said caution should be exercised is to not use the water at present to grow edible crops like root crops. “It is okay to grow non-edible crops like flowers or mulberry – which is what 40% of the farmers there grow. Now many farmers are shifting to growing other crops like baby corn. We should look at how often the food being grown is eaten. Baby corn, for instance, is not

in the regular diet of most people. But this does not mean we don't invest in cleaning up especially the industrial effluents," he said.

## On the plate

But T.V. Ramachandra from the Centre for Ecological Sciences, Indian Institute of Science, said the contamination is going to land on everyone's plate. "It will come back to us. Our ongoing study shows that heavy metals in food are being transferred to us from food grown in K.C. Valley and Vrishabhavathi Valley. Dyeing industries have resurfaced near Vrishabhavathi, which is worse off than Bellandur and Varthur lakes. Food chain contamination is a serious issue and we need to raise their voice against it," he said.

*(The two-part series concludes.)*

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