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## Spoils of lake soil

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### Highlights

BDA transports Varthur Lake silt to 7 villages within 15 km periphery, supplies it to 50-odd farmers free-of-cost, and demand is increasing  
Varthur silt to stop Bengaluru farm wilt

By **Garima Prasher**

When the Bangalore Development Authority (BDA) started restoration work at the Varthur Lake last year, it faced a herculean task to dispose of oodles of accumulated silt. However, the BDA had a eureka moment: use the silt as manure in the surrounding farmlands. Today, villagers in the vicinity of the lake are reaping the benefits.

This conservation work has proved doubly beneficial for the farmers who started using the lake silt in their fields.

Yallesh N, a resident of a village near Varthur Lake, is already seeing encouraging results from the application of the silt in his farmland. According to Yallesh, the crop productivity at his farm has gone up by more than Rs 1.5 lakh/acre/annum.

“My four-acre farmland had eucalyptus cultivation for many years. When the government banned the cultivation and planting of eucalyptus, I was left with no other option but to clear the field. However, I realised that eucalyptus farming had damaged the soil and the quality had deteriorated significantly,” Yallesh told BM.

It was around the same time that Yallesh got an opportunity to attend a meeting convened by the National Green Tribunal monitoring committee on Varthur Lake to educate the farmers on the use of the silt as manure. Yallesh attended the meeting and got a few tippers truckloads of silt transported to his field.

“We tilled the land and mixed the silt with soil. Apart from providing nutrients to the crops, this soil-silt mixture absorbs water slowly and maintains a moderate temperature in the farmland. We applied the silt last year and we will do it again in April this year. I have been growing green vegetables since then and productivity has skyrocketed. It has gone up by Rs 1.5 lakh/acre/annum,” said Yallesh.

According to experts, in traditional agriculture, silt gathered from village tanks and lakes was reapplied to fields to improve soil fertility. They say lake silt is rich in carbon nutrients and other organic content, thereby enriching the soil.

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“The Varthur silt is high in nutrients. Once the farmers apply the silt, they need not go for any chemical fertiliser. The silt alone is doubling the crop productivity in the villages surrounding Varthur. Historically, people have been using silt from the lakes to grow their crops. But today, this practice is far removed, creating the need for chemical fertilisers,” said Dr TV Ramachandra, Centre for Ecological Sciences, IISc, who was a part of the NGT monitoring committee on Varthur lake.

The use of silt as manure is helping farmers diversify their produce and earn a better livelihood. GK Manjunath Babu, a rose grower from a nearby village around the Varthur Lake, is yet another beneficiary. Manjunath has been growing roses on his 4.5-acre land for generations, and said the yield has never gone up so much.

“We have been growing roses for the last 60-70 years. But, the productivity has never been this good. It has gone up by 60% with the use of Varthur silt. No amount of fertilisers had done this for me before,” said Manjunath.

According to MA Khan, principal, KK High School, Varthur, up until a few decades ago, the farmers in the area used the silt from the lake as manure.

“I have seen Varthur Lake since my childhood. I recall villagers collecting the silt in bullock carts during summers to be applied in their farmlands. However, with the rapid urbanisation, sewage water started flowing in the lake all throughout the year and it never dried up. Thus, the old practice faded,” recalled Khan.

Currently, the BDA is transporting Varthur silt to around seven villages within 15 km of the lake periphery and the authority says the demand for the silt is on the rise.

“We are supplying Varthur silt to around seven villages free-of-cost. This is reaching over 50 farmers. We have already supplied 2.5 to 3 lakh cubic meter of silt since March 2021 and the demand is ever increasing,” said Aravind SS, assistant engineer, BDA.

We have been growing roses for the last 70 years; productivity has never been this good. It's gone up by 60% with Varthur silt

— GK Manjunath Babu, Rose grower

According to experts, it is high time the government gave priority to watershed management programmes and made sure desilting of lakes is done throughout the state.

“We have thousands of lakes and tanks across Karnataka. If we rejuvenate all the polluted lakes on the lines of Varthur Lake, we will not only be solving the problem of water scarcity but will also ensure better livelihoods for people in the surrounding villages. For example, Kolar district has about 4,800 lakes and receives 600-700 mm of annual rainfall. However, last year, the district received 2,100 mm of rainfall but most of the water ran off due to reduced water holding capacity of the lakes.

Government should give priority to watershed management programmes and make sure desilting of lakes is done throughout the state,” said Dr Ramachandra.