

## Rs 55 crore '~spent' on afforestation and nothing to show for it

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*The supposed BDA plantation spot on the banks of TG Halli reservoir*

It's been a non-performer in recent years in its core business of forming layouts and constructing houses for the poor, but that has not stopped the Bangalore Development Authority (BDA) from 'branching out' into the self-appointed mission of greening the city. And therein lie the seeds of a scam estimated at more than Rs 55 crore over a four-year period.

Since 2009, BDA has outsourced the work of raising plantations in various parts of the city to contractors, paying out crores of rupees annually. It claims more than 10 lakh saplings have been planted so far, but RTI activists have discovered that the actual figure is not even 20 per cent of what is claimed by the civic agency.

BM had got the first whiff of the scam last year and had front-paged the dismay expressed by Governor Hansraj Bhardwaj himself (If civic bodies cannot ensure a green B'lore, who will, asks Guv, July 11, 2012).

Now, with the scam too big to ignore, BDA commissioner T Sham Bhat has ordered a preliminary inquiry by the agency's task force superintendent of police K N Jitendranath, and a second inquiry at the instance of BDA chairman P N Srinivasachary has also been taken up. The case is likely to be handed over to either the Bangalore Metropolitan Task Force (BMTF) or the Lokayukta. But even as these in-house fire-fighting measures are underway, the RTI activists are not sitting back --- they plan to put the ball firmly in the court of chief minister Siddaramaiah.

BDA had chosen Nirmithi Kendra and Karnataka Rural Infrastructure Development Limited (KRIDL), along with several other private contractors, to raise plantations at various locations in Bangalore Urban and Rural districts. Alleges V Manjunatha, an activist with the Bangalore-based Samana Manaskara Vedike ((Like-minded People's Forum), "BDA's decision to give the projects to these agencies is a clear violation of the Karnataka Transparency in Public Procurements Act 1999, as no tenders were called despite the rule that projects worth more than Rs 1 crore should be awarded through tenders. The agencies and contractors submitted bills for plantations raised and BDA, without any field checks, sanctioned crores or rupees for largely non-existent work."

According to Manjunatha, BDA claims to have raised well-manicured plantations in and around Hesaraghatta. "Hesaraghatta is a grassland ecosystem and there was no necessity to plant saplings there. Even so, there are only trenches there but no sign of saplings. Even more farcical is their claim of having raised plantations alongside the Bangalore-Salem, Bangalore-Chennai and Bangalore-Mysore railway tracks. I have myself visited these places and found nothing, not even trenches to plant saplings. Yet bills were produced for the 'work' and money was sanctioned. This apart, the same contractors have been paid maintenance fees to the tune of Rs 45-50 lakh per annum," he said.

The RTI replies provided by BDA officials state that the cost of planting a single sapling is Rs 150. "But actually they may not have spent even Rs 10 per sapling. Yet, inflated bills have been produced repeatedly year after year. The misappropriation in the name of raising plantations runs into at least Rs 25 to Rs 30 crore. In a year, according to officials, as many as 30 to 50 sectors of plantations have been raised. Each sector would have 31,000 saplings and about Rs 50 lakh has been paid for the work, including expenses for watering, manure and supervision by guards and watchers. Yet, there is no trace of the plantations in many areas. The trenches for the saplings, each measuring 2 x 2.5 ft, should survive for at least five years. But at various locations there is no sign even of the trenches," Manjunatha said.

Manjunatha, who tipped off the BDA brass about the scam, pointed out, "Afforestation programmes are the biggest racket within the government. Every year crores of rupees are released by both BDA and BBMP for planting saplings. Even the forest department claims it has planted several lakh plants. Yet the city's green cover has remained static. The million-dollar question is: Where were the saplings planted and what happened to them?" Even as they prepare to meet the CM on the issue, the activists want BDA to answer, without beating about the bush, why the plantation works were awarded without tenders.

Meanwhile, the BDA brass realise candour, even at this late stage, is the best policy to adopt. BDA chairman P N Srinivasachary told Bangalore Mirror, "It is true that I ordered an inquiry into the plantation programme on July 23 by an executive engineer. I had directed them to submit a detailed report in 15 days. However, they had sought a few more days as they needed to visit plantations at various locations. I will direct the Commissioner to expedite the inquiry and submit a report at the earliest, and will take appropriate action thereafter."

Echoing his boss's stand, B Jayaram, DCF of BDA, said, "Based on the private complaint, an executive engineer and the superintendent of police, BDA task force, are inquiring into the issue. The officials have sought details of the plantation programme. We have kept all files ready for scrutiny. I can not

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