

# The road back to nature

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Sandeep and Chethana have stopped looking for a picturesque hill station or a mall to relax during weekends. The young techies switch to agriculture on those days, a refreshing shift from a stressful week at the workplace. It's not just the monotony of the city that brings them to the village but also the eagerness to grow their own food. "We often read about the dangers of chemical-laced food items and the significance of growing our own food." The couple take a gap from digging a pit and glance at their two-year-old child engrossed in watching a butterfly.

After exploring viable options, they purchased a four-acre land on the outskirts of Bengaluru and tried cultivating food crops. "It is not an easy task, particularly when you don't have a first-hand experience," Sandeep recalls their first attempt when they failed to maintain the crop as weekend farmers and finally abandoned the farm. The situation has changed now. They don't have to struggle anymore as they have found a solution in the form of a collective farming initiative.

Farming is the spice of life

"Bettada Budada Thota", an 18-acre farm in Malavalli taluk, 75 km away from Bengaluru is the culmination of dreams and desires of 11 families with diverse interests. Most of them did not know each other until five years ago when they hatched the idea of collective farming. This is for those whose penchant for nature goes beyond terrace gardening, feels Lakshminarayana, an engineer who was instrumental in bringing the group together.

Initially, they had to work out a couple of legal tangles that came in their way of community farming. As none of them were eligible to purchase land as per the law, they bought it in the name of parents of five members. "It does not affect the involvement of others. All the members have spent equal amount on it and the entire effort stands on mutual trust and conviction," says Rajendra Hegde, who is an agriculture scientist. The group brings in the expertise of its members, which has proved to be useful.

Narayan, an engineer by profession is an amateur naturalist and leads the team in developing a forest patch in the land. Basavana Betta which borders the land from one side is the favourite place for trekkers and bird watchers of the team. They have made use of the technology wherever and whenever possible. Self-moderating solar lights have helped them to keep wild boars away from the field. Drip irrigation system is also set up by the team members themselves. But all is not that rosy. Many times, they had to confront with unexpected hurdles that derailed the best-laid plans.

The team cultivates millets, pulses, vegetables and some horticulture plants. Most of the crops are rainfed and drip irrigation is used to water vegetable patch and horticulture plants. They also raise cattle for the purpose of manure. At least four to five families gather at the farm every week. "Even if we are not able to make it to the farm for two weeks, we are confident that the work doesn't suffer," says another member Anil Nadig.

Group members meet regularly to evaluate their work and plan future activities. The expense is shared equally among the members while the responsibilities are shouldered based on their interest. Difference of opinions, if any, are sorted out at such meetings.

They organise special events like plantation drive regularly when all the families along with their relatives and friends participate. "There is a greater enthusiasm when we are in a group and it is visible in our work efficiency. Sometimes, we are able to do some works that we haven't tried so far," they feel. The members perform most of the activities, both planning and execution. The ease with which they plant the saplings, manure the plants, water them and sit leisurely on the field for a small break doesn't leave a hint that most of them were disconnected from rural life for two generations now.

But, they want their children to get a feel of the soil and understand the basics of food production. The land was barren and was not under cultivation for long. They have gradually brought ten acres under cultivation. Grains and pulses are shared among the members. Vegetables are grown in all seasons. Two local farmer families take care of the farm during weekdays. These farmers and other farmer neighbours are not fully convinced by the cultivation practices of the new entrants, and sometimes even feel sorry for them.

These weekend farmers know that initial investment, both in terms of money and labour, is more but are confident that it will turn even in future when the farm can sustain on its own, without any outside interference.

Creating a better eco-system

A similar effort in Mysuru has made positive strides in achieving sustainable living and influenced others in the process. "Kanana" (meaning forest in Kannada), a community farm initiative on the outskirts of Mysuru has turned into a biodiversity hotspot with over 1,000 trees. "There were just two trees when we bought this land ten years ago," says Manohar, a homoeopath practitioner. Manohar's innate liking for rural life was triggered when he visited an organic farm near Mysuru a decade ago.

When he looked around for options, he realised that many more were equally eager to explore the basics of farming. They decided to team up. After a series of discussions and farm visits six families bought a four-acre land in Baradanahalli, 17 km away from Mysuru. The land was divided among the members and registered separately but they decided to manage it as a team. Thus a patch of two acres was considered as a common land where a house, cattle shed and other basic infrastructure were set up. Remaining two-acre land was divided among the six.

Though each plant is developed based on individual preference, it is managed together. Initially responsibilities were allocated on a rotation basis, now there is a greater level of camaraderie and each person manages the work of his/her interest. When they buy plants, they ensure to get it for all six plots. Even the yield is

shared. Tree-based farming, with a focus on horticulture plants that are not water-intensive, has given good results. They have converted the entire land into a model plot with soil and water conservation models. In their bid to rejuvenate a lake adjacent to the farm, they have conserved a patch of forest land too.

A common house and a tree house in one of the plots are used when the families stay in the farm during weekends. "Both city and village life are equally exciting for us. We enjoy a drama in Rangayana as intensely as we cherish the sprouting of a seed," states Manohar.

#### Out of the box

Members of both initiatives have felt that their lifestyles have changed for better - the stress is more on utilising locally available resources. Millets and indigenous varieties have found a place in their diet. Both initiatives stress on organic mode of cultivation and mixed cropping. Such efforts where people aim to be active cultivators and wish to eat what they grow are slowly increasing around Bengaluru and Mysuru, giving a whole new dimension to the concept of weekend farming.

These communities know their limits and try to understand the ground realities. Farming is not a mere timepass for them, but a passion and a way to get closer to the community which is providing food, daring all odds – natural, economic and social. "It is time to be with farmers and work hard to develop simple, sustainable models that could help them to come out of the vicious circle of loan, unpredictable nature, failing crops, insensitive market system and globalised society," opines Shamsundar, an engineer and farming enthusiast. The trend holds significance at a time when we are moving increasingly away from nature.

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