

Farmers fight the taint and stink

They Hard Sell Veggies They Grow On The Yamuna Riverbed Even Though Studies Say These Could Be Toxic

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New Delhi: Balak Ram pulls out two radishes and a handful of coriander from the lush green beds, has them washed in a nearby tank and holds them up as proof of the fertile soil on which they grew. "Please eat them," he urges. "Do they stink of industrial effluents?" As usual, the 62-year-old farmer is being persuasive about his crop - but the evidence he proffers is regarded with circumspection. After all, if the Yamuna is one of the most toxic stretches of water in the country, wouldn't the vegetables grown on its banks be poisoned too?

"People think we use the water directly from the river. We don't, we use cleaner groundwater," continues Ram. Other farmers nod in agreement, fretting at the constant reference to the effect of the Yamuna's polluted water on anything

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grown on the floodplains. "Are we responsible for the pollution?" snaps Kishori Lal, 60. When reminded that in January this year, the National Green Tribunal (NGT) ordered a stop on the cultivation of any edible crops, including cattle fodder, on the riverbed till the Yamuna regained its health, Lal petulantly responds, "Why snatch away our livelihoods?"

The NGT is worried that the consumption of "highly contaminated" riverbank produce could cause cancer. The Energy and Resources Institute had already reported in 2012 that untreated industrial effluent and sewage flowing into the river had poisoned the soil, and toxins were showing up in vegetables, specifically the leafy ones. A Jawaharlal Nehru University study had also found heavy metals in vegetables grown here.

Claiming that they had got their produce tested at the Indian Agricultural Research Institute at Pusa, which pronounced them safe, the farmers near the Commonwealth Games Village, around a kilometre from the river's edge, refuse to believe that their crops



or the groundwater they use to irrigate their farms pose a risk to health. However, they did try out floriculture, permitted by the NGT, as an alternative. "We grew marigold, but it sold for a mere Rs 5 a kg. Yet transporting it was costlier, as was keeping it fresh," says Chain Singh, 34. There is no demand for flowers at the nearest market, the Ghaz-

ipur mandi, he adds, so the government should aid the farmers by setting up a separate business mart for flowers grown on the Yamuna bed.

But given the glacial pace at which the Yamuna's regeneration is being implemented, it is certain that the farmers will have to continue growing wheat, spinach, fenugreek greens, radish, cau-

LIVING OFF A DEAD RIVER



FIGHTING FOR SURVIVAL: Farmers Chain Singh, Kishori Lal and Balak Ram (L) claim floriculture, permitted by NGT, didn't yield enough returns for them to sustain their families so growing veggies is their only option

liflower and mustard. The produce goes to Ghazipur mandi, from where it reaches local retailers. The most remunerative of the lot are cauliflower, okra and fenugreek greens, which earn the farmers Rs

100-200 for every 5-kg bag. Baljeet Singh, general secretary of the Delhi Peasants' Cooperative Multipurpose Society, says that around 5,000 farmers along the 22-km length of the river from West

to Okhla produce Rs 15-20 crore of edibles every year. Their fields also support migrant farm labour from West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, who are paid Rs 150-200 per day for help in sowing, maintaining the fields, harvesting and for scrubbing the root vegetables clean.

The farmers' have a new confrontation brewing -- with realty lobbies that want to grab the expanses flanking the river for construction. The tillers complain that when the Akshardham temple and the CWG Village came up in 2005 and 2009, respectively, they were asked to surrender their riverine land. Though the families had got the plots on 99-year leases in the early 1950s from Delhi's first chief minister, Chaudhary Brahm Prakash,

Around 5,000 farmers here produce Rs 15cr-20cr worth of edibles every year

their rights were ignored. "They never compensated us for our land and only paid us a pittance for the standing crop that was destroyed," remembers Lal.

So when environmentalist started opposing constructions on the flood plains around 2005, the farmers joined in enthusiastically. "We advised them then to take up organic farming as chemicals from the pesticides would leach into the Yamuna," says Manoj Misra, convener of the Yamuna Jiye Abhiyan, which is fighting to restore the river.

Many of them, Ram and Lal included, claim since to have converted to "jaivik kheti", or chemical-free farming. "We thought our problems would be solved because we would be selling organic vegetables, but concerns about the risks of eating our vegetables did not help," says Lal.

While many may envy the Delhi farmers for their easy access to water, clearly the reality is otherwise because the river that was once their friend is now allied against them -- and it now threatens a life they have known for over