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ENVIRONMENT-INDIA: Thorns in the Booming Cut-Rose Industry

By **Keya Acharya*****BANGALORE, Dec 4 (IPS/IFEJ) - The atmosphere looks sleepy: four women inside a plastic-covered shed, or greenhouse, quietly tending neat rows of rosebeds; two more walk leisurely about the premises, carrying buckets of bright-hued roses on cut stems.**

The quietude in the farm at Naranahalli village, about 60 km outside Bangalore city, belies the activities of the little-known Bangalore-based Karuturi Networks, the world's largest rose-producer, with offices in Bangalore, Dubai, Amsterdam, Nairobi and Addis Ababa.

In 2007, the company acquired the 188-hectare, Kenya-based Dutch rose farm Sher Agencies for 73 million US dollars and says it has plans to produce one million stems daily by March 2008.

With the government offering several incentives, though not measuring up to the increased international demand, India's cut-rose industry is putting its huge 30-40 percent net annual profits into expansion plans.

"Everyone is making money," says Rohit Kulkarni, marketing head of Karuturi.

"It's a win-win situation," says R.D. Reddy, managing director of Bangalore-based Meghna Floritech. "The living quality of our workers has definitely improved over the last decade."

Reddy says year-round wages, instead of the seasonal work that rural workers have access to, has helped families.

"Our export dealings, where clients demand fair-trade practices, ensure that we follow ethical labour practices," says Reddy, adding also that if this highly labour-intensive industry does not look after its labour, "they will go to the garment or the construction industries instead".

Most export firms, under conditions laid out by their clients, need to 'pass' benchmarks for environmental safeguards, labour welfare and good working conditions from international fair-trade organisations like the Dutch MPS-GAP or EUREPGAP.

Companies doing well provide bonus wages and medical help; others with immigrant labour like Karuturi offer food, education and housing.

The majority of workers in the industry are women, whose nimble fingers are better suited to the delicate work of snipping, grading and bunching the stems.

Though there are reports from workers in the villages of not being paid the government rate stipulated for labour in Karnataka, the influential All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA) has not heard of anything untoward from the industry so far. AIDWA's state convenor, K.S. Vimala notes that this is still a nascent industry.

Bangalore has roughly 33 rose farms over 200 ha and together with Pune in neighbouring Maharashtra, account for most of India's cut-flower industry due to their milder climates.

Worldwide, though, cut-roses from countries like Ethiopia and Kenya, form the largest global suppliers.

"We are not level with African countries with their better climates, soils and lesser tariff barriers from importing countries", says Reddy, "But nearly 70 percent of agricultural rose-farm managers worldwide are Indian, known for their competency".

" That is India's knowledge bank," says Reddy.

The roses themselves are grown in greenhouses, 70,000 plants per ha, that needs 12 workers, under 25 degrees celsius day-time and 15 degrees night temperatures.

" We are now resting our plants ahead of Valentine's Day (Feb. 14) orders and applying 40 kg of NPK (nitrogen,phosphorous, potassium) per ha daily, instead of the usual 25 kgs," says Nagaraj, manager at Karuturi's Naranahalli farm.

Valentine's Day and the Christmas season offer great potential to Indian exporters because of climatic advantage during the period. Sale prices, usually around 20 US cents per stem off-season, sell for 3-4 dollars per stem.

"To be sustainable one has to also sell during the lean season," says Kulkarni.

The industry also seems to be fairly, and unusually, ecologically aware: wastage of water or excessive use of fertilisers are avoided through a controlled 'drip irrigation' system. Pesticides are applied only if necessary.

Vermicomposting, farmyard manure, water recharge channels and natural composting of rose-leaf are some features.

" We are one of the most efficient users of water, chemicals and soils. If we don't see to our soils, we will be out of business in two years, " says Reddy, who retired some years ago as the head of Andhra Pradesh's government forestry service.

There has been controversy though, on social and environmental mismanagement by the cut-flower industry in countries where they are more established. A report in the British 'Guardian' newspaper in February 2007 by journalist Ochieng Ogodo, notes that the industry is responsible for both polluting and



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over-extracting water from Lake Naivasha, reducing it to a critical habitat today.

Moreover, there are complaints of poor wages, working conditions and an urban mess with rising crime in Naivasha town which has seen a huge influx of migrant population attracted by the industry.

Karuturi's Ramkrishna, who has water-recharging check dams in his farm in Bangalore and who now owns Sher rose-farms adjacent to Lake Naivasha agrees that the industry is responsible, and needs to be held accountable, for leaching nitrates into the lake, "but not for any of Naivasha's other ills", which he blames on official corruption.

He says Sher's farms store rainwater and has check dams for water recharge.

"We are not governance, we are industry and we pay our cesses," says Ramkrishna in defence. " I am not heading to change the world."

Questions have been raised by environmentalists and food security specialists on the appropriateness of investing vast sums of money in rose farms that must import plant material, pesticides, greenhouse equipment and in consultants.

Internationally-known green campaigner and food security specialist Vandana Shiva says that had the resources used for floriculture been allocated to food production, India would have produced four times more food than it could buy on global markets using earnings from flower sales. "In terms of national food security, export-oriented agriculture destroys more than it creates," she says.

Shiva also contends that export-oriented agriculture was creating an "agricultural apartheid", with third world countries being asked to stop growing food staples and instead grow luxury products for the rich North.

But the cut flower industry has other troubles to worry about, starting with a difficult bureaucracy. Though India's Agricultural Export Development Agency (APEDA) has helped growth through infrastructure development subsidies, its state-of-the-art cold storage and auction facility IFAB (International Flower Auction Bangalore) has been languishing for over a year due to bureaucratic bungles.

And the glaring lack of an association to put forward the industry's concerns to government, points to the lack of unity amongst players in the cut-rose farming industry in India.

" IFAB will begin in December and there is a sense that things will now start moving, " says Karnataka's additional chief secretary and development commissioner, Sudhakar Rao. Rao admits there have been problems but says the lack of an association for the industry is one thorn in India's rose-industry.

(*This story is part of a series of features on sustainable development by IPS-Inter Press Service and IFEJ-International Federation of Environmental Journalists.)

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