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# Bangalore, before the dystopia: The birth, life, and death of India's most liveable city

Harish C Menon | August 09, 2017 | Quartz India

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📷 A fading world. (Reuters/Stringer)

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An old friend and I met up one afternoon this May.

She had changed. Many times over. For good or for bad, I am not to judge, but I didn't like what I saw.

We have known each other since 1980, the year I was born. So, despite long periods of separation, I perk up every time she is mentioned. Evidently, bits of her have stayed on with me.

There's no taking Bangalore out of a Bangalorean, goes the cliché.



📷 Dystopia: Toxic foam from a polluted city lake. (EPA/Jagadeesh NV)

So there I stood at our Borewell Bus Stop rendezvous on Old Airport Road, seeking stray hints of familiarity: Flaming-red Bangalore Transport Service (BTS) buses, the fishing spot in the marsh, *gulmohar* (mayflower) trees in full bloom.

But all I got was a choked highway, an elite township where the marsh once lay, and gusts of exhaust fumes. And, like [I had read](#) earlier incredulously, the *gulmohars*, too, were disappearing.

In just around 30 years, Bangalore had gone from “Garden City” to “Garbage City” via “India’s Silicon Valley.” Today it often grapples with something as bizarre as [self-combusting foaming toxic lakes](#).

When, why, and how did she come to this? The answers are not too obscure if one traces

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## Frantic, choking

Bangalore is the [face of India's changed fortunes](#), a face that itself has changed beyond recognition. Consider these numbers: Bengaluru, as she has been officially called since [November 2014](#), is the hub of the [\\$150 billion](#) information technology (IT) sector that contributes [nearly 10%](#) to India's GDP. She single-handedly generated [\\$45 billion](#) in IT revenues in 2014.

The government of Karnataka expects the state capital to house [2 million](#) IT workers by 2020. Such is her impact that, till recently, western techies dreaded the term Bangalored—it meant losing your job to relatively cheaper Indian peers. The [recent role reversal](#) is unlikely to affect this dominance.

At a [per capita GDP](#) of \$5,051 (2014), the city is the world's 87th most important metro, a Brookings Institute report says. She is India's [fifth-most populous](#) urban agglomeration, with [over 10 million](#) residents in 2017, up nearly 200% from [3.4 million](#) in 1985. To accommodate them all, she has expanded by 360% from [161 square kilometres](#) (pdf) in 1979 to [709 sq km](#) today.



📷 Shaking pillars. (EPA/Jagadeesh NV)

However, due to dismal urban planning and corruption, she's now also a disaster in slow motion.

Take, for instance, those water bodies. Bangalore is that rare large metro with no big perennial source of water nearby. Hence, her founders created a vast interconnected system of lakes and tanks, key to that Garden City tag.

In 1961, there were 262 lakes and tanks in and around her. But satellite imagery in 2003 showed just [18 clearly delineated ones](#) (I don't want to know what it looks like in 2017). Yet, there's been a [584% growth](#) in her built-up area over the past four decades. The result: A parched city depends on [thousands of tanker-trucks](#) for her daily supply of water.

Trees, Bangalore's other pillar, are vanishing, too. According to [study by the Indian Institute](#)

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to a little above 23%. A few minutes at Domlur Signal, with its recently built maze of flyovers, amply drives home the message.

This cataclysm has begun to affect her famed climate. Summer temperatures that ranged in the comfortable 18-33 degree Celsius zone—and rarely on the higher side—hit 39.2 degrees in April 2016.

“Today...quiet tree-lined lanes of creeper- and flower-decked homes have become treeless, concrete, air-conditioned ghettos—artificially created heat islands in a city that once did not need even ceiling fans,” journalist Samar Halarnkar [wrote recently](#).

That’s exactly what I felt on that breathless May afternoon. And if you, O reader, aren’t panting yet, then welcome to Bangalore like always. For she remains a friend as she was all through her growing up years.

“The city’s morphology closely corresponds to four distinct evolutionary phases—the native town (1537-1809); colonial period (1809-1947); science & industry phase (1947-1980s); and the hi-tech phase (mid-1980s-present),” urban planner Radha Chanchani said in a note she prepared on the subject, which she shared with me. “And till the British left, the city evolved as two distinct and separate entities,” Chanchani, managing associate with the sustainable cities programme of the World Resources Institute, Bangalore, added.

My interest piqued, I decided to explore further.

### **Bangalore: The short story**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Milestone</b>
1537	Kempe Gowda constructs the Bangalore Mud Fort and several reservoirs
1760	Hyder Ali commissions Lal Bagh
1803	First chapel in the city. Runner postal line established between Bangalore, Madras, and Bombay
1807	First British military station in Halasuru/Ulsoor

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## Bangalore: The short story

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1864	First train arrives
1898	Plague outbreak
1902	India's first city to get electricity
1905	India's first city get electric street lights
1909	The Indian Institute of Science set up
1928	First instance of communal clash
1937	Connected by air to Bombay
1940	Bangalore Transport Company begins operations
1944	Bangalore Palace built
1947	Named capital of Mysore
1948	Deccan Herald newspaper launched
1949	Bangalore Municipal Corporation formed
1955	AIR Bangalore begins broadcasting
1956	Vidhana Soudha built. Bangalore named capital of the reconstituted Mysore state
1964	Bangalore University established
1972	ISRO established in Bangalore
1981	TV station begins broadcasting
1991	Software Technology Parks of India established
2014	Renamed Bengaluru

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## Split personality

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There are many theories behind the genesis of her name: Some say it came from *Benda Kala Uru* (the city of the cooked pulses), others cite *Vengaluru* (village of Vengala/Venkata) and *Bengavaluru* (town of body guards).

While the oldest reference to Bangalore [is from CE 890](#), her modern foundation was laid down in 1537 by Kempe Gowda, a feudatory of the Vijayanagara empire. Remnants of the fort Gowda built remain to this day, though badly overrun. “It is the oldest kernel of the city...all in the ‘pete’ areas (Chikpete, Doddapete, Sultanpete etc),” Chanchani tells me. “It was a small, native, typical south Indian town within the fort-walls.”

That is, till the British East India Company (EIC) arrived in 1807. The British leased some land east of the old city from her overlord, the Mysore maharaja, and set up a cantonment near the lake in Halasuru (old locality), today Ulsoor. The twin was born.

The EIC’s military installations and symbols still dominate the landscape: Parade Ground, Brigade Road, the Indian Army’s oldest engineering group [Madras Sappers](#), and many others.

Bangalore’s salubrious climate began to attract British families and, soon enough, she turned into a civil station, too. In a way, the urban planner says, they created a spot of England in India. “Bangalore was India without its scorching sun and Europe without its snow,” Chanchani cites an old adage.

Meanwhile, the older twin, too, was expanding under the Mysore kingdom.

The 1898 plague outbreak in the native quarters [sparked an exodus](#) to her newly built northern and southern extensions, Malleswaram and Basavanagudi, respectively.

This may seem unimaginable now, but the area between these two segments of Bangalore—the native town on the west under the Mysore king and the civil and military stations to the east—was a broad belt of open land. Over time, this belt is what became the city’s biggest green lung, extending from Cubbon Park through the race course, golf course, and Palace grounds and orchards, Chanchani says. Lalbagh, the 240-acre botanical garden [commissioned by Hyder Ali in 1760](#), already lay towards the south.



Yet, the cultural differences between the twins are evident even now.

As the British pursued European tastes and practices in their quarters, Bangalore internalised some of these. For instance, its reputation as India’s “[Pub City](#)” stems from the club culture the colonialists spawned. They set up the United Services Club in 1868, which later became the Bangalore Club—a certain Winston Churchill, who called the city “a garrison town which resembles a 3rd rate watering place,” still owes the [club Rs13](#).

Since they were not allowed inside the club, the native elites set up their own Bangalore Club on the other side of the divide in 1912. This later became [the Century Club](#). The Anglo-Indians, of course, had their [Bowring Institute](#).

In short, eastern Bangalore nurtured a concentrated English-European culture, with missionary-run schools, western dressing, manners, etiquette, and merry-making tipplers, while beyond Cubbon Park, in old Bangalore, traditional India reigned.

This was the city’s structural make-up as she entered the modern age in 1947. As India gained independence, she was named the capital of the Mysore state. In 1949, the twins were formally merged. In 1956, she was again named the capital of the newly reconstituted Mysore state.

Around this time, the city witnessed the first major post-independence spurt in population, following India’s administrative reorganisation on linguistic lines. “I remember bureaucrats transferred from the Bombay and Madras presidencies arriving here and looking for houses in 1958. That was the first influx...though it was not big,” says 90-year-old NL Krishnan, a long-time resident and witness to some of the biggest changes the city underwent.

Bangalore had begun to spread her wings, and Krishnan, a young engineer back then, was ready to take flight.

## **Boom town: The science & industry phase**

A graduate of Banaras Hindu University, Krishnan arrived in the city on a cold January day

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He had joined Bharat Electronics Ltd (BEL), a public-sector undertaking (PSU) established a year earlier to make basic communication equipment for a young nation.

“I wanted to be in a new company, so that you are at the starting point and grow along with your group,” Krishnan says. “When I joined the job here in Bangalore, I wasn’t sure how long I’d remain here,” he recalls.

That was 62 winters ago.

The retired BEL chairman & managing director is even older than the Vidhana Soudha, the majestic state legislative assembly building raised in the city’s heart in 1956.

Krishnan’s life in Bangalore ran parallel to her evolution as a science and industrial hub, though that phase had begun much earlier. Precisely speaking, when industrialist Jamsetji Nusserwanji Tata, in association with the Mysore maharaja and the Indian government, established the [Indian Institute of Science](#) in 1909. That was also the year Bangalore became India’s first [electrified city](#). Then, in 1940, came the Hindustan Aircraft Company, now Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd (HAL).

Looking to give India a much-needed industrial base post-independence, the government set up three more PSUs here: the Indian Telephone Industries (ITI) in 1948, watchmaker Hindustan Machines Tools in 1953, and BEL the next year. The following decades saw more coming: the Indian Space Research Organisation, the Defence Research & Development Organisation, the National Aerospace Laboratory etc.

But why Bangalore? The answer is predictable.



📷 Oasis in a toxic desert. (Reuters/Stringer)

“Climate and a fresh site. The government didn’t have to worry about land. It picked up land owned by the defence. It (Bangalore) was an Italian prisoner of war camp (during World War II). Once the war ended, they (Italian PoWs) were repatriated. They (the government) then said now you build a factories and townships in the vacated areas,” Krishnan explains.

After the initial thrust on PSUs, Bangalore’s industrialisation entered the next phase in the decadal cusp of the 1960s and ’70s. This, Krishnan says, followed the Naxalite movement, an armed Marxist uprising in the Bengal region, a key industrial zone till then.

As industries fleeing Bengal shifted here, demand for manpower rose, sparking the second big influx: workers from neighbouring states like Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Andhra Pradesh.

“When we wanted female workers in our factory, particularly in assembly of components,

Malayalis (natives of Kerala),” Krishnan says.

But there was also demand for more qualified personnel. “Some of them (private industries) wanted to start greenfield operations, too. Where do they get well-trained engineers from? So there was phenomenal poaching from the public sector,” he recalls.

Clearly, the buzz for engineers was alive even then in the city. And it grew louder as the stage was set for Bangalore’s shift from being a largely PSU-oriented city to a private-sector, technology-oriented city.

By the late 1980s, as I was learning to ride bicycles and throwing tantrums over Joy and [Dollops ice cream](#), my friend was poised for the IT boom—and the third big migratory wave.

## Life in a metro

Motorised vehicles were first introduced in Bangalore in 1901.

“The first car showroom (and workshop) was set up in the Kannan building on South Parade Road (MG Road) in 1911, by an Englishman called HE Ormerod,” according to [The Times of India newspaper](#).

Krishnan himself bought one, a Sunbeam, in 1955 as commuting was a task (some things never change!).

Buses were few and far between. Auto-rickshaws were introduced [in 1950](#)—Bangalore was the first Indian city to do so, says Krishnan (I couldn’t verify this)—but there were few of them. Taxis were scarce, too. So residents mostly depended on horse-carts. “My father-in-law arrived at our residence at around 10 o’ clock in the night on a *tonga* in 1963,” Krishnan recalls. A little [more than a million](#) people lived here then.

For their employees, the PSUs introduced bus fleets and also built massive, well-maintained townships that are much sought-after enclaves even today. The blue HAL and ITI buses were ubiquitous in Bangalore till recently.

“My wife and I used to go together on foot quite a long distance,” said Sampige Anantha Murthy, a retired district and sessions judge, who first came to the city in 1954. “Those were the safer days.”

Indeed, as an eight-or nine-year-old, I’d travel long distances to school both by bus and foot—alone or with friends. Straying far from home along the highway was a pleasurable Sunday morning routine. Brave would be the parents who’d let their children do that now.

Because by February 2016, there were over **6 million motorised vehicles** in Bangalore, up over 6,000% from the **100,000 in 1971**. While the length of her road network has increased from 960 kilometres in 1964 to **10,200 km in 2014**, it is still inadequate, leaving her with the worst road density among India’s metros. The result: **Over \$6 billion** worth of man-hours spent stuck in traffic—and this for the IT sector alone.

While poor planning, corruption, and land-grab are universal to urban India, nowhere else has the rapidity of growth bogged down a city as much as in Bangalore.

“Today it is not worth my while travelling out of home,” rued 83-year-old Murthy. “Firstly because of the traffic, then unhelpful footpaths. Things are beyond the policemen’s grasp.” This comes from someone who lives in the upscale, leafy Indiranagar locality in eastern Bangalore.

And widening of roads or massacring trees is hardly the answer. “To address traffic congestion by widening the roads is like trying to address obesity by loosening the belt,” said Chanchani, the urban planner, pointing to an important difference within the city. Bangalore’s old quarters like Malleswaram and Basavangudi, Chanchani said, manage the traffic and population better than the new tech zones and IT belts toward the south and east.

“They (old quarters) have very good structured road networks—dense and inter-connected. So traffic gets evenly distributed. In contrast, in Whitefield, there are only four or five main roads. Everything else is closed access, private access,” Chanchani explained. Gated communities and integrated townships have taken up large parcels of land but have also choked the roads by shutting them off, she said.

“There is simply no breathing space,” sighed the retired judge.

Things are so bad now that Bangalore ranks [a low 146](#) on Mercer’s 2017 Quality of Living Index, and 177 for quality of infrastructure, coming in last among the surveyed Indian cities. An IISc study says she will be simply [uninhabitable by 2025](#) (pdf).

All this hits you particularly hard when you return here periodically. Like it hit me in May.

After trying in vain to identify the vestiges of a bygone era, as I began walking back home, I thought I saw an eight-year-old cycling down from the opposite direction and swerve towards the marsh. Perhaps, he was going to meet an old friend.

The boy was on the other side of the clogged highway, the other side of the time-divide.

*(This article has been updated. The earlier version said that 1956 was the year the reconstituted state of Mysore was named Karnataka. The renaming happened only in 1973.)*

We welcome your comments at [ideas.india@qz.com](mailto:ideas.india@qz.com).