

Tuesday, September 26th 2017



CITYSCAPES

How Bangalore went from being India's most liveable city to a dystopia in the making

Bangalore, the face of India's changed fortunes, has changed beyond recognition.

by *Harish C Menon, qz.com*

Published Aug 17, 2017 · 08:30 pm



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.

So there I stood at our Borewell Bus Stop rendezvous on Old Airport Road, seeking stray hints of familiarity: Flaming-red Bangalore Transport Service 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 must often grapple 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 back her footsteps. But before that, a little about the present.

Frantic, choking

Bangalore is the face of India's changed fortunes, a face that itself has changed beyond recognition. Consider these startling numbers: Bengaluru, as she has been officially called since November 2014, is the hub of the \$150 billion information technology 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 two million IT workers by 2020. Such is her impact that, till recently, techies in the West dreaded the term Bangalored – it meant losing your job to relatively cheaper Indian peers. The recent role reversal is unlikely to affect her 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 an estimated over 10 million residents in 2017, up nearly 200% from 3.4 million in 1985. To accommodate all those new people, she has expanded by 360% from 161 square kilometres in 1979 to 709 sq km today.

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, its founders created a vast interconnected system of lakes and tanks, key to her 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 the city's built-up area over the past four decades. The result: a parched city depends on thousands of tanker-trucks for its daily supply of water.

Trees, Bangalore's other pillar, are vanishing, too. According to study by the Indian Institute of Science, more than 68% of her land area had vegetation in 1973; by 2012, that had fallen to a little above 23%. A few minutes spent at the 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°C 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. Because she remains a friend to everyone 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.

Split personality

Bangalore’s history is actually the history of twins.

There are many theories behind how she got her name: Some say it came from Benda Kala Uru (the city of the cooked pulses), others cite Vengaluru (village of Vengala/Venkata) and Bengalaluru (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 told me. “It was a small, native, typical south Indian town within the fort-walls.”

That is, till the British East India Company arrived in 1807. It 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 Company'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 station to the East – was a broad belt of open land. Over time, this belt is what became the city's biggest green lungs, extending from Cubbon Park through the race course, golf course, and Palace grounds and orchards, Chanchani said. 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 Rs 13.

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

So 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 Bangalore's structural make-up as she entered the modern age in 1947. As India gained independence, the city 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.

The city witnessed the first major post-independence spurt in population around this time, 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

A graduate of Banaras Hindu University, Krishnan arrived in the city on a cold January day in 1955, the year All India Radio Bangalore began broadcasting.

He had joined Bharat Electronics Ltd, a public-sector undertaking 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 said. "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 and 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 almost 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 came the Hindustan Aircraft Company, now Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd, in 1940.

Looking to give India a much-needed industrial base post-independence, the government set up three more PSUs here: the Indian Telephone Industries 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.'. Stringer/Reuters

Oasis in a toxic desert.'. Stringer/Reuters

"Climate and a fresh site. The government didn't have to worry about land. They picked up land owned by the defence," Krishnan explained. "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."

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, conservatism prevented the local girls from joining us," Krishnan said. "So we had mostly Tamilians and Malayalis [natives of Kerala]."

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

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 to 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, said 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 said. A little more than a million people lived here then.

For their employees’ convenience, the PSUs introduced bus fleets. They 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 a few years ago.

But despite the limited public transport options, it was still an easy city.

“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 by foot – alone or with friends. Straying far from home along the highway was a pleasurable Sunday routine. Brave would be the Bangalore parents who'd let their children do that now.

Because by February 2016, there were over six million motorised vehicles in the city, up over 6,000% from the 100,000 in 1971. While the length of the city's 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 the 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.

The old quarters of Bangalore like Malleswaram and Basavangudi, she 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." 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 the city will be simply uninhabitable by 2025.

All this hits you particularly hard when you return here periodically. Like it hit me under that May afternoon sun.

After trying in vain to identify the vestiges of a bygone era, as I began walking home, I thought I saw an eight-year-old cycling down from the opposite direction. He took a turn toward the marsh to meet his old friend.

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