

MindTree

A quarter century of solitude

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It was getting to be dark that February evening of 1982 when my Boeing 737 flight landed at Bangalore airport; it was my maiden trip to the city.

A handful of three-wheel tempos awaited the passengers along with a few beat up Ambassador taxis. The same stray dogs you see today, I suspect, were there ~~to~~ keeping a disinterested vigil. The place emptied up as soon as the plane landed. Most of the folks, who alighted, were all taken to their large homes in Malleswaram, Sadashivnagar and a few around the Cantonment with their fruit trees in the front yard, by their respective ancestral drivers. New to the city, I needed to stay with my sister at the Yelahanka airbase for the night, before reporting for work at PSI Data Systems the next morning. After some brisk haggling, a tempo duo—somewhat in the mould of Bhai and Circuit — agreed to ferry me for a sum of twenty-five rupees. We drove in the fading light of the evening— past vineyards on both sides of the airport road, which now is a concrete tribute to the gold rush of the intervening years.

That was a quarter century ago. That quarter century will record Bangalore's ascent to global stardom. Back then, the high-tech label for the city was reserved mostly for the public sector undertakings, while the Indian Institute of Science and the public-sector-focused Indian Institute of Management stayed content doing their own things. Wipro was just born, so was Infosys, Kiran was braving the mosquito menace and the solitude of Koramangala while trying to grow enzymes, and Dr. V.K.Ravindran and Vinay Deshpande — two Stanford returned young scientists, were making rugged PDP/11 compatible computers that would do missile control aboard Navy ships. The United States had embargoed such technology to India. After a few months of my stay here, I went back to Delhi — to eventually return for good in 1988 when I joined Wipro. Bangalore thereafter became home to me. The period after was marked first by the rapid growth of the hardware industry, followed by the birth of the great Indian software industry in the 1990s. This led to the arrival of the world at Bangalore's HAL airport that continues its convulsive struggle between what it was meant to be and what it has become. As Version 2.0 of the Discovery of India got written here in Karnataka, the world asked in awe, how did the city of the sleepy vineyard become emblematic of New India? What was the alchemic tipping point? And, more importantly, where do we go from here?

People say it was the seat of Saraswati before Lakshmi arrived. Had it not been the hub of academic research and of knowledge-centric, high-tech public sector units, the IT industry would not have been rooted here. People also say, it was the weather— ask me about that one. Some even say that it was a benign government that stayed away from what the geeks were doing. In the last twenty five years, only two and a half Chief Ministers had any affinity to, or understanding of the Information Technology industry. Like bacteria, its cyber citizens were breeding in the dark until their fluorescence one day lit up an entire sky. I suspect there is more, much more, to the takeover than these apparent explanations. Before I tell you about that, let me share with you a few striking resemblances between Bangalore and the Silicon Valley.

Both were orchard growing places for centuries — the British even tried growing apples in Bangalore! Both were university towns. Take Stanford away and the Valley isn't there. Both have

stunningly similar weather. Both were defence hubs of a strategic nature.

Astoundingly, both belonged to no one.

The Valley is still jokingly called the Republic of California in the US of A. It is also the ultimate tribute to the immigrant— so much so that it is called the IC land; not one of Integrated Circuits but one by the Indians and the Chinese. Like the Valley, Bangalore is no one's place. Brought to map by a Telugu Chieftain who was served boiled beans by a simple woman dressed in poverty, Bangalore was genetically crafted to be cosmopolitan at its core. Its greatness was in accepting greatness and letting it be.

So, V. K. Ravindran, Azim Premji, Ashok Soota, Kiran Majumdar-Shaw, Sowmyanarayan Sadagopan, Rajiv Modi and Rajeev Chandrasekhar were all as welcome here as were sons of the soil like Narayana Murthy and Gorur Gopinath. To Karnataka, it wasn't the root of your ancestry but the fruit of your efforts that mattered.

That magnanimity is non-trivial in a country that continues to be in the slingshot of morbid regionalism.

The people of Karnataka allowed Bangalore to happen. They did not feel pushed out even as they got pushed out. Kuvempu, D.R. Bendre, V.K.Gokak, Masti Venkatesha Iyengar did not feel robbed of their space and of their consciousness; their heritage did not feel threatened by the arrival of the culturally diverse and sometimes culturally illiterate folks from all over.

No one was treated like a foreigner here.

The Kannadiga's tolerance for diversity is supremely manifest in the temple at Srirangapatnam where the restful deity, on the banks of Kaveri behind the Mosque of Tipu Sultan, has chapatti as part of the daily offering thanks to the Muslim heritage!

The Kannadiga was comfortable in watching a rainforest grow in Bangalore in which the flora and fauna of astounding diversity made home. Without that comfort with diversity, the city could not have been a catalyst in the flattening of the world. The un-belonging of Bangalore was the primary reason of its success.

And now, that un-belonging could also be the reason the city may wither away one day.

Karnataka does not know the full potential of Bangalore. Neither does India. Both have valid reasons for their nonchalance. In the larger reality of life, IT that is Bangalore is just a blip for India that is Bharat.

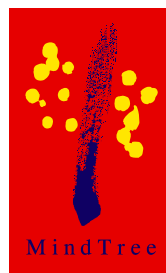
To the MLA in Gadag and the corporator in Shivaji Nagar, the denizens of the glass and chrome world are aliens who put broadband cables in their mouth and suck on electricity when no one is watching. There are two parallel worlds out there and they are at peace because they do not converge.

As long as 25% of the GDP of the state comes from Bangalore city, it is not necessary to seek larger civic engagement between people of the state and the industry. So what if Wipro and Infosys sneeze, the BSE and the NSE would catch a cold? So what if the Nerd at MindTree is busy building the next great piece of intellectual property that will define the ultra-wide-band experience of the world or the Bio-Tech Queen may deliver a new cancer drug that would change the face of pain?

No one truly comprehends that Karnataka could become one of the most prosperous, most powerful, most contributing economic zones in the whole planet. The rapidly deteriorating civic amenities, the lurking fear of an epidemic around the corner, the fact that a matinee idol's death can bring an entire city to a grinding halt, tell me only one thing: while we have flattened the world, we really live in a burrow within.

The MLA from Gadag and the corporator of Shivaji Nagar and all of us behind our computer screens, remain blissfully unaware of each other to submerge our personal goals in the sub-optimality of the collective vision.

Its just one more day in the history of time as the resident stray dogs of HAL Airport, just a little pushed out by progress, cast their disinterested gaze over the Boeing 747 jetliner leaving the tarmac.



Subroto Bagchi owes his life to Bangalore and Karnataka where he co-founded MindTree Consulting and lives with his writer wife Susmita.

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His other writings can be accessed at www.mindtree.com/subrotobagchi

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