

New Indignation, New Alignment

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Sometimes, it seems as though much of the world is trying to crowd into Bangalore. Hold that thought. At almost seven million, our population in this city is already more than the population of new-age countries such as Ireland, and almost half of that of Chile.

Opportunities and desires are clustering together into this new world metro as nowhere else in India. Whether we like it or not. Apparently, we do not. Not one bit. Even if we ourselves came here only 10 years ago. Or yesterday. Now we are the legitimate Bangaloreans and everyone else the outsider trying to encroach on our diminishing comfort zone.

Talk to people, read the papers, listen to the radio. Everyone is puzzled about the apparently sudden collapse of the idea of the city. Infrastructure has become a focal issue. Or the lack of it has. And with good reason. No amount of political grandstanding can change the facts.

Bangalore has become a new city of the world in the past 10 years. There is a global buzz about Bangalore. It continues to attract people, business and dreams. And will no doubt continue to do so. Yet, its infrastructure metrics show it up in very poor light compared to other cities.

Just take Santiago, the capital city of Chile, a city of about six million, with a very strong local government and a thriving economy not dissimilar to our own. It has gone through a growth spurt almost like ours. Yet, its infrastructure has managed to almost keep pace. Remarkably, 90% of its citizens have access to running water, sewerage, and garbage collection. There are multiple modes of transport. By contrast, these numbers decline to between 20% and 60% for different services in our metro.

What is the difference? Is there some magic wand that makes things work in Dublin and Santiago? Do they have a more innate understanding that the individual good resides in the public good? OF COURSE NOT. But, perhaps, there are critical differences between our civic culture and theirs. In

both these cities, people are very vocal about their needs, their ideas. They drive for consensus on city development, sometimes through long and fractious debate. In Santiago, budgetary allocations are made through a prioritisation of basic infrastructure needs in different localities, with transparent and participatory processes of decision-making.

In this city, as we realise that we can no longer sit back, complain and expect an improving quality of life, things are beginning to stir quite nicely. I am delighted to watch the transformation of many people I know who would never have believed there was an activist within. We are asking questions about and from government that we never did before. What are your budgets for such and such, where are your budgets, what are your performance metrics?

We have hundreds of NGOs in this city and they have been galvanised in the recent past. Campaigns like CIVIC and Janaagraha are in full swing, asking citizens from every sector to come forward and claim a spot on the ringside of third-tier democracy. And it is working. We are actually getting a little bit involved. More people have debated and opined on the city's CDP [Clean Development Plan] than could have possibly been imagined even five years ago.

The political establishment has responded with its own salvos and quite rightly so. Unfortunately, it is more the state government than the city government that has been confronting the ire of the citizens of Bangalore. That too will change. Bangalore is maturing politically. Make no mistake about it. There is more dialogue and debate than there are protest marches and rioting. That is one positive sign.

Neighbourhood associations of all hues are filling the vacuum in local government where there are no ward committees. Assistant engineers and commissioners are in equal active engagement with citizen bodies. Elected representatives will follow suit as the pressure builds up. Could it be that a new idea of an old city that was built and almost lost is taking shape again?

Bangalore is unique in that its growth has come from a sudden burst of middle class, tax paying, high maintenance migrants along with an equal influx of poor, determined and hard working laborers. Both groups are talking a new language of demand and aspiration. Bangalore Vs. Bangalore? It is going to be messy, dramatic and long drawn. But something is in the air. A new indignation, a new self-confidence and new alignments. Maybe Bangalore will never look as seamless as Santiago. But this once and future city cannot be kept down for too long

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