

Do cities have a self image?



DO cities have a self image? Does Bangalore think of itself the way others see it? Over the past three years, I have had occasion to travel around the world, attending conferences and meeting thought leaders in different countries. Maybe I should not be surprised, but I always am, when many of the people I talk to are keenly aware of Bangalore. Primarily of course, they see it as the software capital of India.

Woefully, they have also picked up stories of its inadequate infrastructure. And yet, whether we like it or not, Bangalore has clearly become one of THE cities of the world.

But here, at home, what do its citizens think of this metropolis?

My overwhelming suspicion is that all of us are currently feeling grave self-doubt. The state's coalition government clearly has no commitment to the city; in fact, in spite of recent pronouncements, we all know it perceived its victory to be outcome of its anti urban plank.

Technically, this should not matter. Bangalore is supposedly managed by its own city corporation – the BMP.

More than half of all state revenue is funnelled out of Bangalore. Yet it is the state capital, and no one even pretends that the state government is not the keeper of all the critical decisions about the city's development. But Bangalore has been out of political favour for more than one year and we can feel it everyday.

How short a time for such a momentous collapse. Not of a city, but of its perception among

its own residents and the rest of the world.

After all, in spite of the proactive strategy of previous governments, the city was still overcrowded, polluted and divided. But the critical difference between then and now is that much of Bangalore had a sense that things could and would get better. It appeared like someone wanted to and was doing something about it. That was enough.

Now, Bangaloreans feel orphaned. At a loss. Unable to go anywhere on time, unsure of which transportation projects will bring relief and when. A city recently on the move can now barely crawl.

Governance is perhaps more about perception management than we had realised. You let go of the imagined reins, even for a bit, and the horses begin to run amok.

In the meanwhile, hope continues to flow into the city from outside. More people, more vehicles, more business. It seems there is a time lag between people's sense of an opportunity and their realisation of its attrition.

So here are all of us, in this monsoon of city

potholes, flooding, and traffic jams. At times, there is respite when the August winds bring the trees to life.

Then again, trying to walk safely on the streets, or battling road rage, we are once more filled with foreboding. What will happen to this city? What are we supposed to do to change things?

There are many people in this 'city of the world' who have taken these problems by the horn. Some of the most interesting experiments in citizen participation and city development are being conducted right here in Bangalore that should inspire anyone who cares about this once and future metropolis.

Maybe I can try to introduce some of these efforts to the readers of **Bias**, in the coming months.

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