

Walking Down an Avenue between the Past and the Present

8th February 2009

Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) in collaboration with Environment Support Group (ESG) and The Avenue Road Commercial Association (TARCA) organised a **Heritage Walk** on Avenue Road on 8th February 2009. Twenty-five people participated in the walk. This event is part of the series of activities planned on Avenue Road to raise consciousness amongst people of Bangalore on the heritage of the road and its significance to Bangalore.

Avenue Road: A Living Heritage

Legend has it that it was from the main square of Avenue Road that Kempegowda determined the layout of his new city about 450 years ago. As Bangalore chronicler Fazlul Hasan describes it, four milk-white bullocks were let loose from here, and "the routes traversed by those four ploughs became the nucleus of the new town's four main streets". Hence, Avenue Road is one of Bangalore's oldest, and also most important commercial and cultural centers.

On a regular day, Avenue Road- also known as a 'mall for all classes'-represents a thriving market with thousands of sellers and buyers bargaining over a wide range of goods. The traders take pride in the diversity of the goods sold here and say that almost everything, except probably an aeroplane, can be found here.

Avenue Road holds importance for cultural reasons as well. The famous Karaga Festival, which sees the amalgamation of both the Hindu and Muslim culture is celebrated here each year. This festival in many ways is representative of what Avenue Road is- a microcosm of people who come from various religious, linguistic and geographical backgrounds of the country.

This road is also home to several heritage buildings. Some of the shops and residences on this street date back to the early 1900s, with many generations of the same family being witness to its history. Each of the religious establishments here have answered prayers of thousands of people tirelessly for years and also have many tales to tell.

Raising Roads: Erasing History

Today, the first crossroads of Bangalore, Avenue Road, is itself at the crossroads struggling to reconcile its presence in the path of the city's phenomenal growth, which wants it out of the way. As a part of a massive project, Avenue Road is being threatened by an infrastructure project that evidently has higher regard for speeding cars than timeless living structures and their people. Avenue Road is one among the 91 prime roads earmarked by the Bruhat Bangalore Mahanagara Palike (BBMP) for road-widening. The BBMP's proposal to widen this road is supposedly driven by the need to secure connectivity for those who are plying to the Bangalore International Airport from south Bangalore.

Thus the road which is about 10-15 meters wide, currently, is proposed to be widened to 24 meters. The traders have vehemently opposed the road-widening programme as it will destroy the entire shopping lines on both sides of the road, affecting thousands of families who are totally dependent on trade on this street for their livelihoods, besides depriving scores of people a place to shop at reasonable rates.

In exchange for property that is lost the BBMP promises property losers a Development Rights Certificate (DRC) under the Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) scheme. The DRC is a piece of paper that gives the property loser the right to construct 1.5 times the property lost in the remaining space, and allows construction above the existing structure in variance to existing building bye-laws. Alternatively, the property owner can trade this right to construct to anyone else in the open market, thus transferring the right of construction to the buyer.

Traders have refused to accept TDR as it cannot replace the remarkable social and commercial networks they have created on Avenue Road over many decades. Importantly, Avenue Road is flush with many traders who are not property owners, and thus will not in any manner benefit from the TDR scheme, as there is no displacement policy for those without property.

Discovering History: Capturing the Present

The participants for the Walk assembled at the Mysore Bank Circle which marks one end of 1.2 km long Avenue Road. A large open tempo serving hot coffee and breakfast to tens of people was the first sight that greeted the participants at the Circle. This warming sight is typical of Avenue Road's bustling public nature.

Swathi Reddy, co-convenor of INTACH's Bangalore chapter welcomed all the participants for the Walk, introducing Sathya Prakash Varanashi from UDBHAVA who would anchor the walk for the next few hours. After a quick brief on the current status of the road-widening project by Divya Ravindranath from ESG, Sathya took center stage, talking to the participants about how Avenue Road was a fitting answer to those who thought the idea of town planning only came to India with the British. Kempegowda's city had roads running along the north-south and east-west axes. Within this grid were accommodated several petes or townships housing different communities and professions. Each of the petes specializes in certain goods showcasing a highly planned market space. Sathya highlighted how while the lay-outs were formal, the inner spaces were informally used by each one to his/her convenience. Another point made was, as a founded city, Bangalore, has always had a mix of cultures, beginning with when Kempegowda cleared the jungle to build his fort and invited different communities to people his new city. As a result, even today, Avenue Road is a microcosm of the country.

Sathya also spoke about how Avenue Road used to have two gateways at either end that were called the Yelahanka gate and the Anekal gate. This is almost analogous to most celebrations in Indian culture that are often given a boundary or a gate (as in the entrance built for a wedding celebration).

Here, Sathya also said that considering the lack of legislation on Heritage conservation a lot of structures are fast disappearing. This Walk holds importance not just for celebrating history but also to see how the present-living heritage can be saved.

Sathya added here that the question on how Avenue Road got its name remains. Though it is usually said to have got its name from the trees that lined it, photographs from the 1860s show all of two trees so that the origin of the name remains ambiguous.

After this introduction to the road, the participants moved ahead stopping next at the Rice Memorial Church, whose entrance was decorated with Banana leaves. Meera explained that in the 1850s, a mud-structure stood here which doubled up as a church and education center for the community. One of the group members, Arun Pai, from Bangalore Walks, drew attention to the fact that it was here that girls in those days were encouraged to receive English education. Noting its architectural features, Sathya pointed out that the structure had the Parthenon-style pillars, but its arches were more classical.

After spending a couple of more minutes at the Church, the crowd moved to the Chintalapalli Venkatamuniah Setty Hostel. Meera and Divya told others that this hostel was started by the sister of the late founder of Vysya Bank, Dharmaprakash SV Srinivasa Setty. Though herself childless, she was extremely fond of children and used to bring over needy children from their village in Kolar district to their home in Bangalore. Thus began the hostel which till today supports students in need. Constructed in 1911, this building first served as their residence and there on has been home to students.

This royal deep brown structure is an architectural delight. The structure is built such that it utilized natural light at its best. The porch at the back of the house, the kitchen and the beautiful pillars, and wall mounts, have been retained to their original colour and design. The hostel-manager Mr Sadagopan interacted with the participants of the walk giving them more information on the hostel, its activities and so on. Several participants also took the opportunity to chat with some of the inmates who were from different parts of Karnataka.

Hari Ram and Dilip Shah members of TARCA who had joined the walk used the peace and quiet of the hostel to talk to the group about the proposed road-widening scheme, while the participants relished the *Badam-milk* provided by the Hostel. Shah and Haribhai explained that Avenue Road has never witnessed a road-accident or even congestion. Vehicular movement though slow is never stalled. They said that if road-widening would indeed take place, it would destroy lakhs of lives.

Divya also said that few years ago the administration had come up with a similar plan to widen the inner streets ostensibly for fire security. To this, the traders had pointed out that all the structures on Avenue Road were built close to each other such that people could use the adjoining terraces to escape by jumping across structures. Hence, instead of widening, the administration could instead ensure that all electrical lines were well-maintained.

The next stop was the Komatipete Venkataramanaswamy Temple. Oral history suggests that this temple is about four hundred years old. The idols inside the temple are from the time they have been consecrated. After a quick round of the temple, the priest and his family served a hearty breakfast - tamarind rice and curd rice - in the form of *prasadam* to all those present. During the meal, the priest shared the story of this temple. He said that he was the fourth generation priest from his family. He shared that the temple is amongst the

most revered temples in the city and sees a large turn out of devotees during festivals. It is believed that when the temple was constructed there were houses around it. Slowly it turned into a commercial street.

Dilip Shah also shared the story of his family which migrated from Kutch during the partition of India and Pakistan. Interestingly, though Shah speaks Kutchi, he feels Bangalore is his home, because it is here that he was born, and it is here that he makes his livelihood. And this is pretty obvious when one hears Shah speak Kannada with great fluency. His family like many others on this street set up their business over 65 years ago. Today his shop has a strong network of customers not just in Bangalore but also all over Karnataka.

On request Hari Ram also shared his family's story. He said that sometime before partition his family moved from Sindh to Bangalore. His shop is a distributor for Ever-Ready Batteries. He narrated his experiences of the 50s when most people did not understand the use of batteries as they were new in the market. He recalled how the company prepared posters explaining the use of batteries. Hari Ram, like Shah, is a Sindhi speaking Bangalorean, who has seen the city grow and change.

From the temple, the walk-participants walked to Mohan Building where the erstwhile Bombay Anand Bhavan was housed. According to the inscription on the building, it was constructed in 1908. Mr Hariram recalls that prior to being a hotel, this building was where the old Taluk Kacheri was housed. This is why Chickpet Road is sometimes called Old Taluk Kacheri Road, or OTC Road. The Anand Bhavan hotel was shifted from this building a couple of years ago.

The blue structure of Anand Bhavan showcased the glory of yesteryears. However, the structure was in a dilapidated state reflecting the absolute neglect accorded to heritage structures in Bangalore. Out of sheer curiosity, the walkers climbed the stairs to see what lay on the top floor of the building that was clearly in shambles.

To their utter delight, on top lay well-constructed lodging and boarding spaces, which despite being covered in bird droppings, was still in remarkably good condition. The first floor contained what must have once been used as rooms, common toilets and kitchen. The tiles on the ceiling and the wooden partitions harked back to a mix of colonial and vernacular styles of construction. This building was indeed a discovery, and the realization

that it is soon going to be razed to the ground for construction of a modern building is highly disappointing.

While passing the Doddapetta square en route to the next stop, Dilip Shah and Hari Ram pointed out yet another of Avenue Road's markers in the long and interesting road of Bangalore's history. This was the Doddapette square, where Tipu Sultan kept his horses in stables on the four corners. This historic square is also where Kempegwoda's four bulls are said to have started out from, marking down the future Avenue Road

The last stop on the walk was the Shri Mishrilal Indramal shop which is over hundred years old . This building had a shop in the front with a residence upstairs. In the past it was home to a family of eighteen members. Today, the house is used as a godown with just the front portion continuing as a shop. Where earlier the shop sold paper and paper-based items, today, it is one of Bangalore's largest outlets for disposable items. The house-turned-godown is filled with architectural delights. The ceiling of the ground floor has bamboo beams, and it is on this that the flooring of the next floor is balanced. It was pointed out to the walk participants that several such old structures combining residences and shops existed along Avenue Road: all were under threat due to road-widening.

At the end of the walk all the participants signed a petition requesting the Government to reconsider the road-widening plans for Avenue Road, keeping in mind the area's cultural and built heritage. The participants promised to join the traders next time they have a campaign to fight the destruction of this important part of Bangalore's heritage.

It is realized that Avenue Road is important not just for its historic buildings but also for its lively bustling market, which is living.

Report prepared by:

Divya Ravindranath and Leo F Saldanha, Environment Support Group (February 2009)

With help and support from

Meera, INTACH's Bangalore chapter

Contact details of ESG:

Environment Support Group ®, 105, East End B Main Road, Jayanagar 9th Block East, Bangalore-560069.INDIA Tel: 91-80-22441977/26531339 Voice/Fax: 91-80-26534364 Email: esg@esgindia.org or esgindia@gmail.com Web: www.esgindia.org

