

How a Conversation In A Cab Made Me See Bangalore's History differently:

An interview with an Uber cab driver on my way home gave me new perspectives on how history is narrativised. Suresh has been in Bangalore for the past 10 years and has seen Bangalore change from a 'quiet city' to 'quite a loud' city. According to him, there has been a sudden rise in the number of vehicles, the variety in the ethnicity of people and the reduction in the number of trees and lakes. Although these facts are apparent, the way he narrates his story makes all the difference.

"*Anna*, illi aidu nimisha *stop* maadbeku," I say. (Sir, please stop here for five minutes).

He turns around with a surprised look on his face and grins. "I'm happy that you learnt Kannada. These days, I don't feel the need to even speak in Kannada because none of my passengers know the language!" he says. "In fact, I have learnt Hindi and English!"

He goes on to say that ten years ago, Bangalore was completely different from what it is today. The weather of Bangalore was like the weather of Shimla; people would be wearing sweaters even in summer. Putenahalli in JP Nagar was once an isolated area and now it is completely commercialized. The minimum rate of an apartment there is Rs one crore. He grins and says that apart from Hindi, he has managed to learn even Malayalam because most of his passengers are from other states. Women in georgette sarees and men in lungis are not as common a sight as it used to be ten years ago.

Suresh's perspective is expressive and personal. His details tell me things that most newspapers or articles that do a critical analysis leave out. The increase in the population of Bangalore has led to the rise in the number of vehicles and apartments. Bangalore is obviously no longer the 'Garden City'. Most newspapers will analyze the statistics and the causes of such a difference. Suresh's version of the story on the other hand, is personal. He says that he can now earn significantly more because this commercialization has caused an increase in the demand of the number of cabs and autos – creating a profession out of being a 'cab driver' – a rarity earlier. He hadn't thought it possible that he would be earning at least Rs 60,000 a month.

However, he also goes on to say that the cost of living has increased, people are losing touch with the language and there are very few locals living in Bangalore itself. That way, he feels like he has been slightly displaced from his home. The 'Kannada' culture is now an amalgamation of different cultures that have been brought to this city. It is vague and almost 'faceless'. This analogy can be compared to what is happening everywhere else around the world. How welcoming is a local of a particular place of other people who migrate there? What happens to their identity and why is this issue of identity so important?

The insights I have gained from Suresh's narrative is that history is retold differently based on one's personal experiences. An economist's account of Bangalore ten years ago would be different from a techie's. Another important learning I have taken from this conversation is that memory is an effective tool that people use for oral retelling of stories. It is useful as it conveys images in a montage form; almost in flashes. Images, that are recreated in the audience's head during a narration.

The question here is: how can I be sure that the images in his head and in my head are the same? While talking to Suresh, I imagined Bangalore to be a peaceful place ten years ago. But that just may be a picture he painted in my head due to his retelling of his story.

The narrative of history also depends on where the narrator sees himself. Is it backstage, the front stage or the side stage? Overall, the narrativising of history is not just of events but a culmination of experiences and more importantly feelings. In this case, the feeling of being displaced, and losing a sense of culture and identity from language. Such narratives offer a first-person account into the happenings of their lives and the changes that have taken place in their surroundings.

To conclude, no two historical accounts may be the same but it is important to construct the right kind of reality – which in itself is evasive. As Harvard professor Tal-Ben Shar says, “questions create reality” – and it is important to construct meaningful realities in our lives by asking the right questions. These realities are made real through interactions with different people and the sharing of ideas and stories.