

Where are the Horses?

Raji Sunderkrishnan

'Yella okay. Cool drink yaake?' (All is well, why do you need a cool drink?) exhorted maverick actor Upendra, plastered over every other billboard in Bangalore in the early 2000s; United Breweries had launched its home-grown beer, popular today as Kingfisher. I diligently noted the tagline down - it was now the third sentence in my Kannada arsenal, after '*Kannada gothillaa*' (I do not know Kannada) and '*nimma hesaru yenu?*' (What is your name?). As a new migrant from Bombay to Bangalore, I was part of the great migration of software engineers' spouses, a Bangalore phenomenon that accelerated since the late 1990s.

This was the first time I did not know the local language, but being interested in languages anyway, I set about integrating with the city's fabric. The sentences I knew would only allow me to ask somebody for their name and then replace the cold drink in their hand with beer. If I wanted more meaningful conversation, I needed to quickly expand my vocabulary. But where could I find a Kannada teacher?

In the part of South Bangalore that I still live in - once considered the city's outskirts at the turn of the century - the crowd was and still is cosmopolitan. My apartment complex (one of the very few in Bangalore in the early 2000s) was filled with the sounds of Hindi, Tamil, Bengali, Marathi and English. My search for a Kannadiga neighbour proved futile. Determined, I began self-learning - from the radio, auto drivers, and our domestic help. I soon gained fluency in 'household chores-Kannada', but sweeping, mopping, and lamenting over the grease removal inefficiency of a dishwashing soap were hardly popular topics in social situations. I needed more.

Radio to the rescue! '*Onde ondu sari kanmunde baare*' (Appear before my eyes at least once) crooned a love-struck Ganesh in Mungaru Male, a blockbuster movie at that time. I took notes: 'the same saree keeps appearing before my eyes', marvelling at the hero's capacity to remember a saree, a quality not usually ascribed to men. Mind you, my context for interpreting Kannada was through my proficiency in Tamil and Hindi, two languages which did eventually give me the advantage of learning Kannada much quicker than those who knew only one or neither of those languages. And Bangalore's youth largely got by using 'Kanglish', a convenient mix of Kannada and English. But all this also meant that I was constantly attributing hilariously wrong meanings - many months later, I was dejected to know that Ganesh did not really remember the heroine's saree, and that 'sari' actually referred to time in Kannada. Learning from songs eventually also proved to be restrictive because there was a limit to how many people I could profess my love to. Or invite for a midnight rendezvous by the lake.

'Auto-Kannada' - picked up during my chats with auto drivers (while clinging to the sidebar of the speeding auto for dear life, even as Bangalore's cold breeze decimated my humidity and heat-acclimated bones), turned out to be my most impressive progress in the language. Auto drivers were always happy to talk - about the weather, route shortcuts, professional woes, and how inflation in Bangalore had made things unaffordable for them (an unfortunately true repercussion of the software boom). They were the ones who taught me the correct Kannada pronunciations of tricky spellings of localities like Arekere, Chikpete, Bidadi and Kathriguppe. Or mouthfuls like Bommanahalli, Sampangiramanagara and Agradhara Dasarahalli, all

of which had far too many letters and syllables than I was accustomed to. Through these lessons, I learnt that '*halli*' meant village, '*kere*' meant lake, and '*pete*' meant market: it was also a glimpse into the city's form and its focal points.

Talking to auto drivers and eavesdropping on their conversations with fellow-drivers at auto stands or the very few traffic lights that existed then, I also picked up slang words and tonalities. The word *goobe* (owl) was extremely multifunctional, and I used the mild expletive liberally with traffic violators, and as a term of endearment with friends and close colleagues. I could not quite understand the nuances of the popularly used '*chatri*' though, wondering when and why I would need to call a person an umbrella, which is what it meant in Hindi. Of course, I did not give such careful consideration to the usage of words like *yeno/what*, *baro/come* and *hogo/go*, confidently putting a pile of drawings on my boss's desk with a casual '*nodo*' (take a look) thrown at him. He turned red and told me how I probably did not realise that *nodo* lacked respect, and was only used with friends or youngsters in the family.

As my vocabulary grew, so did my confidence. I was picking up Kannada's tongue-twisting tenses and plurals, and one fine day, having learnt that '*-galu*' is a suffix for plurals, I eagerly tried it out on my auto ride home from work. By then, Bangalore's potholed roads were imprinted in my memory, and I had created a pothole map in my head. Wanting to warn the auto driver about an upcoming, back-breaking 'three-potholes-of-various-depths' stretch, I put my knowledge of '*-galu*' to use. The slow head-turn I received from the auto driver, with a shocked expression, after I had unleashed '*mundhe hallagalu barthaidhaare*' (there are potholes coming ahead) on him, is one for my history books. Of course, since he was looking at me and not the road, he drove over the potholes, and my spine suffered the consequences, leading me to admonish him gently - '*naanu helidhini, alvaa?*' (Did I not tell you?). He ignored the admonishment, and equally gently asked me '*yaavu ooru, maa?*' (Which city do you belong to?), an indicator that he had guessed that I was not a local. How? I thought I had nailed it! I was told by a chortling friend the next day that '*barthaidhaare*' is not the right way to pluralise inanimate objects; it is in fact a sign of respect or pluralisation only for people.

Undeterred, I forayed into 'construction-Kannada', a prerequisite for my professional work as an architect. While working on an international school, my boss would often drop by my desk to discuss the design. For a few days in a row, he pointed vaguely to a corner of my computer screen and asked '*gode yelli?*' (Where are

the walls?). I nodded and ignored him for some days, but could sense that he was slowly getting frustrated, asking '*gode yelli?*' multiple times a day.

Making a presentation drawing with plants, people and other templates was supposed to be the last stage of the drawing, but irritated by his badgering, I completed a few things, took a printout, and plopped it on his desk with a 'here are the *godes!*' One look at the drawing and he thundered. Just as I started fearing for my job, he burst out laughing - '*gode*' means wall in Kannada and not horses, as the Hindi speaker in me had presumed. I felt foolish when I saw the equestrian track in the school design, which I had peppered liberally with drawings of horses. This also solved a huge mystery - during site visits, when fellow architects kept asking the masons - '*gode yavatthu kaththaiddiraa?*' It was an inquiry about when the walls were going to be built, and not my perplexing (and now obviously nonsensical) translation of 'when are you going to tie your horses?'

All these linguistic mishaps did not dissuade me from further attempts at speaking Kannada. I am happy to report that over the years, my Kannada grew from strength to strength. The day I was extremely proud of my progress was when a bus conductor asked me if I knew the stop where I had to alight. I nodded and told him in Kanglish, Bangalore's lingua franca - 'next stop *nalli illithaaythini*' (I will alight at the next stop) - a pronunciation that I would have fumbled with a couple of years earlier. I had finally arrived - at my stop, and in Bangalore.

Raji is an architect who ironically dreams about moving out of the concrete jungle someday. A slow travel enthusiast, she often disappears to learn from travel, which she considers her lifelong teacher.
Email: rajisunderkrishnan@gmail.com