

Oota Aaita?

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'Oota Aaita?' (Have you eaten?) is a quintessential Bengaluru phrase often used as a way of greeting, a conversation starter, an expression as mundane or exciting as enquiring about the weather. One uses it to either greet an acquaintance or to establish a sense of familiarity with a stranger - the enquiry is simultaneously intimate and universal.

Oota. Bengaluru revolves around the idea of food. The sleepy little town that catapulted itself into becoming a booming metropolis, earned the moniker of 'Pub City' and suchlike with the advent of the information technology revolution. The once Pensioner's Paradise took on a more cosmopolitan outlook, ushering in a spate of pubs as the quintessential hang-out spaces. In addition, the freshly minted global citizens that made Bangalore their home, brought in many high-end restaurants catering cuisines from across the globe, making the city a gastronome's heaven. The pubs and restaurants however are introverted spaces and cater to a niche crowd. These spaces are detached from the city - passive and distant observers, neither engaging with the city nor its communities.

However, at its very core the city still thrives on a different kind of epicurean journey. One that is both intimate and collective at the same time, in the same space. Where food pushes one to explore and discover the city in the quest for the local yet is about one's territorial identity. Food for the soul, food of the city.

The Ephemeral Epicurean City. The Epicurean City illustrated here is more about an elevation of the everyday through a reclamation of the city while one goes about one's everyday life. The Oxford dictionary defines the word 'epicure' as 'a person who enjoys food and drink of high quality and knows a lot about it'. Here, the ephemeral epicurean city is about the idea of everyday luxury that everybody - right



Figures 1-2. Food Street, V V Puram
(Source: Aliyeh Rizvi)

from locals to migrants enjoy. It celebrates the act of everyday living, including the daily worker's commute through the bustling metropolis, by creating moments of pause that allow one to acknowledge and commemorate the city. It provides the luxury of fresh food, drinking water and temporary shelter in the middle of the busy workday. Further, the epicurean city is not just about the built form that governs these eating establishments. It is the negotiation of these establishments with diverse communities and interstitial areas of the city, with food as the glue that holds them together.

The epicurean city is local and temporal in nature and defined by the intangible - smells, sounds, sights, and the tangible - crowds, queues, flora, and fauna (Figures 1-4). Bangalore, the epicurean city, is about small pockets of food paradise that punctuate the day at varying times in distinctive ways that are one with a specific locality and its people. While the diverse eateries collectively function as one epicurean city, each individual eatery is a subculture that appropriates the city differently. Morning walkers and joggers are sure to be confronted with the first form of the ephemeral epicurean experience - 'the juice shots'. Next in line is the humble *darshini* and *lyengar* bakeries that dot the city. A busy day ends at



Figure 3-4. Food Street Nagarathpete
(Source: Aliyeh Rizvi)

one of the many *thindi beedis* or *bajji* stalls lining the city streets. The juice stands vanish just as swiftly as they appear, while some others become anchors in the everchanging urban milieu. In doing so, they become tools for placemaking.

The contemporary city is defined by spatial pluralism through its multiplicity of uses. A bland pavement by day becomes a bustling space for conversation by night. Busy streets by day segue into placid spaces of pause in the wee hours of the night. These temporal spaces exist and coexist - the ephemeral offspring in a symbiotic relationship with the parent city. Here, ephemerality emerges as an important condition in sustaining the city's built form and is governed by several factors - the social, political, cultural, history and memory.

What makes the ephemeral epicurean city tick? The various identities of Bangalore's epicurean paradise are influenced by local inhabitants. Bangalore is inhabited by multiple communities in different parts. Malleshwaram and Basavanagudi are among the city's oldest pin codes with a population that is predominantly Kannadiga, Konkani and Tamilian - all largely Hindu communities. Further north, the areas of Frazer Town and Benson Town have a large Muslim

population. Central areas like Chikpete, Nagarathpete and Shivajinagar are hubs of activity for skilled workers including blacksmiths, weavers, and carpenters. These areas are peppered with a transient populace from across the country - from Orissa, West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh to name a few. The areas and their inhabitants, imbue the city with the wonderful flavours - territorial identity makes way for a bonhomie that comes through food and sets up the infrastructure that celebrates cultural identity.

Food practices are tied to cultural memory. One could be eating a meaty *kabab*, while being engulfed by the fragrance of a *ghee tadka dal* to be transported to another geography. Familiar food and food smells trigger a sense of belonging and cultural continuity, especially when people are away from home. In addition, urban food practices act as social signifiers of people across the city. Cases in point are Bangalore's *thindi beedis*. Predominant amongst them are the ones at Visveswarapuram (VV Puram), Nagarathpete, Rajajinagar, Johnson Market and Shivajinagar, to name a few. Each of these food streets thrive as they showcase subcultures of their makers and consumers. These eating stalls become indexical of the many migrant and transient communities they represent and indicate the nature of work that brings the migrants to the city.

Nagarathpete, located in central Bangalore is where the Nagarta traders came and settled to do trade in silk and cotton. As the area grew, it attracted other skilled workers - die-cutting and jewellery-makers from West Bengal and artisans from Hyderabad, among many others. Here the Davanagere *benne dosa* rubs shoulders with Kolkota *kababs* and Bombay vegetable sandwiches. After dusk, the street takes on a different *avatar*, becoming a community space to meet, eat and socialise. After 11pm, these pop-up stores wind down, and the edible street goes back to its original function as a thoroughfare. These cyclical changes create an ephemeral city where food and language become markers for cultural identity, and in turn the identity of the city. The ephemeral city becomes a locus for the city at night and a thoroughfare for the city by day; a dynamic datum that caters to both economic and socio-cultural needs of the city (Figures 5 & 6).

Though there are epicurean instances that appear and disappear daily, the city is further defined by the seasonal-cultural edible city like the food spaces on Mosque Road during the holy month of Ramzan and the *avarekai* (hyacinth beans) *parishe* in VV Puram, where the street itself transforms into a site of festivities. Much like the Kinetic City, these points 'create a temporal articulation and occupation of space which not only creates a richer sensibility of spatial occupation but also



Figures 5 & 6. Street in Nagarathpete before and after dusk where people occupy it to partake in the Ephemeral Epicurean City

suggests how spatial limits are expanded to include formally unimagined situations in dense conditions' (Mehrotra, 2008) (Figure 7).

Mosque Road in Fraser Town is the venue of Hajee Sir Ismail Sait Masjid and several smaller satellite mosques that dot the area which is home to a large Muslim population. During the holy month of Ramzan,



Figure 7. Temporal occupation of space in dense conditions

the entire street transforms into a food festival where, in contrast to the daylong fast, the night brings a riot of culinary smells, tastes and experiences. From the humble *suleimani chai* to *haleem* and meaty *kababs* of different kinds ending with *meetha* like *halwa* and *gulab jamuns*, the street transforms into a party catering to not just the Muslim community but the entire city, disappearing in the morning, only to reappear every night all through Ramzan.

In contrast, in the VV Puram's *thindi beedi*, ephemerality is much the same all year long, where pushcarts roll in after shop shutters go down after 6pm and people from different parts of Bangalore roll in to sample local delicacies such as masala *dosas*, *obattu* or the famed curd *kodubale*. In addition, there is the famous VB Bakery and its fare including Congress *kadalekai* buns and vegetable puffs. VV Puram *thindi beedi* is a part of old Bengaluru with a largely Brahminical heritage, hence the fare is vegetarian and South Indian. Much like in Malleswaram, another old area in Bangalore, the local populace is resistant to change and finds comfort in the familiar.

The seasonal ephemeral condition of VV Puram with the *avarekai* festival that started several years ago holds significance in the christening of Bengaluru itself - Bendakalooru, the town of boiled beans with *avarekai* being the star of the show. Starting with *avarekai saaru* (curry) to *avarekai* ice cream - the gamut is endless. The Avarekai Mela is held on VV Puram road where the everyday *thindi beedi* transforms in January to host a food festival with various offerings like the *nippat* and *dosa*, among other delicacies.

In the city, food acts as a semiotic force, carrying distinctly political mileage. The politics of spatial occupation where each space presents multiple dialogues with its context, tangible and intangible, are seen across these informal occupation areas.

Traditional communities resist the influx of newer eating joints that do not cater to their cultural values. Case in point are old localities such as Malleshwaram and Basavanagudi that are also home to several Brahmin vegetarian communities. These areas see minimal influx of food spaces that cater to other cultures or communities, with any 'infiltration' being limited to the edges. However, these areas are peppered with eateries that appeal to the local palate - the *darshinis* and lyengar bakeries.

Darshinis are rooted in history as places of pause for travelling Brahmins, largely travelling to the city from surrounding villages for trade. Local lore has it that these pure vegetarian places sprang up during the plague of 1896-99, when men sent their wives and children back to the villages and were unable to feed themselves in the city. The *darshini* is rumoured to be one of the first restaurants of Bengaluru that catered to the common working man, unlike other establishments of the time that catered largely to the British.

The modern avatar of the *darshini* has ideological roots dating back to 1965. The idea of the quick eating place was started in 1965 with the Brahmin's Coffee Bar in Basavanagudi, while the ubiquitous commercial model which took off in 1983, was the brainchild of R. Prabhakar, a pioneer of the fast-food movement in Bangalore. He was inspired by the corner delicatessen in Western cities that offered quick, affordable, and wholesome meals. The *darshini* uses a very limited footprint (approximately 100 square metres) with the cooking space in the rear and fronted by a self-service counter. *Darshini* eating is an exercise in minimalism where there are pre-cooked standard 'meals' that are more about satiating the appetite than about gastronomic delight.

These eateries open at around 7am, offering a predominantly South Indian menu of *idli-vada*, *dosas* and variations of mixed rice specialties which carry on well into lunch with the famous *bisibelebath* (a rice, lentil and vegetable Karnataka specialty) or *thali* meals. Afternoon snacks include fried goodies like *bajji-bonda* (deep-fried vegetables coated in gram flour batter) with the signature filter coffee. The day winds up for a *darshini* around 9pm as they serve *tiffin* (snacks). The humble *darshini* is a culture unto itself - a momentary landing pad for people from all walks of life. There are approximately five thousand *darshinis* in Bangalore that punctuate the city at regular intervals - dichotomous spaces that act both as pause points and extensions to the bustling street.

Urban living rooms. The *darshini* serves as a vantage point where one steps out of the 'frame of the city' to view it from a distance. Tall tables are set up in

the leftover area on the pavement adjacent to the interior. This change in focal length allows one to simultaneously introspect and participate in the larger urban milieu (Figure 8). The exterior edge of the space acts as a soft threshold, where the line between the interior and exterior becomes ambiguous and blurred, inviting the street into the interior realm and vice versa.



Figure 8. Blurred boundaries between the street and food joint

The lyengar Bakery is another element of the edible city. These bakeries were envisioned by a sect of Brahmins hailing from Hassan. Chefs and temple cooks for generations, members of this community migrated to Bangalore in search of livelihood, in the days of post-independence turmoil. The needs of local vegetarian communities combined with British culinary influences led to the creation of eggless cakes, butter biscuits, *palya* buns, vegetable puffs, toasts and honey cake. The oldest bakeries were started by HS Thirumalachar, with an lyengar Bakery named Bengaluru Brothers Bakery (BB Bakery) way back in 1898 in Chickpet. Thirumalachar is said to have learnt the art of baking from an Englishman, and eventually the bakery was renamed Bengaluru Brahmins bakery in the 1970s. These bakeries have now become the place for one to grab a quick bite on the way to work at all times of the day. They serve as a haven for labourers, travelling salesmen and businessmen in need of an inexpensive and tasty bite. One stands right on the pavement with the edible served on a piece of newspaper. Both the bakeries and *darshinis* epitomise the epicurean city where the pavement becomes an ephemeral

place-making space through this shared experience of eating. Once food is received by the patrons, neighbouring steps, tree canopies, adjacent platforms all become flexible in terms of use - reappropriated to become places of pause and seating, communication and rest. The distinction between the eating joint as anchor and the dynamic street elements, blur as they become one (Figures 9 & 10).

While the *darshinis* and *lyengar* bakeries address the needs of certain communities, the morning healthy juice shots are a contemporary invention in the bustling city. The little 'stalls' are set up under tree canopies adjacent to pavements or steps outside unopened stores. As one walks through the city suburbs in the early hours of the day, one will find foldable tables set up at street corners. Utensils containing health drinks made of wheat grass and aloe vera lure the morning fitness enthusiast to take a break and indulge in some quick health benefits. These instances of the edible city indicate how, in the South Asian context, food acts as a signifier of rank, caste, community and identity. The act of standing while eating and the queues in some places become immediate social levellers (Figure 11). The ephemeral epicurean city caters to the subaltern and the elite alike. The pedestrian walkway becomes a democratic space where everyone jostles for a bite of the same puff or *dosa*.



Figures 9 & 10. Pavement and steps become spaces to appropriate for seating and socialising

Richard Sennett writes, 'Physically, too much urban design is homogeneous and rigid in form; socially modern built forms frequently take only a faint imprint of personal and shared experience' (2012:x). The epicurean city enunciates Sennett's ideas of cooperation and community. The physical city becomes the backdrop, the stage that the epicurean city manipulates through social practices and shared experience. The edible city is at the same time individualistic and of the community.

To summarise, the Ephemeral Epicurean City transforms the rigidity of the built environment, giving significance to interstitial forgotten nooks and crannies, and creating a sense of place that the community occupies and makes their own. These temporal as well as long-rooted spaces act as loci within the city that create new spatial trajectories. The city becomes an assemblage of cuisines, memories and people, transforming from the mundane into an everyday carnival that imbibes physical spaces with new meanings and memories. One could say that these ephemeral 'edible' spaces make the city tick as they go about their day enquiring after random strangers with a sense of intimacy - "Oota Aaita?"



Figure 11. Street as a democratic place of pause

Glossary of local terms

Oota (Food) *Aaita* (Over) - Colloquial form of asking someone if they have eaten, and as a greeting

Thindi - Breakfast but also refers to an evening or tea time snack

Beedi - Street

Dosa - South Indian crepe

Haleem - Stew made of meat, wheat and barley.

Suleimani chai - fragrant spiced tea without milk

Meetha - sweet

Halwa - Dessert with grain, sugar and milk

Gulab jamuns - Deep-fried dough in rose sugar syrup
Obattu - Flatbread of flour, yellow gram and jaggery
Kodubale - Spicy crisp snack shaped like a bangle
Bendakalooru - An apocryphal story states that the twelfth-century Hoysala king Veera Ballala-II, while on a hunting expedition, lost his way in the forest. Tired and hungry, he came across a poor old woman who served him boiled beans. The grateful king named the place '*Benda-Kaal-uru*' (town of boiled beans), which is known today as 'Bengalūru'. (Source: Wikipedia)
Avarekai Parishe - Food festival celebrating the harvest of hyacinth beans
Nippat - Deep-fried or baked savoury
Palya bun - Bun stuffed with cooked vegetables
Bajji-bonda - Deep-fried vegetable fritters

Note: All pictures in this article, unless otherwise mentioned, are taken by the author

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