Mookajjiya Kanasugalu

Transections of aspirations and pragmatic realities of a city

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'In the end, our society will be defined not only by what we create, but by what we refuse to destroy.'
— John Swahill

This essay is an ode to noted Kannada litterateur and *Jnanapeeta* awardee Dr. Kota Shivarama Karanth's 1968 classic novel *Mookajjiya Kanasugalu* (Dreams of the Silent Grandma) and the city of Bengaluru. Focusing on the contrasts and contradictions between Bengaluru's historical core (*pete*) and the city's new extensions, the essay is a literary comparative between a fictional character's life and a city. The central argument is built as an analogy between '*Mookajjiya Kanasugalu*' (Figure 1) and architect-urbanist Aldo Rossi's (1966) treatise 'The Architecture of the City', which is 'a protest against functionalism and the Modern Movement' (The MIT Press, 2023).

In the novel, Karanth critically examines Indian urban society's take on modernity through the conversations between Mookajji and her grandson Subbaraya interspersed with her musings (Kamat, 2005). In 'Architecture of the City', Rossi (1966) looks at the city as an artefact whose permanence is not something to be preserved and mummified, but a timeless quality that can still be experienced in the present. This quality of the city is powerfully articulated in the writings of Karanth and Rossi who are motivated by concerns of quality of life and thus challenge dominant trends at societal and city level. *Mookajjiya Kanasugalu* celebrates the social order, belief systems, traditions and customs that society has artfully woven with place, events, objects and time. It revolves around Mookajji, a grandmother whose narrative moves back and forth in time explaining events, beliefs and systems established within our society. Subbaraya, grandson of Mookajji, relies on his grandmother's perception and logic for the present events and the future.

The discourse of the pragmatic city, Bengaluru, is developed by characterising the city as an actor, drawing analogy to the life cycle of a man and the intricate relationships he establishes with his peers, spaces and the city's architecture. The protagonist Mookajji, refers to the native city of Bengaluru (physical) and Subbaraya (metaphysical), as the voices of the evanescent city. The conversation between the characters is used as a tool to unravel the subtle nuances of a city in evolution. Here, Mookajji represents the Indian ethos; expressed through a man's political, social, cultural and economic life. The grandmother, despite her lifetime suffering through her seventy years of widowhood, has not lost faith in life and yearns to adapt to the new generation. Subbaraya, on the other hand, with his naïveté and limited encounters with reality, continually relies on his grandmother to accept society's multitudinous voices.

Rossi's (1966) writings critically view the city and its layers of development as 'collective memory' that withstands the passage of time. In the course of its construction, the original theme continues to persist and modifies to render itself to newer themes of development. When seen through the lens of collective memory, history is never considered a museum specimen that is decorated and celebrated, but rather as a living organism.

In this essay, the city is treated as a system of 'urban artefacts' (Rossi, 1966). The city as a system of urban artefacts refers to both its physical form and as an embodiment of events, growth, and experiences that
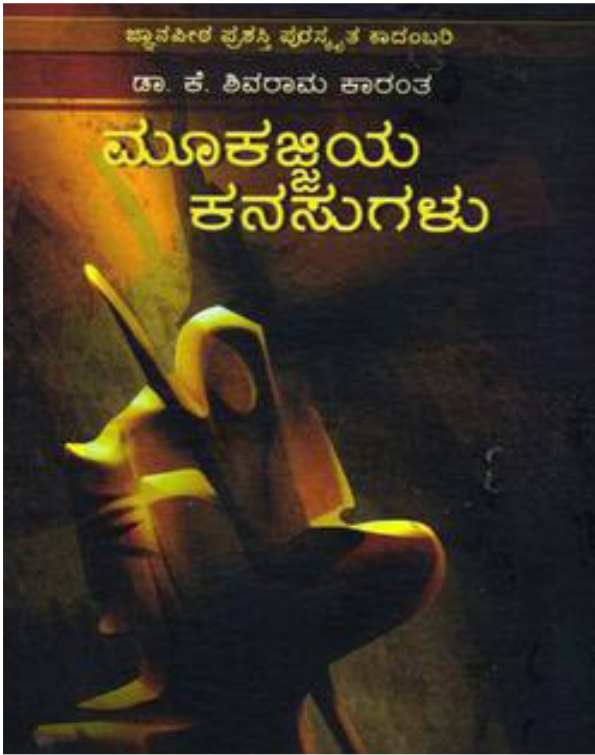
Figure 1. Cover page of Kannada novel '*Mookajjiya Kanasugalu*' by Dr. Kota Shivarama Karanth (Source: Wikipedia)

have nurtured its character in time and space. When a city evolves, the interaction between a series of smaller structuring elements over time evolves into complex forms and patterns at spatial and social scales. The urban artefact manifests into deeper systems where human experiences transform into visible symbols, signs and patterns. The urban artefact prescribes systems of order, preserving a memory of the past and visions of the future. Architecture is thus a mirror of those transformations, an embodiment of urban stories.

Karanth and Rossi, through their individual lenses, emphasise that the past must be acknowledged in the present, in order to understand resilience, adaptation and mutation in the city. The clues to be taken from the analogy indicate the dichotomy of Mookajji and her aspirations versus Subbaraya's position on pragmatic realities. Mookajji is compared to '*pettah*' or '*pete*'[3]. The cityscape of Bengaluru cannot be understood without tying it to its geography, that includes the *pettah* (native town), *kote* (fort), *kere* (lakes and tanks) and *tota* (gardens and parks). These four artefacts form the functional system (Hillier, 2007) or the syntax of the city (Bydar Shubhashchandra & Rao, 2020).

The syntax is one powerful determinant that configures the lay of the land; a rule for spatial organisation. This framework bears the imprints of the past and the course of actions that could take place in the future. It stands as a yardstick to measure events in time

and space and as a critical generator of activities at a micro level, where the communities carefully align themselves to the syntax as cultural imprints. Hence, the urban artefacts of the syntax positively influenced the socio-economic, political, and religious practices of communities, therefore defining the cultural landscape of Bengaluru.

Kempe Gowda I, a chieftain under the Vijayanagar kingdom, gave Bengaluru a new spatial order, superimposing a new syntax on the land in the late 1500s. The new market-fort town was planned as a trading centre of the South that strategically connected surrounding towns. The Bengaluru map of 1791 shows the *pete*, the main trading centre surrounded by a mud fort and moat and the settlement with the *pete* as the epicentre. Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan added to the second oval fort to the south, along with a summer palace to operate as a military garrison, thus emphasising the city centre further as the primary core.

Subsequently, the Wodeyars and East India Company adopted this well-established framework of a planned city, thus aligning their alterations with established systems and interdependencies. Up until the formation of the first formal planning boundary in the mid-nineteenth century, each succession gave new impetus to the city's growth, emphasising the *pete*'s centrality, despite intense growth. This matrix of the market, fort and settlement as an imposing urban artefact known as Bangalore, are embedded in the cognitive memory of natives and visitors alike.

The first deviation from the indigenous planning. system was observed during the 1850s when the British colonists built their military Cantonment in clear separation from the *pete*. The segregation between the two towns was deliberate and is recognisable to date. The divide was not only evident as lines marked on land and in maps but also in the planning systems that were alien to the existing landscape. The new urban artefacts that were typologically driven, added two main typologies to the city - new residential types and recreational spaces. They established a formal tradition, an idea borrowed from the British Raj, which is reflected in the way people interacted with space and built form. The typologically driven urban artefact as a part of the new extension, distinguishes it from the primary element of the city, the syntax, in character, identity and aesthetics.

The use of Eurocentric planning principles was further heightened during the 1900s, post-famine and plague-breakout, when new extensions were created to the city outside the *pete* area. Recognisable grid lines, wide avenues, and rigidly segregated land-use zones

became the new language of the city. The modernist polycentric approach heightened the segregation between the native and the new extensions, and there arose the conflict between historicism and modernism.

Figure 2. Overlay of Bangalore Fort on the contemporary city reflects the urban artefacts' resilience. (Source: Bydar Shubhashchandra & Rao, 2020)

The *pete* at this point was engulfed by a gamut of systems and city networks only reinforcing its position as the historic centre and a fixed point in the urban dynamic. *Pete* became an unperturbed, unapologetic, rigid centre of the city, which continued to grow beyond. Hence, the community-based urban form ceded to the efficiency-driven mechanical shell of the city. In the process of coming together in imposing a pragmatic socio-cultural organisation, people grew dissociated from the urban artefacts created by their predecessors. The antagonist of our narrative, Subbaraya[4], is compared to Bengaluru's new extensions.

Mookajji for us, in short, is the urban milieu (Mumford, 1970). She is living heritage, depicted through human imagination and faith in human endeavour that shapes the culture of the city and later gets translated into a collective of urban artefacts, a tangible form that makes our city visible. Her optimism, her survival skills and accommodating nature are the unique characteristics that have strengthened her resilient nature that has survived changes and become the everyday vocabulary of Bengaluru's inhabitants (Bydar Shubhashchandra & Rao, 2020). This has impacted

the city's physical and social dimensions to what it has evolved today.

If we begin to rethink the urban process as not making radical changes but carefully synthesising the old to accommodate sensitive responses, would we not empower the old and systemically connect the old with the new? Are the urban artefacts just nostalgic remnants of an obsolete pre-modern era? Or do they offer symbolic lessons for designers today? This could be a parallel approach where we can be responsible carriers of past learnings. Narratives from the past can be used carefully to construct and formulate the basis for our pragmatic realities. While there are certainly theories that support the nostalgic remnant proposition, the idea is not to immortalise the city as a symbolic object that we hold onto forever, but immortalise her value systems and legacy through the intangible layers.

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