

The Weatherman's Paradise

Bangalore Memories and the Built Form

Arun Swaminathan

As a child I would look up and see the rising Weather Balloon and wonder about the daily stories that it would tell from the skies above Bangalore.

I would hear visitors to our City asking why Bangaloreans were always talking about the weather!!!

A Non Fan Station

Around 1945 sometime before Victory over Japan Day, 23 year old Lt G Swaminathan, was posted to Bangalore. He was stationed at what is now the Sai Baba Ashram in Whitefield. Part of his duties was to liaise with the Bangalore Sub Area on Cubbon Road. One can still see some very well preserved Colonial buildings on that road and particularly within the Sub Area.

One of the first things he discovered when he was posted to Bangalore was that in the Sub Area Records, Bangalore was declared (then) to be an “NFS” or a “NON-FAN-STATION”. Incidentally Poona was also classified as such by the Army during the British times.

Little did my father know that he would return to Bangalore about 10 years later to settle down and raise a family here.

My Maternal Grandfather Maj RV Sitaraman after his retirement from the Railways at Jamalpur wanted to put roots down in a place like Dehradun or Bangalore because of the pleasant weather conditions. My grandmother prevailed over him to choose Bangalore as they would be nearer to the relatives in Madras... and so he built a lovely Streamlined Moderne - Art Deco house in Malleswaram inviting my parents to move to Bangalore and stay upstairs in a design of their own.

As a teenager in 1977, I clearly remember a moment heralding a different future for this “Garden City” or “Pensioners’ Paradise” (both terms taught to us in Geography in the 4th Std at Bishop Cotton Boys, School when we got ONE ceiling fan for the Living Room...It seemed like a novelty then but when I look back to the time before the coming of that fan I reminisce about the times when I had a frequent cold and that not a non-winter day

went by without wearing a sleeveless pullover or a jacket. Winter was never extreme like the Northern Winters but I was most fond of my TurtleNeck Sweater.

It was normal for children to have sniffles or fall ill... Sleeveless pullovers were common and one could see early in the morning motorcyclists (and even sometimes cyclists) donning gloves. A Jacket or Windcheater was useful to carry around to ward off the wind chill factor especially when it rained.

In fact in the late ‘80s a Norwegian friend who boasted of his extreme winters ended up borrowing my blazer one rainy night.

Morning mists (with egrets visiting) were par for the course, so much so that when my parents took me to the movie “DHUND” I thought the film was shot in and around Bangalore....!!!

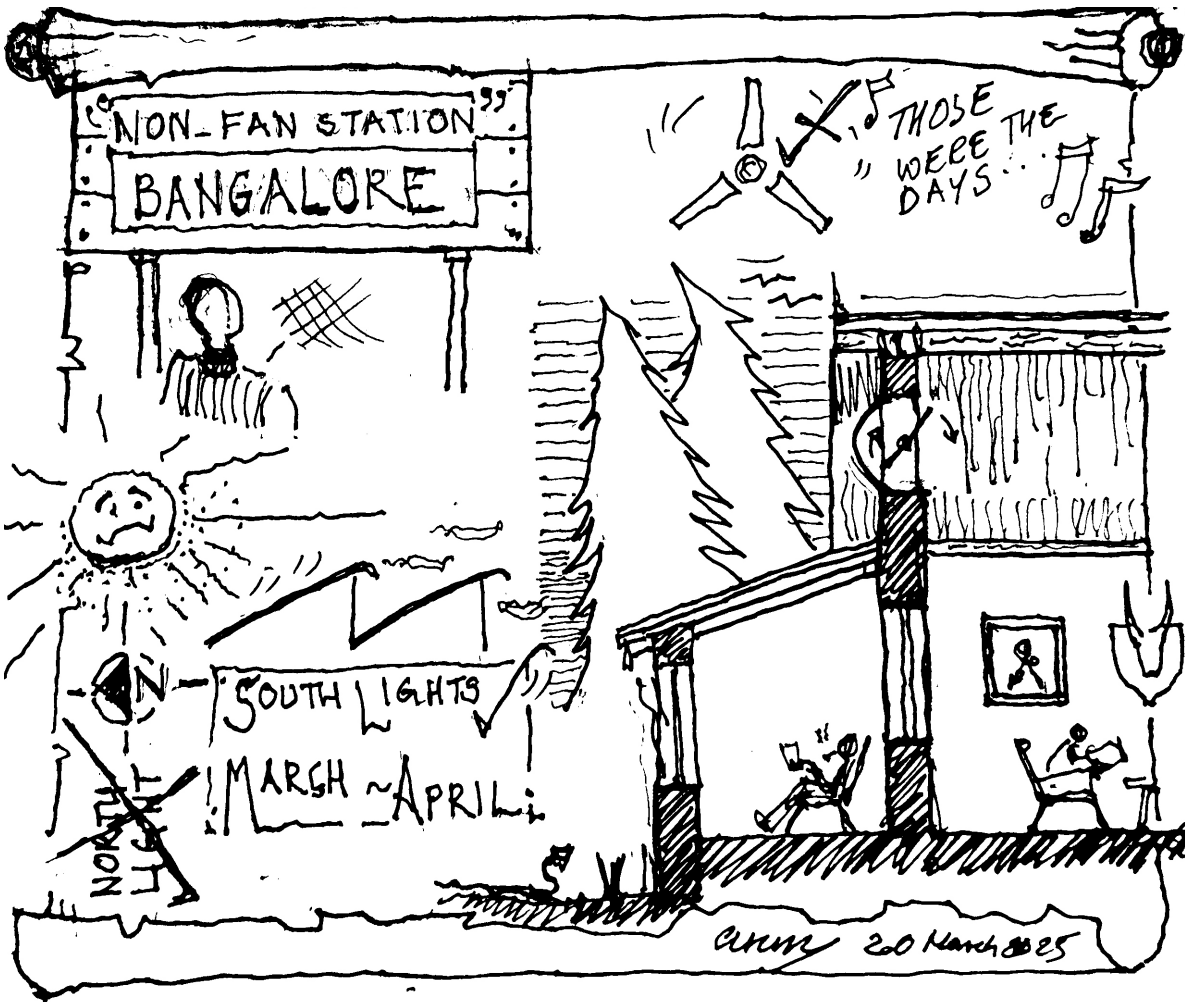
I remember cycling from Malleswaram through Cubbon Park to Bishop Cottons...I used to wear a Blue Windcheater which my mother got me from Germany... it used to get damp cycling through the misty mornings in Cubbon Park...

I have strong memories from my childhood of buildings with a whiff of lime plaster and fresh air within with chill draughts which had to be controlled by thoughtful shutting of certain doors and windows... My school classrooms did not have glass windows but swivelling wooden shutters with adjustable louvres inset...

My late father would have been aghast with the recent soaring of temperatures in our once fair city. He used to say that more and more Tar- Macadam roads were assisting solar radiation which was increasing the city temperatures.

Then something called “Glassitecture” hit our city with hitherto unheard of Air Conditioners increasing the respective manufacturers’ profit margins...The heat gain outside these numerous buildings today can easily be seen with thermal imaging...I would rather not see these images!!!

I remember politely refusing a well meaning and highly prosperous industrialist as he wanted a Victorian Bangalow...I said I will not be the suitable Architect for



Artwork by Arun Swaminathan (Author)

him as I can not replicate the Architectural Elements with that Neoclassical style... However, I said I could give him the quality of spaces through verandahs, high roofs, etc. with the skin comfort which is what makes those old Colonial Bungalows so memorable...

Colonial Architecture in India evolved with responding to the microclimate of the regions where these buildings came up... Verandahs which served as a climatic buffer also served as a socially neutral space (especially in the Tea and Coffee gardens). High ceilings with ventilators that could be controlled by a rope from below had mosquito mesh placed within semi cylindrical frames to accommodate the swivelling of the ventilator shutter.

84 Weathersheds (now almost invisible in new buildings) helped shade the windows and give adequate protection from the rain that could pour at any time of the year... I still remember visiting some of the old Cantonment Bungalows with my father at Christmas time and him telling me that the weathersheds (the shading element over the window) were affectionately known as "Monkey Tops"... I vividly remember one bungalow which had Green and White Candy Stripes painted cheerfully on the GI Sheet placed on top of a wooden frame which made this particular Monkey Top... Of the myth of the North Light and the Bangalore Summer In Climatology all of us are taught about North Lights

and the Indian Summer.

My father alerted me that it does not make sense to have North Lights in Bangalore as the Sun is in the North during our brief but high glare summer which is in March - April and not in June - July as in North India.

The Kanade Brothers also would corroborate this with their students. They would also say that skylights should never be horizontal but allow reflected light from the sides with adequate ventilation to let out the hot air. The late Navnath Kanade told me that the best solution to the Bangalore Summer was to paint the Asbestos (then the main lightweight roofing material) Roof Black in the Stair Cabin to induce heat and a convection current which would draw out the hot air from within the house!!!

Just before the advent of our imminent Bangalore Summer is it a small wonder that Aero India is always around February with its sharp blue cloudless skies?

Bangalore has many memories - Global Memories from well before the advent of the IT Blitz...way back to Roman times with their coins being found in AGRAM... through the World War with the Americans at HAL, ... The British in the Cantonment, Yelahanka, Jalahalli ... The Italian Prisoners of War... to the other Expats who contributed to a new Industrial India... The city is changing and has changed beyond recognition...the micro climate has gone for a toss...

Perhaps this is an appeal to the future Architects and Planners as well as Builders to keep what's left of Bangalore's old soul and that the embers be kept alive... Well...here we are...with fading memories of a bygone Bangalore ...

Arun Swaminathan is a graduate of the School of Architecture, CEPT University, Ahmedabad. He is an architect, academician, writer, children's cartoonist, and illustrator. His wide-ranging interests include model aircraft, military history, literature, and the outdoors. His academic journey began with teaching school children through NIE and "Each One Teach One," leading to a career in architectural education. He has taught at several institutions, most notably RV College of Architecture, where he served as Design Chair for six years and continues as Adjunct Faculty. He has also been part of Boards of Studies and had a formative three-year stint at Rishi Valley School under the Krishnamurti Foundation. In practice, he focuses on projects with personal, social, or environmental relevance, staying away from commercial work. His research interest lies in lightweight structures, for which he conducts student workshops nationwide. He is currently developing educational cartoon projects and writing on Indian military history.