

City of Dins and Tongues

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Ever wondered which of our senses are put to most use? Would it not be the sense of seeing and hearing? For those of you debating whether it is the sense of touch, we are a generation that touches a digital screen more than anything else, hence let us park that consideration aside.

We may be tasting more than the generations before us, but that is because of our gluttony and shrunk-to-phone-size culinary world accessibility, backed by a compulsion to pander to our aspirations of global identity. Less said the better about the sense of smell in the context of the city, especially with the unseasonal rains of late. Since 'seeing' is already at its excessive best, let us dwell on the sense of hearing.

This sense needs to be anchored to a place. A place could be home, or where one works, socialises, commutes, thrives or all of these. A place where one's life is. Life on steroids if you will, in cities - more

precisely Indian cities. We pick the young and old city of Bengaluru (the city which owns the pride of becoming a verb), that can lure and loot. To an outsider it kindles a certain image of anxiety-driven businesses, too much traffic, good weather and beer. The author, as protagonist D, becomes the anchor to walk the reader through accounts of sound, linguistics and environment of this city.

Aaamava, '03. A native of Chennai, when D first visited Bangalore (we had not reached the 'nationalist-city-renaming' spree yet in history!) in 1997 at 15 years of age - from the scorching City of Mad Rascals (colloquial reference to Chennai, formerly known as Madras). What she did not enjoy was the sound of a language she heard being spoken. It was at once throaty, dry and rude. She heard a version of her own mother tongue, Tamizh (also spelt as Tamil), that was unintelligible. Tamizh was one of the many languages that Bangalore's street vendors spoke with casual irreverence.

Newly introduced to a dialect, she went back to her land, where language, food, cinema and a generous dose of pride are served in equal portions to children with an appetite for the 'local'. Six years later, as fate would have it, D came to this city, this time as a young architect. She took the advice of her colleagues and chose to rent a paying guest (PG) accommodation in the Tamizh-speaking neighbourhood of Ulsoor/Halassuru, an erstwhile extension of Bangalore's cantonment. Then, she knew little or no Kannada and did not understand the absurd layer of influence of Kannada on Tamizh. So she often encountered Ulsoor Tamizh-speak:

Aamava (yes, is it?) instead of *Apadiya* (is it so?).

Pesa vechen (I made them/him/her converse), instead of *Pesinen* (I conversed).

Sapda vechen (I made her eat) instead of *Ootinen* (I fed her)

Every verb sounded like a forceful action.
More quirks followed.

Engaladhu ('belonging to us', not including the person in conversation)

Ungaladhu (belonging to the person in conversation without including self)

Nambaladhu (belongs to both people in conversation).

This *engaladhu* and *nambaladhu* business is unique to Tamizh, D would realise. There was subtle etiquette based on one's closeness to the subject that called for appropriate usage. In English, Hindi and Kannada - the other languages she could claim to comprehend - there is 'ours/yours', 'hamare/tumhare' and 'namdhu/nimdhu' respectively. Two clear conditions. Bangalore Tamizh does not bother with this distinction, mixing the 'engaladhu/nambaladhu'. D was stumped by her PG housemate's reference to their shared house as 'engaladhu PG' thus excluding D or her electrician asking 'nambaladha madam veedu?', referring to the work site as D's and his. Six months of the Ulsoor Tamizh meant that D was in for an adventure everyday in her neighbourhood.

With time, D moved out of Ulsoor, leaving behind the local sounds and Tamizh. The sounds in her new environs on MG Road and Indiranagar were infused with linguistic accuracy and sophistication - always a delight to the ear. But D would secretly miss the brash lightness of Ulsoor Tamizh. As resistant as she thought she was, this slang had imprinted on D, and when she went back home, and said *aaamava* for *apadiya* among many other things in the town of Mad

Rascals starting with her own brother who took her for a ride of *nakkal* (sarcasm) and *nyandi* (poking fun).

Kannada Gothu, '09 to '13. Fast-forward a decade into this story - now D is married and has settled in Bengaluru (yes, by now we have reached the 'city-names-being-Indianised' part of history). She lived now in the diagonally opposite end of the city, the parts that sternly had the OG (original gangsters) locals, i.e Kannadigas in *hallis* (villages) and *paalyas* (localities), nestled between housing societies of J-Nagaras - localities starting with the alphabet 'J' and ending with the term '*nagara*' (township/ neighbourhood). She is married into an illustrious Kannadiga family, and English became the language of communication with her inlaws, until she decided to learn their language, out of desperation and boredom.

D evolved a strategy. She would watch her mother-in-law speak, and compared notes with the teleseries running in the background. She would pick words that were a mouthful and exaggerated, and use them boldly in her auto rickshaw rides making instant friends through bus journeys, part-impressing and part-confusing her co-passengers.

She amused people, who stifling their laughter, would correct her, mock her or politely excuse themselves. Every conversation was an opportunity! She deduced some simple comparisons and rules between her mother tongue and mother-in-law's tongue. Words starting with the syllable *pa* in Tamizh, began with the syllable *ha* in Kannada, e.g. *palli/halli* (village), *paal/haal* (milk), *poge/hoge* (smoke), *pagal/hagalu* (day). Words starting with the syllable *va* in Tamizh began with the syllable *ba* in Kannada e.g. *vaa/baa* (come), *venne/benne* (butter), *velli/belli* (silver), *vaayi/baayi* (mouth). Add a 'u' to the end of a known Tamizh word whenever unsure, and make it seem like a Kannada word, e.g. *aval/avalu* (she/her), *magan/ maganu* (son), *magal/magalu* (daughter). With these three simple rules, she would strike a casual conversation, brimming with confidence, and hold it till her brain cells died, exhausted with working the permutations and combinations.

Rodeos, Radios, and Nogroj, '13- '19. Come to think of it, the daily commute in Bengaluru requires superpowers and many commuting Bangaloreans consider their favourite radio jockeys (RJ) as a superpower. To be able to go through the mind-numbing experience that is Bengaluru traffic with zen-like patience and detachment, one needs a strong dose of distraction. The RJs of FM radio are news analysts, counsellors, opinion seekers, pacifiers, comedians and information providers, spicing their

talks with oodles of charm, sarcasm and humour to keep their audience enrapt. D has her favourite RJs too, starting with quick-witted Shraddha of Fever FM Mad Mornings fame; the easygoing evening companion Sriram Sullia from the The SuperHero Show; Disha Oberoi, the passionate voice on current affairs; Rachana of Radio Mirchi for *sakkath* (super) hot information; Kay with his casual cool approach; Prithvi who asks *Prithvi ko Hindi kyun nahi aathi* (Hindi for 'Why doesn't Prithvi know Hindi?'); and Darius Sunawala, who with his gentle personality made Sunday evenings special with deep, meaningful conversations with experts in varied fields.

Who is the *baap* (boss) of them all? Of course, our man Nograj, one of the many avatars of Danish (parody) Sait. D would listen to The Super Hero show on 104 Fever FM, waiting for Danish's prank calls to liven the dreaded wet and long evenings in her car. Danish manages to caricature, criticise, stereotype people and get away with it all, winning hearts and laughs along the way. Is he politically correct? Absolutely not. Relatable? Absolutely yes. It is a brand of comedy that is lowbrow, popular, and representative of Bengaluru! The sounds of Bengaluru through the radio are distinctive and differ in sounds of the city and its voices, and flows of music and traffic. When D visits Chennai, still the Mad Rascals' city, and her brother turns on the car radio, she catches herself thinking, 'Isn't that too much of the same language?'

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Silence of Pandemic, '20. Today, D lives at Silk Board Junction, that infamous Bermuda Triangle for South Bangaloreans (look it up if you are an outsider, and be astonished by the memes and literature on it). Yes. Let that sink in. After 44 days of Covid-enforced lockdown in 2020, she decided to go on a drive. She came back depressed. Going through Silk Board Junction in just seconds, she could count the cars on the road, could hear the hum of birds, and could see the clear sky, yet she came back gloomy. It must have been the 'Silk-Board-without-traffic-is-not-the-same' Syndrome.



Click on the image to watch the video



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Music of the language, '08-'22 - D can now speak, read (very slowly) and write (even more slowly) Kannada. Her Hindi also has improved in leaps and bounds, but will never be good enough. She loves the sound of Urdu, understands Telugu and Malayalam from movies, works and socialises in English, but always thinks in Tamizh. In the past decade-and-a-half, there are some musician friends that connected her to these languages and their beauty, antiquity and depth. In fact, the friends' work is limitless, where language becomes a mere medium to provide meaning. So it is the sound of music overlaid with the sound of language. There is B (Bindhumalini), V (Vasu Dixit), R (Raghu Dixit), P (M.D Pallavi), V (Vedanth Bharadwaj), S (Shilpa Mudbi), G (Gurupriya Atreya) and many more who created this mellifluous sound sphere for D, that she can only associate with Bengaluru - a City of Dins and Tongues, musically so.

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