



Bindu Gopal Rao

What if the best way to rediscover Bangalore is to stop driving through it? Try a city bus instead. Grab a window seat and let Bangalore come to you, neighbourhood by neighbourhood, with its history and character revealing themselves along the way.

In Austin Town, for instance, you may spot the few surviving Nissen Houses, the quick, economical, half-round homes designed by Major Peter Nissen of the British Army during World War I.

Then there is the Bull Temple, home to a granite Nandi carved from a single boulder, one of the largest in the world. It continues to draw pilgrims during the annual Kadalekai Parishe, the groundnut fair.

The trick is that you do not need an elaborate itinerary to discover these slices of Bangalore. City buses can take you there. And, as Arun Bharadwaj argues in his new book *Footboard Diaries*, the journey itself can be as revealing as

the destination.

"That creates a certain sense of familiarity and belonging," he says, something he believes Bangalore is slowly losing.

Bharadwaj has been travelling on public transport in the city since the early 1990s. Over the years, he has watched bus travel become somewhat unfashionable.

But his travels abroad made him look at public transport differently. In many European cities, he noticed, people use public transport naturally to discover the city. Local buses connect them to major attractions, making the journey itself part of the experience.

Bangalore, he says, is no different. "Almost every part of the city, and many of its interesting places, can be reached by public transport," he says.

That thought forms the heart of *Footboard Diaries*, his new book exploring Bangalore's culture and history along the city's public transport routes, including buses,

trains and metro. The book is also an invitation to see Bangalore differently, one journey at a time.

"Footboard Diaries was my attempt to encourage people to get on a bus or train, explore Bangalore differently and, in the process, reconnect with the city," Bharadwaj says.

After all, sometimes the best way to see a city is simply to slow down and look out of the window. Just grab a seat.

A decades-long pursuit

The experiences that form the book have accumulated over two to three decades. "But I started seriously documenting and structuring these memories, routes, stories

and observations for the book about two years ago," he says.

The name *Footboard Diaries* is also intentional. In the early days of BTS and BMTC, buses were often extremely crowded, and travelling on the footboard was almost synonymous with bus travel in Bangalore.

The word "footboard", therefore, immediately evokes a certain era of the city's public transport history. "I liked the idea of using that word because it would resonate with older Bangaloreans who have actually travelled that way, while also being intriguing to younger readers who may have only heard stories about it. And 'Diaries' reflects what the book really is, a collection of journeys, memories, observations and stories gathered over several decades," he adds.

The selected routes were chosen to collectively tell the story of how Bangalore has grown from the centre of the city towards its expanding edges. He deliberately chose routes travelling in different directions and covering different kinds of neighbourhoods.

"I included some legendary routes that many old-time Bangaloreans would remember, some unusually long routes, and even a few routes that no longer exist but have become part of the city's collective memory. I also wanted the book to go beyond buses, so I included the Purple Line of Namma Metro and MEMU train journeys as well. The idea was not to create a transport guide but to use public transport as a window through which one can experience Bangalore," he says.

The city between the stops

Flip through the pages of the book and a host of stories emerge. One tells how prisoners from the old Central Jail helped build

Vidhana Soudha, which later came up on the jail's site. Some routes even surprised the author.

"The history of Route 10A surprised me the most. It is particularly interesting because it is associated with actor Rajinikanth's early days in Bangalore. The route started from Srinagar, which was close to where I used to live, so discovering this connection made the story even more fascinating for me. The route no longer exists and was discontinued several years ago, but its history survives in the memories associated with it," he explains.

The book also raises an important issue - how public transport exposes the environmental costs of the city's rapid expansion.

The city was once surrounded and nourished by three important rivers, Arkavathi, Vrushabhavathi and Dakshina Pinakini. Today, in many places, their presence survives more prominently in railway markings, bus-stop names and Google Maps than on the ground.

Travelling by public transport makes such changes particularly visible because you are moving through the landscape at a pace that allows you to observe them.

"Take Kanakapura Road, for example. Beyond Banashankari, large stretches that were once forested and relatively open have now been completely urbanised. There are similar stories across the city's expanding edges," he adds.

Ultimately, good public transport is not just about moving people faster. It is about making the city accessible, connected and inclusive.

"If *Footboard Diaries* makes people curious enough to get off the beaten path and experience their own city differently, I would consider the book successful," he signs off.

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