

A photograph of Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister of India, speaking at a podium. He has his hands raised in a fist, a gesture of emphasis or protest. He is wearing a white shirt and glasses. The background is a red wall with large yellow Devanagari characters. A blue banner with white text is overlaid on the image.

Opinion

## Modi says Bangalore has become a valley of sin from Silicon Valley. He is not wrong

VIKRAM SAMPATH • 7 May, 2018

## **In Bengaluru, the Congress banks on the poor, while the BJP c its traditional urban support base.**

**T**he one enduring image in recent times that has affected 'Brand B more than anything else is that of huge plumes of smoke rising in right from the middle of the city's biggest lake, Bellandur, spread acres.

Once famed as the city of lakes and gardens, courtesy of its benevolent fc Kempegowda, Bengaluru today is a colossal urban mess symbolising eve that can go wrong with town planning and urban governance. Though a j southern Karnataka, the importance of Bengaluru Urban and its 28 asse goes beyond its status as the political capital.

It is Karnataka's financial fulcrum, home to the biggest and best startups multinational IT and BT companies that have put India on the global ma source of the word 'Bangalored' for global outsourcing.

The city has one of India's most engaged citizenry, with several groups such as Namma Bengaluru Foundation, B.PAC, Janaagraha and RWAs at the forefront of efforts to get citizens heard. Yet, this translates to abysmally low voting participation — only 52.8 per cent in 2013, as against 70 per cent for the whole state.

The city's lakes traditionally harvested rainwater from its catchment and surplus flowed downstream, spilling into the next lake via storm water drains (SWD). But the real estate mafia's illegal lake encroachments, closing of water bodies, dumping of waste and toxic effluents, shoddy desilting and the tampering of the Madivala, Agara, Bellandur, Varthur lakes and valleys in an interconnected lake architecture have all led to flooding in the city every time it rains. More than a dozen lives were lost in incessant rains in

The civic body, Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP), is under the leadership of Congress and the JD (S) and, irrespective of the party in power, it does a job. In April 2017, BBMP started remodeling 146 km of SWDs at Rs 800 crore. Only work has only been completed on 108 km to date. Of a total network comprising 842 km of SWDs, only 389 km has been fenced. Until measures are taken to reduce the quantity of water flowing into SWDs, the problem of flooded roads and water entering people's homes will not be resolved.

On all these fronts, the state government and civic bodies have been caught napping, though the state BJP has failed to effectively capitalise on these issues except now, during the election campaign.

Thomas Friedman might have famously remarked: "I was in Bangalore, the Valley of India, when I realised that the world was flat." But for an average Bangalorean, the roads are anything but flat. Ridden with more than 30,000 potholes, thanks to the contractor mafia, Bengaluru's roads are notoriously non-navigable. Residents placed wreaths on roads to mourn their demise and created splendid art-work with the giant craters, but none of the satire shook political conscience. The proposed white-topping of 29 major roads stretching 93 km ended in another embarrassing disaster for the government and was abruptly terminated.

With a snail's-pace Namma Metro construction and no concrete rapid mass transit systems, Bengaluru has become south-east Asia's second most congested metropolis, with 73.56 lakh vehicles registered in the city (estimated to r

lakh by 2030), most of them caught in endless traffic snarls. The BBMP is struggling with the effective and scientific management of around 4,000 tonnes of solid waste daily with whopping budgets, but is always found wanting. An Indian Institute of Technology study painted a bleak picture, saying Bengaluru would become an unlivable city by 2020, with its groundwater dried up, greenery lost (from 63 per cent in 1990 to 15 per cent now), encroachment on 98 per cent of its lakes, and 90 per cent of its sewage sewage-fed.

All these issues resonate with the enlightened citizenry who came out in thousands of numbers to protest against the ridiculous Rs 2,000 crore steel flyover project of the controversial Bengaluru development and town planning minister, K.J. George. He was accused of being responsible for IAS officer Ravi's suicide and then abetting deputy SP M.K. Ganapathi's suicide. He was forced to resign as home minister but made a backdoor entry into the cabinet.

In a city that has, by and large, been a stronghold of the BJP, which, even in its worst year, 2013, won 12 seats against the Congress' 13, PM Modi's narrative has been to highlight all these issues. Incidents such as the murder of activist Lankesh or RSS worker Rudresh, and the pub brawl involving Youth Congress leader Mohammad Haris Nalapad have added credence to the BJP's accusation of the government worsening law and order and public safety. Modi referred to the city becoming a valley of sin from Silicon Valley.

The Congress banks on the urban poor and hopes that Siddaramaiah's beneficiaries, the 'Bhagyas' will see them through. These welfare schemes range from shoe socks *bhagya*, laptop *bhagya*, *ksheera bhagya* (free milk to anganwadis), *bhagya*, and *danta bhagya* (free dentures) to *arogya bhagya* (free university health), *anna bhagya* (free seven kg rice for each individual in BPL families), *shaadi bhagya* (Rs 50,000 as marriage subsidy for poor women in minority communities).

The BJP contends that many of these programmes rely on central schemes. For example, in the *anna bhagya*, the Centre bears 90 per cent of the costs, and it has asked how Siddaramaiah can take credit by re-branding schemes.

Since August 2017, in Bengaluru, 174 Indira Canteens have been operating, serving breakfast at Rs 5 and lunch/dinner at Rs 10. But a recent survey by the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) and DAKSH notes that betwe

December 2017 and February 2018, only 31 per cent were satisfied with 1 canteens, and that the initiative is unlikely to swing any votes in favour of Congress.

While opinion polls till end-April showed a 5 per cent Congress edge, the Bengaluru will prove to be the game-changer in this assembly election as have now begun to crystallise. With growing disaffection for the incumbent rallies of PM Modi and the BJP tapping into their traditional urban support which way the Silicon city eventually tilts is anybody's guess.

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*This is the fifth essay in a series by the author on the upcoming Karnataka election. Read the [first](#), [second](#), [third](#) and [fourth](#) parts here.*

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