

Examining Bangalore Through Its Food Walks

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Abstract

Across Bangalore, thindi or food walks are bringing strangers together over a shared love for food and the city. These walks are designed around smaller, iconic outlets that define Bangalore's rustic charm. Away from the humdrum of workspaces and the travails of being stuck in traffic, these food walks reveal a different side to the city and its food. Amidst the rise of breweries, patisseries and international cuisine, the tailored food walks offer an interesting menu of butter dosas, puliyogares and tomato chaat with anecdotes about the city's hyperlocal food culture. Beyond the food, these walks enable its participants to examine Bangalore's rapid growth, which has resulted in the bifurcation of the city into older and newer parts. The walks allow them to ruminate over the city's evolution through the lens of food. Apart from the food walks, nature-based walks that focus on the uncultivated foods in the city also merit discussion as they build awareness on conserving green spaces amidst rampant development.

On a rainy November evening, 25-year-old Srinidhi Chaats in Bangalore's Banashankari region witnessed a motley group of food enthusiasts gather around for a bite of its masala puri. From lawyers and software engineers to teachers and entrepreneurs, it was a group that, under any other circumstance, may not have found a reason to brave the rains and come together beside what looked like a run-of-the-mill chaat vendor on the street. But thanks to Ajit Bhaskar, a research scientist by profession and food walk expert by passion, the group knew that they were about to experience one of the city's hidden gems. As they say in the world of chaat enthusiasts, never judge a masala puri by its cover!

Srinidhi Chaats was the first stop for this group, and over the next three hours, they would saunter their way through the streets of Jayanagar, stopping every few meters to savour some of the best chaats—and one ice cream spot in the neighbourhood. Including Srinidhi, six locations were mapped and shared via a WhatsApp Group called '16 Nov Chaat Hopping.' This group was an offshoot and one of the many of the parent group called 'Thindi Capital'.

Launched in 2022, Thindi Capital is home to 900+ food enthusiasts and embodies the name in every way. In Kannada, Thindi stands for a light meal, a tiffin of sorts, and the

banter in the group ranges from food recommendations, fun facts, impromptu dinner plans and vivid descriptions of recent meals—at home or outside. Food is the heart and soul of this nook, a refreshing change of pace from the fear-laden - forward 15 times, WhatsApp messages that usually fill the majority of groups. However, the most crucial reason this group exists is its food walks.

Getting a spot on an impending food walk is serious business. Apart from Bhaskar, a few other food cicerones are present in the group and every once in a while, an announcement will show up for the next walk. The organiser begins registrations by opening slots for first-timers, members who have never been on a food walk before. Once they get a chance to register, the remaining slots are up for grabs, and it is fast fingers first. In a matter of seconds, the organiser gets bombarded with messages, and they close the registrations once they hit their target count. Registered members are then made part of a smaller group where details specific to the walk are shared.

I participated in my first food walk on a balmy Friday evening in February 2024, and since then, I have been curious about the walks for various reasons. What makes a bunch of strangers share a plate of food with equal gusto? Why do these walks consign Bangalore's snarled-up traffic to oblivion? Most importantly, what does it mean to experience the city on foot and through the senses of taste? And how do these walks compare to another set of walks that are making people aware of the rapidly declining green spaces in urban areas? This paper examines these facets of Bangalore's popular food walks.

Oh Bangalore, Where Art Thou?

“What’s the first word that comes to mind when you think of Bangalore? Drop a message and let me know.”

Within minutes of posting this message on social media, I received a mixed bag of responses. “Long rides from the airport,” stated one friend. “Memories of simpler times,” said an old colleague who moved out of the city two decades ago. “Beautiful scene of Bangalore in olden days,” said another expat riding the wave of nostalgia. “Home” and “Family”, a few others chimed in, while some made it more specific and said, “Jayanagar” or “Malleswaram”, referring to their parts of the city. Trees and parks were also mentioned; however, the most common comment was about the traffic!

The “Garden City of India”, Bangalore or Bengaluru as it has been called since 2014, was once known as the ‘Pensioner’s Paradise’. Praised for its pleasant weather, green

spaces and overall peaceful living experience, people pointed to Bangalore as the city to move to once you hang up your boots.

“Is Bengaluru a good city to stay post retiring? Ask me! I should know. I moved in here in 1974 and have lived here for 42 years.,” wrote Gopalkrishna Vishwanath seven years ago, responding to a question on Quora about [Bangalore's changing predilections](#). According to the post, Vishwanath decided to leave his residential area in Bangalore to move to a retirement home 35 km north of the city. Alluding to the city's growing issues with traffic, pollution and rampant development, Vishwanath felt that living in Bangalore is no longer an option for him. “Besides, from being one of the most inexpensive places to stay in the sixties and seventies of the last century, it has become prohibitively costly, and that is a very important factor for retirees to consider, since they will, mostly, be living on their savings and not on their earnings,” he stated.

“While poor planning, corruption and land-grab are universal to urban India, nowhere else has the rapidity of growth bogged down a city as much as in Bangalore,” writes journalist Harish C Menon while examining Bangalore's transformation in his article [“How Bangalore went from being India's most liveable city to a dystopia in the making”](#). Menon explains that Bangalore's past reveals the city's innate preference for a dichotomic existence, and what started as a carefully planned city, turned into a cautionary tale of the consequences of unchecked development.

The city, as we know, came into existence in 1537 when Kempe Gowda, a governor during the Vijayanagara Empire, built the Bangalore Fort, thus moving his capital from Yelahanka to the new city of Bangalore Pete. With only [five percent](#) of the Fort remaining today, the historical structure established some of the city's oldest neighbourhoods like Chikpete, Doddapete and Sultanpete. In 1807, the East India Company arrived and began developing the Bangalore Pete towards the east, establishing the Parade Ground, the Cantonment area and Brigade Road, among others. Between the original and the new Bangalore lay a vast open land which, over time, became home to some of the city's iconic green spaces like Lalbagh, Cubbon Park, Race Course, etc. A plague outbreak in the 1890s led to the exodus towards the city's southern and northern parts, forming the Malleswaram and Basavanagudi neighbourhoods.

The Bangalore of today is a figment of its past. In 2017, [researchers from the Indian Institute of Science](#) released satellite imagery showing how built-up area had increased in the city between 1973 and 2017, going from a mere 7.97% to a whopping 78.7%! As a result, the area under vegetation in the city decreased from 68.2% all the way to 6.46%. Apart from the decrease in greenery, there has also been a 79% decline in

wetlands across the city, the report stated. Percentages aside, those familiar with Bangalore's glorious past need to merely walk through their streets to tell you that this is true. As Bangalore continues to grow and burst at the seams, a new form of dichotomy now marks its identity, one that became evident to me as I accompanied a group of strangers for my second food walk. This time, I was not just a food chronicler but someone trying to examine the city through the lens of these walks.

By The Foot Through The Food

"We often hear about the greenery and the wide roads in Bangalore. But when I moved to the city about six and a half years ago, I wondered where I could see that side of it. Where I live, I mostly see a lot of crowds and dust. There are almost no trees, except within gated communities. Today, I got a glimpse of the Bangalore which we have heard so much about. Look around, it's so calm on a Saturday evening," said Shubransh Shrivastav, a software developer from Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh who now resides in Bangalore's Sarjapura area.

Shrivastav was not the only member of the food walk group to point to this newly evolved dichotomy that Bangalore now wrestles with. Some parts of the city continue to fiercely uphold its virtues in whatever way they can. And there are new parts of the city, a result of its stellar growth in the industrial and IT sectors, that present a land of immense opportunities sans the distinctive characteristics that make Bangalore what it is. Throughout the walk, I became aware of this sense of longing and belonging, not only among people who had moved to the city in search of opportunities but also among those who have lived their life in Bangalore.

For Instructional Designer, Debangana Sen, who hails from Kolkata, these walks are a glimpse into the 'real Bangalore'. "I live in HSR Layout and have explored areas like Indiranagar, Koramangala, etc. I have heard about Jayanagar, but never got the opportunity to visit the locality. Through these walks, I am able to explore these parts of the city and learn about its history and the accompanying cultural nuances. These facets are not that evident in the newer areas. Along the way, tasting different foods is an eye-opening experience for me, and Ajit's descriptions aid in understanding the city better." she adds.

In 2018, researchers from the Indian Institute of Human Settlements published an article that showcased Bangalore's development [through a series of maps](#). Starting with the 'petes' of pre-colonial Bangalore, followed by the British establishments and the influence of the great plague, the article then explained how Bangalore's rapidly growing

population post-independence led to the establishment of residential extensions in Jayanagar and satellite towns in Yelahanka and Kengeri.

The revolutionary Electronic City, which came into existence in 1978, paved the way for modern industrial spaces, laying the foundation for large office complexes interspersed between public and private roads. This also ushered in the city's growth into peri-urban spaces. Whitefield, which the article refers to as a 'quaint village till the 1990s', became home to several gated communities and prominent corporate buildings. On Reddit as well, a user shared [a map of the city from 1995](#) exclaiming how the present teeming parts of the city like Madiwala and Indiranagar were borders and Koramangala was virtually non-existent.

"Tech Bangalore is very different from the one that you see on these walks," comments Amrita, a Content Designer who is on her second stint in the city. "Two decades ago, when I went to school here, everybody went to MG Road and Brigade Road. But now I meet people who have never been to these parts of the city or don't know about the quintessential places like Malleswaram. People are more exposed to areas like Koramangala and Indiranagar," she adds.

As much as these walks make one ponder about the city's rapid growth and development, they are, after all, an exploration of its food culture. Just like the city itself, Bangalore's food culture has managed to steadfastly hold onto its signature Darshinis and its iconic food places like the Central Tiffin Room (CTR), Vidyarthi Bhavan and the popular Mavalli Tiffin Rooms or MTR. The benne dosas, khara baths, kesari baths and idlis coexist alongside Bangalore's growing pub and brewery culture and its fondness for international cuisine. However, these food walks stand out because they offer the participants a view into the city's hyperlocal cuisines by enabling them to sample food from a mixed bag of well-known and lesser-known places. As one participant shared, "Everybody taking a spoon of something new and reacting to it together for the first time is a unique experience!"

Bhaskar explains that the food walks are meant to introduce people to the city's cultural elements while busting common food-related myths. "For most people, typical Bangalore food is what you get in the Udupi restaurants, such as a dosa, a sweet sambhar, and a chutney. But then we take them to a place like Cubbonpet, where the concept of sambhar does not exist and people are shocked. Here, you see rice inside the dosa, which fits the purpose of the community that resides in the region, partaking in a lot of physical labour. The carb-heavy meal sustains them through the day. If you look at south Bangalore, which is primarily a residential area, thematically, this kind of meal

does not make sense. People can indulge, but the food here is on the lighter side considering the needs of the community," explains Bhaskar.

During the chaat walk as well, Bhaskar enlightened the group about how these places add regional influences to the chaat genre. A case in point is the Sapthagiri Chats Centre in Jayanagar 7th Block. This tiny space amidst a residential area is easy to miss and specialises in dry chaat. The place uses tomato slices and dry papdis as the base of the chaat, skipping the signature boiled potato bits that are usually considered non-negotiable when it comes to making a tikki. However, Sapthagiri Chats Centre subverts this notion with their delicious chutneys that elevate the innate flavours of tomatoes or add the right zing to the 'tikki puris'.

"The diversity of food that I encounter in every walk is astounding!" exclaims Raashi, a Nutritionist who works in the social impact space. "You learn so much about the traditional foods of a region and you are also exposed to foods that you normally wouldn't consider. For me, it was something like finding banana stems in chaats. Cultural foods don't gain as much spotlight as the kale and avocados. These walks get people to notice cultural foods and learn more about them," she adds.

It is important to add here that each food walk follows a particular theme. For example, it could be an exploration of the chaat places in the region or breakfast spots. There are also evening tiffin walks and walks that focus on meat-based dishes, explains Bhaskar. But he emphasises that these walks are not an exploration of authenticity. "The food is meant to be enjoyed and not compared in terms of what is authentic and what is not. That is, to me, defeating the purpose of food itself. We end up having the same food in multiple places and participants see that people add their own spin to it. Somebody's khara bath will have sabsige or dill; somebody will add averekkai or flat beans, you may find a tomato thrown in, the dish may vary terms of colour. I don't believe in the whole—this is the best dosa or khara bath place approach. One can pick and choose their favourites." He adds.

Participants are not charged a fee for the walk itself. At the end of one, the total amount spent on food is divided equally and that is the only expenditure for these walks. At times, Bhaskar will collect a small donation of INR 150 per head for the organisation [Rang De](#), which is working towards financial inclusion by funding rural entrepreneurs and agriculturists.

Sights Sounds And Senses

In a 2013 research article, Yi'En Cheng, Lecturer at NUS College of the National University of Singapore, examines the practice of walking ethnography and explains that walking is a 'rhythmic experience' that can 'offer insights to the multiple splices of time-space narratives.' But beyond the act of walking itself, walking ethnography enables one to experience the surroundings through the sensory aspects of 'seeing, hearing and feeling.' These observations allow one to view the city 'from below' or at the 'street level', thus deepening their understanding of the intricacies of urban life. While this may seem like an obvious outcome of walking through streets, it becomes more significant in today's time when the practice itself is becoming a rarity. While sights and sounds are more prominent when you walk for leisure and not out of necessity, adding food to this milieu elevates the overall encounter, impacting one's view of the city.

Take the example of rains in Bangalore. For many of the city's residents, these sporadic downpours usher in woes of commute and significant traffic-related delays en route. However, on the evening of the chaat walk, the rains seemed to have created the ideal ambience for walking through streets of all kinds, navigating traffic and water puddles along the way. Under normal circumstances, the accompanying conversations would have focused on rain-related delays or the lack of infrastructure to handle these downpours. But, today they were heavily influenced by the food, and resonated with the fact that the weather heightened the experience of tasting these foods.

In the book [Food, Senses and the City](#), edited by Ferne Edwards, Roos Gerritsen and Grit Wesser, the scholars state, "Peoples' engagement with food in turn influences the shape and feel of the city, fostering the potential to bring people either together or apart, to connect or repel people from having a connection to place." In an online interview, Gerritsen explains that while there is a burgeoning global interest in food, particularly street food, what makes these local food walks intriguing is that it brings forth people interested in exploring their city. Based on her observations with food walks in Chennai, Gerritsen shares that this means to understand one's city through the lens of food is growing in parallel with a renewed interest in moving away from the generally unhealthy ways of living and closer to exploring the traditional foodways.

"Exploring the city on foot is the polar opposite of zooming past it in a vehicle. Your sensory stimuli are completely different, and you experience everything—the good and the bad in your own way. There are people jostling around you; there is greenery, birds, and garbage on the streets; you experience it all over a few hours instead of a few minutes. You can also walk through nooks and crannies, and because all you have to

do is rely on your feet, you feel empowered with a sense of freedom," explains Sriram Aravamudan, founder of Bangalore Local Walks.

While Aravamudan conducts walks that encompass everything from the history of the place to interesting anecdotes about it, he shares that food plays an essential role in situating the person in a particular place. "One gets the complete sensory experience when food is added to these adventures. When you have a belly full of idli and vada, and then you come to a proper south Indian neighbourhood, you certainly feel more a part of it," he shares.

Adding to Gerritsen's observations on how these walks provide a means to explore a city that one calls home; either temporarily or otherwise, Aravamudan states that a lot of the participants who sign up for his walks are people who have recently moved to the city and are in search of 'that Bangalore'. "People who have lived here for five to eight months and are wondering, where is the Bangalore that you keep hearing about? Where are the parks and the trees?," he says.

He also adds that food is an excellent conduit to make one feel a part of the culture. "Along with the dosas and other regional foods, Bangalore also has a thriving Anglo-Indian and Muslim food culture. The Anglo-Indian food culture is being subsumed into continental food, but it has a distinct identity despite being limited by ingredients. You can discern the British influence. Also, in Shivaji Nagar and Fraser Town, you can find Dakhni food with unique horse gram-based dishes. Most of the people who resided here were horse traders and, therefore, had access to a lot of horse gram. Food provides a window into these cultural nuances," he adds.

Interestingly, both the Thindi Walks and Bangalore Food Walks came into existence post-pandemic. Although veterans like [Gully Tours](#) had been conducting food, among other, walks since 2019, Aravamudan explains that he was approached by the Indian Institute for Human Settlements, Bangalore, to conduct a local history walk as part of their cultural outreach programme in June 2022. The 'Explore Malleswaram' walk received more requests than the number of available spots, highlighting a growing interest in these experiences. Recently, Aravamudan celebrated his 100th local walk!

On the other hand, Bhaskar had been exploring local food joints after his runs and frequently shared his findings on Twitter. "People responded to my Tweets and asked if they could join me for breakfast. That's how we became a gang of four to five people who met regularly for breakfast. A couple of them are also avid runners, so we would run for a bit and then stop to savour different foods," he said. After the pandemic, when it was safe for people to meet, they rehashed their run/breakfast meet-ups and

someone in the group asked if they could add more people. “Suddenly, five became 50, 50 became a 100 and then it just grew exponentially. Now, when I post about breakfast, 10-15 people raise their hands immediately, ready to join me,” says Bhaskar.

While these walks are not a direct consequence of the pandemic, they are influenced by the renewed interest in one’s surroundings due to the lockdown and social distancing norms. “People realised that all they were doing was commuting to work and then going to supermarkets, pubs or movie theatres or planning out-of-town vacations. To identify the place that you live in and sample the local culture—that caught on after the pandemic,” says Aravamudan.

In July 2020, Boston Consulting Group [published](#) the results of their global survey on the pandemic and environmental consciousness and stated that, “in the wake of the pandemic people are more concerned—not less—about addressing environmental challenges and are more committed to changing their own behaviour to advance sustainability.” Similar observations also emerged from [Brazil and Portugal](#), [Malaysia](#) and other parts of the world. While these observations are specific to environmental awareness, a research study by the University of Texas Austin that looked at [pandemic-related impacts on walking frequencies](#) showed that while individuals with more access to resources and greater flexibility could increase their walking during the pandemic, others did so to exercise more or to simply experience the joy of walking. Together, these studies highlight a growing need to connect with one's surroundings and a heightened curiosity about environmental issues. A curiosity that is being addressed by another kind of food walk.

A Different Kind Of Food Walk

The morning of the November 17 Chaat Walk, Shruti Tharayil, who runs the popular Forgotten Greens handle on Instagram, conducted a different kind of food walk in the same city. Around 45 people followed Tharayil as she made her way through Cubbon Park, pointing at the medicinal and edible plants there. Through these ‘Wild Food Walks’ and her Instagram account, Tharayil educates people about the uncultivated edible and medicinal plants commonly found in urban green spaces.

Tharayil joins a legion of chefs, researchers and environmentalists who are making people aware of the uncultivated foods that coexist with them in cities, encouraging a practice known as urban foraging. Urban foraging involves collecting fruits, greens, herbs and fungi from urban green spaces like parks, isolated lands and near water bodies. The practice has immense potential in terms of food and nutritional security, as well as protecting greenery in urban landscapes. “There is this common misconception

that if you want to see wild foods, you must go to a forest or village area to get a glimpse of it. People think that wild foods are not available in cities amidst the concrete jungles. Through my walks, I want to change that perception about cities and highlight that what grows here also offers value,” explains Tharayil.

In a [2021 research paper](#), faculty members from the Azim Premji University examined patterns of urban foraging across four sites in Bangalore city and found that about 76 plant species were foraged from unused lands, parks, farmlands, home gardens and near woodlands in these sites. The study also revealed that most of the foraging was done by women from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. “Redesigning urban environments to create green spaces for forgeable species to flourish, that are made accessible to marginalized communities, is essential for their nutritional and cultural well-being,” the authors stated. Azim Premji University also released a book called, “Chasing Soppu’ or chasing edible greens to shine a spotlight on some of these edible plants.

Tharayil adds that her food walks are just an introduction and do not equip people to begin foraging. “This is just the tip of the iceberg to shift the perspective that urban green spaces hold potential. If people are interested, they can learn more about these plants and develop foraging skills,” she adds.

Citing the example of her last walk in Lalbagh, Bangalore, Tharayil shares how the group spent almost an hour near a tiny patch of land identifying more than 15 wild foods in the area. “One of the participants exclaimed that they were so used to seeing manicured gardens, they never thought it was possible to find edible plants in these places.”

For Indira, a native of Hyderabad who is a frequent visitor to Bangalore, the wild food walk through Cubbon Park was an interesting and nostalgic experience. She identified one of the greens as a sour leaf that her grandmother would pluck from their gardens and make into a daal. “To see that there are so many edible and medicinal plants around us was an eye-opening experience. When we compared notes with someone who had participated in a wild food walk in Lalbagh, we saw that they had encountered plants different from what we did on our walk. It goes to show that there is so much diversity within each region,” she says.

Similar to Indira, Sheetal Bidri, a Homeopath who was born and raised in the city, shared that she was able to identify some of the plants during the walk thanks to her grandmother using them in her kitchen. “We see a rise in terrace gardening and people

trying to grow their own fruits and vegetables. These walks help us see cities as potential areas where we can grow food," she adds,

In 2023, I wrote [an article](#) on the importance of encouraging urban foraging in order to build climate-resilient food systems. Along with Tharayil, I spoke to ecological gardener and Delhi-based forager Kush Sethi and Seema Mundoli, faculty at Azim Premji University. All three of them agreed that a greater awareness of wild foods in urban areas will have a ripple effect on other aspects of urban planning, such as cleaner public spaces, less use of pesticides and efficient use of water. Indira also added that these walks can include collecting plants and cooking with them to show the outcome. In [Food, Senses and the City](#), the editors state that while the heightened awareness towards local foods "has become a catch cry of the sustainable food movement, the role of taste within that shift is not so well explored." Similar to the food walks, adding a sensory experience might help to drive the message forward in this case as well.

Conclusion

The city of Bangalore has witnessed phenomenal growth in the last few decades, which has led to the creation of newer parts within the city that lack the quintessential 'Bangaloreness'. While Bangalore's food walks explore the hyperlocal food culture, they also highlight the city's ongoing dichotomy. Examining the city through the act of walking makes one more attuned to the nuances that exist within the everydayness. Adding food to this experience elevates its sensory engagement. In some ways, food has the ability to alter one's view of the city, making people more aware of the local culture. Bangalore is also witnessing the slow growth of another kind of walk where participants are introduced to the edible and medicinal flora within the city. These 'food walks' reshape the perception of urban green spaces and hold immense potential in driving environmental consciousness.

Glossary

Chaat – popular street food that provides a mix of sweet, tangy and savoury flavours depending on the ingredients.

Puliyogare – Tamarind-flavoured rice

Tomato Chaat – A tomato-based chaat

Masala Puri – A chaat variety that originated in Mysore and is made with green peas curry, puffed rice and spices.

Khara Bath – Savoury breakfast dish made with semolina

Kesari Bath – Sweet dish made with semolina

Benne Dosas – Butter dosas

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