

THIS WAY TO START UP ALLEY

Bandra of Bangalore, GK-I of Delhi, that's Koramangala. This is startup universe, the hub of ideas, inspiration and all the action.



BY AJAY SUKUMARAN IN BANGALORE

T'S half past seven on a Monday evening. The 'footfalls' haven't begun yet in earnest at Prost Brewpub which has five home brews on the menu. A group of three is among the handful sipping their drinks quietly. Cut to half hour later, and the place is buzzing with activity. A large group of 11 troops in for what seems a reunion party. The tables fill up. Some step out onto the balcony with their beer mugs for a smoke. The din throws up snatches of a conversation. "Scaling up...demand hai," one of the trio says to her companions. "...you need that value addition," says another, a bit sceptically. Out comes a notebook and they rummage around for a pen. Then furious scribbling and lots of questions and answers. Another round of drinks. It's been an hour, but the conversation is far from over.

The discussion is about a startup idea (not surprisingly, two of them work with startups; the other, who didn't have much luck with his first venture, is sounding out a new idea) and it's unfolding at a microbrewery on Koramangala's 80 Ft Road. Why? "It's convenient. And, you can get some beer." It's the sort of answer you get anywhere in Koramangala, the place many are calling India's busiest startup locality. The building next door to Prost shelters a couple of startups and there are a few more in the street across the road. They are all over really, and no one keeps count.

1. IT COSTA NOTHING foOfys founder Akshay Kingar hard at work

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CROREMANGALA: THE F

Once the outlier, the locality is now almost city centre. The entrepreneurial spirit resides here

Accel

1 Accel Partners office

2 Nandan Nilekani's house in Koramangala 3rd Block. Along the same street, or in the vicinity, is where his fellow Infosys co-founder **3** Kris Gopalakrishnan lives.

24 Microland's Pradeep Kar, **20** RS member Rajeev Chandrasekhar & **27** Dr Devi Shetty of Narayana Hrudayalaya also stay around.

Practically every main street in Koramangala is teeming with eateries, but **4a** 1st A Cross and **4b** 60 Ft Road in 5th Block exceptionally so



5 Costa Coffee, which doubles up as a hangout for ideas, interviews, funding talks, etc. Occasionally, Flipkart's Bansals have been spotted here as well. Down the road is a **8** Cafe Coffee Day outlet.



6 Prost Brew-Pub and **18** Barleyz: home brews to slake your thirst
Bharathi Layout



7 Momoe, a payments app, whose founders would spend days at **9** Coffee on Canvas, testing their tech, a little over a year ago (living on tea and the cheapest meal on the menu)



11 One of Ola's offices. Not the one founder

Bhavish Aggarwal and co-founder Ankit Bhati work from. The duo, however, live in Koramangala.

Towards MG Road, the heart of Bangalore

KORAMANGALA 7th Block

KORAMANGALA 8th Block

KORAMANGALA 6th Block

KORAMANGALA 5th Block

Hosur Main Road

Hosur Road

10 Wipro veteran Ashok Soota's residence

St Anthony's Friary Church

KORAMANGALA

St John's Medical College



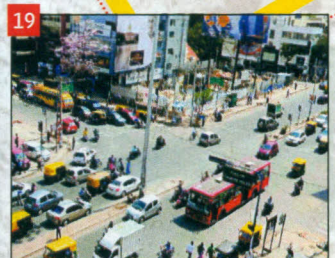
12 Parcelled.in, a logistics startup that will bundle up anything and ship it, on demand. It raised \$5 million funding last year. **13** Furlenco, an online furniture rental startup.

To Electronics City, Bangalore's IT hub

14 Qwikilver, a startup managing gift cards which has Amazon as one of its investors

15 Robert Bosch Engineering and Business Solutions

KORAMANGALA 2nd Block



IGHT ADDRESS

plenty, whether in terms of the people or in the form of ideas.



16 The Forum, one of Bangalore's first malls. At the locality's other end is **21** The Oasis Centre.

17 The Koramangala Club

19 With Koramangala's horrendous traffic, you don't need to worry about missing a landmark. But this one, popularly known as Sony World junction, marks your entry into the startup hub.

zipdial

22 ZipDial, which Twitter acquired last year, was located here



23 ISPIRT (Indian Software Product Industry Round Table), a think-tank.

25 Once M.F. Husain's house stood here. Now, it's a restaurant.

26 The Juke Box, possibly Koramangala's oldest sizzler joints.



28 Flipkart's first office—a two bedroom flat from where Sachin and Binny Bansal (the two are not related) started up.

29 Dotcom boomer Planetasia was located here

30 The office Infosys moved into, in 1983

The tech park corridor towards Indiranagar, another startup hub

Less than 50 feet away is a Costa coffee outlet where headphone-wearing youngsters keep at their laptops all day. Twenty-seven-year-old Akshay Kingar says he knows of at least 25 people who work from there. He's one of them. His firm foOfys creates mobile apps and his team sits in an office 10 km away where he hasn't been to in over a month. He doesn't need to: he spends Rs 12,000 a month to collaborate with his team—with tools like Wunderlist, Slack, Trello, Mockup, AWS—to be AWOL. Akshay conjures up another app to time his work cycle. An average smartphone owner in India uses 17 apps, but he, being in the business, has 300 on his phone. It's the pomodoro way of working (something at least is from the '80s) where one takes a two-minute break after every 25 minutes

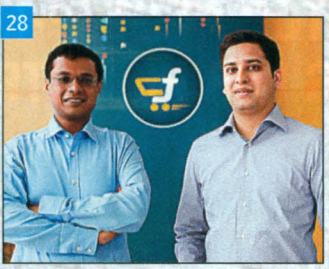
Pradeep Kar
CMD, Microland



"The ecosystem matters, it doesn't matter who succeeds or fails. We need a culture of people starting companies, failing, and starting again."

of work without being interrupted by phone calls, texts or conversation. Akshay hopes to do at least eight cycles. Is that a good working day? "That's superb. I'll celebrate," he smiles. Akshay carries an iPad, a Chinese-made One Plus Two phone, and a PNY power bank his friends call "the generator". He sips three coffees during his seven hours or so at Costa's—lunch packed from home is had in the car—and calls it a day by 7 pm. It's when Koramangala is bustling and the traffic is piling up.

For those wondering what Koramangala is, let's slow down a bit. **It's a neighbourhood in Bangalore just under four sq km divided into eight blocks.** Much like Greater Kailash-I in Delhi or Bandra in Mumbai. It was until the '80s pretty much an outlier despite being just 10 km from the city centre. The few residents—many defence personnel or IAS officers—still needed to make the trip, down a lonely stretch, into town for an evening out or to catch a movie. Then, the IT wave hit Koramangala and nothing was



Graphic by PRASHANT CHAUDHARY

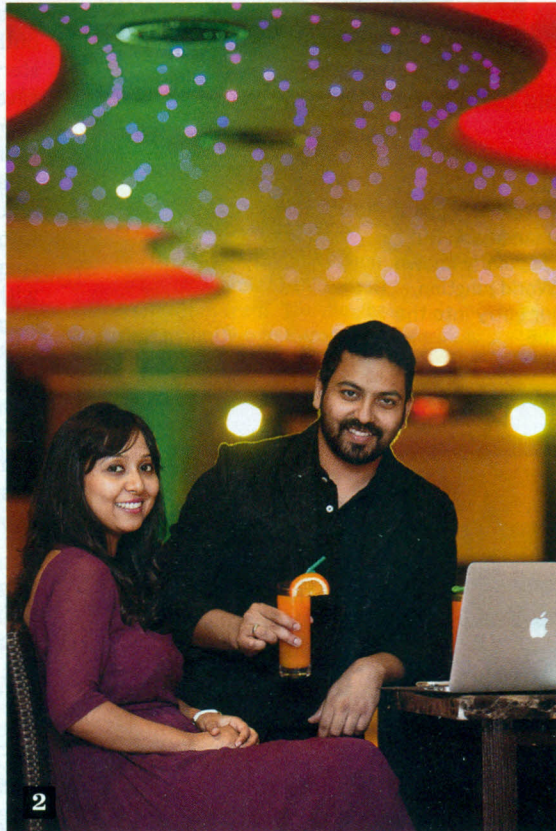
ever the same again.

Koramangala happened to be the closest, nicest, liveable, workable, affordable locality along the southern edge of the city hugging the highway leading into Electronics City, then a newly laid-out industrial estate close to the border with Tamil Nadu. The early IT services companies needed to be close to Electronics City for connectivity. Besides, it wasn't a conservative place, and the residents didn't frown on those working late hours (it was difficult, though, early IT hands recall, to find a cha vendor as you emerged from the graveyard shift). Infosys relocated there. Several outsourcing firms sprung up subsequently, working out of small offices until they grew too big and moved out into sprawling campuses elsewhere.

They left behind a place prime for the consumer internet economy. The big daddy in Koramangala now is Flipkart, which started out of a 2BHK apartment in the area. "What Bangalore is to India, Koramangala is to Bangalore," says Ashok Soota, an IT industry veteran and a long-time resident of Koramangala 6th Block. Four years ago, he had 15 colleagues drifting in and out of his house, busy bringing Happiest Minds, the venture he embarked on at age 69, to life. The spurt in startup activity is unmistakable, he says. "It's not the only game in town, there's bustling activity everywhere. But it is certainly the largest and most vibrant part."



AS booms go, Koramangala has had the worm's eye view, seeing everything ground



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up. So it was with the dotcom bubble in the '90s too (the locality was home to many of the early internet boom names like Indya.com or Planetasia.com). Many have prophesied the same about internet version 2.0 because of the big bucks at stake and contentious business models. There's a slight difference, though, as others reckon.

"The difference between then and now is... there is a real market, real transactions happening," says Pradeep Kar, one of the original poster boys of the early IT boom,

and of Koramangala. He should know. In his late 30s then, and bearded, Kar became known for his knack for spotting new tech trends. Around '97-98, he decided to change Microland's hardware business to enter the internet economy, and launched Planetasia.com, one of the country's first internet professional services providers building websites for companies, then Indya.com and NetBrahma, all of which he sold in 2002 following the dotcom bust.

"If you look at the (new) millionaires and billionaires, they are all focused on the domestic market. In our time, there was no opportunity in the domestic market. We had to find markets outside India because there was no way we'd survive selling to India," says Kar, who lives on 13th main Koramangala 3rd Block, the same street as Nandan Nilekani, Kris Gopalakrishnan and Rajeev Chandrasekhar.

Kar recollects how Microland's office was only the second commercial property on Koramangala's 80 Ft Road at the time—inexpensive real estate was obviously a big draw for all the IT firms then. Bangalore's

poshest pads back then (and even now) were in places like Sadashivanagar or Lavelle Road, not to mention the heart of town, MG Road. Koramangala's now surely in that club, commanding upwards of Rs 15,000 per sq ft, and many a sexagenarian who passed up the chance to buy property there back in the '80s because it was such a lonely place has since rued the decision. But it is still possible to rent small houses that can double up as offices, and the neighbouring localities are full of

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3

paying guest accommodation.

Broadly, there's a three-tier startup ecosystem in Koramangala. At the top are the very deep-pocketed ones like Flipkart whose valuation is guessed to be around \$15 billion. The e-tailer has several offices in Koramangala, which, as some joke, are the new landmarks for startup janata. (In 2017, Flipkart will relocate to a new large facility being built elsewhere in Bangalore.)

"Then, there are hundreds of other companies that, flush with funds, flush the funds in large offices, wall art and fuzball tables. Their employees are hot (as in driven) and the culture is cool. It is also an in-thing to swear a lot. And generally be seen as opinionated and ballsy. There is a whole subculture here that is fascinating and scary in equal proportions," wrote Tyagarajan Sundaresan, 32, in a recent, light-hearted piece on medium.com.

Below this layer are 'gazillion' startups, like his, which don't have VC funding but

can afford a name board and a few employees. And, which are looking to shift up to the next level. Sundaresan spent four years with Flipkart and later had a stint with Amazon before founding his startup ChalkStreet, which crowdsources learning courses online and offers them for a fee. It counts some 30,000 learners on its site as of now and the team is having conversations with investors for Series A funding. Some of the discussions take place at their office, some at the investors' and some at just any place in Koramangala. ChalkStreet's team of 15 comprises many

freshers earning in the range of Rs 5 lakh per annum, which he says is better than average for most engineering campuses.

Koramangala, and its sibling HSR Layout (whose 27th main, many people say, is the startup lane now), are the two localities young tech-heads from across the country are gravitating to. It's the vibe, or what many people call the cluster effect, that's drawing people here. An Android app developer would command anything between Rs 8 lakh and Rs 15-20 lakh per annum (for the front end) while iOS developers are more expensive. The workplace isn't anything like a large IT park where employees are ferried to by the busload. Nor is it the shackled-to-the-desk 9-5 routine. If anything, the place is buzzing with startup chatter—who raised how much, who is doing what, which is the hottest startup at the moment etc. (Swiggy, a food delivery startup, is among the hottest, we're told, though it moved out of Koramangala sometime ago to a new office nearby).

So, maybe the conversation at the pub is actually an interview. Or the one at the cafe an investor meet. Or, as some have experienced, you could be getting a business proposal on a chit from the next table. "Mostly

Nandan Nilekani

ex-UIDAI chairman



"It's a continuum. The IT revolution and jobs created by firms like Infosys et al. I meet companies whose founders have worked in these places."

- 2. EAT, SHOP, LOVE Oindrila and husband Shayak run this portal
- 3. DIL MANGE MOMOE Ganesh, Neelesh, Utkarsh, Karthik and Aiman



4

everybody is fearless, with nothing to lose, right? So walking up to somebody and saying 'I heard you talking about this, do you have something for me?' is a good chance people would take. Nobody is going to take major offence to that. You'd never do that in a large company," says Vivek Karthikeyan, who spent two decades with IT companies in Bangalore before getting together with Venkatesh Srinivasan in 2013 to start a venture in quizzing, a passion they share.

Their firm Nexus Consulting conducts quizzes for corporates and creates content for schools, working out of a house-turned-office that shares space with a couple of start-ups. Nexus is still a small operation, but has been profitable from day one, says Srinivasan. "Obviously, not counting the fact that we've let go of significant corporate salaries for this...so if we tapped our actual salary, it would not be profitable."



*"Bell bottoms, high heeled shoes
More than meets the eye"*

4. STARTUP HOUSE Susheel (in cast), with co-founder Smeet and Radhika

*"I've got my wheels I've got my style
I'm cruising down this aisle
This is where I lose myself"*

When Bangalore band Thermal and a Quarter were singing this verse about Brigade Road in 2002, the one-way street was still the city's hippest 'aisle'. Or let's say the only one. It was where everyone went to, for entertainment. Not anymore, though. The hippest places are now spread out across many of the city's once-residential localities which are teeming with restaurants, bars, malls. The Forum, when it opened in Koramangala in 2004, was

Ashok Soota
*Executive chairman,
Happiest Minds*



"This is what I'd call the cluster effect. It's like Silicon Valley is a cluster. Koramangala is becoming a cluster within a segment."

among the city's first malls.

When Ashok Soota came to stay in Koramangala 6th Block in 1984, there was just one other house in the vicinity, and the bank of some 20 software companies across a park in front of his home was a coconut grove. The area has multiple pluses for him. "I just love the fact that the Forum (mall) is so nearby. I don't see tons of movies in a year, 3-4 maybe. But I'd never travel to see a movie now, I won't spending 40 minutes of my time for that."

Now, the main streets of Koramangala and the neighbouring locality of Indiranagar, an equally busy startup hub, are touted to be among the biggest food and drink clusters in the country. The sort of hunting grounds that companies like Momoe, a one-year-old mobile payments startup, have flourished in. Momoe's business idea is quite simple: don't use cash, use the app to pay at a restaurant, bakery or grocery. That way, a waiter at a restaurant doesn't have to hand the diner a bill or bring him the card swipe machine (if it's a group going dutch, the app splits the bill among them and each one pays on his phone.)

The startup, which does 7,000 to 8,000 transactions per week at present, has so far

raised \$1.2 million in funding and wants to expand operations to 4-5 major cities over the next 12 months. "There are a bunch of business guys in any kind of startup. Usually they come up with the idea or want to do something and they go around looking for tech guys," says Karthik Vaidyanathan, co-founder of Momoe, who was earlier with a venture capital firm. The reverse is also true. What generally happens, however, is that the tech guys and the suits operate and socialise in independent silos.

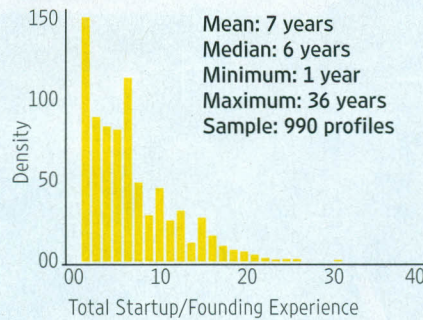
In general, Bangalore's large tech-savvy, young population provides good testing ground for new ideas. Radhika Mohta, 28, moved into Bangalore from Mumbai in mid-2015 when her fiancé Susheel Kumar (they got married in December), an IIT Bombay alumnus, found it was the best place from which he (along with co-founder Smeet Bhatt) could explore an idea for a virtual reality platform. In Mumbai, there were lots of daily chores she did the plain, old way—ride the local train home and pick up groceries near the railway station. That has changed. "In the last few months I have been wanting to have as much of a faceless interaction as possible. I don't want to deal with an autowallah telling me 'ki itna extra lagega'," she says. So she started using the Ola app for an auto, BigBasket or Grofer's grocery deliveries once in a week and Brekke to order breakfast home once in a while.

In the apartment she stays in, the dining table, lamp shade, washing machine, refrigerator, beds and sofa set have been rented online from Furlenco (also a Koramangala startup) for Rs 10,700 a month. It's a four-bedroom duplex flat located in Ejipura, a crowded, lower-middle-class locality lying to the northeast of Koramangala, shared by five people. "This

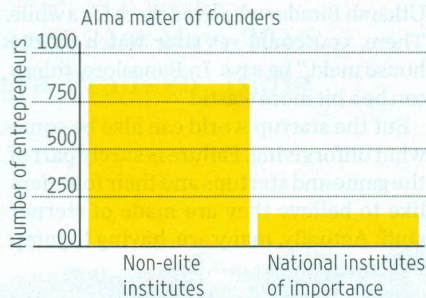
WHO THEY ARE

Based on a NITI Aayog survey of startup founders in Koramangala

WORK EXPERIENCE



EDUCATION



is a startup house," says Susheel. That's because part of the flat is occupied by fellow IITian Xitij Kothi, co-founder of Parcelled.in, a personalised courier service which raised \$5 million in funding this year.

But residents also don't take too kindly to restaurants and commercial establishments cropping up amidst their homes. In Koramangala 3rd Block where Pradeep Kar and Nandan Nilekani stay, the local residents' welfare association went to court last year over a breakfast restaurant started

by a group of youngsters, which incidentally included the son of an IT industry veteran. "Now, citizen activism in general is at a high. Today, the Koramangala 3rd Block RWA is a very active association of people who file PILs, prevent people from building commercial establishments etc," says Microland's Kar. "Let's assume I decide to create a restaurant atop my house, I'm sure someone will file a PIL against me."



IT'S 7.30 pm on a Saturday and Koramangala 80 Ft Road is a long line of stationary lights. It takes the better part of an hour to cross the 1 km-stretch with two traffic signals. It's no better on weekdays. For, Koramangala is pretty much a central area now. To its west is the large residential locality of Jayanagar; Indiranagar is to its northeast. So, people are criss-crossing it on their way home from work.

The startup ecosystem is pretty much spread across Bangalore these days but why was it Koramangala that turned out to be a sort of mascot, more so than Malleshwaram, for instance, where the Indian Institute of Science is located, or even Electronics City, where the IT industry is based? A bit of history might help. For very long, Bangalore was a set of multiple, inward-looking groups—the old market area surrounded by Kannada-speaking residential localities, an English speaking cantonment area and then, later, several townships of public sector factories—that didn't mingle much (but it was, as economist Narendar Pani believes, sometimes mistaken for being cosmopolitan).

That changed in the '80s as the demarcations melted away, setting, in a way, the stage for the software-led economy that was to come. Electronics City didn't

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develop into a residential hub while Koramangala had a more malleable culture where the new IT industry could easily settle into. Of course, the IT industry started to become vocal about civic issues and urban policy around 15 years back when the outsourcing boom really took off. "The silos definitely exist, there's no doubt about it," says Pani.

Of course, many people work late, some shift their timings around to fit in other commitments. But getting the job at hand done is of utmost importance. For many, like Oindrila Dasgupta, who runs the portal Eat, Shop, Love, it can be quite a juggling act because she has two toddlers to care for. Some of that also possibly explains why a city like Bangalore has a thriving startup culture. It probably is more forgiving than, say Mumbai, says Momoe co-founder


5. SLEEPY, DID YOU SAY? A view of Koramangala by evening

Utkarsh Biradar who lived there for a while. "There, you could set your watch by the house maid," he says. In Bangalore, things can be a bit more elastic.

But the startup world can also be somewhat unforgiving. Failure is surely part of the game and startups and their founders like to believe they are made of sterner stuff. Actually, many are, having to jump

several hurdles, not the least of which is getting money at the right time and, of course, spending it right. Often you can hear how someone is pivoting his business idea, which usually means the original idea didn't work out.

In general, Nandan Nilekani says the classic Indian unwillingness to take risks is changing. "Today we are seeing the same energy from startups, and more and more people are willing to become entrepreneurs, and more and more are willing to give up established jobs in large companies and take the risks," says the former Infosys and Aadhar man who is presently working on an education startup. "In fact, from my house in Koramangala, I think there are a hundred companies within walking distance. It's the epicentre of innovation."

Nothing perhaps put things in perspective better than a classic Bangalore idiosyncrasy: anyone who has asked for directions in this city would know. If you reach a dead-end, you can still turn left or right. 

Bruce Lee Mani

Musician



"A lot of modern internet businesses don't have the sort of wide-eyed wonder about doing something. It's all about the business plan."

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TWO WHEELER IS FOR TWO.....NOT FOR
TOO MANY**

**ROAD
SAFETY
INITIATIVE**