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Sunday, Jun. 18, 2006

My Lost World

By Aravind Adiga / Mangalore

The man had been watching me from his balcony for several minutes. He was curious, perhaps even a little worried. Finally, he came to his door and shouted, "What do you want?" I smiled apologetically. "I'm looking for my home," I said. "I think you're living in it."

With a frown, he listened. My family, I explained, had built a home here in the neighborhood of Kodialguttu just before I left Mangalore in 1991. This was the first time I had come back, and I wanted to see that house again. I had been searching Kodialguttu for half an hour, but I hadn't found it. In fact, I didn't recognize the neighborhood at all. Our house had been built on a paddy field, and you could see it from a couple of miles around. Instead of that paddy field, I now saw shopping malls, colleges, apartment blocks and a giant convention center sheathed in glass. The man's house was the only thing that looked anything like my old home. Had he bought it from my father? "I'm sorry," he said. "I built it myself eight years ago."

He put on a shirt, and together we went looking--in vain--for my house. I told him how bewildered I was by the way Mangalore had changed. It happened so fast, he said. In the beginning he had been proud that Mangalore was becoming a city, but now he gets confused. "Even we wonder sometimes what city this is that we're now living in," he said.

The pulse of India beats fastest in megacities like Bombay. But to understand how quickly the economic boom is creating a new country, you have to visit places that few foreigners have heard of--places like Mangalore. Back in 1991, when I left, about 300,000 people lived there. Since then its population has doubled. But that doesn't begin to describe its transformation. A decade of rapid growth has produced shopping centers and high-rise apartments--and most of the construction has taken place in the past five years. Old houses have been uprooted, replaced by bars and restaurants. The city's first multiplex cinema

is about to open. A giant Smirnoff poster in the center of town announces, LIFE IS CALLING. In Indian cities like Mangalore, answering that call has brought consequences no one could have foreseen.

Located on India's southwest coast, Mangalore is hot, hilly and carpeted in coconut palms. When I was growing up, young men of all religions were united by shared values of hard work, enterprise and a desire to get out of Mangalore as quickly as possible. My brother left when he was 18. I left when I was 16. Many of those who got out never returned. There was no need to go back because the place never seemed to change.

But the past decade has seen extraordinary change--and extraordinary excess--in Mangalore. The fastest-growing industry is education. During the 1980s, higher education became the only way out of a broken system for many frustrated young Indians. The best doctors and computer engineers had a fighting chance of nabbing a lucrative job offer from Silicon Valley or Manhattan. So boys and girls throughout India streamed into colleges and institutes, where they studied calculus and organic chemistry with a passion that was probably unrivaled anywhere in the world. In recent years, the trend has accelerated. Mangalore had one medical college when I left; it now has five as well as at least four dental schools and 14 physiotherapy colleges. Some 350 schools, colleges and polytechnics are listed in its yellow pages.

A lot of the new colleges, predictably, focus on computer education. They tempt young recruits with the prospect of rewards that would have been inconceivable before the outsourcing boom. A few outsourcing companies, including tech giant Infosys, have opened shop in town. A flood of new money has arrived, thanks to outsourcing jobs, surging real estate prices and expatriate remittances. As a result, many locals have become middle-class, upper-middle-class or even rich. One ad for "premium luxury apartments" promises, IF YOU'RE IN LIMELIGHT, THIS SUITS YOU THE BEST. AND IF YOU'RE NOT, THIS PUTS YOU IN LIMELIGHT.

The city's new affluence manifests itself in subtle ways as well. Leo Fernandes, one of my old teachers, told me, "All the other teachers have bikes. Some even have cars. Only I still walk." Others spoke in a similar manner of a simpler life that was disappearing. I met neighbors, relatives and classmates, and each had done well in some way--one had his own house, another a car. But each also had some sorrow we could hardly have imagined. A Catholic friend's daughter had married a Hindu, and her family no longer spoke to her. A Hindu friend's daughter had been divorced by her husband. Divorce, extramarital affairs, interreligious marriages, homosexual flings--the doors of experience had swung open in Mangalore. The small city had grown up.

At the Nehru Maidan, an open space in the center of town, I watched kids playing cricket. Among the spectators was a group of drifters and homeless men, some carrying rolled-up mattresses. Most

Mangaloreans I spoke with shrugged off the arrival of so many poor people and said they were itinerant immigrant workers, drawn by the construction boom. Nobody, it seemed, was ready to acknowledge that the city might have a permanent underclass that the boom had left behind.

For better or worse, Mangalore's fate is in the hands of outsiders. "Tier 2 cities" like Mangalore are believed to hold the key to the future of the Indian outsourcing industry. With wages rising in big cities like Bangalore and Bombay, tech companies must expand fast in lower-cost cities. But Mangalore shares the problem of other small cities with big aspirations: it's not an exciting place to live. "Lifestyle is a challenge when you're trying to get people from outside to stay here," Sudhir Albuquerque told me. Albuquerque, an Infosys executive, was taking me around the company's Mangalore campus, the most significant tech presence in the city. "There are things you can do here that you can't dream of doing in a big city like Bangalore. For instance, you can still go home for lunch, which I do on most days." But even that may become a thing of the past. Infosys is planning to move to a new, larger campus soon. From there, Albuquerque said sadly, he wouldn't be able to pop home at lunchtime.

Before leaving Mangalore, I decided to visit Court Road once more. For me, that small, steep, winding road--which connects my old primary school, St. Aloysius, to the high school up the hill--is the physical embodiment of a rite of passage. I had gone up this road as a 13-year-old on my first day at high school. From the top of the hill, I had a fine view of the city. Two decades ago, when you stood at a high point like that and looked down on Mangalore, the city's puny buildings all vanished, submerged beneath a canopy of coconut palms. That was when you felt a sense of contempt for Mangalore and dreamed of going somewhere big. But now you see concrete towers with dozens of metal rods sticking out of their sides, as if they were ripping a path for themselves through the trees. You cannot feel contempt for Mangalore now. You feel a sense of awe at how profoundly it has changed. But if you look a bit longer at the scene, you cannot avoid a faint inkling of something like fear.

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