GRAPHIC: PRAKASH S

NET AND THE CITIZEN

Oh yeah! We all like to blow hot and cold but praja.in is one site where all ravings and rantings get deleted. Ashte! It's a platform for like-minded people to network and address issues concerning B'lore that really matter, says **Renuka Phadnis**

It (the new Bengaluru International Airport) isn't a jazzy airport as such. Stress has been laid on using spaces and a flowing functional design. With plenty of entry gates, check in counters, and security check points (scanners), you could get off the cab and hit the departure gate quickly enough.

They scan all bags once you check them in, so no annoying must-scan-bags-before-check-in queue.

But...they could have done better with either one more set of escalators to climb onto the security gates or perhaps a wider staircase than what they have. I can see some crowding happening there.

Another area which seemed a little short on space was baggage claim ...we saw three conveyor belts in the domestic area. They said it can easily be expanded if required and that they can always use the international ones for domestic flights as well. But assuming 10 flights arriving within minutes of each other, 120 passengers per plane, and 60% of them with bags, you are looking at about 700-800 people standing in that hall. Seemed a little tight to me.

About the factory look and all controversy, I think those comments are overdone. The whole big hall is lit well with natural light. Even though they have glass walls around and glass in the roof as well, it felt hot only inside the aerobridges where the A/c wasn't on. I think the energy aspects of the building have been designed well. No glass for the sake of showing off and no artificial lighting where it's not required.

These are excerpts from www.praja.in, a website that addresses Bangalore's civic issues

While there is no dearth of websites dedicated to Bangalore and its problems galore, some of them get noted as they go beyond the raves and rants. On www.praja.in, you get similar information on the city's civic issues — sharp, with constructive suggestions on how to deal with the challenges. Carping is noticeably absent. The website is notable also for a few other reasons.

Within a relatively short span of time, it appears to have attracted the attention of people who matter. The website is so entirely a creature of the net that its founders have never met each other. While one founder lives in India, the other two are based in UK and USA. All three are of the firm belief that the issues of the city should remain in the foreground and not be overshadowed by anything else including themselves.

The founders' idea has been to network, to get like-minded people to collaborate on civic issues as people find it difficult to meet each other. The India-based founder says, "Most of the self-help groups for civic issues are made of old people, none with young, IT workers." Being in IT himself, he and the two others thought of going online. He says, "We are all in our own worlds, making big money and getting time is not easy. For us, time is money. We can do our bit by setting up a website."

The aim of the website is to create a serious enough resource for bureaucrats to dip into and to decentralise local government by allowing people to participate. Gossiping and cribbing about the city's problems is unacceptable on the website. People keep sending in content which one of the founders looks through while all three founders watch over the website. Any content that adds no value to the site or defames another individual is knocked off.

The website founders are clear that there is no lofty goal. One founder says, "Our goal was never to 'make a change'. The aim is to get like-minded folks together." He says, "The city's roads and traffic are bad but I cannot start building the road. I can't start directing the traffic. But I can make some meaningful suggestions to the guys who are doing it."

He says, "Don't expect us to do it.

We are only 'enabling' those who do it, by helping them to join energies." However, the owners are working towards objectives such as making the site, in the next three years, a repository for all information on Bangalore traffic.

The site's archives have information on logistics theory, user experiences of various public transport systems, issues that go into minute details of policy on public transport, and traffic patterns in the city areas.

"I don't know if praja is a cause, it is more of a platform," says another of the founding three. There is no one cause that 'praja' will endorse and no cause that it will censor. Praja also has no official theory, except that Praja members are free to take up and propogate any theory and any cause within the obvious limits of decency and decorum, he says.

Through Praja, he has come to know that peers can help learn, understand and analyse different aspects of civic life. And online is good because it helps information and knowledge span space and has more temporal permanence.

THE BEGINNINGS

The website was set up in June 2007 and the founders did not intend to announce it. They just told a few friends about the website. One of the founders of the website based abroad writes that the inspiration for praja happened when all three were individually discussing the city's issues on various online fora and felt the need for a dedicated website that serves to connect citizens who care

and want to participate. He writes, "It was the love for our cities and passion for the civic issues that made us take this step."

The other founder says that when he started, he was trying to understand certain issues that Bangalore was facing then. He found he did not understand most of the online documents he found online and would end up looking for further explanations and contexts, searching more and reading more. Finally, it ended with his meeting one of the other founders online. He joined his discussions. "This was a wonderful thing," he says. He would get contexts to his questions and opinions would be ripped apart. "I ended up learning a lot in this peer-to-peer environment. And I was hooked," he says.

Suddenly the discussions within that group began getting serious and they decided the website needed some structure, not too much but just enough to be sustainable and maintain decorum.

ANONYMITY

The founders are faceless. No names are mentioned anywhere on the website. The group is very clear. It says, "We do not want to project ourselves. We want nothing to overshadow the cause, especially individuals." One founder said, "praja is a peer group. Without our members, which includes us too, the website owners would just own a piece of software."

EFFECTIVE

The website has received mails and

feedback from DGPs, BMTC authorities and diplomats. Recently, the Bengaluru International Airport Authority (BIAL) even took along 35 people, through this website, for a recce of the new airport.

Currently, one person works and manages the website part-time but does not mind doing the work of the website full-time if there are ways to make it profitable. The website has refused some offers for advertising from a couple of portals because of the site's original goals. "The original aim should not get diluted," says one of the founders.

ENTIRELY VIRTUAL

The trio has not met face-to-face though they have seen each other on the Webcam. Everything for the website has happened through the net without the three ever being "even once in the same room anytime". The overseas founder writes, "Thanks to the Internet, we can still be here even while being there."

The group does not think geographical distances should prevent anyone from doing their bit towards their beloved city. It is the passion towards our cities that unites us and we use the geographical diversity of our members to everybody's advantage, he writes. He says, "Having been exposed to the best practices from cities all over the world gives praja members a very holistic view of the problems our own cities face. It is as important to step back and take a wider look as it is to see from within."

Most of the members on the website are very widely read and travelled, which has a significant bearing on the high quality of discussions on the site. "We are glad today that we have a healthy mix of people from inside and outside the city to provide their perspective on what might work and what might not," he says.

FUTURE PLANS

In the coming years, the trio wants to expand to other cities and towns in India. There are a lot of people who are knowledgeable about their cities and care enough to participate, says a founder. He adds, "The Internet only makes it easier for these passionate people to connect to each other and Praja wants to facilitate that through the years to come."