

International news

India's silicon city booms to busting

As IT firms pour into Bangalore, the city's infrastructure is struggling to keep up

Randeep Ramesh in Bangalore

On the road to Koramangala, a group of workmen in hard hats stand staring into a six metre deep hole. A line of cars clogs the tree-lined street, engines idling in the sun.

TR Ravichandran drives 40kms each day in and out of Koramangala, the heart of Bangalore and the software capital of India. "The whole city is coming to a halt," said the IT worker. "My journey to the office used to take 45 minutes, but now lasts two hours."

"My wife works at the southern edge of the city, and she has the same problem."

"When we are leaving home at seven and coming home at nine or 10 at night, what chance is there of a decent family life?"

More than 100 firms from outside India, including Microsoft, Google and Reuters, set up offices in Bangalore last year. Hundreds more have farmed out white-collar work such as call centres to Indian companies in the city. Drawn by a booming economy and a temperate climate, a large slice of middle-class India is setting up home in this high-technology hub. The result is that Bangalore is Asia's fastest growing city, albeit one that is unable to cope with the speed of its own progress.

Behind the facade of gleaming steel towers, shopping malls and industrial parks, lies a conurbation groaning under traffic jams, power cuts and spiralling property prices. "We are simply unable to deal with this form of rapid urbanisation. There are 60,000 unfilled potholes on Bangalore's roads, and yet we are seeing more and more families in the city with two cars. This kind of development is not sustainable," said Abdul Aziz, a professor and former member of the planning board of Karnataka, the southern state of which Bangalore is the capital.

The city's software industry will this year bring in the equivalent of £3.3bn in revenue; it has become increasingly concerned and vocal that its future cash flow is disappearing because of inaction by the state and city governments.

Mike Weston, managing director of Logica, a British software company, warned reporters last week that Bangalore's infrastructure was "deteriorating" with potentially disastrous results.

Another multinational, Philips, said there was a dire need for an international airport and a new railway. "[Instead] we have no projects and no results here," said the head of the company's Bangalore operations, Bob Hoekstra.

Critics point out that although it is nearly five months since state elections, the state government has yet to decide who is going to be the IT minister — when



The 28 hectare campus built by the IT company Infosys in Bangalore; work is just being completed on its 41st office building Photograph: Pablo Bartholomew/Netphotograph

Bangalore accounts for nearly half of India's hi-tech exports. A Congress coalition retained control of the state and hence city, in voting which reflected national issues.

To escape what they see as state government indifference and run-down infrastructure, many "new economy" companies have built their own campuses on the southern fringes of the city.

Far from the Bangalore's crowded narrow streets and alleys, there are wide empty roads, stand-alone water tanks, back-up generators, and back-ups for the back-ups.

The gleaming 28 hectare campus of Infosys, a £1bn IT company, in the south of the city has a golf green, basketball courts, a Domino's Pizza and four staff canteens. Work is being completed on the site's 41st office building, and another 10,000 workers will join this year.

But the industry says it cannot indefinitely insulate itself from the city's shortcomings.

In an interview with the Guardian, India's richest man, Azim Premji, warned that his company, Wipro, would move

work outside the city because of "quality of life issues".

"I can't have my employees sitting in traffic when they should be in the office. The government needs to act to sort these things out. Frankly it is embarrassing when there are power cuts during one hour of discussion with clients," he said.

City administrators say that Bangalore is a victim of its own success. MK Shankarling Gowda, the senior civil servant in the information technology ministry, points out that a decade ago Bangalore was a city of 2 million people with a million vehicles, whereas today it has a population of 6m and 3m vehicles. "These are the problems of being perhaps too successful. But we are doing what we can for all the people in the city. IT companies could themselves help by building housing for their workers near their offices."

Campaigners however say that the problem lies not with industry or government but with the state's citizens.

Ramesh Ramanathan is a former Wall Street banker who returned to Bangalore and set up a civic movement, Janaagraha, with £500,000 of his own

'I can't have employees sitting in traffic when they should be in the office. The government needs to act to sort these things out'

Azim Premji



money three years ago, to encourage voters to demand greater accountability and effectiveness from their government.

"The problem here is that there is no civic responsibility for the garbage collection, bad roads, water supply. There are 1m properties in Bangalore, but fewer than half pay taxes. The result is that we collect only 2bn rupees (£24m) in revenue rather than 6bn (£72m)."

Mr Ramathan, who lived in America and Britain for a decade but came back so that his children could get to know their grandparents, says that, in the west, urban democracy works because people demand better services and elect politicians who fail to deliver. With half of India set to live in cities by 2020, he says the need to engage urban voters is urgent. "Not until people start paying taxes and asking politicians for results will anything change here. And we do not have long in India."

"What Bangalore is experiencing today, the rest of the country will feel tomorrow."

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In brief

Japan alert over N Korea missile

Japan has intelligence that North Korea may be preparing to test a short-range missile, Tokyo said yesterday. The number of troops and equipment levels around launch sites were rising, and a taskforce had been set up to investigate. AP, Tokyo

Art damaged after Nazi row

Two installations by the American artist Gordon Matta-Clark were damaged after the opening of an exhibition yesterday when a woman doing handsprings hurled herself into them.

It followed controversy over the Hamburg exhibition of the collection of Friedrich Christian Flick, the heir of a Nazi-era arms supplier. AP, Berlin

Nuclear bomb deal alleged

A German man has been arrested on suspicion of agreeing to supply equipment to make nuclear weapons to an unnamed country. He was arrested on Tuesday and is accused of selling equipment to allow the handling of dangerous materials. AP, Berlin

Syrian troops leave Lebanon

Several Syrian military units withdrew from Lebanon yesterday.

On Tuesday, Syria said it would pull out or redeploy 3,000 soldiers from the Beirut area, out of some 17,000 it has in Lebanon. Reuters, Chitaura, Lebanon

State allows drunk riding

The Pittsburgh supreme court has ruled that drunken riders of horses cannot be prosecuted.

The one dissenting judge delivered his finding in the style of the Mr Ed theme tune. AP, Pittsburgh

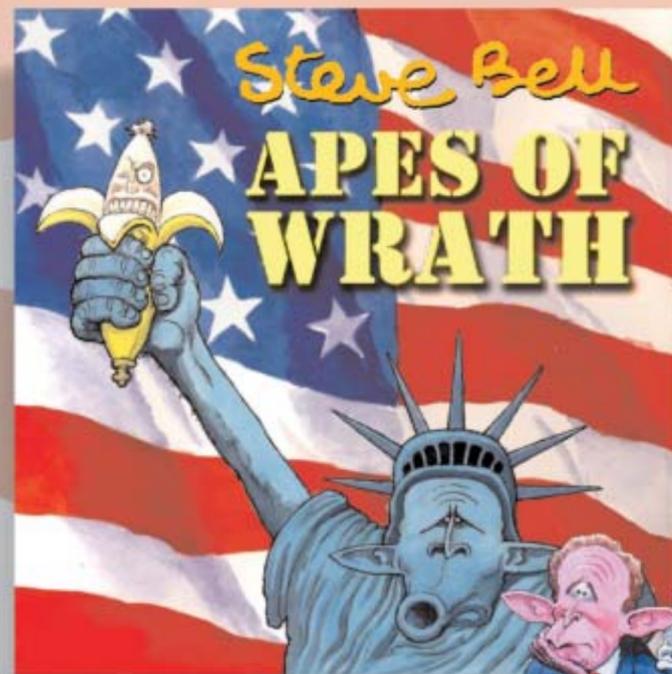
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An exhibition of over 100 of Steve Bell's Guardian cartoons of George Bush will be showing at the Newsroom, 60 Farringdon Road, EC1 from September 17 to November 12