

EXPLORING ASIA:

ASIAN CITIES — GROWTH AND CHANGE

GROWTH AND PEOPLE IN BANGALORE, INDIA

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*Editor's note: This article is the second of five
featuring pieces by Dr. Anand Yang, Dr. H Hazel Hahn,
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"Development" and "growth" are often imagined as categorically good things for both people and economies. This is especially so in the developing world, also called the Global South. When economies develop and cities grow, many benefits are said to follow: the levels of poverty decrease, opportunities are equalized and people's lives become generally better.

And yet such benefits often obscure the more complicated realities on the ground. Development and growth certainly provide opportunities for some, but can also exacerbate existing social stratifications and make life more difficult for others.

Meet Ms. Muniyamma, a woman in her mid-20s living and working in Bangalore, India's third most populous city. Her genuine smile brightens any room, and her simple cotton *sari* drapes over her small build. She and her husband have migrated to Bangalore from the outlying rural districts to begin their own business: selling tender coconut water (known as *elaneeru* in the local language, Kannada) to thirsty customers.

Elaneeru is one of nature's most refreshing and nutritious drinks, consumed throughout tropical countries such as India, Brazil and Indonesia and often sold by small scale street vendors like Muniyamma. *Elaneeru* sellers often harvest their few coconut trees in rural villages outside of metropolitan cities. Every few weeks, Muniyamma and her husband travel to the village to collect their crop, transport the fruits back to the city and set up "shop" on their bicycle or on the side of the road. When approached by a customer, Muniyamma expertly slices off the top of the tender coconut with her machete. She drops a plastic straw into the opening, and "aahh!" Delicious, nutritious, economical goodness. Customers happily meander away, revitalized and their thirst naturally quenched.

But lately, *elaneeru* sellers like Muniyamma and her husband are facing tough challenges due to factors such as globalization, development, growth and progress. We often hear of opportunities that have been created in Bangalore recently because of the influx of jobs, global capital and foreign investment; but their beneficial effects have not spread across all of Bangalore's populations or neighborhoods.

How has all this development and growth transformed the city? Over the past 25 years or so, extraordinary change has been the one constant in Bangalore's social and physical landscape. The advancement of information technology and biotechnology industries—as well as its already established position as a hub for research and development, space industries and academic institutions—have redrawn the city's boundaries and shifted its priorities. Older one story homes are torn down to construct glass and steel high-rises. Ancient trees are uprooted to make way for more paved roads and freeways at incredible cost. Migrants from neighboring states as well as across India now journey to Bangalore to work in the booming construction and services sectors.

All these and other changes affect how people live, work and play --and even what they eat and drink. For example, upper class residents now delight in an expanded range of leisure activities such as frequenting restaurants and multistory shopping malls. With their purchasing power, holidays abroad, elite education and access to information, this segment enjoys a level of conspicuous consumption that is beginning to resemble what in the West is considered "the good life."

Bangalore's city limits too have quickly expanded into the surrounding rural areas. Vast tracts of farmland, like the one in which Muniyamma harvests her coconut trees, have slowly transformed into semi-urban centers, bustling with new construction and big dreams of quick wealth. Even seemingly personal choices—like what to eat or drink—have been subjected to the pressures of development and growth. Whereas people in the past might have drunk *elaneeru* to quench their thirst, the international media and glossy advertisement campaigns of today encourage the newly wealthy to "modernize"



Green coconut water seller Muniyamma (center) with UW Study Abroad Students.

their tastes toward bottled water and name brand carbonated drinks.

Many people in Bangalore and all around the Global South are contemplating thought-provoking questions. How might these large-scale factors affect the chances of a small-scale vendor like Muniyamma to secure a good livelihood for herself and her family? Are there ways to globalize and develop economically and still include all segments of society?

Muniyamma's story reminds us that when it comes to development and growth, there is no single story to tell, no composite glimpse of "success" to herald. The reality, in Bangalore as in all places around the world, is that rapid changes are great in some ways and not so great in other ways. It all depends on whose lives we are considering and how inclusive our lens might be.

What does Muniyamma think of all this? What might she dream for herself and her family? Perhaps she imagines being reunited with her two children who are in school, living with their grandparents 100 miles away. The family has decided that this arrangement is better for the kids instead of the unpredictable city life their parents navigate. Perhaps Muniyamma dreams of a bigger coconut yield or more thirsty customers. On a good day, she will take home 150 or 200 rupees (about \$US 2–3.) For now, she hopes to sell the remaining tender coconuts piled high in her straw basket, eat well and sleep soundly in preparation for another day.



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