



Echoes of Togetherness: Revisiting Traditional Community Living in Bangalore

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Unraveling the Vataras System: A Socio-Spatial Study of Bangalore's Communal Living Heritage

ABSTRACT

The Vataras system of Bangalore has its roots in traditional South Indian communal housing, housing several families around a shared courtyard. It flourished during urbanization, providing cheap living for workers. Vataras still persist in older areas such as Malleswaram and Basavanagudi but are on the decline due to real estate development, lifestyle changes, and lack of maintenance. Several have been replaced by apartments and commercial buildings, while others are turned into PGs or hostels. Though its popularity has dwindled, there is renewed interest in community-based housing, with attempts to preserve heritage vataras or adopt their concept in contemporary urban planning.

Key words - Vataras , Bangalore , Communal Living , Urbanization , Heritage Conservation , Architecture , Sustainability , Adaptive Reuse , Modernization, Cultural Preservation , Traditional Housing , Real Estate Development , Shared Spaces , Historical Evolution , Revitalization

Introduction

The Vataras system of housing is a centuries-old system of shared housing that has influenced Bangalore's cityscape for generations. Based on South Indian residential patterns, vataras are made up of group houses clustered around a shared courtyard, establishing social relationships, communal living, and sharing of resources. In the early to mid-20th century, when Bangalore was growing, vataras became a household housing option for middle-class families, employees, and migrants because they were affordable and accessible. The residential areas not only offered protection but also fostered a community feeling, with common amenities such as wells, kitchens, and open spaces. But with Bangalore's urbanization and real estate boom, the vataras system is on the decline, making way for modern apartment complexes, commercial developments, and nuclear family living. Land value appreciation, shifting social choices, and neglect in maintenance have hastened the process.

This research seeks to map the historical development of vataras, evaluate their present state, and examine the reasons for their decline. Moreover, it seeks to determine if aspects of vataras-style communality could be retained or innovated within contemporary urban housing schemes. Through this process of transition, the study seeks to obtain insights into sustainable, community-based housing models that strive to integrate the old with the new in the urbanizing city of Bangalore.

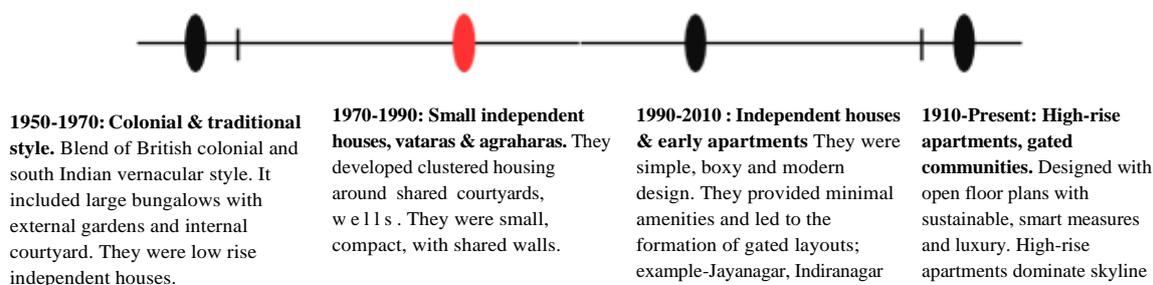


Fig. 1.1 - Timeline showing the growth and change of housing styles in Bangalore

The Vataras System: A Comparative Study of the 1990s and the Present

The vataras have been a significant part of Bangalore's residential district, especially in older areas like Basavanagudi, Malleswaram, Ulsoor, Chamarajpet, and Shivajinagar. Over the years, these historical housing structures have undergone considerable changes in view of progression and urbanization. This report presents a comparative study of vataras of the 1990s with their present-day character, with special reference to the cultural, social, and structural changes that they have undergone thereby.

Vataras System in the 1990s: A Way of Life

Vataras are essentially clusters of single-room or multi-room dwellings placed in a U or rectangular configuration around a central courtyard.

These houses tended to be simple and functional, often with tiled roofs, wooden doors, and simple air vents.

Most homes have a community verandah or a dwelling area for interaction.

Social and Community Life

At the center of the vataras was the courtyard, the play area for children, a meeting ground for the elders, and the social ground for families.

Many vataras would have common water pumps, share a toilet, or have open-air washing areas, which helped continue the spirit of cooperation and interdependence.

The festivals Deepavali, Ugadi, and Ganesha Chaturthi were celebrated collectively, with residents conducting pujas, community feasts, and cultural programs.

Neighbors in good spirits would lend their helping hand in times of need, either financially or personally.

Trends in Economy and Occupation

Vataras consisted of middle-class families, factory workers, petty-bourgeois merchants, and government employees.

Many were tenants who paid affordable rents that allowed them to work in textile mills, government offices, markets, and early technological firms while living at central locations.

Its low living cost ensures that markets, schools, and workplaces were close enough to be reached by foot or bicycle.



Fig. 1.2 - Bangalore city map, circa 1924 from "Murray's 1924 Handbook", with the pete and Cantonment areas clearly visible.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Bangaluru



Fig. 1.3, 1.4 - Pictures from early vataras living system

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Fig. 1.5 - CIDCO low cost housing by Raj Rewal showing same concept with better spatial design.

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Vataras System Today : A Vanishing Legacy

Majority of the traditional vataras have now been demolished to make way for multi-story apartments, commercial buildings, & PG accommodations. On the whole, only the vataras that are still left standing are, in most cases, deplorably neglected, with an utter lack of proper maintenance and the presence of monumental structural issues such as leaky rooftops, cracked walls, and outdated back plumbing.

Some landlords renovated the vataras into modern, rental accommodation, splitting bigger homes into studio apartments or shared accommodation spaces for students and young professionals.

Altered social dynamics

The sense of community has already undermined as long-settled residents have moved out for higher rents and resettlements.

Many of these are now occupied by nuclear families and working professionals, thus reducing neighbour-to-neighbour interaction.

The courtyards that were once central to social belonging have either disappeared altogether or have been converted to parking spaces instead of a space for social gatherings.

Concerns about security have made people much more private and less dependent on their neighbours.

Economic and Occupational Shifts

With the boom in Bangalore's real estate sector, the property value has made living in vataras less feasible for long-term habitation.

Many families sold their vataras homes to developers and have now shifted to somewhere in the suburban areas.

There are new economic demographics that have taken over the vataras, which now house transient populations such as migrant workers, PG residents, and short-term tenants.

Rents have gone up to the extent of being prohibitively high, so that traditional vataras living has become less viable for lower-income groups.

Lifestyle & Cultural Change

Children are spending less time outside in play with other children in courtyards and are instead playing indoors or at organized play areas.

Festivals are celebrated by lesser families together, many simply opting to celebrate traditions in their homes or gated communities.

From Vataras to Modern Housing: The Changing Face of Chamarajapete

Chamarajapete, laid out in 1892, was one of Bengaluru's earliest planned localities, built to cure congestion in the old city. The locality was named after Maharaja Chamarajendra Wadiyar X in recognition of his forward-thinking vision for urbanization. In the early 20th century, it was a common sight to see large plots of around 50x80 feet, which made it easy to build 'vataras'—grouped tenements of single rooms within a common compound. Vataras were a housing solution that worked for more than one family, bringing people together in close-knit communities.

Built and materials

A concise vataras consisted of a central house that housed the owner of the property, flanked by various adjacent tenements leased to other households. Such buildings were constructed with local materials such as brick and lime mortar and had Madras terrace roofs or Mangalore tiles. The house plan typically featured a shared central court, which doubled as an area for social gatherings and daily use.



Fig. 1.6 - Zoning of the existing vataras , ground level

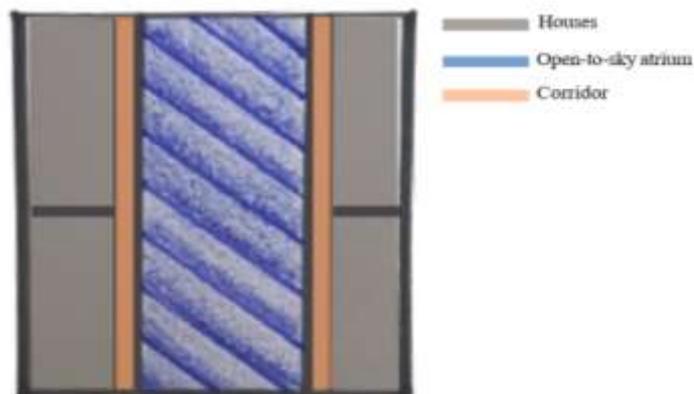


Fig. 1.7 - Zoning of the existing vataras , first level



Fig. 1.8, 1.7, 1.9 Pictures from chamarajapete vatara

Fig. 1.10- Common well

Fig. 1.11 OTS atrium

Demographics and Community

Multiple families were accommodated in each vatara, with a single unit having the capacity for up to four or more individuals. This arrangement resulted in lively communities where community members shared resources and engaged in shared activities. The intimate proximity and common spaces created strong social relationships and feelings of mutual care among residents.

Economic Activities

Vataras residents had mixed occupations. Numerous residents held jobs in nearby government public sector units, schools, or small enterprises. Living in close proximity allowed residents to network, as neighbors usually helped one another find jobs. The shared courtyards also offered room for small entrepreneurial endeavors, and they added to the family income.

Evolution and Present Status

Through the decades, Chamarajapete has seen a lot of change. The traditional vataras have been replaced over time by apartment blocks and commercial buildings. Urbanization, increased property prices, and a change in lifestyles have all played a part in this transformation. Though some vataras continue to stand, retaining the historic feel of the place, many have undergone redevelopment to meet the increased demand for modern housing and infrastructure.

Inference

The redevelopment of vataras in Chamarajapete is an example of the wider transformation in Bangalore's urban landscape, from low-rise, community-based housing to high-density, contemporary developments. The earlier courtyard-based layouts that promoted natural ventilation, passive cooling, and social interaction have given way to multi-story apartments and commercial buildings, optimizing land use and economic development. Although modernization has enhanced safety, infrastructure, and functionality, it resulted in the loss of vernacular architecture and public living areas. For architectural continuity to be maintained, future planning must include climate-responsive and sustainable designs that integrate heritage factors with modern demands.

Reasons for the Decline of the Vatara System

The decline of the Vatara system in Bangalore has been closely tied to changes in architecture, urban planning, and evolving residential preferences. Here's how architectural and design factors contributed to their disappearance:

1. Inefficient land use & less density

Vataras contained single vertical or even horizontal structures that consumed large land space of open courtyards.

Single-story homes were regarded inefficient in land use, making way for multi-story apartments, which accommodate more inhabitants per square foot, because of the escalation of real estate demand in Bangalore.

2. Inconsistent with modern amenities and infrastructure

Traditional vataras were designed in common wells and shared toilets with basic ventilation, while these amenities do not even meet modern lifestyle expectations.

With indoor plumbing, dedicated kitchens, and independent living areas taking over, there was only limited assimilation of vataras, making them less valuable.

3. Poor durability of structures

A lot of vataras were built almost completely from mud bricks, wooden beams, and Mangalore tiles, which need endless maintenance.

Due to a lack of repairs, water damage, and structural failure, over time, many vataras became unfit for habitation.

4. Shift of housing preferences:

From communal living to privacy to vertical living. Original vataras design placed the emphasis on collective living.

As a result, apartments offering individual living units with balconies were more attractive.

5. Impossibility of Adaptability in Urban Planning

Clearly, modern planners vie for selections providing neat grids and broad avenues, while vataras had a haphazard array of back-lanes and closely clustered houses.

A scarce amount of parking space, bad drainage systems, and limited area for expansion rendered vataras incompatible with the needs of modern city planning.

Reviving Vataras: A Sustainable Approach to Preservation and Modernization

The restoration and maintenance of vataras in Bangalore entail structural conservation, adaptive reuse, and a sustainable modern interpretation.

- Use of treated wood, lime plaster, and waterproofing to reinstate these structures will provide an additional veneer of strength while keeping intact their archaic charm.
- Modernizing plumbing and electrical systems and ventilation is an essential part of ensuring that these homes meet modern living standards.
- Adaptive reuse will characterize vataras that might house heritage homestays, boutique hotels, or co-living areas, with the repurposing of shared courtyards into community gardens or coworking spaces maintaining their communal essence.
- Official heritage status, along with government incentives, grants them a certain legal protection against demolitions and helps raise awareness of the values of those structures through initiatives such as heritage walks and cultural events.
- Incorporation of sustainability features such as rainwater harvesting, solar panels, and passive cooling techniques also makes them greener and future-ready.

Furthermore, urban planners and developers may develop a new vataras-type model for housing—a traditional communal living style paired with contemporary apartment-style amenities.

Conclusion: Honoring the Past, Building the Future

The traditional vataras system is on its last legs, but the basic principles of community living and shared spaces still stand strong. Some architects and urban planners are considering putting a new face on villager styles in contemporary housing, including:

- Co-housing communities with shared amenities.
- Eco-friendly housing models promoting social interaction.
- Adaptive reuse of old vataras as cultural or heritage spaces.

Most vataras may vanish, in their purest physical form, but their legacy celebrating life together and bond remains to inspire modern urban planning in Bangalore.

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