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As the Karnataka Quiz Association turns 35 this year, we look at what makes Bengaluru big on quizzing

By Sowmya Rajaram and Vidya Iyengar, Bangalore Mirror Bureau | Updated: Apr 1, 2018, 03.00 AM IST

Thirty-five years ago, three quizzing enthusiasts headed by Wg Cdr GR Mulky (Retd) founded the Karnataka Quiz Association (KQA) at a house in Malleswaram. An informal group that began with the aim to popularise the ‘sport of the mind’ among students and the general public, it has today evolved into an association and has created a platform for avid quizzers. In fact, KQA is often credited with having aroused interest and curiosity about quizzing among the city’s youth.

Today, Bengaluru holds the top spot for being the quizzing hub of the country, thanks to a “diverse population that is passionate and intellectually curious, which is why the quizzing culture has blossomed here,” as Ravi Subramanian Ganapathy, who runs the SAP Labs quiz interest group – QUIZIT – the oldest interest group in the company, which has been in existence for 18 years, says.

Bengaluru is “pretty much the only city in India,” says Thejaswi Udupa, quizzier and quizmaster, “where large bookstores are not just thriving but also prospering, and that too in prime areas such as Church Street.” “This itself tells you a thing or two about the kind of culture prevalent in this city, and why quizzing is so popular.”

EM Bhargava, a quizzier/quizmaster formerly from Hyderabad and now based in Bengaluru, believes that the level of quizzing in Bengaluru “is to be seen to be believed”, citing the sheer number of quizzers, the number of participants and the variety of quizzes that cater to every kind of interest, ranging from general quizzes to theme-based quizzes “including and not limited to love, music, science, technology, arts, philosophy, history, geography, India, popular culture, movies, and Asia”. “The quizzing can get quite intense as well, thanks to the competitive nature of the participants. A significant number of top quizzers in the country call Bengaluru home or are employed here, and this is clearly reflected in the top-notch events hosted in the city. This also means that lot of people actually travel to the city to attend some these quizzes, which makes the whole scene even more interesting,” he says. What has also helped the city move from “strength to strength” in terms of quizzers is the fact that it is a hub for startups in multiple

industries, which helps “hugely talented folk land up in the city”.

A lot of the city’s interest in quizzing comes from the fact that the habit of quizzing, formed in Bengaluru’s robust school events and college fests, “brings in a new set of quizzers into the fold”. “The college quizzers often end up attending the fortnightly quizzes at KQA as well. This journey ensures that there is a steady pipeline of quizzers created, and that there are enough avenues to engage with the quizzers in the city,” says Ritvik Chattopadhyay (22), a student at PES University, who finished first at the India Quiz, was a runner-up in the Sci-Biz-Tech Quiz and the Major Quiz, and second runner-up in the Magnum Open at the recently-held Under the Peepal Tree (UTPT) (concluded last weekend, it is labelled Asia’s Largest Quiz Fest and is conducted by RV QuizCorp, one of India’s biggest quiz clubs, affiliated with RV College of Engineering).

Chattopadhyay has been participating in quizzes since he was in the eighth grade.

Preparing for a quiz

Chattopadhyay says he doesn’t “prepare at all”, or it would become like studying by rote for school, and that takes the fun out of it – something Bhargava agrees with. Instead, it is his habit of reading things, which makes him good at quizzing, he believes. Being good at quizzes, Chattopadhyay says, is more about knowing how to read clues and putting them together to answer questions. And of course, practice makes perfect. “The more quizzes you attend, the more you learn how to do it.”

Snehashis Panda (22), who was here from Mumbai to participate in UTPT, agrees. He came first in the Literature and Entertainment Quiz, the Varun Krishnamurthy Memorial Sports Quiz, The Sci-Biz-Tech Quiz, and The Major Quiz, and finished third in the Fandom Quiz. “People think it’s about memorising names of Presidents and such, but it’s actually about connecting the dots. There will often be a time in a quiz when you don’t know the answer. But you put clues together and work it out. That’s what quizzing is about,” he says. To prepare, he just reads up on what he is interested in. “The important thing is to be curious, to be a sponge.”

For Bhargava – both quizzer and quizmaster – the nature of the beast dictates that he keep reading and consuming media in its various forms regularly. While setting a quiz, he goes through some bookmarked articles, and then doing a marathon a week or two ahead of the quiz to see if there is anything which he could use to form a question. “It takes three-four weeks for me to set a good open quiz,” he says.

Agrees Udupa, who conducts quizzes regularly. He has gotten into a near-obsessive habit of “bookmarking anything interesting that I come across”. “And that near-obsessive bit also means that I am always looking at things I read, listen to, or watch through the ‘can I ask this in a quiz?’ filter. As for the difficulty level, what I usually do is to just strive towards setting interesting questions, and during a quiz, if I see that people are finding it hard to take a guess, start adding more and more clues.”

And a good question, both quizzers and quizmasters will tell you, is the heart of quizzing. Panda cites a question from a MELA (Music, Entertainment, Literature and Arts) Quiz he hosted

recently by way of example: ‘Certain components of Spanish acoustic guitars were originally made from the small intestine of sheep and it was only in World War 2 that the production material was switched to nylon, as all of the material was being used to create surgical thread for treating wounded soldiers. What was the result of this usage of sheep intestine?’. “The answer was ‘This is why we refer to guitar strings as gut strings or catgut’.”

Chattopadhyay cites a question Major Chandrakant Nair asked in one of his quizzes, which went something like this: ‘A comic book store in England filed a petition to change the name of the street it lay in. Unlike other road names which are abbreviated to St., Rd, etc, the name of this street is written in full, just like the store’s demand. What was the new name?’. Chattopadhyay says: “The answer is Lois Lane, which is very easy to figure out because when you start thinking of alternate names of roads, you think of lane; and since it’s a comic book store, Lois Lane is the first name that comes to mind!”

Venkatesh Srinivasan, committee member of KQA and co-founder and CEO of Nexus Consulting (they’ve been in the business of quizzing/content/knowledge development for the last four years and work with schools and corporates) says that they work on authentic questions which are both interesting and accessible without relying on just Wikipedia or a random newspaper article. “Neither do we make it too obscure where people lose interest,” he says.

At the workplace

A mind sport that builds curiosity, competitiveness and camaraderie, Ganapathy wanted to foster quizzing as a hobby and a culture within the company. “Living in Bengaluru, we wanted to meet like-minded people who were keen to participate in external events. When I joined the company, there wasn’t a formal quiz interest group. We started the Quiz Interest Group and conducted internal quizzes for small groups of people. We then slowly graduated to participating in external quiz competitions and today we conduct annual quiz events for SAP across all entities and locations in India,” he says.

As they conduct quiz competitions on a variety of topics, Ganapathy points out that quizzing is all about asking the right questions that can be at once entertaining and perplexing.

Prep and planning

Quizzing events such as UTPT don’t take place without arduous, advance preparation and hacks and jugaad at short notice. Aditya Giridharan, coordinator of RV QuizCorp recalls how a hostel dweller was in charge of putting up banners for the festival and forgot to get enough ropes. “With one last loop remaining and all nearby shops closed, he removed the string holding up his pyjamas, handed it to the people putting up the banners and walked to the hostel holding his pyjamas up,” he says. Anirudh Raghavendra, another RV QuizCorp coordinator, shares stories of die-hard quizzing enthusiasts completing internals at college early or even skipping an internal to attend a quiz which they were sure of winning.

Winning or not, as Udupa, who looks at quizzing as a sport says, it is far more inclusive than say running, cricket, tennis or even chess.