

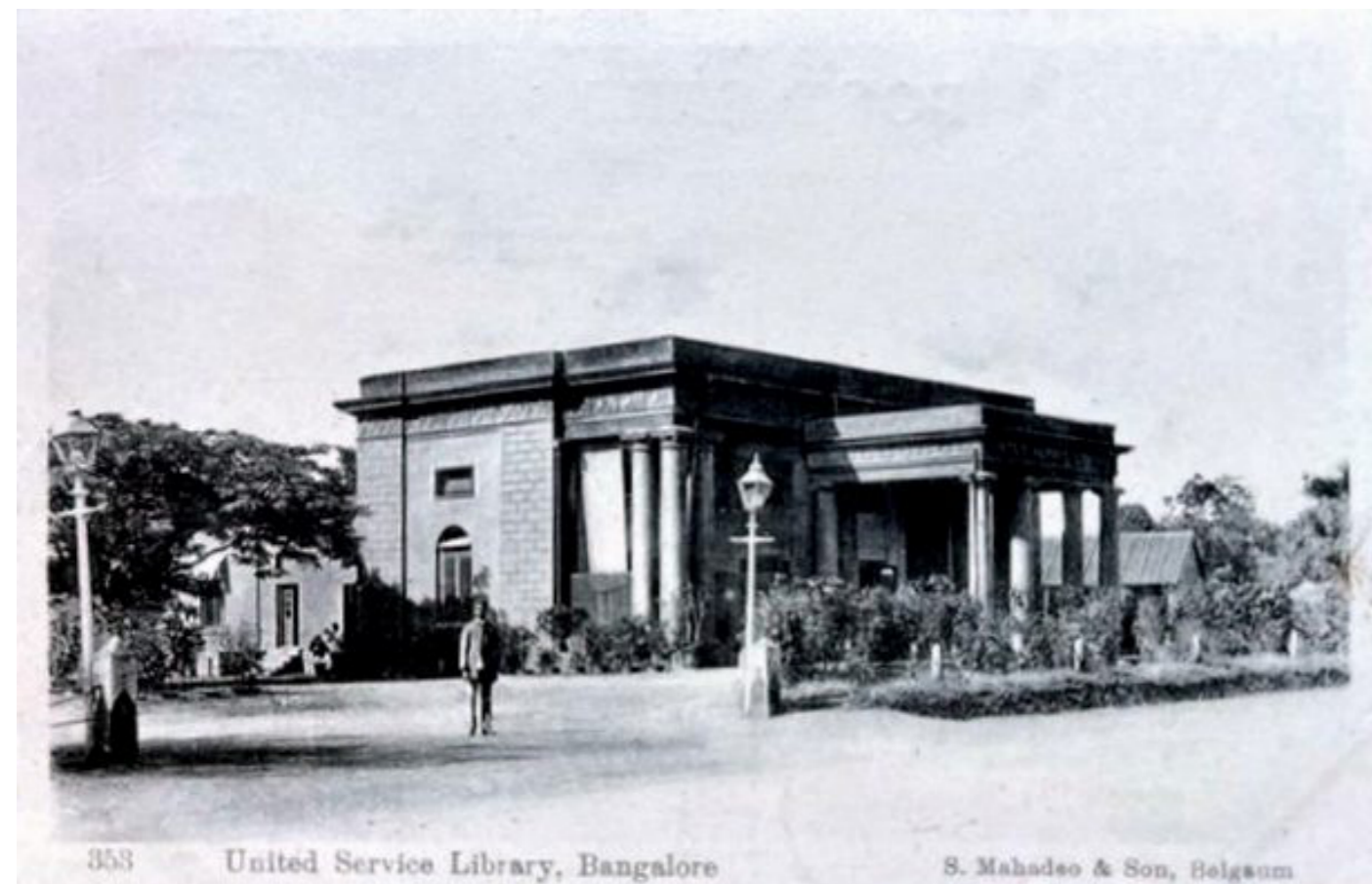
BOOKED IN BANGALORE

Chandan Bilagunda

Bangalore was founded eons ago by a local chieftain. Today it is on the western side of town. It was anything but European and was all things Indian, the eastern side of town on the other hand was all things European having been built by the righthonourable John Company (very well known for venerable misexploits) for it's soldiers & hanger ons. As is one's wont in such cases the two sister towns looked upon each other with suspicion lest one rob the other of their vaunted ways & mores. The western town called the Pettah by the ever mispronouncing Brittons and the Pete by it's true denizens, went about it's ancient ways unfettered by the "evil" new influences except of course in cases whenever the influence was found to be "spirit-ually" convenient to mind & body.

Same could be said about the cantonment folks who thrust their nose in the air and went about their business like they were in good Ol' Blighty, without a spot of bother for the native blokes.

Now our lil' piece of Britain used to be the poor man's la la Land for all those white chums who couldn't make it to the hills filled with pompous lords of the EIC. Perched a bit high up on the gentle slopes of south Indian hills, it had a climate of similar disposition, gentle, cool and breezy, yet sunny at the same time. None of the hot blazing Sun of the Indian plains nor the bone crunching chill of it's northern mountains but filled with tree lined avenues and tropical fruit gardens in every compound. Aside from the fact that homes of non-Europeans were in quite closeted neighbourhoods, the town was made up largely of quaint colonial bungalows adorned by some unique local features called Monkey Tops, with large tree laden compounds and ship loads of soldiers set up in equally spacious airy barracks. Just the right setting for a steaming cup of tea or strong coffee perhaps in this case and a thick book on your lap that smells, like an old worn out book on a lazy cloth chair in the colonnaded verandah.



Old Lending library on East Parade road
Source: Old post card image provided by the Author



Bowring Institute, Bengaluru (Source: Old post card image provided by the Author)

This easily moth eaten European invention of communication came to Indian shores hidden in the racks of those merchant ships like mice in a ship's dirty lower decks. The Indians of the yore didn't take to this inexplicable import instantly, being suspicious of its true intentions but by & by took an earnest interest as they probably suspected it might contain the secret to the white man's craftiness.

Bangalore's Cantonment was a military town filled with an assortment of characters whose primary endeavour was to make their pile by providing utmost satisfaction from all means possible to the army and its shenanigans. A brief hop across it's leafy streets suggested a colourful line up of soldiers, officers, merchants, servants, hawkers, sparkling white ladies in hats & umbrellas, anglicised natives in turbans, armenians, jews, afghans, horses, bullocks, monkeys, donkeys, pet spotted hyenas, ah yes ferocious beasts lounging in the local botanical park, lost stray leopards or an odd elephant. This vibrant atmosphere had to have its weekly quota of games, races, hunts, parties, picnics, balls, costume balls, secret duels, sunday services, concerts, weddings, affairs, saucy scandals & mandatory court martials for incorrigible mischief makers who would inevitably become sick of the loathsome stifling regimen. Speaking of affairs, while most served as much needed fodder for mouths

starving for material, a silent hushed affair that stood out was the one with the books in this cosy atmosphere fittingly conjured up for that. A good book anyday was an incomparable companion, from telling tall excitable tales to elevating one's low faculties to high brow wisdom, it kept one away from regular mischief.

A century ago, one such young witless officer in town, who fell to the inevitable allure of books was a stumpy fellow named W L S Churchill whose worldly goals until then had circulated around chasing polo ponies. Up & down the country he went with his mates, popping up in every decent tournament of note, lifting a royal cup here and losing a penny cup there, until he lost his head trying to outwit bright fellow officers dipped & roasted in Eton sauce. His Sandhurst schooling had added no extra brilliance about the world at large except for a staid stiff point of view of a military man. He resolved to dust off his petty station in life to rise and shine as a true snobby English gentile. It was up to his mother's considerable resources to send over cartloads of overbearing books authored by unpedestrian names like Plato, Gibbon, Schopenhauer, Malthus, Darwin, Aristotle and such unspeakable sorts. Ergo, a storm in the teacup possessed the reader's mind, shattering all pretensions of past lowliness. Thus emerged a world renowned unflappable statesman fit to run



Sheshadri Iyer Memorial Library
Source: Old post card image provided by the Author

down an evil dictator or two, moulded through considerable heavy lifting done under the incessant orchestra of chirping and squeaking of little birds & squirrels of Bangalore compounds.

The old Pete meanwhile lay at the crossroads of ancient south Indian trade routes, in the midlands where the twain from both the east and west coasts of India met. Over the centuries the effects from every part of southern India had churned up a warm welcoming merchant town. Every era would see a multitude of people descend upon its streets to sell & dwell for the foreseeable future. Thus a medieval trading metropolis had become a coveted faberge egg for many a bickering power of the Deccan. An urge shared enthusiastically by the foxy Brits too. This throbbing town held an attraction for both the man of the sword and pen alike.

So as time rolled by, the above inimitable charms of the town made it a mecca for book lovers and many a aspiring author. The unhurried pace of the town was complemented by an intrinsic love for the imagination of science and arts, well represented by institutes of national importance that began to be installed at the turn of the century. As such the first prime minister would one day proclaim Bangalore as the "City of the Future". As it hopped towards becoming a modern technopolis weaving together technology and the thought economy of India, it would do so as one of the literary capitals of India under the ever looming shadow of the grand capitals of commerce; Calcutta, Madras & Bombay where wheels of industry spun at breakneck speed.

By now natives had already warmed up to the thrills and chills of the printed word. The early Christian missionaries were pioneers who braved the feared jungles of India to spring many European inventions upon the antiquated

Indian mind such as the first newspapers, dictionaries, translations of local clerical material, maps and what have you. The native saw light in the power of the Book. Bangalore's status as political and cultural capital of the region, would make it burst with writings in both English and Kannada.

Modern Kannada literature which had its beginnings in early 1800s with stately encouragement by Mysore king, Mumtaz Ali Krishna Raja Wodeyar would mature by early 1900s, fascinating the native mind towards an ethnic form of the book. By mid 1940s a revolution bannered as Navodaya in this ancient vernacular would engulf Bangalore and Karnataka uplifting them away from the ancient themes & structures focused mostly on mythological themes to the new wave of modern literary thinking intertwined with social evolution. By the 1950s another literary movement mimicking pop themes from influences of modernist philosophers like Kafka, Camus, Sartre and Freud, called Navya would upstage Navodaya. It would also extend itself illustratively using another modern art innovation, the movies to better express itself, carving out a parallel literary cinema movement. Kannada greats who were part of this movement were the likes of Lankesh, Girish Karnad, Nisar Ahmed, Chandrasekhar Kambar, B.V. Karanth, Baraguru Ramchandrappa, C.R. Simha.

The quaint high lanes of colonial South parade, Brigade road, Commercial street & Infantry road & the Pete were packed with bookstores selling wares from every corner and variety of author. Unfortunately the only one still standing from that era is Higginbothams. Surprisingly today it's the once unexceptional lane of Church street that's become a nucleus of modern book shops. Libraries too came up in all respectable neighbourhoods & snooty city clubs to feed the

love for reading, the most famous of all, the classical looking Sheshadri Iyer memorial library aptly placed within the flowery roundabouts of Cubbon Park.

Over the years many bookshops became mainstays for passionate book lovers such as Gangarams who began as Bangalore book bureau, were famous early on for their large multistoried bookstores, one of which would unfortunately crash while under construction in the early 80s, the biggest news then. Sapna book store of Mr. Shah, who is well known for supporting upcoming local authors and also for the biggest bookshop in India. Other good names were Strand, Bangalore tract and book society, International Book house, Cooper & Co, The Bangalore circulating library etc. Not just large bulging buildings there were small cosy book shops hidden within its lazy lanes. The master pen wielder from far away hills Ruskin Bond, would sometimes pop by the Select bookstore of Mr. Murthy sniffing about for any rare titles, somehow lost and only found in Murthy's tiny cave. Then there was Shanbhag's Preimere bookshop in the corner of Museum road haunted by such high literary souls as Girish Karnad, Ramachandra Guha and even a star like Kamal Hasan. Ruling the roost today from a couple of decades in the same lane are Mayi Gowda's Blossom, Krishna Gowda's Bookworm, and in the nearby neighbourhood the Sankar couple's Atta Galata.

It was the time for notable writers of local flavour to bloom. Bangalore's liberal yet rooted to the soil ethos gave them ample material for wide exploration of social themes while keeping the text as unpretentious, modest and connected to the reader. A vivid example of such storytelling was R K Narayan. Though in effect a Mysorean, from Bangalore's sister city, the murmur in the grapevine is of how he was inspired by Bangalore's two famous neighbourhoods Malleshwaram & Basavanagudi to create his fictional Malgudi. It guides you into typical middle class south Indian lives of the colonial era in transition very accurately, keeping the narration in simple humour without any grandiose prose.

Chandan Bilagunda is technology design and business consultant having an eclectic 3 decades plus work experience in advertising, technology design & business advisory. Presently working with technology startups to project advisory for all govt & generic industry sectors. Personal interests include delving into history research, sociology, urban design, social enterprises and creating historical conservation plus awareness projects.

It wasn't only fiction, there were tales from the variety that only real life mysteriously affords. Kenneth Anderson known as the Jim Corbett of South India wrote of hunting man eaters and his daring exploits with other trouble makers of the forest. Shakuntala Devi the superhuman maths calculator wrote about that insolvable maths stuff & magic with numbers, astrology, women issues and everything she thought about. B V Raman, considered one of the greatest modern astrologers would churn out authoritative texts to periodicals on astrology for the clueless peeping toms of the future.

Bangalore also chuffs itself up, for the lot that's being written about it to quite a bit mired in it. Some of the best reads about Bangalore are The City Beautiful by T P Issar, Bangalore: Roots and Beyond by Maya Jayapal, Past and Curious by Stanley Carvalho, Bangalore by Kerry James Evans, Bangalore Through the Centuries by M.Fazlul Hasan, In First Person Singular by Mahesh Bhat & Bangalore A Century of Tales from city and cantonment by Peter Colaco. Bangalore's nooks & corners and the town's earthy protagonists come alive in the stories of Aditi De, Anjum Hasan's 50 year old Qayenaat's wanderings, Anita Nair's bumbling inspector Bore Gowda, Swede Bangalore in law Zac O'Yeah's gully Hero, Andaleeb Wajid's wonky teenager.

If you got heaps of booklovers and writers piled up in a small town you also need book readings, writing workshops, launches, lectures, debates, discussions & all that a book mad population usually get up to. By the holy cows of the road, there's always some such thing or the other happening in the city's numerous book shops, auditoriums & public halls every blimey day.

Even though present day new generations have teleported themselves into the wacky tacky world of digital gadgets, Bangalore's streets are still packed with bookshops still puffing along for all & sundry. Book lovers & students can't miss a jolly good time with that charming ancient contraption of communication.