

The Bangalore Detectives Club

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Harini Nagendra

Book in Question

What motivated you to write *The Bangalore Detectives Club*, a very different genre from your academic writing?

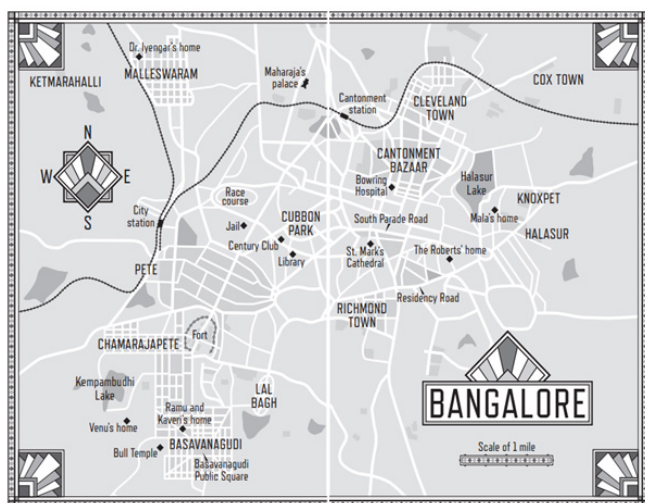
Fiction writing has always come first for me. When I was very young, I wrote a lot of fiction, short stories for school, entries for writing competitions (I won two medals in the Shankar's International Children's Competition, organised by Children's Book Trust, when I was 8 and 9 years) and for magazines. Later, up until my PhD and postdoctoral research, I wrote newspaper 'middles', short stories for the Sunday children's section of newspapers, and even a story for an online literary magazine. As my academic life became busier, though, I turned to academic writing and then to popular non-fiction writing, and this left me with little time for fiction writing. I never forgot or lost my fascination for, and interest in writing fiction though. I read a lot - one of my favourite genres is historical mysteries. In 2007, the idea of writing a mystery book set in historical Bangalore came to me. My original plan was to set this in the 1890s, but I later changed it to the 1920s, as this was a time that was far more interesting to explore for the reasons above.

What is the role of the city of Bangalore in the book? Backdrop, protagonist or character, or all of these?

Historical Bangalore provided a backdrop and setting, but a very important one, which has agency and influence in the way it shapes the lives and activities of the main protagonists in my book. For instance, the aristocratic Mrs. Urs, part of the extended royal family, drips condescension and disdain when she speaks of the need to keep 'riff-raff' out of the hallowed bounds of Century Club - paying little heed to the fact that Century Club was itself established because the British refused to allow the 'natives' (whom many British quite possibly considered 'riff-raff' too!) into their elite clubs. So, it has always been, in history, with the excluded forming their own clubs, and excluding those they think are further beneath them. In contrast, women from the lower socio-economic strata such as Mala, Thimakka and Narsamma, have very little, but share whatever they have most generously, without bounds - because it is precisely that dependence on others, that community-feeling, that has helped them survive in hard times - so when they are in a position to, they extend a similar helping hand to others. The landscape and ecology shaped the structure of buildings and streets, and in turn shaped the characters, mores and social life of people. In that sense, Bangalore is the backdrop, but not a neutral backdrop - it is a setting with agency.

Can you please elaborate on your choice of the time period in Bangalore's history for the book and how it defined the city at that point or even today?

Bangalore in the 1920s was a fascinating setting for a mystery book that could showcase the cultural contrasts between the British cantonment. I especially love Golden Age mysteries, set in the time period between World Wars I and II, an era when the world was on the cusp of major transformation. For women, especially, this was a time of great opportunity. In the US and UK, with so many men lost in the war, women had begun to step out of their homes in large numbers to enter the workforce, changing social attitudes, norms and expectations. The suffragette movement for women was gaining force, with women across the world demanding the right to vote and enter parliament. In many parts of India, and certainly in Mysore State, these movements had their influence as well. There were many women stepping into public life, entering the teaching profession and setting up schools for young women, joining the Mysore Representative Assembly, launching womens' magazines, becoming coffee entrepreneurs, and doing so many other things that were unheard of for women even a decade before. These women were true trailblazers and their struggles and perseverance, navigating past formidable societal obstacles, showed the way for women after them. Because the city in the 1920s was jointly governed, with some parts controlled by the British administration, and other areas by the Mysore Maharaja, the intersection between colonial and local lives was stark, and at the same time very fluid - providing many interesting opportunities for a historical crime novel.



What aspects of the city's identity/identities did you consider as integral to carry the narrative?

The landscape setting of different parts of the city shaped identity, and therefore, shaped the possibilities of different social and domestic interactions. The British Cantonment had large bungalows with gardens and pools, maintained by hard working Indian staff - but these gardens were largely empty. The wealthy Indian neighbourhoods such as parts of Basavanagudi had similar large homes, though with very different kinds of garden spaces - less ornamental, fewer lawns, more focused on fruits and flowers - more *used* gardens - but life was similarly conducted indoors for the most part, as Indian women from 'respectable' families were not expected to spend much time in the public gaze. In contrast, in the cramped bylanes of places like Ulsoor, where the cowherds made their homes, much of daily life was outdoors, with women moving freely through public spaces, and claiming them in the same way that men did. Many of these signatures live on in the city today, in the differences in the kinds of vegetation we see in the Indian areas such as Malleshwaram and Basavanagudi, with their *peepal*, banyan, coconut and *champa* trees, versus the former Cantonment areas, with butterfly, wood apple and Christmas trees - as well as some of the old homes that still remain, although fewer and fewer of these remain each year.

In what ways did particular locations and their socio-political milieu in Bangalore shape the storyline?

I can illustrate this best with examples, perhaps. At the Century Club, a club for Indians, but with 'elite' membership criteria that excluded many from it - the workers who labour there are focused on their own struggles, but resent the British influence that is strong and persistent even in places supposedly created in defiance of British exclusion of Indians. Similarly, through the British obsession with renaming Indian place names, and even the names of Indian people whose names they found difficult to pronounce - such as their servants, who toiled hard for them, and were unable to protest if they called them by a different name - I was able to illustrate power hierarchies and the injustice of everyday lived experiences of many Indians under the British rule - even if partially buffered by the fact that Mysore was a Princely State and the local residents here were not directly under British control.

Ralph Waldo Emerson famously wrote that 'Fiction reveals truth that reality obscures.' In what ways does this apply to The Bangalore Detectives Club?

We turn to nonfiction for data and facts that help us make sense of the world - but we turn to fiction to understand how people felt, lived, imagined, laughed, loved and dealt with the world. History is critical for us to make sense of our place in the world. So many of the things we do today - as a society or as individuals and communities - the thoughts and beliefs we hold closest to us, the norms and values that propel us to act or to stay silent - are contingent, not absolute - shaped by the past lives and societies inhabited by our ancestors. Fiction books set in historical times allow us to look at a diversity of lived experiences of people from various strata of society, in a way that it becomes difficult to pursue in a nonfiction, because the dominant voices in a nonfiction book are necessarily those that are recorded in some form or other. In this way, fiction helps us examine issues such as power and hierarchy, gender, caste and class disparities, and socioeconomic obsessions with status, whether Indian or British, in a more imaginative and empathetic way that emerges from the heart of the writer and in that sense, has a better chance of connecting directly with the reader.

In the process of writing the book, did you encounter any hitherto unknown facets of Bangalore that you would like to share with us?

In Lal Bagh, when my main protagonist Kaveri - a young bride who has just moved to Bangalore - goes with her husband Ramu to the zoo - the boundary between the wild and the cultivated parts of the city are clear when Kaveri sees a litter of tiger cubs in the zoo being suckled by a street dog. Their mother refused to feed them, so the zoo authorities turned to a local dog for assistance. This is based on a true incident recorded in the archives, although I took some liberties with the timeline. Similarly, the story of how the Century Club was founded - by Sir M.Visweswaraya, who wanted to create a club for Indians because he was once denied entry into the Bangalore United Services Club (now the Bangalore Club), is a true one, though better recorded in the archives.

Note: Images in this article are contributed by Harini Nagendra.

Harini Nagendra is a professor of ecology at Azim Premji University, and a well-known public speaker and writer on issues of nature and sustainability. She loves trees, mysteries, and traditional recipes.
Email: harini.nagendra@apu.edu.in



Statue of Queen Victoria, Cubbon Park (Source: Madhuri Rao)