



Bangalore's Lalbagh

A Chronicle of the Garden and the City
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Suresh Jayaram

Book in Question

What motivated the writing 'Bangalore's Lalbagh: A Chronicle of the Garden and the City'?

I live in Shanthinagar, a locality sandwiched between Lalbagh and Cubbon Park, two gardens that define the character of the city's identity. This has shaped my perspective on life and nature in the city. My life revolves around these two gardens of Bangalore. The motivation to write a book was to record the oral history of my family of farmers and gardeners (*Thigalas*). They grew fruits and vegetables in their orchards and farms for the British. It is here that my grandmother told me a story about an apple tree in her garden. I was fascinated to imagine this elusive apple tree that was almost like a myth and a catalyst to write this book.

What does Lalbagh - past and present - mean for Bangalore and its people?

For many Bangaloreans, Lalbagh is just not a lung space but also an emotion. It is central to the identity of the city and is still one of the favourite haunts of the citizens.

How have you characterised people, place and time in 'Bangalore's Lalbagh'?

My idea of framing the book involved looking at the context of Bangalore becoming the 'garden city' from the native 'naked country' as a consequence of its altitude and weather. The initial seeds of Lalbagh were sown by Haider Ali and Tippu Sultan and their vision to create an Islamic Garden. The colonial interlude laid the foundation through the visionary zeal of John Cameron and G.H.Krumbiegel. And later on, the Indian superintendents H.C.Javaraya and M.H.Marigowda introduced their unique perspectives on this garden. These influences made the city a global botanical hub.

Since this book is intricately linked with your personal experiences in and of Bangalore, can you shed light on how Lalbagh shaped you and your identity locators over the years?

I am trained as an artist and art historian with an interest in botany and nature in the urban context. Lalbagh has been a source of inspiration from my childhood to paint landscapes and to make botanical drawings in school. Later on, it became a garden of earthly delights that shaped my senses and kindled my curiosity. I slowed down, paused, and looked at the garden as a palimpsest of nature and culture. The horticultural element comes from my own lineage of being born in a farmer's family and looking at the change and conflict in the city.

You drew on various sources of information over the three years to write this book. Can you please elaborate on the process of collating the various layers and formats of information in one comprehensive narrative?

The personal archive of looking at and mapping the city was a passion that led to focusing on the changing landscape of Bangalore. The postcards, photographs from private albums, botanical drawings from the Lalbagh library, and many more images from Google Commons have enriched this book and made it a rich visual narrative with personal anecdotes, and oral histories that are often relegated to the anteroom of discourse. This book is a collection and a conversation with the city at large and the garden in particular.

Did you encounter any hitherto unknown facets of Bangalore that you would like to share?

The story of the Lalbagh Zoo and its many animals is a fascinating story for us today because it is unimaginable to fathom the idea of all these exotic animals housed in this botanical garden. I heard that a tiger slipped out of the cage by accident and was frightened by the gunshots of the caretaker and a local hunter to return to its cage. This was a sensational story!

What in your opinion is the quintessential Bangalore and Bangalorean?

For me, the quintessential Bangalore is very nostalgic and is a romantic postcard from the past - colonial bungalows, home gardens, and tree-lined avenues with no traffic. But the reality is different. This city has influenced my work as a writer and an artist. It has made me a *flaneur* of nature in this urban context and has influenced the way I live in a home/studio that is built as a homage to the city and has a reference to the native and colonial, set in a contemporary context.

Can you elaborate on the importance of seeing city archives as repositories of city identity and collective memory?

Bangalore's archives are repositories of specialised information that are often not accessible to the public or the researcher. One needs perseverance and tact to penetrate the red tape and get the information one needs. These archives are not user-friendly and need to be more open to discourse and dialogue. The city needs an interconnected archive that is online and comprehensive.

Note: The pictures in this review are taken by Suresh Jayaram.

Related references

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