

5. Snapshot Bangalore, India - Monideepa Sahu



Bangalore was once called Garden City or Pensioners' Paradise for its lovely parks and trees. That street was like many others in the city. Stately trees lent a serenity transcending the occasional honk and clatter of easygoing traffic. Interlaced branches of margosas and gulmohars allowed just enough sunlight to form playful mottled patterns below. Those temple bells, the cool breeze rumpling my hair, the gentle shade, made it the perfect place where I would meet that most cherished person in my life.

I would visit a hospital on that street once a month at first, and then, as I grew accustomed to a sweet constant presence, more frequently. Once, the display of cheerful hand-woven cottons drew me into a little shop lining the street. I chose a peacock blue and parrot green bedcover to usher in the bright outdoors into our bedroom. Another time, I was tempted by aromas of filter coffee and freshly roasted spices. Entering the restaurant, I sat at a table with a brown and grey marble patterned laminated top. Their dosa was crisp, with a pat of creamy freshly churned butter melting on top. On my next visit, the waiter served me with a smile of recognition.

As months passed, my visits became more frequent out of necessity. I treaded the rough-hewn granite slabs lining the footpath with mounting strain. Climbing onto the bus home needed greater effort. Yet public buses were safer than the unacceptable hazards of a bumpy auto-rickshaw ride, and cars were a luxury. Soon my newborn son and I faced each other for the first time in the hospital on that peaceful tree-lined street. When he learnt to focus his eyes onto mine and rewarded me with his first smile, we reached a perfect understanding. They say souls of unborn children can choose their mothers. If that was so, he later said he had chosen right; the one mother who shared his deepest concerns and his love for the droll and absurd.

Leaving Bangalore on transfer, we returned and drove by the same street seven years later. Would I spot that hospital between new high rises and glass and aluminium store fronts of India's fastest growing technology city? Would the now taller and thicker trees hide the old two storied building? The restaurant with those divine dosas was upstaged by a pizza parlour, where busy waiters would have no time to remember customers. Women in silk sarees and old men in white cotton panches were rare eye-catchers now among swarms of jean-clad youngsters. Would the hospital be there at all?

There it is! I cried. That's your birthplace. The whitewashed building with fading green windows thirsted for a fresh coat of paint. My son averted his face with the silent dignity of a ten year old. I drove by many times through the years. The growing grime on the hospital's signboard never dulled my secret thrill on seeing it still there, a mellow presence amid the cacophonous swirl of chaotic traffic.

Recently, clouds of dust billowed from that road. The trees which had welcomed me decades ago lay felled and helpless. Piles of rubble lined the pavements. Every single building was fractured, exposing dangling wires and doors yawning into emptiness. A white commode jutted out amid mangled pipes from the upper floor of the hospital. This wasn't a terror attack. Pillars for the new Metro Rail are rising above the city. They are remodelling the façade of the hospital and fixing a reassuring new signboard. Some day the dust will clear and shiny new things take over. The hospital will continue for now, showing a renewed face to the evolving road and city. My son points it out while driving the car, and this time we meet each other's eyes and smile.

Monideepa Sahu is a former banker. Tired of managing money for others and not making much for herself, she quit and took to writing. Her short fiction has most recently appeared in "A New Anthem", an anthology of short stories by South Asian writers. Monideepa lives in Bangalore, India, with her computer and her family. This story was previously published only in print in Apocalypse, the literary journal of the Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago.