

BOOKS

This debut collection of poems explores Hyderabad through memory, history, language, people and everyday life

“Hyderabad is constantly changing”



If Charminar could speak, what would it say about the way its historical significance has been reduced to a smartphone angle? If the founder of Hyderabad, Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah, were to return, what would he make of the city as it stands today? And if iconic landmarks were not maintained through tireless labor, would the city's rich history continue to be preserved?

These are some of the many thought-provoking questions Manu S Kurup (writer, educator, and researcher) raises in his book, *Tea and Tombs: Poems on Hyderabad*.

Kerala-born Manu arrived in Hyderabad over two decades ago. Initially unimpressed by the city, he gradually discovered its ethos in cafés, railway stations, forgotten lanes, and places where it wears its history: tombs, mosques, temples, palaces, markets, and lakes. “Here, history is not a museum exhibit; it is a living presence,” he states.

IS WRITING *TEA & TOMBS* YOUR WAY OF GIVING THE CITY AND ITS MAKERS THEIR DUE?

Yes, but the book is also an attempt to question who gets to become history in the first place.

I've always been fascinated with the difference between the city that gets remembered and the city that actually gets lived. When we talk about Hyderabad's history, we naturally talk about rulers, monuments, battles, architecture, and political events. But monuments do not build themselves. Cities are made by masons,

stonecutters, cleaners, cooks, drivers, traders, mechanics, domestic workers, booksellers, tea sellers and thousands of people whose names rarely enter the historical record.

I wanted to look at Hyderabad from that other direction.

“Hyderabad is simultaneously old and new, traditional and modern, multilingual and increasingly homogenized, monumental and ordinary”
— Manu S Kurup

HOW IMPORTANT IS IT TO YOU TO PRESENT COMPLEX THOUGHTS WITH CLARITY AND MAKE READERS FEEL SEEN?

That is probably one of the most satisfying things a writer can experience. There are thoughts and emotions that remain vague until somebody gives them language.

When a reader tells me, “I have thought about this but never knew how to say it,” I take that as a very serious compliment. It suggests that the poem has moved beyond my individual experience and entered somebody else's.

CAN YOU DISCUSS CHANNELING TWO DECADES OF EXPERIENCE IN THE CITY THROUGH POETRY?

I came to Hyderabad as a young person, and over the years I have watched the city and myself change. At some point, I realized that I had accumulated too many fragments of Hyderabad to leave them as fragments.

Poetry seemed particularly suited to this because a city does not exist as a neat chronological narrative. Hyderabad is simultaneously old and new, traditional and modern, multilingual and increasingly homogenized, monumental and ordinary. A poem can hold those contradictions together.

WHY FREE VERSE?

I used free verse because it felt appropriate to the city I was trying to write about. Hyderabad itself is rather unruly in its rhythms. It is multilingual, constantly changing and full of interruptions, repetitions, and unexpected juxtapositions. I wanted the poems to retain some of that quality.

YOUR ADVICE TO BUDDING WRITERS?

Write before you worry about being published. Don't be in a hurry to publish everything you write. A manuscript needs time to become a book. Sometimes the most important part of writing is knowing what to remove.

Don't write because you want to become a writer; write because there is something you cannot leave unwritten. The identity of “author” comes later. The work has to come first. ■ IPSHITA

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