

Booknook

Siddharth Dasgupta



In the southern Indian city of Bangalore (or Bengaluru, if you prefer the official, syrupy version), names point to the melange of eras, empires and confluences that have danced in and out of these geographical coordinates over centuries.

If, for instance, you were to find yourself in a specific part of town, you would disembark from a rickshaw or Uber ride saturated with the loud, pulsating sounds of the region's Kannada film industry (ingeniously labelled Sandalwood). Skipping past unceasing traffic on the central Queens Road, you would enter a tiny haven of a side street—Edward Road—named in accordance with familial affiliation and surrounded by the tangential roads Cunningham, Jasma Bhavan, Ali Asker and Infantry.

Within the quietude of Edward Road, you might savour the abundance of centuries-old trees, not failing to notice the plushness of the buildings packed around you. Reaching the end of the lane, you might just consider turning back and exploring in other directions. But if you were to persist you would be rewarded with the aroma of darkly brewed coffee, a sanctuary for the soul and words gathered with care. For here—appended to a mixed-use bungalow plot containing a school, a spa and an Airbnb rental—lies Champaca Bookstore, Library and Cafe, nearly engulfed by foliage.

It's almost as though Champaca doesn't want to be discovered. 'I was scared that the location was too hidden, like a secret,' the owner and proprietor Radhika Timbadia admits with a laugh. She needn't have worried. In roughly a year and a half (the bookshop opened in June 2019), Champaca has attracted the sort of adoration and niche following that independent bookstores usually take years to cultivate. Much of this has to do with the ambience: arty canopies that sway at

the slightest hint of a breeze; clusters of flora that form an encircling welcoming committee around Champaca's large, open windows; the lingering subtlety of a native plant—the bookshop's eponym, *Magnolia champaca*—at the counter; dark wood and dancing light; and, of course, the books, occupying floor-to-ceiling shelves.

'I wanted this to be an open, green space where book lovers could idle and browse, or simply gather over coffee and a warm bite to eat,' Timbadia says. Part of Champaca's appeal lies in the fact that Timbadia has approached the bookshop as a reader would. Cosy nooks abound, and the mood is quiet and welcoming. Leaves from the enfolding trees flutter in from time to time. Most importantly, the books themselves—rarities, well-loved classics, popular fiction, graphic novels, small-press poetry, forgotten folklore and a wealth of translated literature—have been curated with finesse and passion by the Champaca team.

Timbadia seems an unlikely candidate for this kind of story. Born in Bombay (Mumbai), she moved to Bangalore in her teens and ended up devoting herself to ecology. The nuances of being an ecologist have since seeped into her calling as a purveyor of literature. 'I was used to long, meditative spells—always reading and researching, spending extended periods of time with nature, wildlife, books, being immersed in my subject,' she says.

Timbadia is ardent when mentioning her team's contribution to the soul and identity of the bookshop. 'Champaca is what it is because everyone has brought a little something special,' she says. 'Ideas, projects, events—everything has been part of a fluid, organic process where things get added and improved. Should we have book readings and select soirees? Sure. Should we nurture a small children's library

that prospers over time? Absolutely. Is there room for cultural collaborations? Yes. Does the café menu need tweaking? Totally. Everyone here was a reader first, and they've added a terrific amount of perspective to what Champaca can be.'

On a crisp winter's day, what Champaca can be flourishes in plain sight. Sunlight streams in through the canopies. People discover things, or ask for recommendations. Time seems to slow. Perhaps Champaca could have prospered only in a city like Bangalore—home to a fertile culture of secondhand bookstores (such as the legendary Blossom Book House) and a general populace in love with the written word. India's literary ecosystem isn't exactly geared towards indie bookshops, but it's an interesting time to have a conversation about the role of bookstores and publishing in effecting change.

I wonder how hard this surreal year has hit Champaca. 'It's been incredibly tough,' Timbadia admits, 'but also empowering.' She explains, 'We launched our online store, much earlier than we'd anticipated. We also launched an annual subscription service, where we bring our recommendations directly to readers—this year focusing entirely on translations. These have proven vital in our desire to cultivate a local community, to gather something special for readers.'

Timbadia mentions that many readers have turned to cookbooks and romance novels—'you know, all the fun stuff'—during the past year of flux. I ask her what she's been reading. 'N.K. Jemisin's *The City We Became*,' she says—and then, after a brief pause and a chuckle, 'Crime. I've turned to a lot of crime.' □

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