

Letter from Mangalore

MANGALORE: A CRUCIBLE AND A CRADLE

In the early part of the 14th century, Ibn Battuta was travelling across India as part of his lifetime journey across 40 present-day countries. He spent 7 years travelling in India and his journey included the port of Mangalore, which he described as one of his favourite places. He noted that it was situated on the greatest estuary of the Malabar and had the presence of thousands of Arab and Yemeni traders who were involved in the spice trade. His travels are a part of recorded history. Mangalore also figures in Amitava Ghosh's novel *In an antique land* and has a story woven around the Mangalore–Egypt trade, the life and times of Abraham Ben Yiju, a Jewish trader of the 12th century, and of his slaves (freed later), Ashu and Bomma.

I have been an itinerant physician of sorts for 33 years, having worked in different capacities in northern, western and central India, serving predominantly its rural population, and enjoying the journey immensely. We moved to the south of Vindhyas, 8 years ago, and dropped anchor in the port city of Mangalore. The relationship with the region has grown in a direction that I love its people, feel pride in its past with some anxiety for its present and the future. This is my tribute to the city's unique position as a crucible of languages, cultures, and a cradle of banking and education.

Whenever I introduce myself, half the time, people hear Bangalore instead of Mangalore and start talking of the distances and the traffic. I then have to politely interrupt to repeat Mangalore with a capital 'M' and explain that in Mangalore the maximum travel time within the city is 20 minutes. Ibn Battuta most certainly did not visit Bangalore or Bengaluru since it was founded as a city much later in 1537 by Kempegowda.

Mangalore is a crucible of languages, religions and cultures. When we arrived here, I had the notion that I would have to learn just Kannada to survive and perhaps later thrive. I was stumped when I realized that the most common language spoken here was not Kannada but Tulu, a language more closely related to Tamil than Kannada. A large number of our patients came from the Kasargod district of Kerala, just across the border, who also spoke Malayalam. Soon I detected other languages: Konkani spoken by people migrating from Konkan to this region; Beary, a language spoken by a Muslim community in Mangalore. A language again unique to this region, apart from Tulu and Beary is the Koraga, a language of the Koraga tribals, a particularly vulnerable tribal group. The rounds for me, were an exercise equally about interpretation of signs, symptoms and tests, and about interpreting the languages, and my colleagues have been patient with me. Given the multiplicity of languages, my attempts have been on learning Kannada and leaving the rest to another lifetime. There are of course patients from northern Karnataka who speak Dakkhni, which resembles Urdu, patients from urban areas who understand Hindi, and the occasional migrant workers from northern parts of India. We are in the midst of a renaming spree with regard to places in India. Mangalore, which is the Anglicized name, already has a record of sorts in alternative names: Kudla (Tulu), Mangaluru (Kannada), Mangalapuram (Malayalam), Kodyala (Konkani), Maikala (Beary). Ibn Battuta

called it Manjarur. The average Mangalorean is a multi-lingual person navigating the languages of the region effortlessly, something a linguistically challenged person like me envies.

The melting pot of Mangalore has had its rulers from Ashoka, to the Alupas, from the Vijaynagara rules to the Mysore Sultans, to the Portuguese, and the British. There have been waves of migrants of different religions and ethnicities, from people of Konkan fleeing the persecution of the Portuguese (both Hindus and Christians), to the missionaries from Germany, Switzerland, and France, both Protestant and Catholic, to current migrants like me drawn to it by its location by the sea, natural beauty of the western ghats next door, its culture and opportunities. Mangalore is one of the most multicultural cities in India, and one in which Dussehra, Eid and Christmas are all celebrated with gaiety and fervour. Moodbidri with its Jain temples is called the Jain Kashi. Near Mangalore is the 8th century Malik Dinar Mosque. The Rosario Cathedral, whose dome resembles that of St Peter's Basilica in the Vatican was built in the 16th century by the Portuguese, while the Chapel of St Aloysius College is modelled after the Sistine Chapel of Vatican, complete with frescoes painted by an Italian Jesuit. There are of course scores of Hindu temples, Shaivite and those of Shakti cult being most prominent. A milestone in the recent history of Mangalore was the arrival of the Protestant missionaries of the Basel Mission from Basel in Switzerland in 1834 and the establishment of the St Aloysius College by the Jesuits, which formed the nucleus of the educational activities in the region. Unusual for an evangelical mission, the priests also looked at skill development and developing trades in the region with starting of a printing press in 1841. But what really had a nationwide impact was the development of the Mangalore tile in the 1860s by Father Georg Plebst, a German engineer using the local clay. These Mangalore tiles, aesthetically pleasing and durable, were extensively used in all government buildings in the British era, and can be seen in the Chhatrapati Shivaji (earlier Victoria) terminus in Mumbai. Father John Haller developed the 'khaki' dye in Mangalore using the shells of used cashews, which later became the colour of the British armed forces worldwide. The intermingling of cultures is reflected in a diverse cuisine that draws from different traditions. Fish is a staple here, and there are many non-vegetarian signature dishes of the region. For vegetarians, the *Neerdosa* (literally water dosa, and it is almost translucent), Mangalore buns (stuffed with banana), variants of *idlis* wrapped and steamed in different kinds of leaves, and the local greens and gourds cooked in the delicate coastal style with coconut are a revelation. Baking comes naturally to Mangaloreans, while the local ice-cream brand IDEAL with its unique flavours and mixes (e.g. jackfruit!) is an institution.

Mangalore is also a cradle of initiatives in the field of banking and education. No less than five banks—Canara, Syndicate, Corporation, Vijaya and Karnataka banks have originated here. The uniqueness of these banks lay in their origins, by local entrepreneurs focused on the needs of people from rural areas, workers, farmers and are excellent examples of grassroots banking. One of the founders of Syndicate Bank at the age of 27 was Dr T.M.A. Pai (1898–1979), who started a pigmy deposit scheme where the poor could deposit even a few *annas* a week with bank agents. Dr Pai, an alumnus of St Aloysius, provided

healthcare to people but also established some 15 schools and vocational training centres. Later he founded the first self-financed medical college in India, the Kasturba Medical College in Manipal along with other institutions, and a medical college by the same name in Mangalore. Today Mangalore has seven medical colleges, all well-equipped in terms of infrastructure, a record of sorts for a city with a metro population of 0.7 million.

What struck me about the culture in Mangalore was the pleasantness of day-to-day interactions, where rudeness is exceptional. Even purchases at stores are not transactional and exchanging pleasantries before one makes the purchases is common. In the medical colleges I have observed a remarkable civility with patients and collegiality with co-workers, which I did not experience frequently in northern parts. There isn't a place where I have exchanged so many greetings and smiles with people I may not know by name, and where hierarchy does not dominate interactions. I found colleagues who were models of patience with patients. Interactions between medical colleges are also marked by a sense of cooperation with an element of healthy competition. The reasons are many: the faculty of different colleges may be related by a common Alma Mater, or

members of the same family may be in a different medical college. Also, you might retire in one college and then take up assignment in another! The world is round and so is the medical college circuit in Mangalore. The general civility and lack of strife, makes mobility possible and painless.

Mangalore is a microcosm of India as are its medical institutions. These occasional *Letters* from this microcosm will deal with experiences and reflections on medicine and public health in India, in all its dimensions of care and prevention, education and research, its past and the present, its glory and its feet of clay, from the perspective of a generalist, who shares what Romain Rolland termed as 'pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will'. I hope to inform, provoke and even sometimes amuse and entertain. Watch this space, and do send your comments and critiques!

ANURAG BHARGAVA
Department of Medicine
Yenepoya Medical College
Deralakatte, Mangalore
Karnataka
anuragb17@gmail.com
