



All smiles Mysore plays muse in author Mahesh Rao's debut novel

events such as riots breaking out in Mysore. The characters in Rao's novel come through as wholesome individuals with a distinct past, present and future. The three central female characters – Mala, Susheela and Uma – all hold their own, while giving ample room for readers to reflect on their personal stories. Presenting strong female characters as a male writer, though, doesn't necessarily influence the portrayal of the characters themselves, according to Rao. "A character's gender can be a crucial part of character development but there are so many others. It is a complete understanding of their history, motivations, aspirations, regrets, fears, these sorts of complexities, that bring the richness we seek," Rao said.

In many of the conversations between the characters, the use of Indian English and the inclusion of slang create a sense of the book being rooted in a real place. For instance, an angry woman in the streets swears in a string of choice Kannada profanities, sunglasses are referred to colloquially as "cooling glass", and the casual punctuation of sentences with "I say!" evoke a strong street feel. According to Rao, slang, observations and the inclusion of local words helped root the story in the setting. "I think a profound sense of place can be achieved through the expression of the particular way in which English is spoken or written somewhere," said Rao, whose short fiction piece "Drums" was nominated for the Commonwealth Short Story Prize in 2012.

The Mysore that Rao writes about seems reflective of the Indian urban population which is attempting to hold together the traditional and the contemporary, embracing both lifestyles and often allowing the two to meld. "It's a cliché but we are dozens of worlds; and in spite of all the collision and attrition, somehow the essential centre still holds," Rao said. "And best of all worlds? Of course, but the real questions are: best for whom, who gets to decide and on what basis?"

**The Smoke Is Rising**, Random House, ₹499.

## Mysore pack

Mahesh Rao's debut novel explores the multiple identities that coexist in an Indian city, finds **Asawari Ghatage**.

In Mahesh Rao's book, *The Smoke Is Rising*, coffee shops are the hub of political discussions, and civic issues are dealt with in an open forum, while gossip and unrest lurk beneath the surface as the city of Mysore threatens to go up in flames. The book is set around the time when India's first unmanned mission to the moon, Chandrayaan-1, was launched into space. As India is on the brink of cutting edge science, its people grapple with basic issues like water shortage, corruption and land-grabbing. Through his words, Rao, who began work on the book in 2008, paints a picture of a city that attempts to find a middle ground between tradition and modernity. The world of the privileged ensconced comfortably in Mysore collides with the struggles of ordinary people, offering a portrait of a city brimming with multiple identities.

Rao, a lawyer who moved to Mysore from the UK about five

years ago, said that he did not start with the intention to write about the city. "I think any writer who writes in English and lives in Mysore probably feels compelled to sense the presence of RK Narayan hovering nearby," he said, referring to Narayan's fictional town of Malgudi which featured in several of his stories and novels. "I didn't succeed in that, but I think it was

quite natural for me to start to think about what Malgudi would look like today, what would its conflicts involve, how would its inhabitants live?"

In the book, there is violence brewing against the backdrop of the development of a proposed theme park called Heritage Land. The protests pervade not only newly developed areas of the city but also the

narrow bylanes that usually remain unaffected by proposed influx of tourism. "The visual drama of our particular modernity seems to be superficially very appealing. So we have a constant stream of pictures of sadhus with mobile phones and oxen transporting spacecraft components, or whatever else it

might be. And then the focus shifts," said Rao, over email.

*The Smoke Is Rising* tells personal stories of the people who make up a quintessential part of life in Rao's rendition of Mysore. Their interactions present the different realities that coexist in Rao's story. Each character's personal story is told against the backdrop of politics and development. Contemporary issues that India faces are woven into the story, for instance, farmers' resistance to land-grabbing. Rao admits that news, reportage and analyses has possibly seeped into his fiction in terms of the prose, which often tends to carry journalistic overtones. "I think the act of writing is inevitably political: even if an active political position is avoided, a choice is being exercised and that choice can reveal a great deal," he said.

Visual drama also permeates Rao's detailed prose, which presents a vivid picture of characters, the sociopolitical setting and often, unexpected

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