Lounge Fiction Special: ‘Sleuthing for suffrage’ by Harini Nagendra

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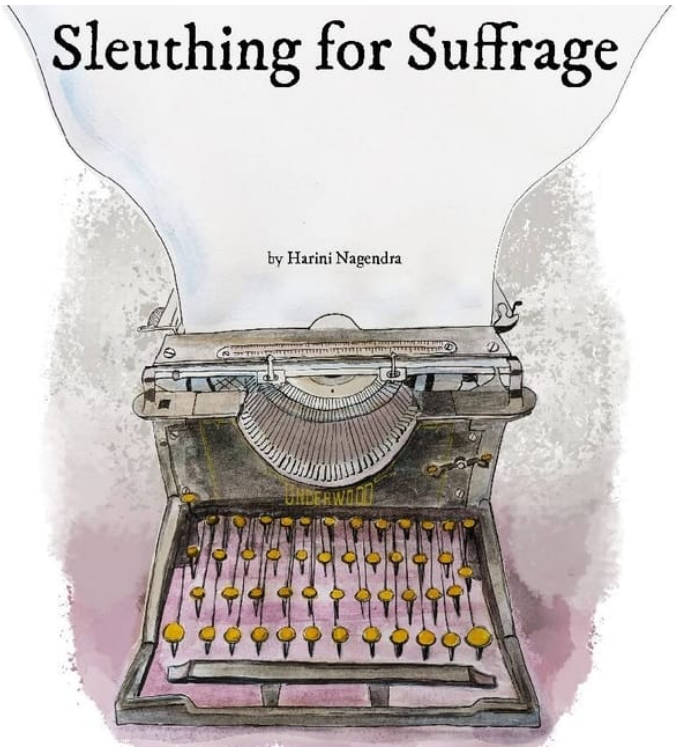

‘Sleuthing for suffrage’. Ilustration by Nithya Subramanian

8 April 1922. Bangalore.

The chimes of the large grandfather clock competed with the snores from the easy chair. Only 10 in the morning? The day loomed ahead, large and empty. Kaveri slipped a pencil into the large plaster cast that covered her right leg from toe to shin, trying to scratch an itch with little success.

Removing the gold chain from her neck, she tucked a piece of folded paper into one end, taking aim with the paper at the porcelain statue of a dog using her makeshift catapult.

Crack! Slipping from Kaveri’s sweaty hand, the chain flew through the air, hitting the small form curled up in the chair.

“What?” The snoring stopped as Uma aunty sat upright, rubbing her eyes.

“Sorry, aunty. I was testing out a new type of catapult. I didn’t mean to wake you. I was testing out different materials. See?” She held her book open for Uma aunty to see. “My physics textbook says you need a rigid material—that’s my cardboard notebook here—and a flexible thread. I have tried out elastic, rubber, coir, wool—and now my chain. I doubt gold will work—it’s malleable and ductile, but too rigid. Do you want to try?”

Uma aunty gave the notebook in Kaveri’s hands a dubious look, heaving herself out of the chair with a grunt and walking over to her. “Too much time on your hands?”

“I hate sitting at home like this,” Kaveri scowled. “I should be in college, studying. Our former Diwan, Viswesvaraya, made education compulsory for girls, yet Dasanna and his men from the education department block us at every turn. They have delayed the construction of the Womens’ Block at Central College for a year now, on one pretext or another. It is because of men like him that I sit at home, unable to register for a degree in physics or mathematics. If only I had something to do. A case.” She gave Uma aunty a hopeful look.

“After solving the murder in Century Club and the shooting at Sampangi Mills, your fame has spread across the city. I’m sure a new client will come along soo…” Uma aunty stopped as she heard the gate open, followed by the sound of quick footsteps. The front door was thrown open, and a short round woman bustled in, bristling with energy.

“Such a sorry face! Don’t sit here feeling bad for yourself, Kaveri.”

Kaveri sat up straight, beaming at the new entrant. “Lakamma aunty! I thought you had forgotten me.”

“I need your help,” Lakamma said, sitting down next to Kaveri. “You know we are in touch with our sisters across the seas, in Sri Lanka, Britain and America, where the suffrage movement is gaining force. But unlike them, we want to work with our men to bring about change, as compatriots and allies. We can’t afford to fight amongst ourselves, at a time when we must work together, for the cause of Swaraj .”

“Shh!” Uma aunty ran in from the kitchen, hastily closing the windows. “The wind carries our words to the neighbours. Lawyer Swamy is a toady of the British, always seeking to inform on others. It is dangerous to speak openly of Swaraj these days.”

Lakamma lowered her voice. “We have to get the rules changed, to help women succeed. And for that, we need to be where the discussions are taken.”

“Where is that?” Uma aunty asked, bringing in hot tumblers of coffee from the kitchen.

“The Mysore Representative Assembly, which meets twice a year—that’s where all the real decisions are made. Even if two or three of us gain admittance, we can make a real difference.” Lakamma drained her coffee tumbler in one gulp.

Kaveri gaped at Lakamma. She must be really worried if she's drinking her special brew so fast, without even tasting it.

"Last year, when Mrs Jinarajadasa, the famous writer, visited Mysore—you went with her to submit a petition to the Diwan Kantaraj Urs. Didn't that help?" Kaveri asked.

"He promised to help us. But a year has passed since that meeting in July 1921. One of our male supporters had proposed a motion to allow women to occupy elected posts in the Assemblies and other posts of power." Lakamma thumped the table, her red and green stone bangles clattering. "We had several supporters in the Assembly. I was confident that the motion would be passed, and we could stand for elections in the next term. But now—everything has changed."

"What happened?" Uma aunty's eyes were wide with worry.

"The Maharani reached out to me this morning. The members of the Assembly have received anonymous notes, warning them to vote against the motion. Three of them contacted her. The blackmail attempt didn't intimidate them—it made them furious, determined to help us. But they say that many others are worried. There is a risk that the motion will be defeated, setting our cause back another year."

Kaveri felt the familiar thump-thump-thump in her chest, her heart racing as it always did at the start of a new case. She opened her notebook to a fresh page.

"What's that contraption?" Lakamma asked, watching Kaveri insert a pencil into the cube-like box mounted to the table.

Kaveri's face flushed with pleasure. "That's our new pencil sharpener. Battery-operated. My husband bought it for me for our wedding anniversary."

Lakamma laughed. "Trust you to be ecstatic about a gadget instead of a new pair of bangles." She sobered, leaning forward, her hand on Kaveri's knee. "The notes warn that we are in Kaliyuga, when society is immoral, and women have become uncontrollable. They hint of scandalous goings-on, suggesting that someone in their family is having an affair. The letter writer positions himself as an anonymous 'well-wisher', suggesting that they vote against the motion, if they want to retain their reputation."

"We must stop them!" Uma aunty nodded so vigorously that her bun came undone. She wound her long grey plait into a bun again, stabbing hairpins into her hair as though she was stabbing the letter writer himself. "We will find the perpetrator. Kaveri will find him."

"We don't have much time. Today is Friday, and the Assembly meets on Monday—10 April, at 9am." Lakamma pulled out three sheets of paper from her purse, handing them to Kaveri.

Kaveri squinted at the sheets, holding them against the sunlight. “These look very similar—they are on plain paper, without any watermark.”

“What does the handwriting tell you?” Uma aunty pointed to the book of graphology on Kaveri’s bookshelf. “You told me that you can look at a letter and deduce if it was written by a man or a woman, young or old, and so many other details.”

“I wish I could. But these are typed, all from the same machine. Do you have some suspects in mind?” She turned to Lakamma, tapping her pencil against her cheek.

“We suspect it is one of three men. P. Dasanna is a senior officer in the Education Commission, one of the men blocking your entry into Central College. In the last Assembly gathering, Dasanna argued that women were the incarnation of Goddess Saraswati—they should not sully their reputations by leaving their homes, entering the public gaze,” Lakamma said.

“How convenient,” Uma aunty commented dryly, as Kaveri grimaced. “And the other two suspects?”

“Mr Y. Narasimhan owns the large brick factory near Elgin Mills. He employs mostly women, paying them a pittance. He fears that women members, if elected, will demand equal pay for equal jobs—which Mrs Jinarajadasa writes about so eloquently.”

Kaveri fumed. “Last year, a pregnant girl fainted while working at his factory, and was rushed to Bowring Hospital. My husband Ramu treated her. She had a miscarriage. He told me she was severely malnourished, just skin and bones. We must get you into the Assembly, Lakamma aunty.” Kaveri gripped her hand tightly, squeezing and releasing it. “Who is the third suspect?”

“Your neighbour, Lawyer Swamy. He is worried about the campaign initiated by Sarojini Naidu and others, which demands that inheritance rights be extended to women. Swamy refused to share his father’s large estate with his mother and two unmarried sisters, throwing them out of his house. He is terrified that he will be forced to divide his estate.”

“Each one a scoundrel,” Uma aunty muttered. “Kaveri will tell us who it is, won’t you?” She looked at Kaveri hopefully.

“With my leg in a cast, I feel like I am restrained in chains! The only clues we have are these letters.” Kaveri held the sheets to her nose and sniffed, her brows creasing together. “I get a faint whiff of something…”

She squinted at the letters again. Something was tugging at the edge of her memory. If only she could remember what it was.

Uma aunty took the papers from her, inhaling deeply. “This paper smells like pudina, like the mint we use for cooking—but somehow different.”

“Swamy and Dasanna can use a typewriter—they have to, as part of their jobs as a lawyer and a government officer. But Narasimhan is not well educated—he is only 5th standard pass. Shall we cross him off the list?” Lakamma asked.

“Wait a minute,” Kaveri exclaimed, hobbling to her table. She returned with a sheaf of newspaper clippings, rummaging through them. “I know what this reminds me of. The Prince of Wales brought two portable Underwood typewriters with him on his recent visit. Several Indian businessmen then ordered the machines, but they are not easy to operate. That’s why I didn’t get one of these yet. That’s also why I stored these clippings—because I was studying them.”

She pulled out a ruler, measuring the length of the sentences. “As I suspected, this was typed on an Underwood—it’s in Pica font, not Elite. Pica is larger, with 10 characters per inch, while Elite squeezes 12 characters into the same space.”

“I don’t understand, Kaveri,” Uma aunty complained. “What does this ‘font’ business have to do with the case?”

Kaveri brandished another clipping at her. “Because of this—the other bit of news I remembered. Narasimhan employed a secretary—an American who came with the Prince’s entourage, experienced in operating an Underwood. That’s the critical clue.” She beamed at them.

Lakamma and Uma aunty gazed back at her blankly.

“Don’t you see it?” Kaveri brandished the letters at them. “These letters were written in Pica font, which means they were typed on a portable Underwood. The American is one of the few men in the country who knows how to operate these machines. Now look at the date. These letters were typed yesterday—6 April. But the date in the top left corner is 04-06-1922. We would write it as 06-04-1922. Only Americans use this approach—first the month, then the date.”

Kaveri highlighted another word with her pencil. “See here—‘recognize’ is spelt with a z, not an s, another giveaway. Only Americans spell it like this.” She gave them a triumphant look. “These letters were typed by the American secretary, on the instructions of his employer, Narasimhan. Ergo, Narasimhan is our anonymous blackmailer.”

Lakamma leapt up, embracing her. “You never fail me, Kaveri.” She looked at the clock, collecting the letters and stuffing them back into her purse. “There is no time to lose. I will inform the Maharani, who can pass this on to the men. Without firm evidence, they can’t

reveal Narasimhan's identity—but they can reassure the other members that the letter writer has been found, and the danger is behind them. Now everyone can vote in accordance with their conscience."

Watching Lakamma leave, Uma aunty turned to Kaveri. "We must ensure Narasimhan does not reach the Assembly on Monday. He is a dangerous man. What if he finds another way to halt the vote?"

"Leave it to me," Kaveri winked at her.

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On Monday afternoon, Lakamma burst in through the front door, startling Kaveri's dog Putta, who erupted into a volley of barks. "We did it!" she exclaimed, hugging her fiercely. "The vote was passed. We can stand for elections." She gave Kaveri another hug.

"But tell me, how did you do it? I heard Narasimhan came running into the Assembly an hour late, after the voting concluded, his clothes dishevelled."

"Do you remember the man from Majjigepura, aunty? My second case?" Kaveri gave her a mischievous grin. "When I helped him recover his lost flock of goats, he promised to give me any help I wanted. Well, I sent word to him. On Monday morning, when Narasimhan stepped out of his home, his car was surrounded by animals. Someone had spread fresh grass across the road, and the goats, stuffing their bellies, refused to move. The goatherd—our friend from Majjigepura—appeared deaf, oblivious to the sound of the car horn. Narasimhan was forced to get out and walk. He got goat hair all over his Savile Row coat—made from the profits he squeezed from starving workers." She burst into a fit of giggles. "He must have smelt absolutely foul by the time he reached the venue."

"Oh, and speaking of smells," she rummaged in her bag, pulling out a small tube wrapped in tinfoil. "I realised what the fragrance on the anonymous notes reminded me of. Mrs Roberts gave me this box of American candy for Christmas last year."

Uma aunty peered at the tube. "Life Savers?"

Kaveri nodded. "Mint candy. I believe these are all the rage in America these days." She unwrapped the silver foil, handing one of the coin-shaped sweets with a hole at the centre to the two women.

"My cast comes off on Sunday. That gives us the rest of the week, to complete one final task." She gave them a wicked smile. "To expose Dasanna's machinations, so I can enrol in a BSc by the end of this year."

The women crunched the Life Savers with relish, studying Kaveri's notes, their heads close together as they plotted.

Harini Nagendra is an ecologist at Azim Premji University in Bengaluru and the author of multiple non-fiction books: most recently, Shades Of Blue: Connecting The Drops In India's Cities*. Her debut historical mystery,* The Bangalore Detectives Club*, was shortlisted for the Anthony, Agatha, Lefty and Historical Dagger prizes and featured in The New York Times' 100 Notable Book of 2022 list.*

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