

Q & A **LAVANYA SANKARAN** | 45
AUTHOR

‘Our national tendency is sentimentality’

WRITING ABOUT

contemporary Indian cities is not about traditional families and happy endings. Lavanya Sankaran's debut novel, like her prized collection of short stories, is set in Bengaluru, the boomtown of the new Indian dream. It is, she tells **ARADHNA WAL**, the Lindsay Lohan of Indian cities — full of promise but forever poised to self-destruct.

EDITED EXCERPTS

What inspired *The Hope Factory*?

The novel is a story of the tremendous opportunities that exist in Indian cities. Life for those chasing a dream is an obstacle course, but the prize is big. *The Hope Factory* captures that through two protagonists, Anand and Kamala. Neither is an exceptional superhero. All Anand wants is to expand his factory, but he is stuck in a quagmire of complication and corruption. Kamala's goal is to ensure her son gets an education. But she's a single, working class mother with no roots in the city. Anand's story came to me from a National Geographic programme I was watching on the pioneers in America

going West. In the West was opportunity, but if something went wrong there was no one to help. If you're a small businessman in India today, that's your story. It's not grand or heroic, but it's the unsung story of India. Kamala's story was born when I had to fire a cleaning lady, who couldn't turn up for work two weeks at a time because she was



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PHOTO: ANKIT AGRAWAL

sick, or had to look after her child. Her 12-year-old son stood outside and watched as I fired his mother. He gave me this look and I knew he hated me.

Your first book was a collection of stories. Was it a difficult transition to writing a novel?

Writing short stories trained me in craft and discipline. Since I was writing about contemporary urban Indians, I didn't want to trip into stereotypes. I also wanted to avoid that other Indian trope of sentimentality, of moving towards a cheery ending with the family all in one picture. That's a national tendency; we've been doing it since the *Ramayana*. Writing is a political act. But I don't want to be standing on a soapbox.

You write acutely about different classes. How do you get to know your characters?

It takes a lot of research. A lawyer showed me the mechanics of a land purchase, taking me to the registrar's office and walking me through the process. I met people in the manufacturing industry to get a feel for Anand's life. In Indian cities, you have access to all sorts of classes. My responsibility is to use my skill as an observer and bear witness with great honesty. I can't use my characters for propaganda.

How important is Bengaluru as your backdrop?

It is the perfect representative of the changes happening

in India. It's the great Indian boomtown. But Bengaluru is also the Lindsay Lohan of Indian cities: it's done some really interesting things and then messed them up. Have you heard the story of the new airport? The private company in charge of building it delivered on time, but the government wasn't ready so there was no road to get to the airport. The private company guys, in the face of the hundreds of committees 'examining' the problem, went ahead and built the road. Then the government began work on a highway leading from the city to the airport road. And then it changed its mind to build the highway to go above the road. But that project got stuck because the guy to whom the government gave the contract got into some corruption trouble. What makes India tick is how we deal with bad governments without losing hope. People like Anand do not let the government get in the way.

How do you use language to distinguish between your characters?

Anand's world is primarily English-speaking, recognizable to most urban Indians. It was easier to capture his voice. But Kamala speaks in Kannada. There is a way of writing about the East that I didn't want to adhere to. The language is very simple, making the characters seem mystical to a reader from the West. Indian languages are as complex as the lives they represent. I went back to the pre-industrial Elizabethan English of the 1600s. It's the language of a complex mind and that's what I wanted to give Kamala.

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