

Kolkata Crimes



Author Aftab Seth

by **Krishnan Srinivasan**
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Talented Author & Distinguished Diplomat

Krishnan Srinivasan – Kris to those who know him – has had an extraordinarily distinguished career as a diplomat, as well as an author of scholarly works relating to various aspects of international relations. He has had diplomatic experience in parts of the Middle East, and several spells as head of missions in Africa. His tenure, at a turbulent time in the history of Bangladesh, resulted in a major book dealing with the fall of Gen. Hussain Ershad, the military ruler of Bangladesh. Apart from describing the situation of civil society in that revolution, the author included a memoir of his years as head of the mission in Dacca, now Dhaka. In later years, after serving as foreign secretary, he wrote a book about this period called *Diplomatic Channels* (2012).

After his tenure of several years as deputy secretary-general of the Commonwealth of Nations in London, he wrote a scholarly work titled *The Rise, Decline and Future of the British Commonwealth* (2005). During his long academic career, Kris spent time at Wolfson College and at the Centre for International Studies at Cambridge, and was also for a time – as was I – at Christ Church, Oxford.

Just before Covid struck the world in 2020, he was engaged in a scholarly work published as *Values in Foreign Policy* (2019). I had the privilege of being associated with this project and made a small contribution to it. Kris has continued all these years to publish articles on subjects relating to international matters in the leading newspapers of India. After such a storied diplomatic and academic career, it is a refreshing surprise to learn that he has also written several volumes of detective stories! The book under review is the eighth in this series.

Kolkata Crimes – Venues & Characters

Kolkata Crimes is a volume of a little under 300 pages comprising seven detective tales, which are racy, mysterious, and full of suspense, unfolding mainly in the Calcutta of the past, now Kolkata. The author takes us to many areas of this teeming metropolis, which in the early 20th century was called “the city of palaces” – a reference to the magnificent buildings in central Calcutta. He describes places such as Gariahat, a middle-class area with a strong

Bengali population, and the ancient Tollygunge Club features in more than one story (its golf course is said to be the second-oldest course in the world after St. Andrews in Scotland).

There are two main characters in *Kolkata Crimes* who appear in each story, and who are in fact in all the author’s earlier detective novels. One is a former Somali diplomat who has suffered immense personal tragedy: Ambassador Michael Marco has had a few postings abroad and one in India as a trade consul. He stays in Calcutta at an establishment colorfully called the “Wise Owl”. In the course of these stories, Marco makes utterances which often are reminiscent of his abode. His conversations with Koel Deb, the other main character, are replete with rare insights into human behavior, nuggets of wisdom and sometimes scintillating wit.

Deb herself is a brilliant young woman who has a prosthetic arm, the result of an earlier serious accident. She came first in the civil service exams, but chose not to join the higher civil services including the Foreign Service. Instead she opted for the Indian Police service. After her debilitating accident, she set up shop as a private detective, using her experience and contacts made while in the police, as well as in other echelons of Calcutta society. Deb’s chosen mode of transport, rather unusually, is a large Harley Davidson motorcycle on which she buzzes about the labyrinth of Calcutta’s streets and lanes.

The author draws sketches, with much facility, of some of the fascinating characters who people these pages. There is Mrs. Shahnaz Sarodana in Bombay, for example, most likely a Parsi, a racehorse owner who is concerned about her prize filly “Catalytic” and its safety. The Mahalakshmi Race Course in Central Bombay is the place where her valuable horse is stabled. There are fears that some persons might take action to harm this horse, and this is how Deb the detective is brought into the story.

The first meeting with Shahnaz Sarodana is described by Deb: “Mrs. Sarodana rose with a smile as I entered the terrace. It did not light up her face suddenly, but seemed to suffuse it by deliberate degrees. Her hair was presumably dyed because it was jet black and sleek and shining and sculpted around the ears. She was slim and held herself upright, but it was her beringed hands that most clearly betrayed her age that was in the late 50s, because they had none of a young women’s soft roundness.” Talking of the fashionable Mrs.

Sardona and her position in society: “In her circle, her social decrees were law, but she was said to have too many admirers not to have an equal number of enemies.”

Then there is the former Swiss diplomat, Hans Hartman, who learned Sanskrit in Benares and became a specialist in the languages of the Kuki and Mizo tribes of Northeast India. To add an air of mystery and barely disguised menace, Hartman is described thus: “Not everyone regarded Hartman as a harmless elderly scholar. To some who claimed to be in the know, he was a man of violent mood swings, an odd character who alienated people by being abrupt and who had generated gossip for decades, someone considered unstable and unfit for social life.” This Swiss scholar has an adopted daughter acquired from the orphanages of Kalimpong and Kurseong in northern Bengal. The girl is apparently of European descent, judging from a description of her physical features. Hartman and his daughter are the central figures in this particular story, which also involves a cast of other characters.

There is also a Japanese person by the name of Nakamura Sato. He buys art by famous Indian artists and invests in a Rabindranath Tagore painting. Sato is described by Parul, the lady looking after the art gallery: “These Japanese people are so smart and hi-tech and sell their products all over the world, and they have made so much money that they have more dollars than they know what to do with. Their latest fashion is to invest in art from abroad.” Parul is in fact referring to a type of Japanese who made huge amounts of money during the “Bubble Era” in the 1980s. That was a time when land values in Japan hit astronomical heights; the Imperial Palace in central Tokyo, for example, was valued as equal to almost all of Manhattan! Nakamura is obviously a Japanese of the Bubble Era ilk. He and the gallery are involved in alleged forgery and a network of con artists, which leads to unexpected situations.

There is also the incredibly smooth, glib, slightly shady society dentist Augustin. Augustin has little time for the hoi polloi, mixing as he does with Calcutta high society. His posh friends, heads of the top clubs in the city, the odd diplomat and other big business tycoons, have swinging parties at his special flat maintained ostensibly for such purposes. What actually happens at such fun parties is the subject of this story. The characters in the book also include some from the underworld of Calcutta. The bar owner of the Olympia Café,

Shirish Saha, is a case in point, “with a flat face and thinning hair ... with a loud voice, big paunch and a broad false smile ... like other bars in this area, it could have been a front for drugs, women and small arms. The local police were always welcome to use the place gratis, and were compensated sufficiently to look the other way.” In this part of the book there is a display of an uncanny familiarity with the nefarious activities in the seamy slums of Calcutta.

There are also scenes in picturesque places such as Kala Bhavan at Shantiniketan, the university set up by Nobel Laureate Tagore in the early 20th century. At Kala Bhavan, the Fine Arts center, there is an encounter between dour, humorless lawyer Anirban Raha and detective Deb, who describes the meeting thus: “Raha greeted me with all the enthusiasm of an usher at a funeral! ... waiting with the saturnine Raha could not help anyone’s mood, but there was nothing for it except to sit as far apart as possible ... and listen to Raha expounding the laws of consumer fraud.” This meeting relates to the same story which is set in the art gallery of Calcutta mentioned above.

Domestic Politics

As might be expected of an author who has spent a lifetime dealing with politicians of varying hues, there are perceptive comments on domestic political situations in India. In one story the following description is illustrative of this: “The Kolkata Police Commissioner was obliged to hold a press conference on the instructions of the Chief Minister who felt, perhaps unwisely, that it was better to head off any criticism or false rumours by revealing what could be revealed ... Commissioner Prasanta Chandra, flanked by a laconic Dutta and Shankar (who remained silent under the nation’s Home Minister’s strict injunction) did the best he could in front of a querulous crowd of journalists.” Many such journalists “had been confidentially briefed by the New Delhi Union government, to make things uncomfortable for the West Bengal state government.”

Those familiar with current domestic politics in India would see the accuracy with which the tenuous juxtaposition between the central government in Delhi and state government in Bengal is described.

Art, Literature & Music

Running through the book are dalliances of various varieties, extramarital affairs galore, some tender with a degree of depth, others imbued with starkly dark malice. Almost all such liaisons are inextricably intertwined with high intrigue, bloodcurdling danger, and in some cases death. Many of the stories in the book have a number of literary and musical references which lighten the narrative with attractive interludes. Ambassador Marco responds to Deb's statement about an occasion when she listened to Verdi's *Aida* in Italian in Delhi, with the following: "Ah Minnie [the name he uses for Deb] how satisfying, "If only my dream might come true, and to you my heavenly Aida, to return crowned with laurels." Similarly while talking to a young student HiraK, Marco says: "Some rise by sin, and some by virtue fall." HiraK's quizzical look is answered by Marco with aplomb: "Shakespeare, HiraK, 'Measure for Measure'."

Again, while driving in HiraK's car Marco says in response to a remark by the young student: "Perhaps you are right, HiraK. But as Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai said when asked about his assessment of the French Revolution: 'It is too soon to say.' HiraK, needless to say, is duly impressed by the erudite ambassador.

There are many more such quotes from literature and from Latin with which the author shows much familiarity. In the story about the art gallery in Calcutta, he displays his admiration of the work of some of the greatest Indian artists, including Raja Ravi Verma, M. F. Husain, K. K. Hebbar, Francis Souza, Laxma Goud and K. C. S. Paniker.

Tensions & Enigmas

As one might expect in detective stories, there are several points of palpable tension in the narrative. This is so in the story about a group of actors touring in Cooch Behar. Here is an example: "Satish played a card game of Solitaire by himself. Prabhat filed his nails and sulked. Asha stared at her mobile phone as if it explained the mysteries of the universe. And they seemed to be warily watching each other as well, creating an intense atmosphere ... they seemed to be sticking to each other, because each of them was afraid to leave the others alone for some reason."

No detective stories would be complete without a fair share of deaths, suspected murders and an occasional suicide. *Kolkata Crimes* does not lack any of these. On the contrary, there is a detailed litany of gory and at times grisly accounts of murders, which show a familiarity with medical detail: "Dutta gently opened the blouse to examine the cuts on her chest. As he did so, he and the paramedic leaped up in shock. The sternum of the corpse had been cut open and many of the ribs broken, exposing the interior cavity of her body." Equally macabre, when the body was removed to a hospital, there is the following olfactory description: "The smell of antiseptic and cleanliness gave way to the smell of the dead and damaged ... whether Indian or Swiss, poor or rich, the odour of the dead human being was identical."

The last story, "The Unravelling", which is the longest in the book, ends on a delightful, even if slightly enigmatic note. To savour the many joys of reading this book one has to go through each story carefully, in order to unravel the mysterious conclusions at the end of each chapter. In the case of this reviewer, some of the more complicated stories had to be read more than once! But it can be said without any hesitation that it was well worth the effort. **JS**

Aftab Seth is a former Indian ambassador to Japan, and has served in nine other countries around the world. Educated at St. Stephen's College and as a Rhodes Scholar at Christ Church, Oxford, he has also been both a student and professor at Keio University, and is a leader of several educational and cultural organizations in Japan. In recognition of his outstanding contributions to bilateral relations for more than half a century, he received Japan's highest decoration, The Grand Cordon of the Order of the Rising Sun, from the emperor in November 2015.