

In Search of *Paradise Lost*

Books and literature are thriving in India and its major cities have long been an inspiration for writers and readers alike. And unlike anywhere else in the world, print media is still a growth industry. Bookshops are heaving, libraries packed and even the street sellers stock a rich array of classics that puts the average British bookshop to shame.

At Milton's Cottage – only surviving residence of John Milton and the place where he completed *Paradise Lost* – we're aware that our Indian visitors seem far more familiar with Milton's poetry and prose than their British counterparts. We're curious to find out why and the British Council Heritage Alliance travel grant offered a welcome opportunity to explore this literary paradise and its connections to Milton.

Swapping the grey October skies of Buckinghamshire for the post-Monsoon sunshine of Mumbai offers the perfect start to any bibliodyssey. All of the world's great cities have a turn as literary hotspot and Mumbai seems to be having its time in the sun right now. Bookstore shelves here are crammed with new titles set in the city while contemporary storytellers, such as Salman Rushdie, Suketu Mehta and Rohinton Mistry, have been profoundly influenced by the local landscape.

Staying in the south Mumbai neighbourhood of Fort enabled me to step straight into literary history, from the Parsi complex in Colaba - home to Dina Dalai in Rohinton Mistry's novel *A Fine Balance* - to the beautiful David Sassoon Library, bequeathed in 1834 by an influential member of the city's Jewish community.

Next door is the crumbling Esplanade Mansion, site of the old Watson's Hotel – once the swankiest address in town. Mark Twain's wrote about his stay here in his 1897 travelogue, *Following the Equator*, describing how the European manager's treatment of the servants reminded him of American slavery.

Though no longer a hotel, the building is still tenanted by the Indian crow, a species that Twain describes being set upon while in Mumbai, while the nearby Gothic sailor's home, where Joseph Conrad stayed before boarding the *Narcissus*, is now the state police headquarters.

Aldous Huxley hated the gothic style of this part of Mumbai, which has since attained World Heritage status. "Architecturally," he wrote in his 1926 travel memoir, *Jesting Pilate*, "Bombay is one of the most appalling cities of either hemisphere."

One of the few buildings he did approve of was the Asiatic Society of Mumbai, describing it as "long and low, with its flight of steps, its central pediment, its Doric colonnade, it has an air of calm and quiet decency. Among so many architectural cads and pretentious bounders, it's almost the only gentleman."

I went there to meet Professor Vispi Balaporia, the first female President of this venerable institution - which is still every bit as beautiful as Huxley claims. A retired academic, she is a wonderful ambassador for this history-laden, members-only library and took me on a fascinating tour, from cosy-armchaired reading rooms to clinically efficient conservation labs.

I was also shown some remarkable works from their rare books collection, including John Gould's *The Birds of Asia* and exquisite books of fabric samples from the 19th century. Having apologized for the paucity of their Milton collection, one of her colleagues proceeded to print-out a list of some 60+ of his works that they do

possess. Their shared enthusiasm is an inspiration and I can think of no better place to develop future literary partnerships than this extraordinarily storied library.

I left walking on air and, just a few minutes away, tumbled across an equally inspiring sight: the street booksellers of the Flora Fountain. Briefly outlawed a few years ago, they seem to be making a return – building extraordinary castles out of books on the pavements of Mumbai. I couldn't resist looking for a copy of *Paradise Lost* – and the very first seller I asked found a copy in less than three seconds.

This became a recurring theme in the bookshops I visited: every single one had a copy of *Paradise Lost* on display. Everywhere I went people were reading - not just on their phones or kindles but printed books in an array of languages and genres. And from the historic Bahrison's Booksellers of Delhi to the heavenly Tara Books in Chennai, they are well served by an abundance of well-stocked bookshops.

Chennai offers a particular pleasure for Milton aficionados, as you can view digitized parish records showing details of Milton's great-grandson and family, who lived in the city until at least 1743 when Milton's great-great-grandson, Abraham Clarke was buried there. No further records have been found but it seems likely that if there are any remaining descendants of John Milton, then they are living in India – which perhaps explains their enduring passion for his writing.

India is truly a literary paradise. During my visit I attended boisterous book-clubs, conversed in writer's cafes, attended author's readings and luxuriated in libraries that were both beautiful and busy. In the process I made many new friends and look forward to launching the International Friends of Milton's Cottage there soon.