

BOOK REVIEW

## On forensics and true crime

ANAGHA ANIL

**B Umadathan. Priya K Nair, transl. *Dead Men Tell Tales: The Memoir of a Police Surgeon*, HarperCollins, 2021, 394 pgs, Rs 251(paperback), ISBN:978-9354224294**

"The dead tell stories. But to listen to these silent stories, a forensic surgeon has to be fully alert, with all his senses fine-tuned," notes Dr B Umadathan in his gripping memoir which could easily pass for a detective novel. Fondly remembered as the "Sherlock Holmes of Kerala," the author worked as a police surgeon, and was professor and head of the department of forensic medicine at several government medical colleges in Kerala. Translated into English as *Dead Men Tell Tales* by Priya K Nair, and published by Harper Collins, the retired forensic surgeon's memoir was initially published in Malayalam as *Oru Police Surgeonte Ormakurippukal*. Apart from being a record of Dr Umadathan's career of over 30 years as a forensic surgeon, *Dead Men Tell Tales* garners attention as a comprehensive work that explains the technicalities of the trade without relying heavily on esoteric jargon. In the few instances where the author resorts to technical terms, he provides a detailed explanation to benefit the lay audience. Thus, halfway through the work, readers are already familiar with terms like "exhumation," "photographic superimposition," "toxicology analysis," etc.

Apart from familiarising readers with the discipline, the memoir also discusses some ethical challenges faced by forensic surgeons. One chapter is devoted to the story of a surgeon who fabricated an autopsy report, without even conducting the procedure, on the persuasion of family members of the deceased and concerned authorities. The forged autopsy report stated that the victim had died of a head injury sustained after an accidental fall in a state of inebriation. However, the facts revealed later pointed towards

murder and that too, a patricide. The eldest son of the family had put an end to the abuse by his alcoholic, wife-beating father. The author utilises this episode to illustrate the need for surgeons to remain objective, despite facing an ethical quandary.

The memoir dedicates entire chapters to cases the author had been associated with. One such infamous case, the Chacko murder case, continues to be popular as the culprit Sukumara Kurup remains a fugitive even after 30-odd years. The case, which included insurance fraud, gained much traction in popular culture and was adapted twice for the screen. The author, however, stresses the relevant forensic aspects, such as photographic superimposition, which played a crucial role in solving the case by aiding in the identification of the victim, Chacko. It was one of the first cases in Kerala where photographic superimposition was used, and the author describes how the procedure was conducted. The author also discusses other controversial cases he encountered, such as the untimely death of yesteryear Malayalam actress, Miss Kumari, and the dread-inducing serial killings by Ripper Chacko. Despite the sensational element in these cases, Dr Umadathan reports them without exaggeration, and with the precision and clarity that befit a forensic surgeon.

His commentaries on cases are often accompanied by annotations from classic medical texts to substantiate the inferences drawn. The author cites John Glaister's *Medico-Legal Aspects of the Ruxton Case* and Alfred Swaine Taylor's *Principles and Practices of Medical Jurisprudence*, among others, along with the memoirs of other forensic pathologists, giving the book an academic quality. This memoir is a valuable book of reference for students of forensic medicine.

A separate yet significant conversation in the memoir concerns mental health and the role played by psychological disorders in causing suicides. Dr Umadathan writes on psychosomatic disorders which are essentially caused by mental health issues. He mentions that stress and anxiety can, over a period of time, be manifested as physical conditions like warts and acidity. However, severe mental health ailments, such as depression, can be triggered by chemical and hormonal imbalances in the body. In his detailed account of depression, the author criticises the general taboo in Indian society on addressing psychological disorders, and the associated stigma which compels the patient to seek treatment covertly. The author addresses this

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stigma by drawing parallels with developed countries, where death by suicide is regarded as a grave social issue, with extensive psychiatric studies being carried out and action plans implemented to prevent the same. The inclusion of such

diverse themes makes the memoir a comprehensive yet interesting read, which successfully dissects different aspects of forensic medicine, while leaving room for personal history and social commentary.

## BOOK REVIEW

# Cancer and caste inequality among rural women in South India

SRE RATHA

**Cecilia Coale Van Hollen, *Cancer and the Kali Yuga: Gender, Inequality, and Health in South India*, New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Private Limited; 2023. Rs. 1095, 302pgs, ISBN: 978 93 5442 336 9**

Cecilia Coale Van Hollen's book, *Cancer and the Kali Yuga* is a dense, "critical feminist ethnographic" study of Tamil Dalit women's experiences with breast and cervical cancer, (which Van Hollen jointly refers to as "reproductive cancers"). Van Hollen's work is mainly focused on the "nexus of gender, caste and class" that produce specific forms of vulnerabilities, especially to cancer, among the sample population. Employing a critical feminist lens, Van Hollen explores how caste-based occupations, economic marginalisation and gendered conceptions of women's roles and their bodies, produce discourses around cancer and the paths adopted by women to navigate a cancer diagnosis. Through ethnographic data, this book demonstrates how a diagnosis of breast and cervical cancer acquires cultural significance, as this diagnosis has a direct impact on the reproductive function that women are culturally expected to perform in patriarchal societies. Though Van Hollen places importance on the causes of cancer and its medical implications, she is more keen to investigate the perceptions of these women diagnosed with cancer and the effects of a terminal illness on their lives. This detailed analysis of lived experiences and cancer among Dalit women in Tamil Nadu, is the most striking feature of the book and also what

sets it apart from similar work on the same theme produced in the past. Borrowing heavily from Caduff et al [1], research conducted by the Cancer Institute, and Broom and Doron's [2] work on structural inequalities and cancer rates in urban India, Van Hollen attempts to bring to the forefront the voices of those targeted by intervention campaigns and make their particular conditions known to larger local, national and global contexts. She argues further that while most campaigns assume that more awareness, information and earlier detection ie changes in individual behaviour would help women in lower class or lower caste communities, there needs to be a more critical look at the sociocultural factors that inhibit the efficacy of such programmes. This book, therefore, is her attempt to locate cancer firmly among the social and cultural factors that the women interviewed in this book deem important enough to highlight.

The evocative title ties cancer, a terminal illness, to the *Kali Yuga* which Van Hollen defines as "a period of darkness in which people have lost their way spiritually and are driven by avarice rather than dharma" (p 15). *Cancer and the Kali Yuga* shifts its focus away from clinical treatment of the disease and instead highlights how religious symbols and rituals acquire specific cultural meanings in the light of a cancer diagnosis.

The author begins by stating how women situate the causes of cancer in the vulnerabilities produced by demographic factors such as their caste, class and gender, rather than solely on physiological factors. Thus, the author builds her arguments towards advocating for a more nuanced look at the social factors behind healthcare issues. In the narratives, Van Hollen argues, *Kali Yuga* emerges as a critical motif signalling the many social, cultural and environmental factors that women see as the causes of cancer. Some of these include their exposure to agricultural chemicals by virtue of their work, water scarcity in their villages, lack of access to clean latrines and pesticide-laden food. The invocation of the *Kali Yuga* is therefore an important political critique and is emblematic of the marginalisation that women face and embody in their

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