For a city like Bangalore that has captured the world’s imagination for more reasons than one, it is unfortunate that so little has been researched and written about its evolution and past – ‘cursed to forget its past’, as the authors so brilliantly put it. Plugging this major loophole is this meticulously researched book edited by Pani et al. The title of the book itself clearly implies the motivation of the authors to bridge the widening gap between the different interest groups – dominant and otherwise, in this wondrous city.

The book under review is divided into seven parts, each of which deals with a separate theme. Opening from the Bendakaloor of Kempegowda, the book traverses the trajectory of the city through its highs and lows – the fall of Tipu Sultan’s Bangalore, the bifurcation of the city into the Pete and the Cantonment post-Tipu, the colonial seat of power under the Commissioners, the impact of the Wodeyars, especially Nelwadi Krishnaraja Wodeyar and his illustrious Dewans like Sir M. Vishweshwararaj and Sir Mirza Ismail, the heralding of modern technology in Bangalore starting from it becoming an educational hub to the coming of electricity, the establishment of Hindustan Aeronautics Limited and finally information technology with the renowned Infosys as a case study. The book also touches upon the language dichotomy that the city has had to grap-

ple with over several periods of its history, right from the alienation of the local Kannadigas in the erstwhile Cantonment to the Gokak agitation of more recent times. It ties history back to the present in a unique way by discussing the current issues that Bangalore faces in terms of population growth, urban governance, climatic changes, infrastructure management, traffic control and so on. To that effect the book is perhaps one of the first comprehensive accounts of the city seen from varied viewpoints and issues; linking the past to the present in a seamless and delightful fashion. It is therefore quite a prototype for how one needs to study and evaluate the history and growth of urban spaces in India.

Given the natural biases and subjectivity that goes along with any study of history, the authors have come up with an ingenious technique to recreate the past. Their methodology is inspired by the concept of 18th century Italian thinker Giambattista Vico, as interpreted by Isaiah Berlin, that it was not enough to know the fact that a particular act was carried out in the past, but to understand the motive behind it through the artefacts, the works of art and the writings of the people who lived in that era. Hence the subtitle ‘Imaginations’ assumes paramount importance and is perhaps the most repeated word in the entire book! Every era is viewed from the point of view of an imagination of the dominant socio-political group of the time. Therefore, the entire journey of Bangalore’s past is seen through the eyes of the different players of those times. Thus, among others, Thomas Munro speaks to us about the storming of the fort during the Third Anglo-Mysore War, Francis Buchanan tells us about the different social groups he met during his sojourn here; Maharaja Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV’s inspiring speech at the foundation ceremony of IISc sets a blueprint of sorts for education not only in Mysore state but the whole of India; U. R. Ananthamurthy passionately argues for the need of linguistic harmony, co-existence and tolerance in an era fraught with chauvinism and Mahatma Gandhi shares his grand vision of an ideal governance model.

This approach however has both its pros and cons. It takes the reader through a time-machine, literally, enabling her to visualize that era – almost making one feel one is hearing ‘live’ that inspiring speech of Mirza Ismail delivered at the Bishop Cotton School on his ‘imagination’ related to examination and meritocracy, or one is actually sitting through that reception hosted by Rajamma Thamboo Chetty for the missionaries in charge of zenana education! The flip side however is that it would reduce the historical work to a mere mammoth compilation, which by itself is no mean achievement given the abysmal lack of documentation that our country suffers from. But then as much as a historian is called upon to maintain the stance of a neutral and dispassionate observer, she is not a moral eunuch and it is her moral voice that gives the work that unique timbre. The taking of a stand or position while documenting history is not necessarily a bad thing to do as a historian recognizes that while she makes conclusions, there are really no absolutes and the white heron in the snow displays a different colour! Much like 19th century Danish philosopher Kierkegaard, who affirms his subjective certainty in the world of objective uncertainties.

To be fair to the authors, they do preface each chapter with a context that has been lucidly written. One wishes that there were more of those delightful insights rather than the reams of colonial literature which do lead to reader ennui at times. Some taut editing of the passages quoted (particularly the ones like the Infosys IPO Prospectus or Wilks’ long winding account of the fall of Bangalore in 1791) would have made it more reader-friendly and the point sought to be made would have been more crystalized and focused. It is also interesting to note that the book which sets out as its credo the visualization of the ‘imagination’ of each era, begins in right earnest only with the colonial period and thereby relegates the ‘imagination’ of its supposed founder Kempegowda to the position of factual details in the preface! One then wonders if the ‘imaginations’ of the Yelahanka Prabhus or of Kempegowda in his construction of numerous tanks in the city known as ‘Kalyana Nagari’ or the motivations behind the Gavi Gandhagharshwara Temple, the sacrifice of Kempegowda’s daughter-in-law Lakshmi Devi to supposedly safeguard the city from plague (something that haunted the city even by the end of the 19th century which has been elaborated by the authors) and that of the not-so-dominant class as manifested in the bazars of Chikka pete, City Market and Avenue Road, or in fes-
tivities like the Karaga, Annamma Jathre, St Mary’s Feast or the Kadalekai Parish which are so unique to this city, have no relevance or importance just because they have not been catalogued and documented in colonial literature. Whereas the dominant and recurring theme in the book is the historical fact of the city’s bifurcation into the Cantonment and the Pete, its linkage to the harsh reality that Bangalore has erased memories of its past has not been analysed or correlated. After all, all the cities in British India then, including Calcutta and Madras had their Black Towns and White Towns to separate the British populace from the ‘dark-skinned natives’. On comparative terms, why is it then that while contemporary Chennai and Kolkata continue to celebrate their past heritage despite this bifurcation (sometimes even bifurcation), Bengaluru (despite its name change) has not? This question remains largely looming and unanswered. Even if the Cantonment part of the city sought to obliterate the Kamadu culture of the Mysore state, why are there no manifestations and memories of this in the Pete area too today? Why has Bangalore taken such a surge forward where its past has been struggling and unable to keep pace with the march of the present and the future? While the authors rationalize this by saying that ‘all through Bengaluru’s tumultuous history, the dominant groups have had little reason to celebrate the past’, this is not a Bangalore-specific syndrome where groups have displaced others. So one wished these vital questions that determine the very spirit of the city had been dwelt in more depth and convincing viewpoints brought out.

But these flip sides apart, the book is largely fascinating and scholarly, and a timely addition to the existing meagre literature that exists about the city. Bangalore stands today at crossroads in the course of its long and eventful existence. The very identity of the city and what defines being a ‘Bangalorean’ has perhaps never had as many versions and conflicting answers as we find today. Linguistically, culturally and ethnically, the tussle between Bangalore and Bengaluru has been accentuated in this globalized world, where the term ‘Bangalore’ has assumed different ramifications to different groups world over.

History is often described as a mirror in which we recognize ourselves as a people, as a nation. It is a different matter that a modern Bangalorean would in that case barely be able to recognize what she sees in this skewed mirror that is occasionally held up to her! In such despairing moments of ‘rootlessness’, efforts like this book backed with immaculate research become extremely vital and necessary. Using the past to build a bridge to the present and a road map for the future, as encapsulated in the book, is definitely how the history of any city needs to be written, read and understood.

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In asking the apparently simple empirical question of how India earns, spends and saves, Rajesh Shukla and the National Council for Applied Economic Research (NCAER), New Delhi are entering the minefield that Indian economic statistics has now become. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the estimates of persons who live in poverty. The Arjun Sengupta Committee placed the figure as a high 77%; the N. C. Saxena committee put the figure at 50%, the Tendulkar Committee said it was 37%, and some earlier optimistic estimates by supporters of liberalization had insisted that the figure had come down below 20%. When the estimates of poverty can vary anywhere between a fifth and nearly four-fifths of the population, the credibility of economic statistics is certainly not at its peak.

This credibility crisis has at least three sources. Ironically enough, the one with the greatest impact is the closer relationship that has emerged between policy and poverty statistics. Built into the poverty line is the difficulty with cut-offs. Those just above the poverty line are not all that much less poor than those just below it. This difficulty did not matter a great deal as long as the poverty line was only a matter of academic debate. But once those below the poverty line received greater benefits in the Public Distribution System, it meant those just below the poverty line received a number of benefits that were not available to those just above it. This disparity between two sets of people facing not too different conditions was politically explosive. And politicians responded by simply raising the effective poverty estimates to a level where those just above it would not be keen to be considered poor. Thus, in some states the percentage of the population eligible for Below Poverty Line (BPL) cards could be as high as 80%.

The second source of variation in data on the income status of the population is the simple fact that those using these statistics are not always talking of the same thing. The basis for defining the poverty line can itself vary a great deal. The poverty line in India was based on a family having enough resources to buy food to meet its essential calorie requirements. There is now a move to increase the parameters that need to be considered. People interested in international comparisons tend to favour more easily recognizable criteria, such as those with incomes below a dollar a day. Even here there is no great sanctity about the line. Some would like it to be raised to more than a dollar a day. And we have to keep in mind that the value of the dollar itself can vary a great deal.

Determining what people mean can become even more complicated, when we look at economic statistics other than poverty. Commonly used terms can mean different things in different societies. The term ‘middle class’ in India reflects a very different level of income than it