

Off the Shelf

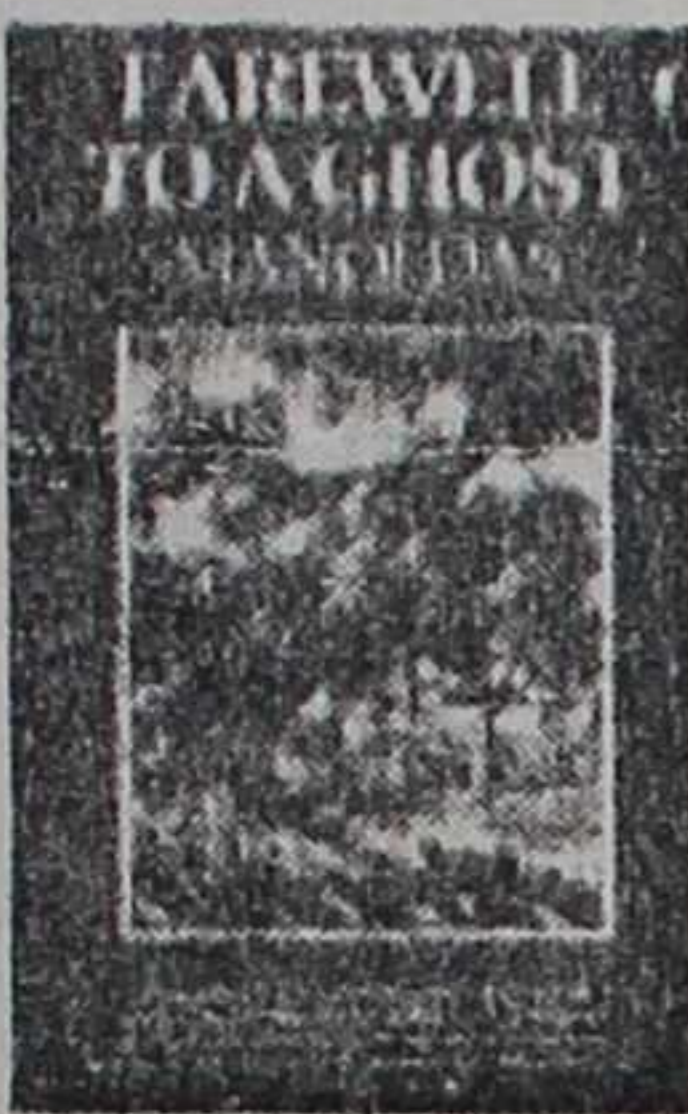
Old world charm

Farewell to a Ghost

Manoj Das;

Penguin Books;

Rs 100; 185 pages



You might be tempted to dismiss Manoj Das' collection of short stories as a wee bit old-fashioned. That would be a mistake. True that in some of the stories,

the language has a formal, old-world air. But then the realisation dawns that Das is depicting a slice of India that is fast vanishing thanks to the invasion of electronic media.

The 23 stories that feature in Das' collection portray the texture of life in the small towns and large villages. That Das locates the stories unmistakably in his home state, Orissa, gives them authenticity and substance.

The stories themselves are built around simple happenings in the coastal towns and villages with the Eastern ghats as their backdrop. The parade of characters is fascinating. Simple villagers, eccentric Anglo-Indians like Miss Moberley and Miss Dunkerley, grassroots politicians, and ghosts with strangest attachments grip the readers.

Das' world is unfamiliar territory to today's urban reader. It is clear that the author himself likes to romanticise life in these areas. Both the eeriness and the magic of the nocturnal atmosphere have been captured quite effectively. The coming of the night have been beautifully described in such stories as "The Owl", "The Tree", "Friends and Strangers" and "After the Sunset".

Similarly, the people have been portrayed as innocent, trusting, affectionate human beings. "Farewell to a Ghost", from which the book gets its title, tells the story of a beautiful female ghost who is resident in the village in an old decaying house belonging to a sahib. The villagers are fond and quite protective towards her. When ultimately, the house has to be demolished, an exorcist is called in. But the villagers are distressed about his heartless ways of getting rid of her and entreat him to treat her gently like a daughter of the village.

Then again, in "The Rain" a

businessman comes to inspect a village site for development. Caught by a sudden thunder shower, he takes shelter under a banyan tree where he notices three local men who look like thugs. He becomes increasingly nervous at the goings on of the three men, apprehensive that they will attack and rob him. This feeling grows when one of the men leaves the group but his fears are soon dispelled when the man brings back an old umbrella to protect himself better.

In fact, a recurrent note is the impact of modern, urban development on the old ways of life. In "The Submerged Valley", one gets a glimpse of the deep ties of affection that villagers feel for their roots even when the village itself is inundated because of a dam. While this deals directly with the tragedy of dislocation, subtle nuances in other stories also indicate the sadness evoked by a changing culture.

The other delightful strain found in most of the stories is the presence of gentle irony. Even as the author laughs at the idiosyncrasies of the villagers, his tone is not mocking. He is not setting himself apart on a judgemental height, but is identifying himself with many of his characters. And so a charming sense of the absurd forms a gleaming thread of gold in a texture predominantly mysterious or melancholy.

Thus, the predicament of the retainer who is asked by the Rani of the state to receive a group of guests who are nudists raises an understanding chuckle from the reader. Or take The Murderer. He is a feared creature for having the courage to kill the village moneylender. A myth grew around the killing because the moneylender vanished suddenly one day and his reputation grew into a legend by hearsay till one day chance brings the alleged victim back to the village in the garb of a sadhu. And the murderer emerged, a sickly old man, disproving all the fearful legends about him. But the mood of the village was such that people preferred to go on believing the old story.

There are many such stories which can raise a smile making the collection an unusual reading experience.

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