

# A brisk entertainer

ANAND PARTHASARATHY reviews Manoj Das' book.

**A** small feudal state making the uneasy transition to the newly independent India is the setting which Prof. Manoj Das uses to create a nostalgic, atmospheric — at times almost magical — piece of fiction.

The last Maharaja of Samargarh has departed, having cut his losses and sold most of his property, except the old Castle at Nijanpur. But even as the old princely state gets its first whiff of democracy, the Maharaja returns, no one knows precisely why, and resumes residence in the ancestral castle.

His entourage includes his invalid daughter Balika, a child-like young woman suffering from some mysterious disease; and the worldly wise Heera, thought to be the half-English step-sister (and possibly current mistress) of the

widower Maharaja. The effect of this motley royal invasion on the staid senior citizens of Nijanpur is startling — and often hilarious. An elderly *dhoti-clad munshi* turns into a trousered romantic fool courting the unattainable Heera. Such bizarre goings-on are recorded with sardonic detachment by the narrator, Devadass, who turns one of the Maharaja's former houses into a guest house for foreign tourists. The Maharaja has his feudal duties restored in a manner of speaking, when a local tiger turns man-eater. Before the royal bullet can find the beast, much drama must run its course and the rich cast of characters suffers rapid, often violent, depletion.

Through the eyes of his narrator, Manoj Das seems to look at

these weird goings-on with amused detachment. The style is ironic if over-the-top.

The book is peppered with vivid metaphors: "His laughter ate into my heart like termites"... "Ketu Singh was glistening in the bright sunlight like a snake that had just shed its old skin"... It is a magical time and place which Manoj Das evokes, reality slipping swiftly into myth and superstition. A brisk, enjoyable read which hovers like the tiger of the title in a murky twilight, where one does not know from moment to moment, whether one is still in the world of facts or of misty legend.

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A TIGER AT TWILIGHT by Manoj Das; Penguin; 1991; pp 132; Rs. 65.