

The idyllic village

THE SUBMERGED VALLEY AND OTHER STORIES. By Manoj Das. Batstone Books, Malmesbury, Wiltshire, UK (1986). Pp. 159. Rs. 25.

by Githa Hariharan

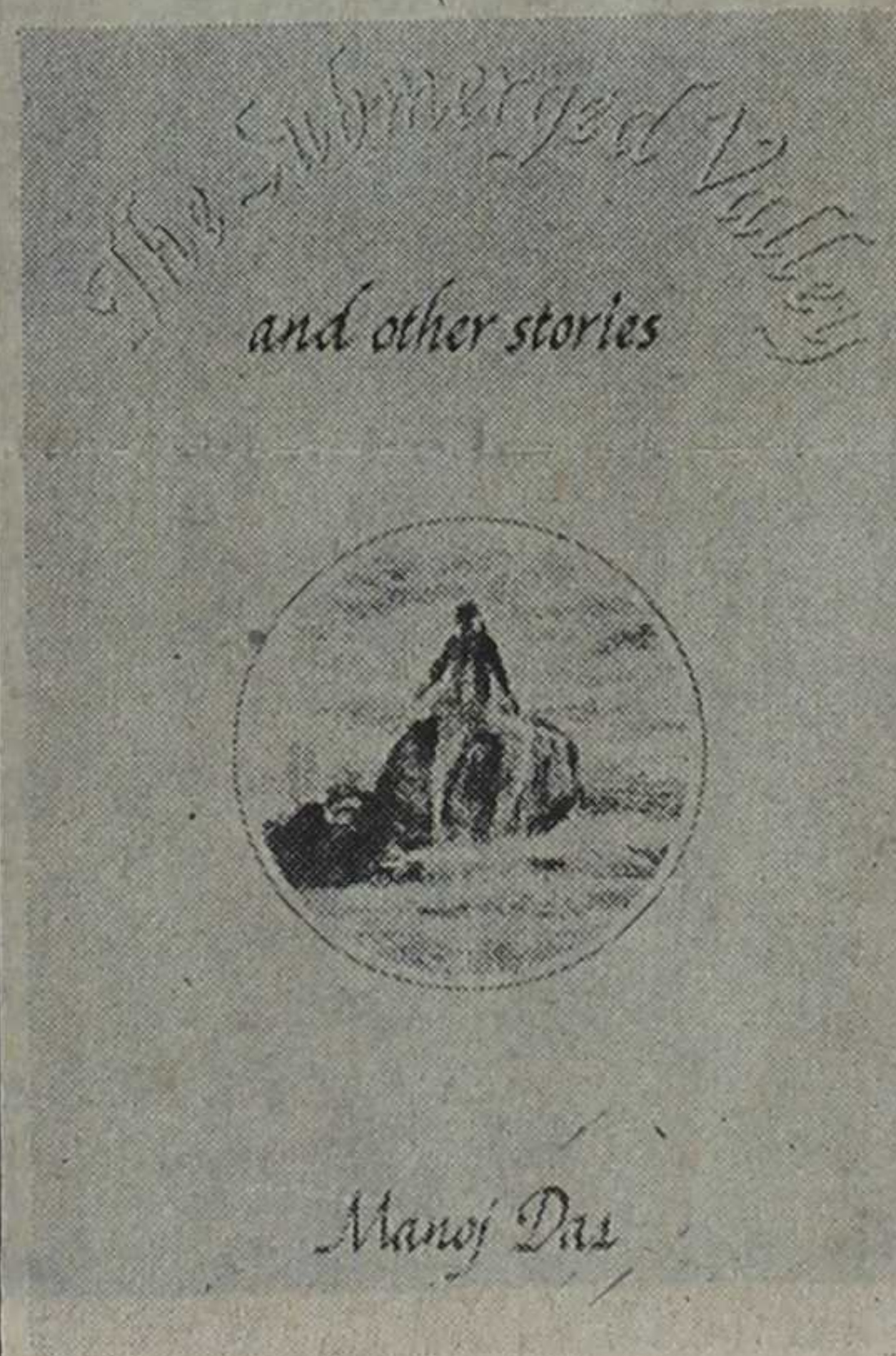
MANOJ Das was born in a remote seaside village in Orissa and grew up during the period leading to Independence. This personal background is clearly evident in his new collection of short stories, *The Submerged Valley and Other Stories*.

Das's easy familiarity with different aspects of village life gives his work a certain concrete, image-filled link with rural India. His stories invariably mirror the "typical" Indian village of the Forties and Fifties: the feudal hierarchical relationships, the simple pleasures, the credulity and the unexpected depths of wisdom, and above all, the upheaval round the corner as the village encounters the political and social repercussions of the independence movement.

Das's rural India is painted in picturesque, if rather stereotype, images. The stories abound in angry rivers that flood villages, small temples on hillocks, jackals, tigers, ghosts and magic. Das sees the formerly pervasive hold of magic on the village mind as now subject to a conflict — the power of faith versus the disbelief (not rationalism) that accompanies progress.

It is primarily the magical and

"that beyond reason" which attracts Das to the villages. On occasion, this theme is woven competently into the better stories — generally vignettes of childhood — so that the story is flavoured with a delicate nostalgia for youth, and its capacity to believe in the mysterious. In "Farewell to a Ghost", for example, the narrator remembers with affection a resident ghost in the village where he spent a happy



childhood. On one of his trips back to the village, the narrator, now adult, finds the palm tree in which the ghost lived dead, struck by lightning. His visits to the village become rarer, and "the new generation of village boys were so different, so ignorant. They were just afraid of ghosts."

In most of the stories however, magic is not so eloquently identified with the vision of childhood, or the adult's flash of perception through the memories of childhood. Magic — manifested through ghosts, trances, religious ritual, women turning into crocodiles and living underwater, owls wreaking vengeance on decadent young zamindars — becomes the chief means to romanticise the village and the "simple wisdom" of its inhabitants. Thus the overemphasis on the "charming and romantic" aspects of the fantastic makes the stories flimsy and often thin in terms of credibility.

Perhaps this romanticised, vague ethos the writer idealises leads to occasional ambiguity of language, even some clumsiness. As the hero of "The Kite" launches his kite into the sky, he "heard in that roar the secret song of his throbbing heart. In that resounding uprising of his creation he was thrilled to feel his own incarnation."

In spite of these indecipherable patches, *The Submerged Valley* has its better moments, when humour or a delicate lyricism temporarily overshadow a romantic view of rural India.