

# Panchatantra for today

By Soumitra Das

**M**ANOJ Das' reputation as an Indo-Anglian author rests on his seemingly artless short stories. These bring back memories of tales told by village raconteurs, the kind that R. K. Narayan grows nostalgic about. Das' endearing style, the manner in which he brings the queen's language to the Indian point of view, has a forerunner in Lal Behari Dey of the Folk Tales of Bengal fame. But even the author's most fantastic tales have a hard core of human truth that is the strong point of our best *rup-kathar galpo*.

In an earlier collection, the cock-and-bull story of the old man who forgot to breathe and the love of the crocodile's lady are endowed with this quality. They hinge on truths gradually revealed, often with comic effect.

He makes light of his art as in the Princess and the Story-teller but is dead serious about his craft. His satire never loses its trenchancy. The venerable Rao Sahib's explanation of how both his timid sons-in-law could take credit for annihilating a rabbit is a classic example.

Yet his humour is rarely cruel. The denouement, after the old folk of the Northern Valley "was fantastic", raises laughs. The lovely princess who eloped with a scarecrow, turns out to be an old maid. Vitriol is tempered with the softer emotions. A laugh brings back things in their proper order and restores sanity.

In the present collection, Das shows he is still in form. He updates the device of fables and fantasies to underscore age-old values and saws and spins variations on the Panchatantra. Fools are worsted, the avaricious pay with their lives.

But in a world denied poetic justice the wily get the better of the noble as the jackal did of the lion. In a clever variation on the tale of the tiger and the bangle, a turtle who couldn't hold his tongue during a cross-country flight becomes an excuse for the king to throw his weight about. A monkey with a human heart suffers the same fate as the fox who fell into a vat of blue. An "epoch-making" tumour becomes the touchstone of true love.

But mooning and swooning over romance is not Das' way. Which is why the tenderness the young lovers feel for each other comes across more movingly. Life has too many rib-tickling asides to divert one's attention.

No one is spared the pinpricks of Das' sarcasm. A "love letter" was inspired by Churchill's address to the House of Commons. Schoolchildren are doled out peanuts "in keeping with his family's tradition of philanthropy." As in his earlier *Mystery of the Missing Cap*, politicians are his favourite target. A Minister given to malapropisms can't distinguish between "seduction" and "sedition."

His unkindest cut comes when a couple's dream of buying a house is shattered. Das has a ludicrously horrific vision of a phalanx of humanoid bulldozers and echoing laughter amplified by microphones. Blinding tears cannot dampen his sense of the ridiculous.

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**Bulldozers and Fables and Fantasies for Adults.** By Monoj Das.

(B. R. Publishing, Rs. 120)