

Slices of life

by Nandhini Iyer

THERE is a moment, when Subrato Das, one of the many protagonists of *Farewell to a Ghost*, and erstwhile "enfant terrible" of the political pantheon, reluctantly confronts his past, at the remote Kakali — scene of a bizarre youthful debacle when he is startled into flight, while somewhat clumsily attempting to woo his benefactor's teenage daughter, his dhoti impaled forever on an obdurate wooden snag. Decades later Subrato returns, in a bid to conquer and shed the demons that have scaffolded and circumscribed his meteoric career moves, and salvage the self esteem and dignity sacrificed unwittingly at the altar of an imprudent youthful infatuation. The denouement is a minuet in irony

In many ways this moment from *Farewell to a Ghost* is vintage Manoj Das. A popular columnist and short story writer, both in English and Oriya, Manoj Das has carved a distinctive niche for himself, at a time when the indiscriminating fascination with literary "exotica" has been numerous authors of varying capability, clambering onto the Anglo Indian literary juggernaut plundering images, vernaculars, even pre-history and myths in a desperate bid to craft suitably ethnised personal literary expressions, designed to catapult the author to instant stardom or equally instant obscurity.

Where would-be-hopefuls, consciously seek out an elusive profundity, or encumber their narratives with an arch symbolism, Manoj Das opts for a reduc-

complacent village into cognizance of her being, or the reticent but amorous Chinmoy Babu, who seeks the protective cloak of anonymity, unwittingly provided by a power cut to give expression to his unrequited passion for the redoubtable Roopwati, live out their lives in an provincial town in an era," where dogs still barked at motor cars, where spectators sat for hours gaping at silent films, when modernity meant a newly wed lady sharing a handpulled

FAREWELL TO A GHOST: by Manoj Das; Penguin; pp 185; Rs 100.

rickshaw with her husband and a young adolescent's blush at a furtive look from a young man was construed as conclusive proof of affection returned.

THERE are few melodramatic contrasts of mood in *Farewell to a Ghost*, Manoj Das' latest collection of short stories, few steep gradients of plausible and implausible, jarring the reader's sensibility and even fewer hairpin twists of plot propelled by a heavy handed, laboured irony a la Maupassant or O. Henry often associated with the classic linear structured short story. Instead Manoj structures his stories around a more deliberately terraced irony, which though mildly satirical, is innocent of an unsympathetic

satirical gaze, thereby muting its impact to blend in with the pace of the narrative. In the process what emerges are the delicate pastels, rather than the more vibrant primaries, of a mood etched in fleetingly, a denouement that fades into the horizon like a gentle wash, blurring a more hard edged clarity.

"The Naked" is typical, where the faithful retainer, Bhanu Singh, wrestles with the problems of etiquette posed by the command to receive a delegation of visiting nudists, finding courage when the local deity's sacred precincts are violated and the deity himself shockingly disrobed. Similarly "The Owl" is a delicious juxtaposition of superstition and insensitive, even callous modernity, in a remote village, somewhat disbelievingly, shaking off the shackles of feudalism, where the local zamindar, succumbs to the wrath of a doughty owl, the revered keeper of the shrine, slain or in a subsequent sleight of narrative hand, merely slighted by an ill conceived display of shooting skills.

Indeed, in many ways, *Farewell to a Ghost*, despite its deceptive simplicity, is at another level, both revealing and thought provoking. For ev-

ery metaphysical wrath that flits through the narrative, whether the predatory crocodile who succumbs to the charms of his would be prey and is transformed into an ardent if faithful husband, slaughtered by unknowing humans, when anxiety propels him on a quest for his wife, or the glamorous ghost who is exorcised from a ruined villa, to make way for a governmental construction, there are a myriad metaphorical "ghosts" — demons of treachery in love, intrepid courage that dissolves in stage fright, the heroics of an imagined slayer of a vicious moneylender or even the death of an ageing midwife whose dramatic efforts to be noticed, culminate in an expected death that fails to shake the village out of its indifference laid to rest.

What emerges in the ultimate analysis, are slices of life, pregnant with a delicious irony, that catch the myriad cadences of life, the unsung and often, but not always, unattempted jousts, with the deeply personal demons, that rattle furtively in hidden caverns of one's life, seeking gentle exorcism by circumstances.



as the local Chowdrani metamorphoses into the "moon Subrato had once rushed at", the keeper of his guilty secrets, hinting at a passion, or at a minimum, a shared regard, that might have obviated flight. In a delicate twist of irony, stripped of the crippling scaffolding of fear but robed in the attire of self esteem, Subrato finds he no longer requires the political crutches that have underpinned his life and withdraws abruptly from the political arena.

tionist narrative style and structure that is a distillation of austere essentials — the seemingly archetypal linear structure, inexorably carrying the narrative to a classic denouement. His strengths are a tensile callibration of the narrative, that recreates the ethos of small town India, in a bygone era, and an uncanny, even unerring, eye for the detail of characterisation capturing every foible, every whimsical mood. As a result, characters as diverse as Gouri the ageing midwife, who wished to shock a