

EXPLORING SPACES

Despite flaws such as an undistinguished style and a diffused narrative, this is an unusual and imaginative book, says Indu Saraiya

To miniaturise into a slim paperback novel of a mere 132 pages, the many intangible forces which over the years have moulded Indian society, recognisable as such, is the distinctive achievement of this novel. It is an unusual book not without its weaknesses—meandering, diffuse, undistinguished in style, and encumbered with narrative detail which sends the reader into tizzies. Nevertheless, a whole picture does coagulate around the central figure of the book, the erstwhile Raja of Samargarh, once a small princely state and now a faceless acreage of India.

Does the novelist regret the passing of obsolete feudalism? Das is careful about authorial commitment on that count as he

tiger, the tiger of the title of the book? Here, perhaps, lies the key to the moral of Das's novel.

The tiger is a law unto himself, killing and mauling at will. Could it stand for the untamed perils of the power game which fill the vacuum created between an old world order changing to the new in our country? The question may sound too weighty for so fragile a novel, but it keeps buzzing around one's head like a gadfly. The buzzing is further intensified by the supernatural, octopus-fingers Das very frequently perceives in the natural universe of moonlit forests, jungle paths, abandoned lakes, even bald hill tops. Again and again, this perception is evident in his earlier writing, mainly short stories, so reminiscent of HG Well's. The supernatural

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is about commitment on the leech-sucked anaemia caused by the British interregnum in India. He merely brings the two together—at times in confrontation, at times in conjunction, as historical realities. Yet, the noble, gentlemanly Raja, burdened, like Melville's Ishmael, with the weight of centuries—centuries of noblesse oblige, of superstitions involving human sacrifice, of yakshas guarding underwater treasures, of other arcane beliefs—suggests the writer's sneaking sympathy for all that the Raja was, and all that he stood for.

Heera, the half-European, half-Indian intruder from other climes, is, on the other hand, portrayed as an embittered virago, a predatory and debilitating presence. The symbolism here is clear enough. But what of the

borders on extra-sensory perception, and in this book, even acquires a karmic presence, generating a force of its own. Perhaps it is an expression of Das's mystical side which drew him from academia to the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education in Pondicherry where he currently teaches English Literature.

Reviewers are often taken to task for reading too much into some books. But when, as in this novel, the sub-text releases the imagination to explore spaces of its own, the reader and the reviewer alike, in their own different ways, can share a living, amplifying literary experience with the writer.

A Tiger at Twilight, A Novel by Manoj Das; published by Penguin Books; price Rs 65; pp, 132.

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