

CRITICSMAN
OCTOBER '86

VILLAGE VIGNETTES

MANOJ Das is one of modern India's better known writers in English and won the Sahitya Akademi award as long ago as 1972. The present volume* collects 17 of his stories. With their unassuming style, sharp observation and unpretentious depiction of simple human situations and dilemmas, these stories compel the most blasé contemporary reader to return for a brief trip to a lost literary wonderland.

The majority of the stories are set in remote villages and provincial towns where the most learned person is usually the local schoolmaster, and the most pressing problems those posed by the encroachments of the modern world. The stories are frequently framed as recollections of the narrator's childhood events and apart from two or three, all the stories could be read and enjoyed by children. The child's eye view is a commonly attempted literary device but Das manages to bring it off with rare sensitivity and intuitive understanding.

Take, for instance, what is, in some ways, the best story in the collection, Farewell to a Ghost. It recounts, with warmth and verve, how a young woman ghost

was sustained by a romantic legend and beguiled a band of village children merely through reputation. As usual, however, the march of civilization could not be staved off. The ghost's dwelling—a deserted and ruined villa—was soon bulldozed to make way for the implementation of some mysterious governmental project. The villagers regretfully led the ghost to a new dwelling (a palm tree on the outskirts of the village)



with the assistance of a necromancer and the favourite playground of the village lads moved with her. But this respite was a short one. Her fans grew up and dispersed, the tree was struck by lightning and the ghost lingered only in the narrator's imagination. Neither did she receive any attention from a new generation of children, who were "just afraid of ghosts".

The mystery of the Missing Cap deals with a minor political crisis

precipitated by the theft of a sleeping Minister's cap by a monkey. Reported by an intrigued child, this hilarious tale is enriched by its subtle barbs against the ignorance and machinations of all too many post-Independence politicians. Yet, the exercise is rescued from being a tirade by the author's warm humanity and absence of malice. Another masterly story, Prithviraj's Horse, describes the transformation of a timid

schoolmaster into a fearless hero after an astrologer's disclosure that he had been Prithviraj Chaudhan's faithful horse in an earlier incarnation. Bengali readers will note its formal and thematic affinities with Satyajit Ray's Banku-babur Bandhu in which a similar transformation is catalyzed by a close encounter with a being from outer space.

Romantic themes are tackled with aplomb in The Dusky Hour, The Bridge in the Moonlit Night,

and The Love Letter. All three tales depict the various way in which love inevitably engenders lies and deceit. This unpleasant core, however, is lightened by Das's unfailing sense of humour and enviable ability to inject just the right amount of pathos into a story without falling prey to melodrama. The Owl, The Tree and the title story deal with one of Das's major themes: the erosion of traditional bucolic existence by modern life. In the introduction, his publisher remarks: "His work shows familiarity with every aspect of Indian village life, and also with the effects of change on the feudal society that was breaking up, and the predicament of people, formerly of some importance, caught up in the social upheavals involved in the making of the new India".

Some of the unclassifiable but nonetheless memorable stories included here are The General, The Martial Expedition and The Kite. The Martial Expedition is a skilful portrait of the psychiatric condition known as manic depressive psychosis and is accurate enough for inclusion in a textbook as a typical case history. However, Das has inaccurately described the condition as "psychotic depression" which, as the name indicates, is a condition where depression is unrelieved by the flights of elation and playfulness which the story's hero displays so prominently.

—C. K.

*The Submerged Valley and Other Stories. By Manoj Das. (Batstone Books, distributed in India by Rupa and Co., Rs 25)