



QUINTESSENTIALLY INDIAN

FAREWELL TO A GHOST by Manoj Das.

(Penguin India), pp. 186, Rs 100/-.

Graham Greene extolls Manoj Das' virtues on the front cover simply by placing him alongside Narayan; Das' Orissa alongside Malgudi. The added element in Das, says Greene, is the mystery. Not that rural Orissa is any more mysterious than Malgudi but Narayan has a certain amused cynicism that Das lacks or displays seldom and it is this that makes the reader sit up and say that this is 'life that is typically Indian and is now, perhaps, in danger of extinction' as the blurb on the back cover does. Das' narratorial persona accepts a world where there is nothing surprising about the supernatural, where ghosts have a right to exist.

In the story that lends its title to this

collection of stories, 'Farewell to a Ghost', a girl's ghost has to be evicted from a deserted villa so that the building can be demolished and the land used for some other purpose. The villagers will not think of allowing the demolition of the house with the ghost still present in it. So they arrange to have an exorcist lead the ghost out (to a tree) though they collectively wince at his rough behaviour. The village tearfully bids farewell to the ghost whose blessings they had always sought for years on every conceivable occasion. A few months later even this new abode of the ghost, a palm tree, is struck by lightning and soon no one refers to this ghost. But times change even more within the narration of the story itself—the new

generation of village boys 'were just afraid of ghosts'.

But it is not only ghosts which are given their space within Das' stories—his world accommodates centrally various individuals the 'real' world would relegate to the margins, whom time would forget. Take for instance Miss Moberly and her friends who inhabit an aged people's home in 'Miss Moberly's Targets'. Or Gauri, in 'The Strategy', an old retired midwife who has receded so far to the edges of people's memories and lives that she feels the need to pretend to them that her death is imminent in order to shock them into acknowledging her and articulating their need for her continued existence. Her strategy fails

miserably. In this search for significance many of Das' characters affirm more than anything else their right to exist, to be accepted as they are. In 'The Concubine' some ambitious would-be journalists decide to expose a campaigner for the local ex-prince as his father's concubine. Instead of smothering her in shame the accusation made by them during a meeting only pleases her. They have publicly recognised her significance! Little wonder that the would-be journalists decide to give up investigative journalism.

This is almost emblematic of Das' world. His stories are not forays into the under or overgrowth of the soul. He is not even overly interested in depicting the complexities of relationships. His is a world of vignettes which illustrate the given pluralities of life that people have to accept, conditions of life which can perhaps never be explained but

FAREWELL TO A GHOST MANOJ DAS



'Manoj Das... will certainly take a place on my shelves beside the stories of Narayan. I imagine Orissa is far from Malgudi, but there is the same quality in his stories, with perhaps an added 'mystery'
Graham Greene

which you have to come to terms with. A politician who once loses his dhoti when he runs from a girl's room meets her years later

and she returns his carefully preserved clothing as well as his sense of honour to him. No questions, no analyses. And the politician now feels able to retire from public life. Acknowledgement of unrealised possibilities has a weight equivalent to real experience.

Ultimately, though they do not lack humour, though the stories to a large extent manage to engage your sympathies, they retain a certain distance and remain but charming. They can and do slip into a naive idealism. The reader will catch him/herself saying that if only things were like this now...as if they were so once! Das' language doesn't work all the time either but perhaps that adds to his charm. Definitely a writer and a book worth reading.

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