

BULLDOZERS AND FABLES AND FANTASIES FOR ADULTS: By Manoj Das; B. R. Publishing Corporation, Division of D.K. Publishers Distributors (P) Ltd., 29/9 Nangia Park, Shakti Nagar, Delhi-110 007; Rs. 120.

In his preface to this publication, the author has candidly admitted his feeling of slight unease in bringing together a collection of stories that had appeared more than once within the country and abroad over the past two decades or more. What obviously worries him is the closeness to reality of some of the stories which, in the first instance, should justify his writing them. There is, at the same time, the real danger that satirical writing these days can become scarcely indistinguishable from reality. In that case it ceases to be art and becomes a mere transcript of reality and might well read like a stale newspaper report of some sensational event that took place some time ago and was mercifully forgotten like a bad dream. Not even George Orwell managed to escape altogether the risk of self-parody, satire being a double-edged sword. Precisely where is the line to be drawn when one is writing a satire on society?

Practising satirists are believed to be performing a signal service to society by wielding the powerful whiplash of ridicule and scorn at those who offend the norms of civilised behaviour by overindulging in their all too human foibles beyond pardonable limits. In a society which has attained a certain measure of equilibrium, where norms are widely and unquestioningly accepted, as it probably happened in England in the 18th century, satire is even regarded as the highest form of artistic expression. Poets like Dryden and Pope lavished all their ingenuity as well as inspiration on the production of satirical pieces. In so doing, they were entitled to the gratitude and applause of their contemporaries if not of all posterity.

However, in an evolving and far from stable society like ours, with wide linguistic and regional diversities in education and degrees of cultural sophistication, what really is the role and function of a satirist? Is art imitating reality or is reality catching up with artistic inventiveness?

Orwell's nightmare of a totalitarian and diabolically repressive state described in his *Nineteen Eighty Four* was in less danger of being realised in 1984 than Antony Burgess's light-hearted comic novel with the very same title. Burgess's

schoolmaster, insisting on his right to work in a Britain run by socialists who officially sponsored strikes, had to be put in jail when he actually attempted to teach his pupils. While this was certainly unimaginable in Thatcherite Britain, it is not wholly outside the realm of possibility in Marxist-ruled Kerala. There was indeed a singularly striking instance of life catching up with art a few years ago when a very successful satirical film on politicians and their ways was shown repeatedly to overflowing cinema houses in Kerala. The climax of the film was a mass tragedy caused by adulterated liquor. And yet this was followed before long by precisely such a major tragedy involving probably an even larger number of deaths than shown in the film.

It is, therefore, hardly surprising that the writer finds himself in a double bind: by adopting the satirical mode, he sails much closer to reality than is always comfortable, and he runs the constant risk of being wrecked on the rocks of reality. His artistic restraint might well make his satire far too much a pale imitation of the real world. On the other hand, he anticipates real events with the special gifts of imagination and ingenuity which he possesses as an artist, which life is only too willing to imitate.

It is a matter for speculation whether some of our much admired popular politicians and men of public affairs are in any way embarrassed by their counterparts in fiction and other forms of satire. Most of them seem to be only interested in out-Heroding Herod. Every clown is in danger of being taken seriously.

Manoj Das's stories and fables are essentially satiric in their inspiration, *Bulldozers*, for example, must have been proved much too close to reality and could be justly considered much tamer and unexciting than life is already these days. One should naturally question the wisdom of including it in this collection, especially when, as the author points out, some of these have "appeared and reappeared in different magazines in India and abroad."

Some of the later fables and fantasies display enormous inventiveness and resourcesfulness and provide enjoyable reading. One cannot, however, altogether escape the nagging feeling that the artistic medium does not always succeed in catching up with the author's phenomenal inspiration and originality.