

Stories of rural India

THE SUBMERGED VALLEY, AND OTHER STORIES, By Manoj Das, Batstone Books: Rupa & Co., 1986, Rs.25.

A country that includes among its literary classics a collection like *Katha-sarit-sagara* ('The Ocean of Stories') can never fail to cultivate the 'short story' as a perennially fresh and fascinating art form. In our own times, masters like Tagore, Premchand, Masti, Mulk Raj Anand and Vaikom Muhammad Basheer have made their mark as exemplars of the art. And Manoj Das is of the same class.

Manoj's short stories in Oriya won the Sahitya Akademi award in 1972, and some of his English stories, convincingly autochthonous, have by virtue of their very Indianness won for him a discriminating world audience. The background is rural India, the changing yet changeless Indian village, or the rather more quickly changing 'our small town'. Bholi-grandpa, the retired General Valla, the elusive yet ubiquitous Abolkara, the dying-undying village tree, Kunju and his kite, the intriguing owl, the well-beloved local ghost, the faded heroine of the local myth about the crocodile-bridegroom, the would be murderer, the obsessed avenger...these and other uniquely realised persons and powers are, not of Orissa alone, but of all India. Manoj's 'our village' is thus, by a feat of imaginative universalisation, the reader's 'village' too, and perhaps the 'global village' as well.

"The truth about the good short story", says Sean

O'Faelain, "is poetical; it lies in a pointed vision, a sort of *eclaircissement* of an inward eye-flick, the fixing of an unforgettable, thing seen". Everything hinges on the climax, which is quite unexpected but by its own logic rings true; and yet a residual mystery floats in the air. These 17 stories of men, women and children, of places, landmarks and presences, are the outcome of a seemingly effortless art that nevertheless conceals an uncanny and compulsive art. And the similes: "sweating like an ice-cream stick", "feeling like a badminton cork hit by a gorilla's racket", the temple and the hillock of the 'submerged valley' "looking melancholy though charming, like two memories emerging from the mists of time"! In the several contexts, nothing could be more apt or more richly charged with undertones.

Life at all times has had to come to terms with the tension between stability and change, tradition and revolt, but the coming of independence has meant a change of pace as well. The passage from British colonialism to Hind Swaraj, from local feudalism to swadeshi-sarcarism, from Gandhian idealism to careering corruption has created tensions and comic situations that are the raw stuff out of which Manoj shapes his moving and memorable lyrics of prose fiction. My own favourite is the "tragical-comical-historical-pastoral scene indivisible" 'Mystery of the Missing Cap'. Two cheers for Jhandoo the monkey that stole the visiting minister's Gandhi-cap!

K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar