

Farewell To A Ghost
 By Manoj Das
 Penguin India
 Rs 100/-

MANOJ Das' new collection of stories harks back to an age of socio-cultural incorruptibility. Located in the backwaters where telephone lines are rare and cable television non-existent the stories seek out the unassuming creature who lurks behind the facade of human ambitiousness. A large number of inconclusive, slim and unsubstantial ghost stories are fragments of comment on the question of human conviction. Das' characters do not deny the existence of the supernatural. In his

for him. The unexpected turn of events and the resolution to convert the mudslinging daily newspaper into a monthly magazine (named *The Monthly Jasmine* if you please!) are indications of an authorial vision which won't accept malevolence and the basic component of human nature.

In one of the more amusing vignettes *The Irrational*, successful politician Subrato returns to the village of his youth to confront *Chowdhurani* by putting his hands on her... eyes! Subra-

nips his industrial ambitions in the bud: "No, he would not allow a bazar to crop up here. Long live the banyan tree; long live the tribe of the two he met; long live their wretched umbrella!"

The stories claw at the collars of cliches to emerge unspoilt, if not entirely surehanded. Cultural and moral conflicts in real life do not come to as auspicious conclusions as they do in *The Rain*. Manoj Das' stories make you wish they did. In *The Brothers* the excessively idealistic freedom fighter Bhuvan grows

Back of Beyond



Bikash Bhattacharjee: 'And Alakendu' oil on canvas

stories characters accept what they perceive to be inevitable and cope with it with unostentatious fatality.

In *The Different Man* the protagonist Singh sees the world spinning around and away from his orbit of comprehension. "Why is everybody so eager to be sarcastic, so ready with retorts?" Singh seems to voice the author's own impatience with the literature of scepticism.

Although clouds of corruptibility gather menacingly around the characters they are magically dispersed, if not by goodwill then by death which intervenes just in time to equalize the damage done to the basic benevolence of human spirit. In *The Concubine* a scoop-starved scribe tries to bring down an election candidate by publicly derogating the elegant woman who canvasses

to had fled the scene of the unpardonable crime vowing to never return again, confident in the belief that the woman was none the wiser about the culprit's identity. Now when the grey-haired *Chowdhurani* reveals she knew of Subrato's prank all along he is jolted into a new awakening about the scope of the human conscience.

If the stories create humour out of a moral and spiritual dilemma they also bring to light the frightful collapse of a moral order by drawing attention to the essential ingenuousness of human nature. In *The Rain* a property baron finds himself trapped in the rain with some villagers whom he intends to render homeless. When they expose themselves to be vulnerable hospitable souls Jaipal is filled with an unutterable compassion that

SUBHASH K JHA reviews a book which concentrates mostly on ghostly goings-on in a part of the country

old to be a source of constant embarrassment to his family. The uncalculated benevolence of Bhuvan's nature is restorative.

In *The Strategy* a desolate old woman announces her impending death to all and sundry in order to glean sympathy. In *The Bridge in the Moonlit Night* old Sudhir confesses to his senile friend about how he had foiled his friend's romantic attachment in their youth. In the finest story of the collection *The Dying Horizon* the aged narrator recalls the terrible misadventure which took away the life of a childhood friend, the sweet Lily. In this, the most elaborately laid out fiction of the collection, Das makes eloquent use of time and space to create a climate of compassionate longings.

"If only I could weep like you!" the childhood friend of the narrator blurts out in *The Dying Horizon*. In their shared guilt about the death of Lily the two friends represent a fountainhead of guilt and absolution. In Das' stories right and wrong are more than relative values. One heals the damage done by the other to the extent that human foibles begin to seem indispensable prerequisites to moral rectitude.