

TRIBUTE

Goodbye to Malgudi

RK Narayan cooked no delicacies out of his country's shortcomings, churned out no concoction of realism and erotica, but focused on the little ironies of life, writes Manoj Das

"THE final test of a novel will be our affection for it, as it is the test of our friends and of anything else which we cannot easily define," said EM Forster in his *Aspects of the Novel* (1927). The statement indeed helped me to sustain my interest in the works of RK Narayan.

My first entry into Narayan's world was through his most popular work, *The Guide*. I enjoyed reading it, but was undecided on rating it. I was intrigued by the author winking at stark realities while making thousands rush to a severe drought-ridden region to see the possible miracle of a 'holy man' bringing down rains — hardly a miracle in a country where Babas produce ashes galore and occasionally a wristwatch at the sleight of hand! How could the authorities deem the location and the occasion fit enough to deserve special trains? In the 1950s, when colas and bottles of mineral water were yet to invade the rural bazaars, what were those picnickers and the curious lot drinking?

But as I read more of Narayan, even though the law of willing suspension of disbelief did not quite operate in me, I felt his flaws and weaknesses overshadowed by a certain uncanny air of innocence, a jovial

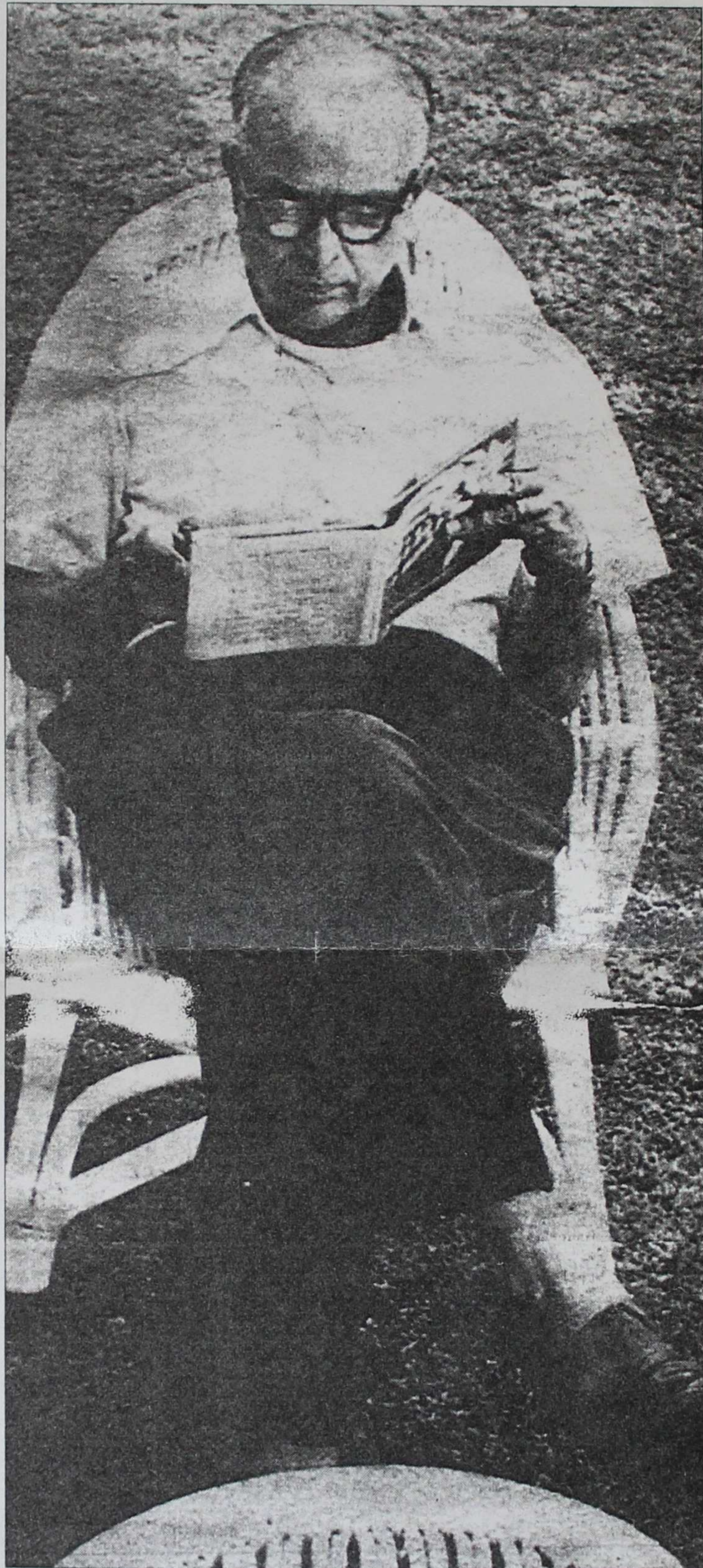
indulgence in disregarding both gross factuality and the need for probing the characters deeper. I spontaneously exempted him from his obligation to depict the conflicts some of his characters were bound to experience at moments of grave transition in their lives — such as what the danseuse Rosie should have gone through when surrendering herself to her promoter Raju, in *The Guide*. I could almost hear a breezy Narayan muttering with a chuckle, "Well, this is my story — some slices of life — I don't care to be pretentious nor do I promise you profundity!"

And rarely did any writer's

language go so well with the plane at which he presented his characters and situations. Similes and metaphors gilded them beautifully as they floated across our vista as light clouds.

Narayan's phenomenal popularity could probably be appreciated in the perspective of history. Though a particular genre of pre-Independence Indo-Anglian prose, consisting of works by Sri Aurobindo, Radhakrishnan, Nehru et al, had proved formidable; the stream of creative fiction flowed along a few narrow lines — depicting the miseries of the exploited or projecting the spirit of revolt against the colonial exploiters — as in Mulk Raj Anand or Bhavani Bhattacharya. Something fresh, something different was the need of the hour with the advent of freedom. Narayan pulled apart the screen that kept the wider horizon of Indian life veiled. Pigmy heroes and villains, puny politicians and pardonable hunters of ephemeral happiness, came scampering onto the liberal stage called Malgudi — a motley crowd, fascinating for their naivete and oddities as well as small dreams and modest sacrifices — in the pages of *Swami and Friends* (his first novel, 1935), *Bachelor of Arts* (1936), *The Dark Room* (1938), *The English Teacher* (1945), *Mr Sampath* (1949), *The Financial Expert* (1952), *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955), *The Guide* (1958) and his two collections of stories, *An Astrologer's Day* and *Lawley Road*.

Narayan was the first Indian fiction writer to be widely read abroad. That was remarkable, for he cooked no delicacies out of his country's shortcomings; he churned out no concoction of realism and erotica. He focused on the little ironies of life, exaggerated to the permissible degree of caricature and cartooning. Also, he often presented authentic glimpses of South Indian scenes where God, love and life made a smooth collage, as in *The English Teacher*:



RK Narayan: (1906–2001)

"In the flickering light the image acquired strange shadows and seemed to stir, and make a movement to bless. I watched my wife. She opened her eyes for a moment. They caught the light of camphor flame, and shone with an unearthly brilliance. Her cheeks glowed; the rest of her person

was lost in the shadows of the temple hall. Her lips were moving in prayer. I felt transported at the sight of it. I shut my eyes and prayed: God, bless this child and protect her."

It was Graham Greene who recommended Narayan to publishers in the West in the 30s of the 20th

century. Decades later December 1986, it was revealed to me what had struck Greene most in Narayan. Greene happened to read a collection of my short stories, *The Submergence Valley* (now incorporated in Penguin's *Selected Fictions of Manoj Das*) and wrote my publisher, Dick Batstone, "I read the stories of Manoj Das with very great pleasure. He 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."

No doubt there is a world of difference between the elements of mystery in Narayan's works and mine. I firmly believe that there are "more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy", whereas there is no clear evidence of Narayan believing in matters occult despite the character or two of his having supernatural experiences, like his modest hero in *The English Teacher* who has the apparition of his wife but which can very well be interpreted as a hallucination. Nevertheless, there is a mystery of a kind about Narayan — the mild, delectable mystery of hopes, anticipations, of things expected and unexpected, with which he goes on exploring the moments in our every lives.

But I wonder if the phenomenon of the mild and the good had not come to an end; I wonder if another Narayan would click. Readers of the Indian fiction in English have been conditioned to expect sophistication, the sort that could be a euphemism for titillation. I do not know for how long can we keep alive that charming attitude with which Graham Greene viewed Narayan:

"Whom next shall I meet in Malgudi? That is the thought that comes to me when I close a novel by Mr. Narayan's. I don't go for another novel. I will go out of my doors into those loved and shabby streets and see with excitement and a certain pleasure a stranger

approaching, past the bank, the cinema, the haircutting saloon, a stranger who will greet me I know with some unexpected and revealing phrase that will open a door into another human existence."

(from the Preface to *The Financial Expert*)