WRITER AND ILLUSTRATOR (July- Sept. 1996)
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the same roof and yet know each other as little as Pooja's parents did.

An Odd Week-end is a delightful story with not much of a storyline or plot to it. It describes the range of feelings experienced by Mitu, the usual, carefree middle or upper-middle-class schoolgirl, as she comes into contact with the women and children of a trans-Yamuna slum. The circumstances here are much more 'everyday' than, say, the next story, *Home For Christmas*, which appears, just a little, contrived. Eleven-year-old Tina plans for a Christmas party with her father in a Santa Claus outfit. But it suddenly seems that her father, a Major in the army, will not be able to be home for Christmas. Tina feels like chucking up the idea of the party. But she realises that this will sorely disappoint Nikki who, disabled and lonely, has been eagerly looking forward to the party. Tina overcomes her personal feelings of depression and decides to carry on with the party for Nikki's sake, with herself as Santa Claus! However, the new Commanding Officer turns out to be Nikki's grandfather, and he sees to it that Tina's Daddy is home for Christmas.

Never Talk to Strangers deals with an urgent, contemporary issue. Children of nuclear families with both parents going out to work, often have to stay by themselves in their flats for certain lengths of time. They are repeatedly asked to be wary of strangers who make friendly overtures. This precaution is absolutely necessary for safety. But in shutting out strangers, one may be shutting out possible friends as well. How is one to know?

The Case of the Missing Gulab Jamuns makes the point that everyday life is full of mysteries and puzzles, though they may not all figure thieves or robbers or villains. It is also a sad commentary on poverty and hunger — everyday matters in India.

Loser Takes It All tells us that even when one is faced with a seemingly unbeatable opponent, one should not lose heart, but try to fight back. A familiar line. But we all need it to be told to us— almost everyday.

Lakshadweep Mystery reiterates the point that behind what appears to be an exotic mystery, there often lies a simple complex of the human mind. And like mysteries that get solved, complexes too get cured. With Chikee overcoming his fear of the water, the book ends on a cheerful, bright — and right —note.

Nature is described vividly and imaginatively in *Lakshadweep Mystery*. But in the school stories, the language is too reminiscent of Enid Blyton.

Since other stories have liberally used italics, it is puzzling why *The Case of the Missing Gulab Jamuns* does not use them for 'dekchi', 'bhaiya', 'beta', 'kaka', 'samosa', 'khoya', 'burfi' or, for that matter, 'gulab jamuns' (in italics in *A Strange Day's Story*). *Loser Takes It All* prints 'yaar' without italics, while *Lakshadweep Mystery* does the opposite. The editing could have been more careful.

However, the illustrations, both on the cover and inside, are completely in tune with the book. Sandeep Sinha especially has been able to depict the right expressions on the people he has sketched.

At Rs 40, this book is a rare delicacy. What is more, it should be able to raise the appetite for more of its kind.

—DIPAVALI DEBROY

LEGENDS AND PARABLES OF INDIA (English)

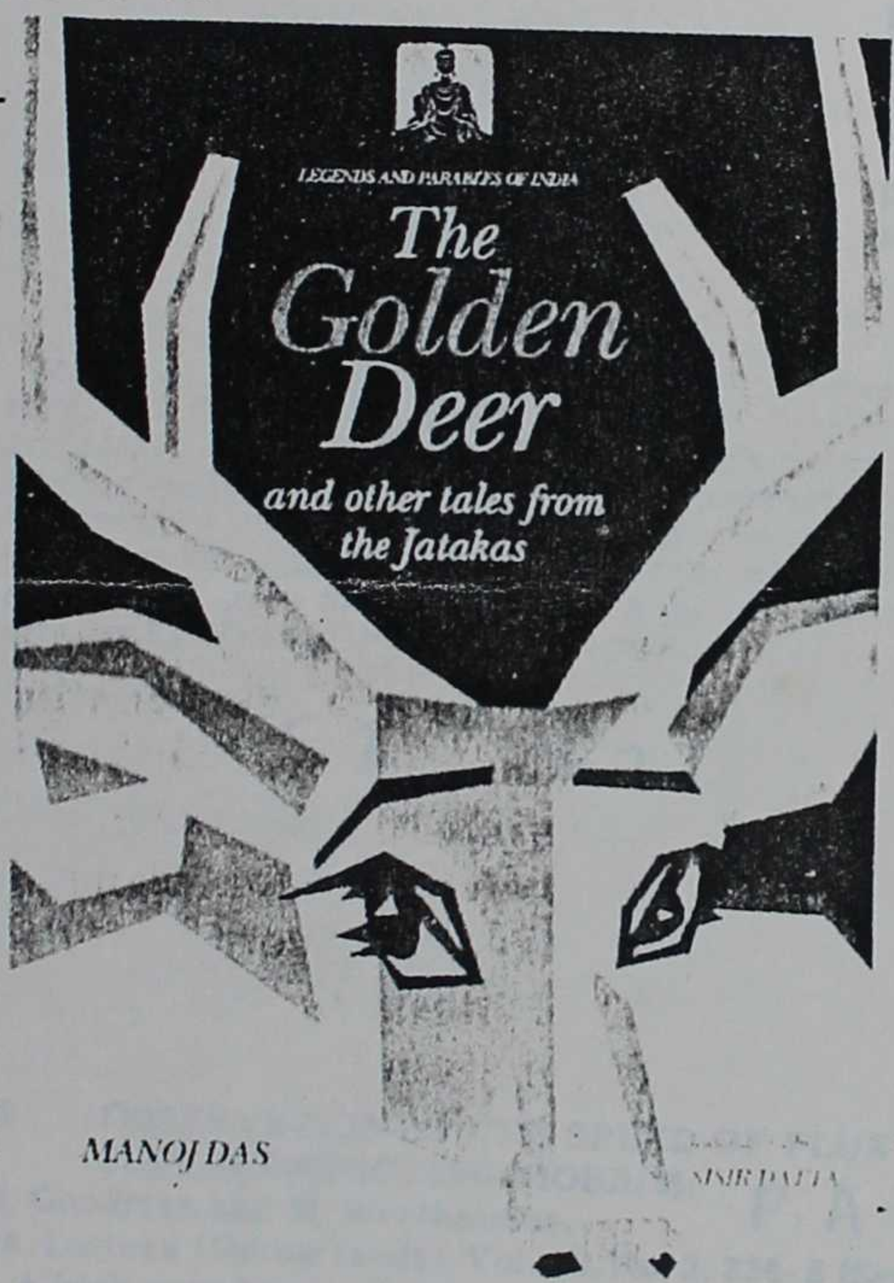
Equal to a Thousand and Other Tales ; *Manoj Das; Illustrated by Sisir Datta; Published by Chandamama Pubns., 188, N.S.K. Salai, Vadapalani, Madras; - 600026; 1996, Pages 51, Price Rs 25 .*

The Magic Tree and other Tales; ***Manoj Das;*** *Illustrated by Sisir Datta; Published by Chandamama Pubns., 1996, Pages 64; Price Rs 30.*

The Golden Deer and Other Tales from the Jatakas; *Manoj Das; Illustrated, by Sisir Datta; Published, by Chandamama 1996;*

Pages 48; Price Rs 30.

Legend of the Golden Valley;
Manoj Das; Illustrated by Sisir Datta; Published by Chandamama 1996. Pages104. Price Rs 40.



All the four books mentioned above are the product of one publisher, creation of one author, and the art work of one illustrator, like one brand of sweets! All the participants in this production have a well established name in the field of children's literature.

The author is one of the leading writers of children's books and has won several prestigious awards. The illustrator has won distinctions in his own field. The publisher too is a big name in children's literature. Thus what we have in hand is a delightful quartet which is likely to grip the young reader's attention.

The books are very well written, well illustrated and well produced. The language used is simple and far from verbose. The style is lucid and facile. A single thread runs through the foursome. They all narrate folk tales, legends and parables. The similarity of contents has induced even the publisher to consider only a single prefatory note to be appropriate for all of them.

Many may not view the publication of folk tales and legends favourably, considering them as repetition, and dubbing them as 'old wine in new bottles.' But their repetition does not make for monotony. It rather helps them in their survival and continuity. By the time a new lot is published, there is a new generation of readers to read them. Sometimes the contents of the stories also undergo a sort of metamorphosis in the hands of new authors and illustrators. They provide a peep into the past, and keep the culture and tradition of the country alive. Though written for children, they are read with interest by adults also, who are more appreciative of the wisdom contained in them.

I say this with my experience as Director of the Delhi Public Library, where before the commencement of the school summer vacations we used to replenish the stock of folktales in all our branches, adding multiple copies of each title in every branch. As a result, the daily issue at our branches doubled from day one. At Shahdara it crossed 1500, I remember. About 80% of the borrowers were children. And at any time all copies of the folktales were issued out. Later, we had to make special efforts to wean children away from these folk tales.

It appears paradoxical that in the present age of science and reason folk tales have a strong appeal, even though they contain elements of implausibility, like magic, the supernatural and the miraculous. Their appeal perhaps lies in the fact that they are richly endowed with the aroma of the native soil. Even when repeated, they retain the charm of the oft-frequented pathways, now half forgotten. They carry the wisdom of the ages and teach moral values, without moralising.

One great service that they do, unnoticed, is that they quietly work for the unity of the country and oneness of its culture. In the folk

tales of the north we would find stories of people's travels to Godavari, Rameshwaram and other places in the south, while folk tales of the southern states speak of people travelling to Haridwar, Kashi, Kailash Parbat etc. In fact many tales and legends in one state are found current in other states, with minor local variations.

I would, however, suggest that the modern writers, when writing or re-writing tales and legends, should try to weed out the unbelievable, where possible, without making unacceptable changes, and make them more plausible for the modern day child, who is more rational and questioning. For instance, in the story entitled *Crown for a Commoner*, in the book, *TheGolden Deer*, on page 15 it is stated that a woodcutter and his wife cooked rice and meat, carried them a 'mile' away to the Ganges for a sort of picnic. There, while they were taking a dip in the Ganges, the pots of rice and curry were carried 'miles' downstream by a flash flood, and there a mahout found them 'steaming hot'. The time lag and the flood waters would not leave things boiling hot. Such statements, even if found existing in the oral tradition or in printed literature, can be easily eliminated without detracting from the quality of the story.

In passing now, a word about the illustrations:

At the outset it may be said that all the books have attractive and colourful cover designs. Even inside, the standard of illustrations is good in comparison with those in other commercial publications in India. But let us have a closer look at them in the light of the following general observations:

Illustrations in books have two functions to perform, *viz.* to elucidate the text and to lend colour and charm to the book. To perform the first function, the illustrations picturise the objects likely to be less familiar to the reader. But pictures which are themselves not clear and have to seek the help of the text to be properly understood, fail to fulfil this function. Such is the case with some illustrations in these books. One such example is on page 15 of the book *Equal to a Thousand*, and another on page 17 of the book *The Golden Deer* (column 1, no.3 and 4).

All books for children, even if not text books, serve to educate them. By accident or by inadvertance they should not miseducate the child. For example, the dogs drawn on page 9 of the book *The Magic Tree* appear to have hooves instead of paws. The plough shown in the picture on page 17 of *The Golden Deer* points in the wrong direction.

While discussing this subject I would like to say that as the language in the children's books has to be simple and straightforward, the illustrations should also avoid pedantry in art. A simple, realistic style should be preferred to advanced modernistic styles. An artist of Sisir Datta's calibre is capable of much better work provided the publisher had compensated him for his labours. In the books under review, owing to the style adopted by the artist, some of the pictures appear as if cut out of paper. Examples: *The Magic Tree*, pages 7,8,29,55.

ABOUT THE BOOKS:

EQUAL TO A THOUSAND AND OTHER TALES: Incidentally, this book has no list of contents. But I can vouch that it contains ten tales. It would be futile to give a list of them here. Anyhow they are all interesting, written in a straightforward style. Each story runs into 4 or 5 pages, including one full page and two or three small illustrations. Thus the reading matter is not much. But no words are wasted and the story is always on the move. The small size of the story will encourage the young readers to read on. Each story has a moral lesson to teach, which is left quietly in the mind of the reader without much ado.

As all the stories are equally interesting and instructive, I shall not comment on any of them in particular. Still, two stories among them are different, in as much as they can be stories

for modern times with a serious message for the people of today. They are: *A Trivial Act that Raised a Riot* and *Meditation with Cats*. The former tells how careless wiping of honey-smeared fingers on a pillar by a shopkeeper gave rise to a chain of events which ended up in a communal riot. The second one shows how people with blind faith imitate their *gurus*. In the story a hermit, who has a pet cat, ties it to a pillar before sitting for meditation to prevent it from disturbing him. But the followers think that a cat tied to a pillar is vital for good meditation; and a cat market develops in the neighbourhood. Such blind faith is not rare even today!

THE MAGIC TREE AND OTHER TALES: This is a collection of twelve stories. Each one occupies three to five pages, including one full page illustration and two or three smaller ones. It is diffucult to summarise and comment on each one of them in this short space. All of them are interesting and hold a message. Some of them are linked with famous Indian personages and places. *The King and the Cobbler* relates to the revered Saint Ravidas, and *The Deity Came as Witness* is about the Sakhi Gopal temple, situated near the pilgrim centre Puri.

The first story in the book, *A Sweeper Bridegroom for the Princess* is a psuedo historical story and could have been based on facts, though the time and the kingdom has not been mentioned.

The story entitled *The Right to Advise* is about a sage who has to advise a prince to desist from eating sweets for a fortnight. But, to lend force to his advice he himself abstains from sweets for a fortnight. As I said above, such tales travel to all parts of the country. And in so doing they undergo minor changes. This story, in pre-partition Punjab was attributed to the well known Saint Chhajju Bhagat of Lahore. He was to advise a boy to refrain from eating *gur* (jaggery). To feel justified in rendering such advice he himself abstained from *gur* for a week. This story (among many others about him) is believed to be a reality. The moral is an antidote to the oft repeated Hindi proverb: *Aap guruji baingan khayen, auron ko updesh sunayen.*

A few misprints in a book of Indian origin have to be overlooked. But at certain places they become too obtrusive. For instance, in the contents list, Mandarpur, a proper noun, has 'M' in the lower case. In the introductory note entitled 'India, the Land of Stories' para 1 line 4, 'tables' shuld be 'tales', para 2 line 1 'and' should be 'has'; line 2 'fold' should be 'folk'; in the last para, penultimate line 'maters' should be 'matters'. If enough attention could not be paid, this note should have been eliminated. Fortunately these trifles do not detract much from the charm of the stories, though they do reflect on the efficiency of the producer.

THE GOLDEN DEER AND OTHER TALES FROM THE JATAKAS: This bunch of ten stories is stated to be from the Jatakas. As is well known, the Jatakas relate the previous births of Prince Siddhartha before he attained Buddhahood. They not only make interesting reading but also teach moral values of life. They are full of love, compassion and sympathy. They promote *ahimsa* and respect for life. In some stories the author has identified the Bodhisattva, but in some of them he has left it unmentioned. And from an assessment of the characters in some stories it becomes difficult to spot the Bodhisattva. Still, the stories are interesting, without the Bodhisattva being pinpointed.

The story of *The Golden Deer* tells how a king and all his subjects gave up hunting and became vegetarians.

A couple of other stories that call for special mention are: *Cure for a Snob* and the *Two Noble Princes*. The first one describes the wisdom of a noble man who not only pardons his servant for his treachery but also cures him of his snobbery, without uttering a harsh word

and without display of anger. The second one describes a chance encounter of two princes of different states, one of whom accepts the superiority of the other just by comparing their virtues, without taking recourse to the sword or lashing of tongues. It is a duel of nobility.

LEGEND OF THE GOLDEN VALLEY: This is not a collection of tales but a novelette. Fairytale novelettes are a rare variety. The story relates to a peaceful kingdom nestled among inaccessible hills surrounded by ranges of high mountains—a world in itself. Pursuing the adventures of Raju, the central character—we are taken to newer valleys where we witness funny situations and meet weird characters. Raju goes through a series of adventures and ultimately marries the deity turned princess.

Though we pass through eerie lands, inhabited by strange people, the atmosphere is not tense with fear and suspense. On the whole peace and tranquility prevail all through. Human follies of avarice, vanity etc. are quietly put to shame. The story contains mystery, myth and fiction but higher planes of human existence are also implied. Towards the end, the story appears to be inching towards a mild tragedy but suddenly takes a turn and finishes with a happy ending.

However, it appears a little odd when in the midst of a mythical and weird atmosphere we read about the centres of higher learning and research projects in mathematics and space science. There are small errors here and there but ordinary readers are not likely to spot them.

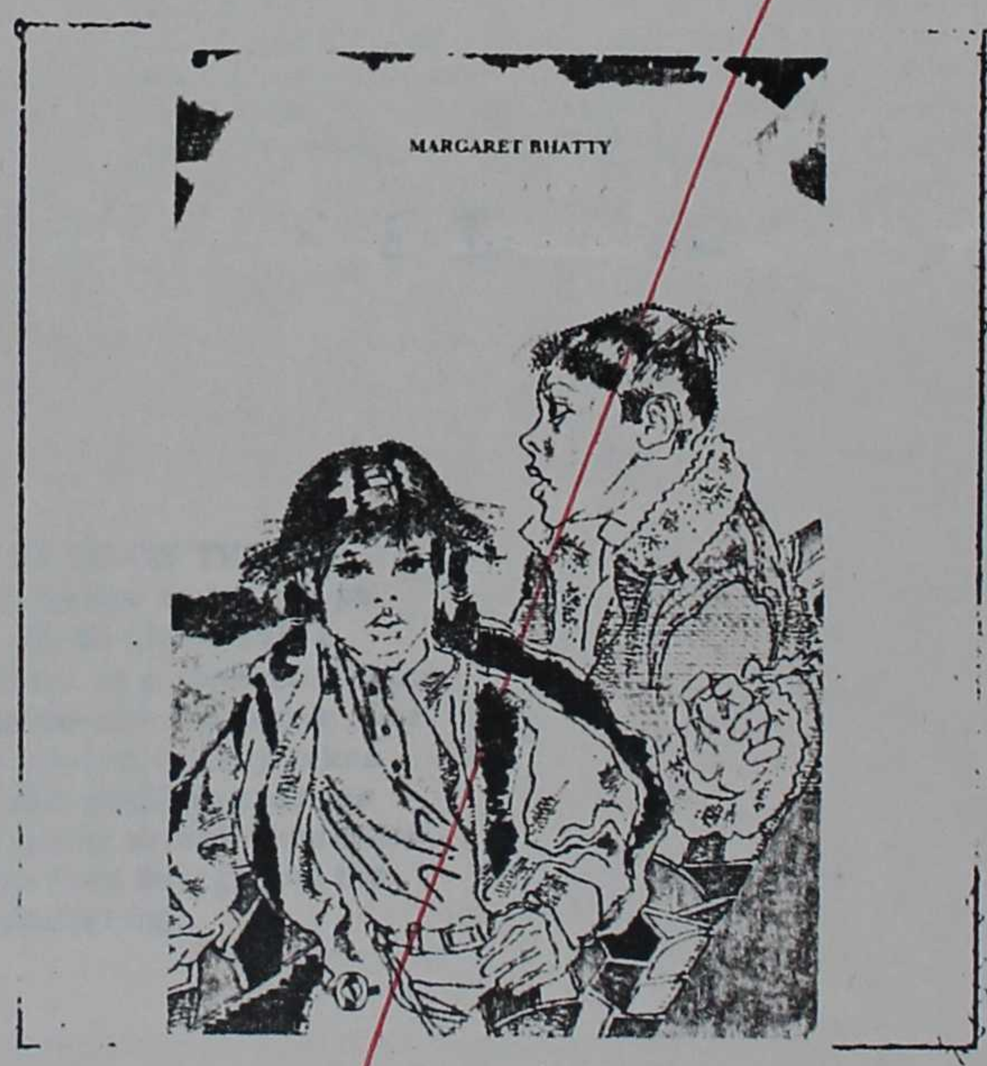
At places one may not agree with the phrases used, e.g. Raju 'packed up' his sword (P.41, line 1) - A sword is not packed; it is put in a scabbard or a sheath; and 'tears of joy drizzled in Raju's eyes' page 41, para 8, line 1). A drizzle is a fall in spray and cannot be applied to tears.

Illustrations are in line drawings and at one or two places quite unsatisfactory. However, the cover picture is a good piece of art. Overall, a good bargain for the buyer.

— J.C. MEHTA

THE SECRET OF SICKLE-MOON MOUNTAIN (English)

Margaret Bhatty; Illustrated by Mickey Patel; Published by Ratna Sagar Pvt. Ltd. Kirat Bhavan, Mukherjee Nagar, Commercial Complex, Delhi-110009; Pages 96; Price Rs 23.90.



Adventure always finds a follower. Especially if the audience being dealt with comprises children. For the thrill, first hand or vicarious, the excitement and the suspense of an adventure, whether it be on celluloid or in then the form of a book, is unbeatable. Small wonder then that all over the world this *genre* of children's literature has been the fastest to develop. And India is no exception.

A few years ago, when the Association of Writers and Illustrators for Children (AWIC) organised an author-reader interaction, one child said quite frankly that the only Indian author she had ever read was Nilima Sinha, an author whose *forte* is the adventure story. Now there are many who have tried their hands at