

ROUGH 1992

U R ANANTHAMURTHY

Eminent Kannada writer and Chairman, National Book Trust

■ I consider Devanuru Mahadeva's work, *Devanuru Mahadeva Avara Kritigalu* (Devanuru Mahadeva's works), published this year, one of the most significant contributions to the Kannada language. In fact, I think it deserves national recognition. These are his fictional writings which combine a profound realism with a mythical imagination. There are nine works in this volume, long tales as well as short stories.

Mahadeva is a Dalit by birth and is one of the few among Dalit writers who can present the existential suffering of the Dalits from a profoundly compassionate view. There is an anger but it is not directed historically against any particular community. It is a meditation on the human condition which is caused by the sharp-sightedness of the ruling classes of all times in the history of mankind. It is almost Buddhist in its grasp of the human predicament. Mahadeva can do this because he is very innovative in his narrative techniques—his writing is sheer poetry. He is very difficult to translate into any other language.

M V KAMATH

Ex-editor, *Illustrated Weekly* and columnist

■ Having short-listed my choice of the best book I have read this year to three—Robert Conigal's *The Man Who Knew Infinity*, R M Lala's *Beyond The Last Blue Mountain* and L N Rangarajan's *Kautilya; The Arthashastra*—my final

accolade goes to Rangarajan. The last to critically study the *Arthashastra* was R P Kangle whose translation of the book was to form the basis of all later translations and commentaries. Rangarajan has surpassed them all. In his translation, the verses have been rearranged, ambiguities removed, and archaic expressions, voluminous footnotes, incomprehensible literalness and muddling of the text with tedious facts, have been shown the door. What comes through in Rangarajan's study is meticulousness and accuracy combined with readability, scholarship reinforced with clarity of thought and felicity of expression. It is in these departments that Rangarajan scores heavily. Kautilya belongs to another age, but in many ways he is marvellously contemporaneous and Rangarajan's work brings this out very forcefully and convincingly. The author is humble enough to admit that he stands on the shoulders of both Dr Shyamashastri who first discovered the text and Dr Mangle who first wrote a critical analysis. But he can be proud of the fact that his contribution is no less admirable and praiseworthy.

UPAMANYU CHATTERJEE

Novelist and bureaucrat

■ Believe it or not, I haven't read a single good book this year, only reams and reams of files.

RANJIT HOSKOTE

Poet and Critic

■ Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land* represents a certain responsive side, a

questioning and not a conquistador side of the scholar gypsy's art. The narrative has two basic strands. The first is concerned with the lives and deeds of a Jewish merchant who lived in Mangalore in the first half of the 12th century and his Indian slave; the second, with Ghosh's own stay in an Alexandrian village, in the interests of his research. Along the way, the book evolves into a braided quest for elusive facts, a detective hunt among the relics of lost tribes, the spoor of extinct species. It becomes an extended field trip for the glyphs of a lost language, which hold the secrets of our past.

In effect, Ghosh works to bring about several shifts of gaze: for instance, the usual regime of single-layer history is interrogated and put aside. Our attention is drawn to the many possibilities of fiction and friction which necessarily attend the reading of a palimpsest, such as our layered background. If our historical record is to be pieced together, it can only be done through the tailoring of absences, footnotes, slippages. Nothing is absolute in the way certain ideologues picture it. We must recover our histories from the various fantasies enacted upon them; from inscriptions partly erased. Ghosh reconstructs a world of trade languages, shared metaphors, relations of dialogue among the peoples of West Asia and West India. The focus is also taken off the northern plain, with its other discourse of conquest and adjustment; and aimed at the coast, with its other narrative of exchange and innovation. This is a reassuring act of cultural replenishment: in a time of provincial history-writing and parochial nationalism, of invasive internationalist intervention, it is necessary to remind ourselves of these ancient pluralities. They are our only guarantee against the ethnocentrism which threatens to consume us. Ghosh's antique land, perhaps, is not so much an imaginary homeland, as it is a subtle area of light.

VIJAYA RAJADHYAKSHA,

Writer and Academician

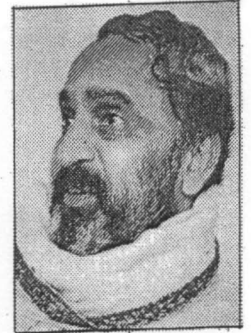
■ Shortlisting the best book of the year is a task

nothing short of formidable—given the fact that there are several that can lay claim to this title. Yet, if a choice has to be made, the book that comes most spontaneously to mind is *Drishtadrishta*, a compilation of 26 profiles, by Dr Y D Phadke. In a literal sense, *drishtadrishta* is both something that is seen and not seen; as a composite word, it means 'at a glance'. For a perceptive writer like Dr Phadke, however, even a glance is sufficient to build the personalities he has sketched.

Of his subjects, there are some whom Phadke has seen at close quarters—the others he knew only as artistes enriching his cultural life, a contact point further developed by an avid reading of books on them. Reading is Phadke's way of life—he is a well-known research scholar and has won much acclaim for the disciplined, authentic research which has gone into several of his books. But this scholar is also a genuine art lover—he reads poetry, listens to music, follows painting and films—and this accounts for the variety in the character sketches which comprise this book. So, if you have Lokmanya Tilak and Babasaheb Ambedkar on the one hand (political science is Phadke's area of specialisation), you also have A S F Talyarkhan, Mogubai Kurdikar and Begum Akhtar on the other.

Variety, however, is only an external aspect of the book—what is internal is Phadke's fine understanding of his subjects as human beings, the insight with which he fathoms them, though knowing fully well that even the deepest fathoming has its limitations, because there is something in every human being to which nobody has access.

One obvious pitfall in writing character sketches is that one is often tempted to draw one's own character sketch—and a flattering one at that—treating the material at one's hand as incidental. Phadke avoids this pitfall by keeping himself meticulously backstage. After reading *Drishtadrishta*, the first thing that strikes one is the versatile personality of its author, and his fine feel for



U R Ananthamurthy



M V Kamath



Upamanyu Chatterjee

