Miniatures from across India

One Point Two Billion: Stories
By Mahesh Rao
4th Estate/ HarperCollins Publishers India, 2015, 243 pp., Rs 499 (HB)
ISBN 978-93-5177-484-6

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"He had fifteen blue silk ties, each a slightly different shade of cerulean."

It is a simple little sentence, offset nicely with paragraph breaks above and below. It stands by itself. It conjures up an image of a fastidious man, a professional (in this case, a lawyer), careful – even painstakingly so – about things, including his appearance and image. Perhaps a bit of a narcissist. Is he a narcissist?

You'll have to read 'The Philanderer' to find out. But this little sentence – thrown just carefully so into the mix – points to something essential about Mahesh Rao's collection of short stories, *One Point Two Billion*. He knows his game, and he's on top of it. There are worlds in these works, which Rao draws you into effortlessly. And when you're done, as with all the best journeys, you're going to be, in equal parts, thoughtful, exhilarated, even a bit pissed walking away.

Rao is of course well-known for his previous novel, *The Smoke Is Rising* (2014), which won the Tata First Book Award and drew attention to Mysore. Aside from his deadpan delivery (he's a seriously funny writer) he was referenced most often in the media as an RK Narayan of our time, immersed in the culture and politics of the small (ish) Indian town, bringing a gentle, sympathetic and wry authorial hand to the pressing issues of our age. I'm an RK fan, but I'm glad to tell you that Rao's skipped past that particular comparison with these stories.

Narayan's stories gained their universality precisely from his minute examination of the particularities of Malgudi. The beauty of his insight was inductive; the way a person behaved in that small part of South India pointed to general truths about our shared condition. Rao stays with the microscope, but he applies it to 13 different parts of India. That's the structure of this collection — one story each from all these different places.

A stressed manager of a dubious yoga retreat outside Bengaluru finds neither comfort nor salvation in the *asanas* she's observing; the world-weary benevolence of a fading "villain" of the Mumbai film industry is revealed, in the face of the unexpected success of his protégé, to be a mask; a boy copes with the spiraling madness of his mother in Guwahati; an Adivasi woman in a displaced migrants camp somewhere in Central India settles old scores; a physically brittle teacher finally stands up for something in Kashmir. There are reluctantly returning Rajputs in rural Rajasthan, emotionally unavailable advocates in Kolkata, Christian converts in the cotton belt of Punjab, families chasing a burbling cola dream in pre-globalised Madhya Pradesh.

All too often, writers (especially those writing in English in India) falter precisely because they don't aim high enough. Ambition in a writer is itself laudable, and Rao has it in spades. What sets his ambition apart is that he seasons it with craft. He's gone for maximum coverage, yet stays with the particular. In certain ways, it's a real feat of ventriloquism. The two strongest stories in the collection, 'Drums' and 'Hero', are in the first person. The first one is from the point of view of an ageing Adivasi woman nursing a lifelong grudge as her world changes around her. The other is voiced by a young male inmate of a wrestling *akhara*. He nails the tone in each story, and convinces us of their truth. In effect, we inhabit the tellers' worlds with them for the duration of their tales.

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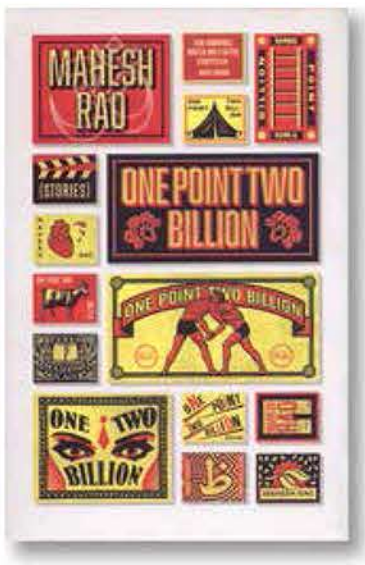

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While there are many moments to savour in this collection, there are false notes, as well. In my opinion, the weakest story is 'The Pool', where Rao's tone, usually so pitch-perfect, is slightly off. He enters the world of a privileged young woman in New Delhi coping with the new love of her father's life. There are some really funny moments, and some really true ones, but it does seem that he's striving here for something that he hasn't quite visualised as completely as the rest of this collection. The accoutrements of the girl's life are well set out, but for me, the milieu seemed a bit stilted; a tad second hand; as if gleaned from somebody else's observations. God knows there's no shortage of probing, right now, at the scab of our urban rich. One wishes he could have brought something new to it.

Perhaps there is a lack of empathy in this story. Other reviewers have mentioned the warmth he brings to his characterisations, and with good reason. Here, there isn't any, or not enough. The girl, rendered again in the first person, lives out the final moments of her tragedy behind drawn curtains, the grief of those around her a distant prospect. Are the rich so inured to horror?

That these are minor blips is due to the immense facility Rao shows elsewhere in delineating the tragedies of ordinary people with a light touch and refreshing lack of sentiment. He doesn't shy away from the big issues and the big stories, either. 'The Word Thieves' sketches out the many inhumanities of Kashmiri life effortlessly, yet situates the protagonist of the story in a drama with domestic dimensions. There is a redoubtable grandmother who is obsessing over money owed to her by a neighbour, but we also know that she couldn't keep her other grandsons safe and with her. The protagonist is as far from being an alpha male as is humanly possible, yet he commits an act of almost unimaginable heroism. But it is entirely in keeping with him, his character, his life's work. Here is a man, a person, a life that Rao believes in. He takes the time to imagine him and his world completely.

This belief, this care, this warmth, finally, defines the world Rao creates in these stories. It's a good thing, because these are not gentle confections, regardless of what you've heard. They are shot through with violence, with death, with anger and betrayal. That he manages to deal with issues like Adivasis being forced from their lands and the mass graves of Dalits in Rajasthan, without losing sight of the characters themselves, is worth commending.

There is no lack of politics here. But it is never, or hardly ever, didactic. Rao demands your close attention as he worries away at the fault lines that your average middle-class Indian probably wishes (or worse, believes) didn't exist in the first place. But they're always there. A bomb in Guwahati takes a young boy's father. Nationalisation chases away Coca Cola and creates a new Indian soft drink company, only for globalisation to kill it. Even our notions of heroism and villainy are changing. As the ageing ex-villain in 'Suzie Baby' puts it, "Today, the gangsters are all loveable losers, the avaricious industrialists are being feted and, following the economic reforms of Dr Manmohan Singh in the nineties, the smuggler has become extinct."

What would Prakash Mehra, Manmohan Desai and all the rest have made of this new India? Perhaps Kundan Shah needs to give Rao a call.

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