

Book Reviews

India Has No Walls

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The Village Had No Walls by Vyankatesh Madgulkar, Asia Publishing House, Bombay. Translated by Ram Deshmukh. Pp 170. Price Rs 6.75.

THE Village Had No Walls', is the story of a school teacher who goes for three years to Bangarwadi, a very backward shepherd's village in Aundh. The story is autobiographical, there is hardly an embellishment or an omission, as one soon realises plodding through the first 20 pages.

The first 20 pages are slow, dull, devoid of action or apparent purpose, yet they are essential to the book, for they create the atmosphere in which the rest of the three years fly past as the village becomes familiar, as tension and interest grow until one is sorry to leave Bangarwadi when the school teacher is transferred.

'The Village Had No Walls' is perhaps the most important book written by an Indian about India to appear in English since Nehru's 'Discovery of India'. It is important in many ways; first, at least to the reviewer's knowledge, it is the first book written about rural India by one who really knows because he has really lived there for sufficiently long to become identified with the people. Shri Madgulkar may since have become a professional author, but this has not affected the honesty with which he records his early experiences as a school teacher in a backward village.

So few Indian novelists write about what they know at first hand, with of course the exception of R K Narayan whose experience of Malgudi is authoritative. Most novelists have an axe to grind; they want to change society, they want to complain about social injustices. Shri Madgulkar does nothing of the sort; he simply records what he saw, sometimes with sympathy, sometimes with irritation, always with objectivity.

The village is dusty, dirty, dingy, it smells of sheep's urine and the people are so poor that they are mean, miserly and suspicious. Yet, gradually, as one gets to know them, the people become human, they have character good or bad they have dignity, affection, decency and as the village's walls fall apart, once the teacher is accepted as a friend,

it becomes a place to live in just like any other.

Some times, the narrative soars to great heights, not by trick of style but because of the human material it deals with. There is the story of Sekhu's strapping wife harnessing herself to the plough together with the family's last ox and ploughing the day through. The author does not dramatize her action; on the contrary, the dry matter of fact way in which he describes the whole episode makes one feel that life is like that. Just as life is like that when villagers cut the nose of a woman of their own caste for eloping with a sweeper. And life is like that when the teacher's protege and friend steals the money hidden under the teacher's chapatis, not because he dislikes the teacher but because he is a chief. Indeed, this thief loves the teacher and nearly kills the man who wants the teacher out of the village. Life is like that in the village.

There is dust and the sheep have to be fed, and the ewes must lamb and life goes on, always on the verge of disaster because of the vagary of the monsoon. When the teacher leaves Bangarwadi, he leaves nothing but mud walls; for months there has been nobody in the village except an old shepherd, too old to migrate waiting for death to dry him up like the wells and the ponds. The shepherds and the sheep have all left in search of something to drink something to graze, only the old man and the school teacher were left behind.

What makes 'The Village Had No Walls' so important is that besides describing life in a village, it also describes, incidentally, the ways by which an educated man can, with patience, honesty and humility, transform a village, get over factions and get things done. The climax of the story is the building of a gymnasium at the instigation of the teacher by the villagers themselves much along the lines of community development project. But before the teacher could mobilise the village he had to spend a whole year just letting them get used to him, and if attendance at the school was not encouraging at

first, it only became sustained after the teacher became everybody's friend. But even a friend can become suspect, especially when there is no dearth of jealous tongues. The headman, whose generous support saved the teacher from despair in the beginning, becomes almost an enemy later because of gossip. However before the headman's death the two leaders clear up their misunderstanding.

All these little squabbles are bound to arise in community life and they are bound to affect village development. The way to solve them is to befriend many people in a village, not to be dependent upon the support of one leader or one faction. In short, one must live in the village, not camp in it with an ulterior motive guiding all one's actions. It took the teacher perhaps a year before they trusted him; once they did, the whole of their savings was the limit, like the shepherd who gave all his fortune--a sizeable one at that to the teacher to change from old silver coins into new money and was in much less of a hurry to get the money back than the teacher was to get rid of it.

And there is humour too, of a quiet dry kind, as in the story of the bania who drank himself to death on tea. or in the description of the Rulers visit to the village for the inauguration of the gymnasium. One must congratulate Mr Ram Deshmukh for his translation and the Asia Publishing House for bringing "Bangarwadi" to a wider public.

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