

OFF THE SHELF

Holding up a mirror to India

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Each year, when Katha comes out with their volume of *Prize Stories*, the average bi- or trilingual Indian gets a brief glimpse of what it would be like to be the only person in the Tower of Babel who understood all the languages being spoken there.

Volume Six contains short fiction translated into English from 10 Indian languages. Reading this collection is like being a guest at a banquet consisting only of *hors d'oeuvres* — the remaining wealth of regional literature is still in the kitchen, to be sampled only by the most multilingual among us.

But *Volume Six* is also unique in the Katha Prize Stories series, because it coincides with India's fiftieth year of independence.

The stories here hold up mirrors to India that reflect the country as it is, not as we would like it to be. Some are funhouse mirrors, fixing on angularities and distorting them still further; others function like the



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naked light bulb in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, pitilessly stripping away illusions. A few simply take reality and reflect it right back at the reader. All serve the purpose of mirrors, which is to make you take a second look at yourself.

The collection opens with N S Madhavan's 'Mumbai', a controlled short story destined for classic status. Aziz is a simple man with an uncomplicated fondness for the city he lives in, and an inability to interpret warning signals such as sticklers saying "*Garv se kaho, hum Hindu hain*". His quest for a ration card under the "new government" leads him to the office

of Pramila Gokhale, who possesses the infinite patience of someone who knows that victory is a step away.

"So you admit that you were not in India in '70?"

"This is really absurd, Madam. I was not born then."

"Shall I record that you were not in India when the infiltration from Bangladesh started?"

Vishnu Magar's 'A Dip in the Sangam' deals with another aspect of communalism through the medium of the naked, raped corpse of a girl that washes up on the shores of a village. The issue here is whether it's a Muslim corpse or a Hindu corpse. In the end, the corpse itself "speaks", settling a larger question than the one asked.

The eponymous protagonist of Rawindra Pinge's 'Jamuna' sneaks, too, but she is essential-

ly inarticulate, unable to explain why she continually runs away from the various husbands she is sold to. Yashodhar Mishra presents us with a completely different protagonist in 'Purana Katha's Sati', an ostracised woman who is willing to talk about her life and her bid for freedom, but who does not admit the need to defend herself at all.

But Sati is an unusual woman; the sister of the narrator in Irathina Karakalam's 'Oorakali' is much more typical. This low-caste woman has no voice in her own story, as she loses her innocence, her virginity, her baby and her life in rapid succession. On the other side of the caste coin, there is P Lankesh's 'The Violation', which suggests that there are only two castes — the oppressors and the oppressed, and they change sides every so often.

Political changes get their due. In 'Pigeons of the Dome', Shaukat Hayat measures the fallout of the demolition of the Babri Masjid in terms of the

small change of the lives of ordinary people.

Dhruba Hazarika looks at another aspect of destruction in 'Chicken Fever', a complex story centered on a government officer in Assam. Mohinder Singh Sarna explores the damage caused by Partition in 'Ek Omkar Satnam', an unusual but somewhat disappointing piece.

Not all of *Volume Six* deals with the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse and their friends. In 'A Woman Called Aai', Priya Vijay Tendulkar transcends the impersonal chill of a hospital ICU to celebrate the warmth of a very special woman.

P Vatsala conjures up an idyllic Adivasi world in 'The Honey of Panguru Flowers' — but notes that this is, after all, subject to the tourist gaze. And Vishnu Nagar's story, 'Horse Who Was A Friend of Grass' is a minimalist gem that stands out as the only abstract work in this collection.

Those who like their literature well annotated will enjoy the 24 pages of author's, selector's and translator's notes given at the back of the book.

Though not every story is an instant classic, and a few are seriously disappointing, *Katha Prize Stories: Volume Six* is a collection to cherish.