

Not shackled by history

CHAT Biman Nath has captured the stories of ordinary people in extraordinary times in his latest novel, *The Tattooed Fakir*

Biman Nath brings stories from lesser known parts of the country to us, urban dwellers. His latest novel *The Tattooed Fakir* (Pan Macmillan, Rs. 299), like his 2009 novel, *Nothing Is Blue*, makes for a refreshing read. This is because it is set in rural India during the relatively unknown Sanyasi-Fakir rebellion against the British between 1770 and 1790, led by Majnu Shah.

Launched by Jahnavi Baruah at Sapna Book House this month, *The Tattooed Fakir* begins with the kidnap of a fakir's young wife, Roshanara by the village zamindar, who lusts for her. The British sahib, however, intervenes and takes her as his own mistress. Asif, her husband, is distraught and eventually joins a militant fakir group. Years later, Asif meets his son Roshan, a ferocious tattooed fakir, in a rescue mission, and finds that he is insecure about his identity.

Through *The Tattooed Fakir*, Biman Nath not only provides a glimpse into this period of history but also attempts to understand reasons behind ordinary people turning against the state.

"Warren Hastings, the then Governor-General, branded the fakirs as 'enemies of the state'. I wanted to understand how an ordinary person would feel being termed a terrorist and what drives them to take up arms. The fakirs in my books are religious Muslims, but they aren't fundamentalists. A similar situation can be seen with the Maoist movement."

Biman points out that he is a history buff, but his passion is to tell a story well. His novel is essentially a story about ordinary people who live in extraordinary times. "I find it interesting to put ordinary people in difficult circumstances. Asif, for example, is a simpleton, who doesn't know his place in the world. But through the narrative, he realises his worth."

Biman compares writing a historical novel to making a period film. "I like to imagine my characters in particular settings. And I visualise every detail as meticulously as possible."

A historical novel requires in-depth research, but Biman ensures that it doesn't detract from the story. "Although research is important, it doesn't take precedence over the plot. It only provides a backdrop. I read as much as I could lay my hands on, but as soon as I started writing, I sort of de-focussed the details in my mind, so that my characters are not shackled



OF IDENTITIES And how people get branded overnight
PHOTO: V. SREENIVASA MURTHY

by history. The story has a sense of timelessness, even though it is set in a particular time."

Biman was born and raised in West Assam, where the recent Assam riots occurred. "I witnessed many scenes of conflict in the remotest villages, which would shock my urban friends. Some of the characters, like the fakirs, are people I had known as a child," says Biman who writes in Bengali too

won the 2005 Rabindra Puraskar for non-fiction in Bengali.

The writer in Biman cannot be curbed. He always finds time out of his busy schedule to write at night and during weekends. "Even though I am a scientist at the Raman Research Institute, I feel incomplete if I don't get to write," says the mild-mannered Biman.

SRAVASTI DATTA