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THE WRITER'S SOUL

Every language has a soul, says Manoj Das, one of the few successful bilingual writers in India, in a conversation with **Subarna Ghosh.** Together with this Sahitya Akademi winner, she explores the realm of English and Oriya writing.

Childhood seems to be universally appealing to writers (in all languages) from Proust in French to Tagore. What especially engages you about this early period of your life as an individual writer in Oriya and English?

The psychic being (soul) of a human being remains in the forefront in his or her childhood. Also, all the other faculties (mind, emotions), too, are most receptive during one's childhood. I believe, one learns more during the first 12 years of one's life than one does during the next 50 years. But, of course, the early learning, mostly in the shape of impressions, remains as a kind of hidden treasure, to be utilised in one's creative writing later.

As with all given material for a writer, childhood, too, must have presented you with special problems of literary transformation. What precisely are they?

In several of my stories where the child is the protagonist, what I have tried to show is meant for consumption by adults. In other words, what the child has seen or felt is important for the grown-up. The challenging task for me has been to present that feelings or experiences of the child in such a way that they should be credible as the child's, yet they must be significant for the grown-up.

Looking back on your career from this point of your life, what do you think has been your literary balance sheet in satisfaction and dissatisfaction?

I have written partly inspired by a creative urge and partly spurred as by necessity or demand of circumstances. I had never set a certain goal for achievement before me. (My first passion is to understand the phenomenon that is life or consciousness; the second is writing). Hence I have not thought in terms of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with my performance—or in regard to the recognition it has received or it has been denied. Sometimes I feel that one need not write a lot. The world does not lack in good writing. If one has written a dozen good short stories (or, say, one good novel or a score of good poems), that is contribution enough.

There has been much appreciation of you in England and America. Apart from the natural warmth of one's reaction to such things, have you ever doubted the quality of understanding in Western audiences of Indian themes? If so, in what way has that interfered with your writer's relationship vis-a-vis them?

"Much appreciation" is a relative term. The sphere of appreciation of my stories in the West has been limited to the academic world. There the audiences are constituted of discerning individuals. They are conscious of my milieu. I have never felt the necessity for being conscious about a Western readership beyond the fact that I am writing in English and there will be Westerns among my readers and hence I should be expressive enough in that language despite my peculiarities as an Indian writer handling the English language.

In respect of subject matter, there might be a question in your case. Why childhood over so many accepted, far more urgent social themes in India? One might be tempted to think you escapist!

Only some of my stories portray the childhood of the protagonist, not all. Even in the case of such stories, the issue projected may be quite realistic or topical and the child as the narrator, may only be the part of a technique.(some behaviour-patterns of adults appear so funny when seen through a child's eye!). But I must hasten to add that I have written on themes that have creatively inspired me. "Urgent social themes" have urged me to write features (I had been a columnist in a national daily) or editorials — and some, not many though — short stories, too.

What or who have been your literary influences here and abroad?

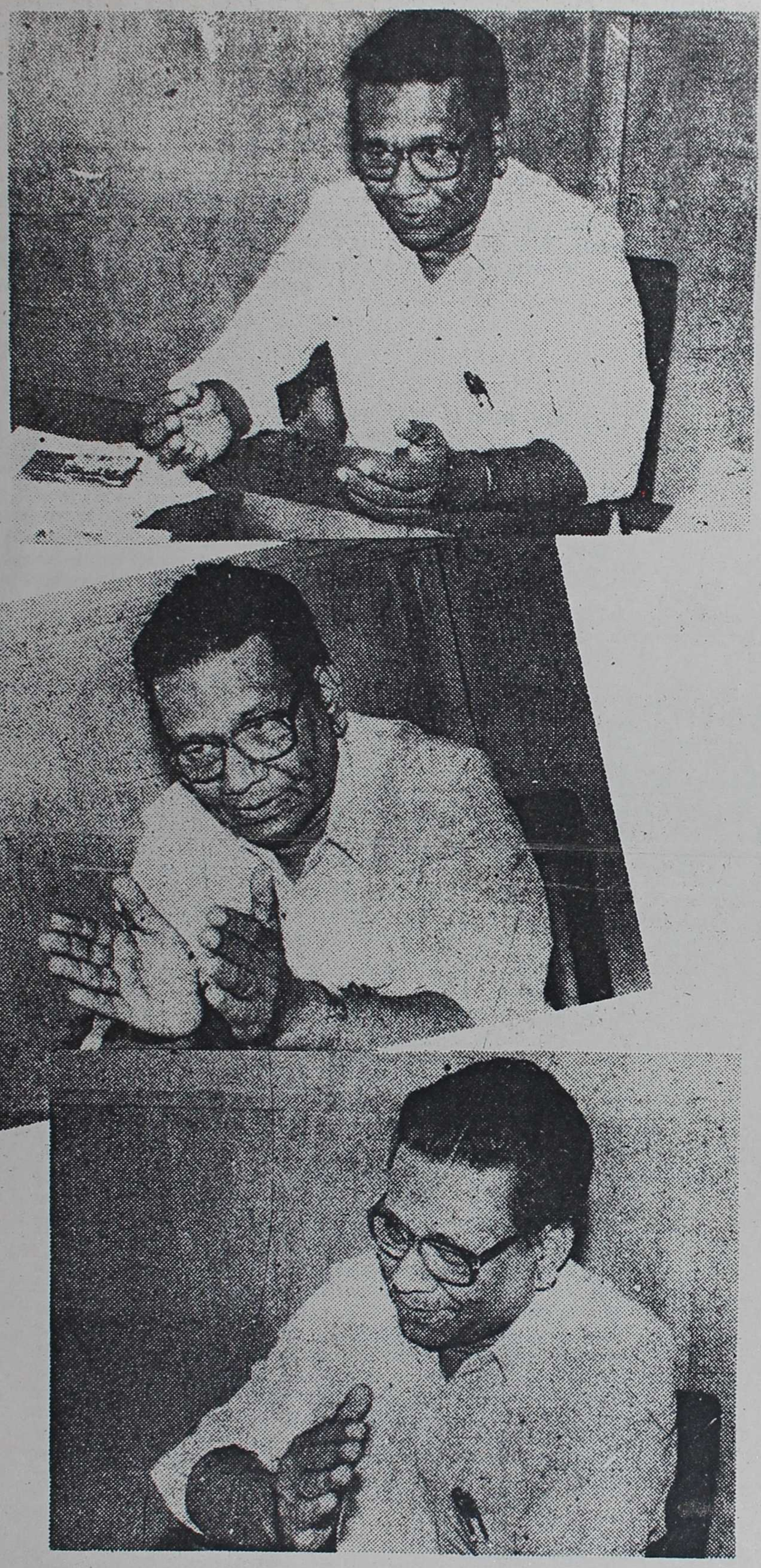
Fakir Mohan Senapati, the father of Oriya literary short stories was an early influence. I am profoundly influenced by Somadeva, the author of the Kathasarit Sagar and Vishnu Sharma, the author of the Panchatantra. I am, unfortunately, not a prolific reader. But I am beholden to classics. Shakespeare has influenced me and so have Chekhov, O. Henry, Maupassant and many others. Anything excellent leaves an impact, often not very pronounced.

What do you think are the problems of style for an Indian writer in English, fitting your experiences, past and present, to the spirit of the Anglo-Saxon idiom?

Every language has a soul — apart from its form and grammar. It is important to enter that living inner spirit or the soul of the language. That helps one grow intimate with the language both in its spirit and form. How to enter that spirit? A true love for the best of literature produced by that language is a way — supported by the writer's intense love for his own theme. I have struggled to develop adequate expressiveness in English; but have not been self-conscious about it. That has helped me — as I see now.

Who are your favourite Indo-English writers in India and abroad?

Mulk Raj Anand could be the first favourite — the Mulk Raj of yesterday. I like Raja Rao too — and Arun Joshi,



Ruskin Bond and a few others. I am speaking of fiction writers. The reason? The Realism of Mulk Raj (as in Two Leaves and a Bud or Coolie); the mystic touch in Raja Rao's works (as in Serpent and the Rope); poignancy and understanding of the Indian psyche in Arun Joshi (as in his short story The Only American in my village); and the sunshine in the narrative style of Ruskin Bond. I don't bring Sri Aurobindo here because he is a world apart.

Please sketch a typical day in your regular life as a writer-teacher.

If I do so, it will read like the written version of a Chaplin-made scene in which he slows the camera and shows the pedestrians comically jumping and hurrying! I am ready for work early in the morning. As you know, I live in Sri Aurobindo Ashram at Pondicherry. By 6 A.M. or so I am in the main Ashram building to spend a few minutes in meditative silence. Some days around 8 A.M. and some days a little later I report at the fourth floor of a building called "Knowledge" (a faculty of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education), where I take classes in English literature. I devote the afternoon to editing The Heritage. In between there are a number of visitors, known and unknown and frequent telephone calls to and fro Madras — the publication office of the magazine. A visit to the Ashram once again in the evening. Thereafter reading or writing till 10 or 11 P.M. The routine is interrupted by a power-cut or on occasional mood of withdrawal from everything.

There seems to have been in recent years a run of successes for Indo-English writers with Eng-American publishers, from Salman Rushdie to the newest face, Upamanyu Chatterjee. What do you make of it? Is this all tantamount to a generally optimistic trend?

I'm afraid, no. The situation is paradoxical. The most splendid vision of India is represented by Sri Aurobindo's major works, the Life Divine in prose and Savitri in poetry. At the bottom there are the current favourites who have in them neither a true touch of Indian consciousness (or any kind of higher consciousness) nor any depth. They have easy technique and they know what will sell. Between the most splendid at the top and the ordinary at the bottom there is a formidable gap. A Mulk Raj or a Raja Rao or a gifted poet like Jayanta is only a shovelful of earth, too meagre to fill up that gap. We need a number of powerful writers, genuine products of a mighty tradition but glorious in their individual talent, to undo the situation.

What in your experience, is the sure recipe for an Indo-English manuscript (of prose) to click with foreign publishers?

An easy plot, a spoonful, of vulgarity (they find the legendary shy Indian suddenly daring to bare himself titillating indeed) and unconventional, broken sentences which can pass as novelty in style. I'm surprised that even illustrious names in publishing are falling for this. But this is not the whole truth. A really good piece of writing will not fail to get a good publisher. Also, the publishing scene is changing. Some Indian publishers have a regular alliance with foreign publishers. A book published by the former is sold by the latter. The fascination of the 'foreign' is slowly fading.

What has been the impact of Sri Aurobindo (and the Centre) on your writing work?

Very subtle but profound. It sustains my faith in the future of man.