ARTICULATIONS



ultra-modern, sophisticat-Led men and women go for a hunting expedition and intend to combine it with a fun of a picnic. Their motives had been to turn primitive for a night, as men and women were, they believed a mildestination - a deserted bungalow tempts the driver to a play of passion. The driver obliges her, but of guilt. mechanically and without any sense of participation or any emotional involvement. She feels humiliated and doubly challenged. When the hunting group returns to the bungalow bringing with them a wounded boar, Mrs Mity brings a wild charge of attempted molestation against Shyamal. The driver is beaten black and blue till he swoons away. They then throw into the high walled kitchen garden, they light a fire, sit around it and drink. They drag out the boar and throw it into the fire and eat the half-roasted pork. Then they all fall into a stupor. The morning breaks out. Let me quote what happened then: Mrs Mity sat up and looked

through the window. It was still dark.

whole being and oozed out in a

She called and woke up others... Raja Sahib was the first to speak. "Good morning, everybody, . towel for him. we better arrange for tea now. Let me see what happened to that

He advanced towards the room into which Shyamal had been

"Please don't!" Mrs Mity shrieked and stopped Raja Sahib from advancing.

"B-b -But why?" stuttered the surprised Raja.

"I don't know. But suppose you see the boar instead of Shyamal?"

she said. Her eyet were wild. "But we roasted and ate up the

boar, didn't we?" "But suppose you see the boar

instead of Shyamal?" "But we didn't we? ate the

"But suppose you see the boar instead of Shyamal?"

The deadly silence was broken by a gust of wind that threw a handful of dry leaves into the hall. Someone said, "But we can go to the kitchen garden. Much of the

boar should be still there!" "For heaven's sake, let us not!" cried out both Mrs Mity and Mrs Chakodi, "If you ind the remains

to be not of the boar?" The sepulchral silence was of the term. back. There was a long howl by Jackals behind the bungalow. Each

could see the others shivering. The crew leaves the bungalow Inspired from within

without the driver Shyamal.

This is the gist of one of the earliest short stories of ManoJ Das lion years ago to gorge, to romp titled "A Trip into the Jungle". and to be violent. They reach their Some of you might have seen its award winning Hindi film version inside the jungle. After a round of Aranvaka, directed by A.K. Bir. light refreshment and drink, they This story is a typical example of prepare to go out for hunting. whip-crack ending which O Henry Shyamal, the driver of their vehi- had used with facility to surprise cle, refuses to accompany them. the readers if not to shock them. Mrs Mity too stays back, and the But in Manoj Das the technique rest go for a hunt. Mrs Mity taking culminates in a powerful searchadvantage of the loneliness. light focused into the dark nooks of human sub-conscious and feelings

In his short story "A Night in the Life of a Mayor", we meet the mayor who is quite proud of his achievements in life. He laughs at his old professor, who is upset over a stray cow chewing up his grand daughter's psychology notebooks.

The same evening the mayor was having a dip in the river at a lonely spot leaving his trouser and. his shirt on the bank. In the water him into the dungeon where they he was obliged to take off his had deposited the boar. Returning underwear too and it slipped off his hands. Imagine his predicament when, crawling ashore, he finds the notorious cow moving away, his half-eaten clothes still clinging to'its mouth.

His open car on the bank soon rouses suspicion in some passing officers. The police arrive. The naked mayor lets himself be drifted away resting on a small canoe. He had not been alone for a long . From nowhere, a chill of terror 'time. Under the starry sky he has a crept into her and spread into her · dialogue with himself. At dawn a little girl comes to his rescue by sacrificing her soiled frock for him, and then, upon learning that he was a big man, by fetching a

On his way to the town, the first thing the mayor decides to do is to apologise to his professor. He had realized to what helplessness one could be reduced any moment. " believe, I earned my adulthood last night", he resolves to say.

Manoj Das is most at home with stories dealing with human psychology. Treated on a par with O.Henry, Chekov and Maupassant, he has successfully explored the deepest recesses of the human mind in his fiction, both short and

Manoj Das writes with the kind of austere simplicity which he uses in a very Indian way with a choice of warm earthly images. He has a clear lucid way of handling dialogues - he creates conversation that sounds real and this he manages to do even through the lips of such stock types as the politician with his inflated ego, the doctor with his neuroses and a Raja with only a past. In most of his stories he is not only a story writer but also a story teller. His English has its peculiar charm. It is at once chaste and yet has the Indian flavour in the most delicate sense

Hence it is no wonder that his fictional writings have fascinated the sophisticated Western readership, through publications such as

His writings are like a searchlight focused into the dark nooks of the human sub-conscious. Austere simplicity marks his writing which he uses in a very Indian way with a choice of warm earthly images. Besides being a social critic he has, through his stories, stressed the divinity and psychic splendour inherent in man. P RAJA profiles Manoj Das, this year's Padmashri award winner who has also bagged the Birla Foundation's Saraswathi Samman award

The Ascent (Department of wealth. English, University of Illinois), The Carlton Miscellany (Carlton College, Minnesota), The Malahat Avant-garde journal The New York Smith which introduced him as "one of the foremost of the new generation of Indian writers" way back in the early seventies.

Pondicherry can boast of having such a writer of eminence as one of its residents. Born in the affluent, feudal family in the seashore village Sankhari, North Balasore, Orissa on Feb. 27, 1934 as the second son to the late Madhusudan Das and the late Smt Kadambini Devi, herself a gifted poet, the first son being Dr Manmothnath Das, the well known historian of India and now a Parliamentariane A child prodigy, he showed an immense interest in writing right from a tender age. When he began contributing to Oriya periodicals he was barely 14. At 15, his first collection of poems Satabdira Artanada saw the light of the day, when he was a IX standard student at Balasore Zilla School. At 16, he edited Diganta, a cultural monthly devoted to creative writing. The next year when he matriculated his first collection Kshudha, was published.

The kindling of talent

What actually drove Manoj Das to take up the pen is an interesting two part story in itself. A devastating cyclone followed by a terrible famine were the calamities he saw in his native area at a tender age of seven. Manoj Das's house was the most affluent one in a cluster of remote villages miles away from the solitary seasonal bus-stop or the railway station. Between his house surrounded by prolific gardens and orchards and the sea, lay an ever-green meadow, studded with hundreds of palm trees and marked by two ancient lakes one abounding in red lotuses and the other in white ones. But suddenly one night a gang of dacoits invaded his house. In a matter of few minutes the house was stripped of

through the landing window. It

plays on Vishnu's face. It passes

through his closed eyelids and

whispers to him in red. The red is

everywhere, blanketing the

lent father, soon it transforms into

the red of his old lover's room. But

throughout this flood of memories,

he hears echoes of his mother's

Therein lies a clue to the spirit

of the novel. Vishnu emerges as

the keeper of the building, extract-

ing kindness from petty lives and

If at first it is the red of Holi,

ground, colouring the breeze."

Both these traumatic experiences woke young Manoj Das to several posers like: Why must man Review (Victoria University, suffer? Why should there be so British Columbia, Canada) and the much inequality in the society? Years later his questions were to mature into: What is it that sustains man through travails and torments of life? Is it the dream of happiness? Can man ever be happy in the true sense of the term? It is this quest that made him turn a Marxist, for he felt sure that that way was to be secured the panacea for human misery.

The tumultuous college days were marked by his active participation in the politics of the time, convening public meetings, organising rallies, and holding protest marches, as a student leader and President of College Union and later Puri College. After graduation, he joined the law college at Cuttack of which he was the unopposed President once again, but he found himself behind bars for nis political inflammatory speeches In 1956 he went to Bandung Indonesia, to participate in the Afro-Asian Students Conference where he met the leader of Partai Kommunist of Indonesia (PKI), Mr DN Aidit. That was Khruschev's de-stalinization era and there was of short stories in Oriya, Samudra A lot of furore and confusion in the international Communist movement arena.

It was only during his college days, Manoj Das began contributing to English dailies and periodicals. After taking his MA. degree from Ravenshaw College, Cuttack, he Joined the Christ College, Cuttack, as Lecturer in English. And that was in 1959. That same year he married PratiJna Devi of the erstwhile Raj family of Kujang, whose parents were well known freedom fighters.

In the early 60's, he underwent a phase of internal dilemma as the realisation dawned upon him that the external conditions were not the sole cause of human suffering. On the other hand, often they were the external projections of problems in the realms of deeper consciousness of man. This gave rise to a few questions in him. Can the its legendary gold and other hidden source of maladies be identified? Can philosophies lead one

to their discovery? In the course of quest to identify the esoteric cause of all maladies, his explorations in spiritual lores he read Sri Aurobindo. The Yogi's visualisation of man as an evolving being and his observation that the state of consciousness, namely mind, that dominates man today is but a transitional phase and man can transcendit and rise to a higher

phase in evolution, brought him a new awakening and optimism. In one of his evening chats with me, he said: "I am convinced that our civilisation is undergoing an evolutionary crisis of consciousness. The lack of morals and a total degeneration in values are our crumbling existence. This crisis occurred earlier too in the long optimist at heart as I believe in Sri Aurobindo's faith in the intrinsic suprahuman stage where there will be a qualitative transforma-

tion in his consciousness." After a short stint of four years of English teaching at Cuttack, he joined Sri Aurobindo Ashram in 1963. Since then he has been a Professor of English Literature at Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education, Pondicherry.

Recognised as the most prolific contributor to the various genres of the post-Independence Oriya literature, he has till date fifteen collections of short stories, three fulllength novels, ten volumes of poems, a volume of essays, two travelogues and two volumes of Belles-Lettres. The Dagora Silver Jubilee award (1962) was followed by the Orissa Sahitya Akademi award (1965), the Prajatantra Visuv Milan Awards in 1971 and again in 1986, the Sahitya Akademi

In 1992, he started writing a

But Vishnu was saved from a

Award in 1972, the Sarala Award in 1980, the Sambalpur University Bharat Nayak Award in 1987, the Orissa Sahitya Akademi Award for a second time - a rare event - for his essays in 1989, Utkal Pratibha Award in 1996, the Sahitya Bharati Award, of which he was chosen to be the first recipient in 1996, the Bharatiya Bhasha Parishad Award in 1996, Sri Aurobindo Puraskar in

Most of his fictional writings are available for the readers both in his mother-tongue, Oriya as well as his chosen tongue, English. And so I once asked him, "You are a bilingual writer. In which language do you think while formulating a story?" He answered: "In the clearly showing in all the vistas of language of silence... A fiction writer is first moved by experience, or an inspiration. I let this history of mankind. But I am an experience or inspiration become a feeling in me, a process that goes on in silence. When the feeling is capability of man to overcome this well-formulated, I sit down to factors. If I have promised a story to my Oriya Publishers, I write in Oriya... But I do not translate one into another. If the theme continues to inspire me, I try a fresh execution" (Literature Alive, The British Council, June 1988).

Apart from teaching English literature and freelancing for various dailies and magazines, and writing a regular column in Thought (1968-70), he was also editing World Union. It was during this hectic period of writing, his first collection of short stories in English appeared. Published in 1967 by Higginbothams Pvt Ltd, Madras, Manoj Das's A Song for Sunday and Other Stories, bagged very rave reviews. Many were the writers who read the book and encouraged Manoj Das. Since then Manoj Das has

eleven collections of short stories. Through his two hundred and fifty eight short stories, he has brought about a new awareness about the sweetness and serenity in general and the rural Indian life in particular. He has been a crusader against the invasion of India's intellectual climate by decadent values. He has not only been "Social critic of the first order", (as M V Kamath had said of him), but also what is more important, he has stressed the divinity and psychic splendour inherent in man, through his stories. The pretentious life-styles of pundits and the ignorance of villagers seem to have provided much of the inspiration to the author. He delights in making digs at pompous politicians and depicts their behaviour by putting them into ridiculously oversized clothes or cutting them to size.

In his ghost stories the funniest aspect is the absence of ghosts. One of the earliest ghost stories of Manoj Das is "Farewell to a Ghost". The deserted house once constructed by the Fringhee Indigo planters has been the abode of a century-old girl's spirit. The villagers have looked upon her as an unfortunate daughter of theirs and have never failed to offer her share of food, on festive occasions, of course, with a warning that she was expected to behave. But the authorities now propose to demolish the house. Where will the ghost

Aurobindo is his favourite author

ed the magic that place holds for Sharma who gave us the me. I knew that Manoj Das, the Panchatantra, Oriya writer Fakir poet writer whose short stories Mohan Senapaty, Ved Mehta, and novels have delighted many a Mulk Raj Anand and Graham heart by their lilting prose, lived Greene. Incidentally Graham there. When a meeting was Greene was fascinated by the arranged, I was very happy. I met writings of Manoj Das. I asked the author at the Ashram that has him the cliched question that been his home for the last 38 every ignorant must ask, "How

lette. I remember reading 'Tiger collection of short stories. at Twilight', and was held captive by the lyrical quality of the prose. ture exist in India, distributed Manoj Das says he owes this to among our various languages, the beauty of a remote village in says he. Only we do not have Orrisa, where his house was faithful translators! He told us flanked by endless green mead- about one of his books in Oriya ows and lakes with lotuses growing in them.

could see was books. Books on the however, 'Signals' do not convey floor, till the ceiling, in book- the same meaning that 'Ishara' shelves and on the table. To a does. Hence, he has given the query on his favourite author; he book a different name! Says the "Because of his mastery over own Saraswati and one has to be English prose and ideas. a devotee of the language." He Churchill was a great historian, was once invited to a workshop but then he was just that, where writers were being taught Shakespeare was a dramatist par to translate works from other lanexcellence, but his writings were guages. He found that very few of not as varied."

when somebody once asked sincerery learning the craft. him if he were to read only a single book in his life, what should it ing his books for the Penguin edibe? Manoj Das asked him to read tion and writing his childhood 'Savitri'! And if he were to read memoirs. While recounting to us just one more? He was asked to the columns that he wrote for the read 'Life Divine' because that is Shankar's Weekly, he remarked, the only book that contains answers to all questions on life.

The maid brought in cups of fragrant Darjeeling tea and we heard stories of that very special child. friendship he shares with Ruskin

when it is crumbling down, struck

by lightning. No character in the

story sees the ghost, nor is the

bines the old art of storytelling

with modern ideas and techniques.

The method he adopts goes back to

the oral tradition. There is poetry

and drama in the superb style of

narrative that has earned a place

more than what meets the eye.

"The Banyan Tree" and a fortnight-

appropriately put to use when he

edited The Heritage, a cultural

monthly, for the Chandamama

Group of Publications, Chennai.

In spite of his tight schedule as

editor and columnist, he found

time for his creative writing. His

first novel Cyclones was published

in 1987 simultaneously by three

countries by three different pub-

lishers, viz. Sterling (Delhi), O.U.P.

ing, I asked Manoj Das: "Why did

you turn to novel writing after con-

fining yourself to the short story

for more than two decades?" Here

is his answer which I recorded for

The Journal of Life, Art and

Literature (Vol. 3: No. 1, July 1992):

"There was no 'turn'. Different

themes must have different forms.

No doubt, my prime preoccupation

is with short stories; but I have

About his foray into novel writ-

(U.K.) and Facet (USA).

A poet at heart Manoj Das com-

reader made to see it.

I went to Pondicherrry after a Bond. Among his other favourites gap of almost two years and reliv- are Shakespeare, Pandit Vishnu did you like the 'God of Small Manoj Das was already a poet Things"? "I did not like it", was before he began writing prose. the candid reply, "forty percent of And it is poetry that peeps from it is eroticism, it commits vioevery corner of his writings, be lence against the English lanthey short stories on the little guage and is calculated to sell. It Lord Krishna (published in the is not a great work of literature." All India Magazine) or a novel- He has not read Jhumpa Lahiri's

Even today, the best of litera-'Akashara Ishara', when translated into English, literally, it would We were in his study and all I read as 'Signals from the sky', Aurobindo'. writer, "every language has its them were actually interested in

> At present he is busy retouch-"You are young. This happened a long time ago." That is true, when compared

to such great men, I am but a

Papiya Bhattacharya

crisis and rise to a new phase in write. In which language I should go? After prolonged discussions written several novelettes too. evolution - to transcend into a write, depends on some immediate the villagers commission an exor- From short story to novelette, from cist to do the needful. The women novelette to novel is a natural tranweep, when one rainy morning, sition", the exorcist leads the ghost to a His next, novel A Tiger at solitary tree in the meadow. At the end the narrator sees the tree

Twilight published by Penguin India (1991) is an enlarged version of his novelette of the same title published in The Heritage. The novel captures a real but unusual milieu, a valley nestling amidst hills and forests with a solitary castle of a former Raja, the Raja's unexpected return to his erstwhile Rajya, and its impact on men and beasts around him.

Writing for children

for Manoj Das among the very best It is not often that a writer who of storytellers. "Where do all the is famous for his works for an adult butterflies go during a storm", readership can also prove efficient "The red sun, as though shot at, in writing for the young. In Oriva sank down behind the hills", "The literature Manoj Das is a living legsummer noon descended on the end. In Indo-Anglian fiction he is stubborn hamlet like a medieval one of our serious writers who has school teacher" are some of the not fallen prey to vulgar commeropening sentences quickening the cialism. When Chandamama imagination of the reader with Publications, Chennai, branched out and ventured into book pub-When Manoj Das's short stories lishing, their choice fell on Manoj were bagging awards and rewards Das. And when they brought out their first six books for children, for their author who richly deserved them, a weekly column Viz. Legend of the Golden Valley, The Fourth Friend, A Strange ly column "Tides of Time" that he Prophecy and Other Tales from the wrote for The Hindustan Times, Jatakas, The Golden Deer and Delhi and Hindu, Madras respec- Other Tales from the Jatakas. The tively were received with great Magic Tree and other Tales and eclat. The experience he gained as Equal to a Thousand and Other editor of World Union and later Sri Tales, all authored by Manoj Das Aurobindo's Action in his early and published in 1996, they were days in the ashram was most widely acclaimed. It is to be noted that his is not any new entry into children's literature. In fact two of his books of this class Stories of Light and Delight (1970) and Books For Ever (1973), both published by National Book Trust, India, have continued to be popular for more than the past twenty-five years, undergoing numerous reprints.

Manoj Das's stories for children are mostly folklore retold. But they have a typical Manoj Das touch. His fairy tales are often witty and spiced with gentle sarcasm. Humorous, yet thought provoking. Manoj Das's style seldom pulls us into the depths of moral comment.

Hundreds of essays, reviews and features that belong to the nonfiction genre remain scattered in a plethora of newspapers and magazines, and Manoj Das with his auriferous pen is only sixty four years young.

Most 'eagerly awaited' author

__sor of mathematics at the University of Maryland being just died." offered a five-million-dollar advance for his debut novel. Then atose below the staircase other came the amendment that, no, in fact the US rights went for a lesser figure - \$350,000. Thereafter, the hype picked up with a stream of gushy teasers in the international press and on the net. The venerable Time magazine declared The death of Vishnu to be "one of the most eagerly awaited

books" of the new millennium. Yet, when Manil Suri visited Bombay recently to release his novel, the reception was muted. Except for two bookreading sessions, one at the American Centre and the other at a bookstore,

the city could not care much for the man who grew up in a run down building at Kemps' Corner

The novel too is set there. "Vishnu was a real person," the author insists. "He lived on our building landing and lay around chewing paan. He ran errands for my mother and greeted me with a

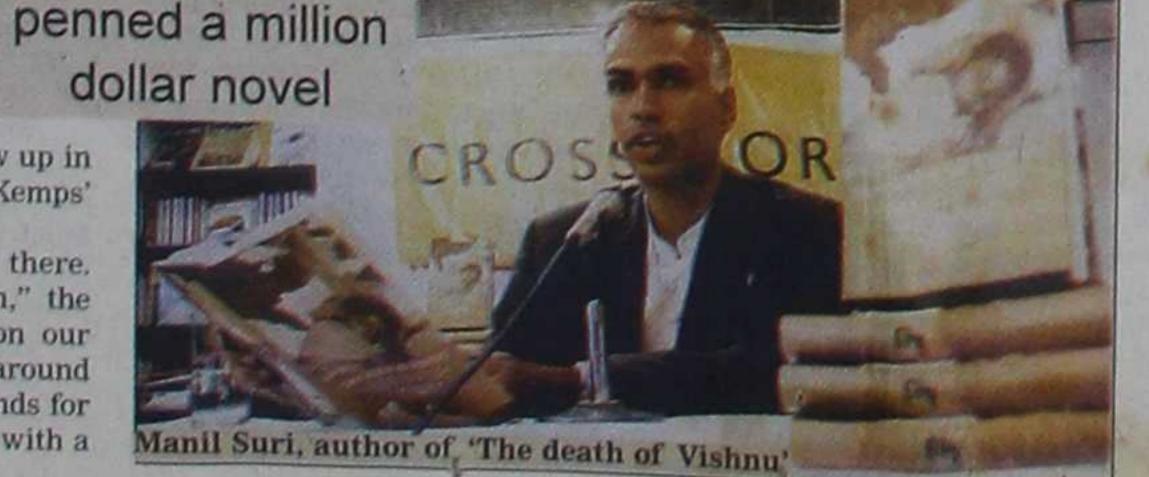
TT began with a news agency 'salaam baba'. In 1994, he fell sick, Writes Suri: "The light shines and although there was some talk about getting an ambulance, he

> In the novel, as vishnu lies comcharacters stir to life. There is a Mrs Asrani who derives karmic fulfilment from giving Vishnu his evoking painful memories of a viomorning tea. The bodily stink from the landing also draws Mrs Pathak who does her bit by nourishing Vishnu with leftovers.

As confusion prevails, Vishnu's words: "You are Vishnu, keeper of life whirs the universe, keeper of the sun..." vate screen.

Dinesh Rathod by on a pritells the tale of It is a gentle how a professor of

mathematics



playing catalyst in spiritual awakenings. So even as he visits his past in that kaleidoscopic red, stories are coaxed out of the flats above.

Clearly, these too have been drawn from Suri's first-hand experience: "When my parents arrived 1947), they moved into a single room of a large flat. There were constant skirmishes over the common kitchen and bathroom. My childhood was a fight for space."

Suri's father was an assistant to music directors Laxmikant-Pyarelal and Madan Mohan. His mother was briefly secretary to Indira Gandhi and then a teacher at Clare Road Convent. Manil, himself, went to Campion School, Jaihind College and the Institute of Science.

"In those days, everyone did medicine and engineering," recalls the 41-year-old author. "So I vaguely considered research. In my class at the Institute of Science, seven out of 12 students were trying to go abroad. I did too. And I landed in the United States, at Carnegie Mellon."

The next stop was at the University of Maryland, where he teaches "everything from calculus up". Whenever he found time, he wrote letters to his mother and on an eventful week, at least four bulging envelopes took the journey from Maryland to Bombay.

"My mother saved all 2,500 letters, counted every word, compiled statistics and approached the Guinness Book," says Suri, who has woven a similar anecdote in the novel. "When they turned her down, she approached the Limca in Bombay soon after Partition (in Book of Records. And there we are -- Most Letters from son to

> novel with the death of Vishnu planned as the ending. But the beginning "took off in its own direction" and the characters turned increasing bizarre and complex. He abandoned the project, wondering if he should just concentrate on mathematics.

second demise by a string of coincides - a writing workshop, a fresh burst of confidence and the Pathaks and Asranis started talking again. He sent the final draft to his agent in January 2000 and left for Bombay on a holiday, not expecting things to move in months. "Three days later, my agent e-mailed me," he exclaims. "A number of publishers were interested and an auction had been planned. My parents and I would sit by the phone and wait for the entertainment to start. Finally I accepted a \$350,000 advance from W.W. Norton." The rest is history.

Maharaja Features