

MANOJ DAS

By P. Raja

A meeting of the City-fathers takes an unusual turn when an emritus Professor accuses the Corporation of its failure to check a certain cow that had eaten away his grand-daughter's Psychology note-books. In fact the cow had become notorious for similar daring activities and had mastered the technique of giving everybody the slip.

The Mayor laughed at the Professor's lecture, only to regret an hour or two later. On a lonely spot alone the river-bank he stopped his car and, in the dusk, removed his clothes and entered the water for a cool dip. Lost in his reverie, he took rather long to realise that what looked like an apparition on the river-bank was a cow busy making short work of his trousers and shirt.

Under a quite credible combination of conditions his underwear too had slipped away. The naked Mayor went ashore to challenge the cow, but to be flooded by the headlights of a jeep. He had to jump back into the river, to hide his nakedness.

The jeep stopped and the three passengers wondered if they did not see an abominable snow-man hopping away!

But soon they discovered the Mayor's open car. The bewildered party left only to return with the police. A drama of investigation began.

This is the summary of the first part of a short-story by Manoj Das. "A Night in the Life of a Mayor" (first published in India in IMPRINT and abroad in the inaugural number of ASCENT, published by the English Department of the Illinois University, and then included in the author's collection of stories.

'The Crocodile's Lady'.

UNUSUAL

The story, obviously, has a humorous, though unusual frame. But a study—even a casual reading—of the story will leave any reader convinced that it has a far greater purpose than to amuse the readers.

The naked Mayor boards a small boat and glides downstream. In that strange loneliness: tears rolling down his cheeks, he reviews his life and realises how helpless a man is. At dawn, he

Song for Sunday) more than twelve years ago : "I read and re-read the stories and enjoyed them immensely. I do not know if 'enjoyed' is the right word. Beneath the bubbling gaiety of even the happier stories, there is an undertone of sadness, so characteristic of Indian life. One reflects how thin is the partition between joy and sorrow, sanity and madness, adolescence and adulthood, dream and reality. But reflection is an aftermath: one simply enjoys the stories,



P. Raja with Manoj Das (left)

appeals to a small girl standing on the river-bank for a piece of cloth and she obliges him. On his return to the town, the first thing the Mayor does is to meet the old Professor and says, "Sir! I earned my adulthood last night."

Like the one that is summarised above almost every story by Manoj Das has a humorous frame and it thereby serves the greater purpose of driving home a message that is concrete: the message of life—the brighter and darker side of it.

One remembers what Mr. K. P. S. Menon had said on reading the first collection of Manoj Das's stories (A

and on re-reading them one feels that there is more in them than meets the eye."

"Bubbling gaiety" indeed is the phrase that can describe many situations in the stories of Manoj Das. although, as Mr. Menon so rightly points out, there is always more in them than meets the eye.

ORIGINAL

"Critics have found your humour original and refreshing. What is the inspiration behind the humour in your stories?" I put the question to Manoj Das.

"Believe me, I was hardly aware of the element of humour in my writing until I read what reviewers had to

say about it, whatever be the element—RASA—humour or pathos, I have employed it only when a situation or a character has warranted it," answered Manoj Das.

"True, your humour is natural. Nowhere one feels that it has been grafted on a story. That is why I wish to know the art behind it, discipline that has elevated your humour to a subtle technique," I persisted.

"The only art behind it, if we should call it art, is the author's all round involvement in the situation he is depicting. Should I explain what I mean by an all round involvement? Perhaps in times to come I shall hit upon a more appropriate phrase. Often a question is asked, whether the writer should stand detached from his characters or be engrossed in them? The answer is, there is a condition which includes both these conditions. The writer ought to be so much involved in his story that he can feel all his characters, all his situations fully. It is being subjective in the sense that he can be really objective. The creative writer's objectivity is not a scientist's, not a passer-by's, not a witness's objectivity. His is a subjective objectivity. Do I sound fuzzy? I don't mind, if I have communicated what I meant," said Manoj Das.

SAINTLY VILLAINS

"I understand. That explains how even characters which are the objects of your satire show flashes of goodness too. For example, in your Lakshmi's Adventure, you make the priest, who has behaved like a villain, mutter that he wished he had no tongue. That is a rare tribute to a fellow who has been indirectly responsible for Lakshmi's death," I observed.

"Indeed, such is the paradox in the human nature. However evil one might be,

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you can never dismiss the presence of a psychic spark hidden in him. That is why to write satire is a great responsibility. I always remember what Jonathan Swift said: "Satire is a sort of glass, wherein beholders generally discover everybody's face but their own." Manoj Das paused and added with a smile, "But I never forget to try to behold my own face in that mirror."

As one reads a bunch of an author's works, the reader forms a certain idea about

the author's personality and his vision of life. And the image the writer had created in the reader's mind is nourished day after day, only to be shattered to pieces when the reader meets the writer in person. Yes. In nine out of ten cases, 'X' the writer is different from 'X' the man. Don't we experience a shock when we see the cruel villain and the frolicksome comedian of the celluloid turn out to be a jolly good Falstaff and a serious Jacques respectively in real life?

'HUMOROUS HUMOURIST'

But Manoj Das is an exception. We read his humorous stories and laugh 'with' him. And the laughter continues even when we meet him in person. Genius and humility, always a rare combination, one is dumbstruck to note, go hand in hand with Manoj Das. He is the 'Humorous Humorist', if one is allowed to coin such a phrase to describe this born humorist. As I found hardly any difference between Manoj Das the man, and Manoj Das the writer, ever since my acquaintance with him - more than 28

months I was tempted to ask a final question:

"Writing is not a profession but a vocation of unhappiness. I don't think an artist can ever be happy." said Georges Simenon. "Do you agree with the writer?"

Manoj Das replied, "My common sense says that he cannot be right, unless there is a deep philosophical implication in his statement which I fail to grasp. Does anyone ever choose unhappiness? The process of writing may invoke pain, anxiety and tension, but underlying it there has to be a current of joy natural to all creative activity. Often what we do not know is, we look upon happiness as our birthright and we take its presence in our real life a natural phenomenon. It is only to the reverse movement that we wake up with a jolt. If an artist is unhappy, it is not because his art gives him unhappiness, but because things often fall short of his expectations as an artist".