

Aesop, faith and Manoj Das

**He is an author, published many times over.
He writes for newspapers although he sees himself
as a creative writer. And it is his short
stories for children, fables to some,
fairy tales to others, that capture
the imagination writes MINU THAROOR.**

WHAT impresses one immediately about Manoj Das is his innate graciousness.

A man of considerable importance and influence in India's literary and journalistic world, a winner of India's most prestigious literary honour — the Sahitya Akademi Award — he is in Singapore for a week's visit.

Despite a busy programme of lectures and autographing his book at several book-stores, Manoj Das is unfailingly courteous and cordial.

The local Sri Aurobindo Society invited him to deliver a series of lectures and talks (See What's On, Page Two), including a discourse to students of the National University of Singapore.

Manoj Das is a follower of Sri Aurobindo, a visionary philosopher and mystic who, in the early part of this century, formed his beliefs in the future of mankind in highly-charged prose and poetry.

Mr Das is a Professor of English Literature at the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education at Pondicherry, in South-eastern India.

Perhaps there was just the hint of the learned professor about him as we talked.

He was perfectly relaxed, holding his black-rimmed spectacles in hand, smiling and willing to talk about his writing, his teaching, and the source of his inspiration — Sri Aurobindo.

Manoj Das is best known in India as a prolific writer of short stories and newspaper articles in English on a variety of subjects.

He explains: "I am essentially a creative writer, though I do feature writing for news-

papers. I started writing very early as a child. My first story was published when I was 14, in Oriya (a language of Eastern India).

"Though," he says, "that should not be taken as any certificate of merit."

Since then he has published innumerable stories in magazines, journals and anthologies, both in India and abroad.

Martha Foley's annual list of best stories published in the USA and Canada in 1975 includes the five stories that Manoj Das published that year.

His highly-acclaimed *Fables and Fantasies for Adults* is a charming, sometimes whimsical, collection of contemporary satire and ancient legends retold with a fresh, thought-provoking perspective. I ask him about his penchant for fables and the slightly fantastic.

"I make fantasy a medium of comment on current problems and realistic issues. For example in *Sharma and the Wonderful Lump*, which is about a man who becomes a celebrity because he has the largest growth in the world on his head, my satire is directed through this fantastic situation at the sensationalistic media."

Many of his stories revolve around princes and princesses in magical fairytale lands; doves and tigers act out very "human" scenes in moonlit forests.

Despite the ambience of fantasy, a hard core of realistic predicaments and problems underlines the stories.

This is particularly true of the intriguing little fables, ideas for which are derived from ancient Indian tales.

In fact, Manoj Das dedicates one of his stories to "those unknown yarn-spinners of yore, threads from whom have been spun into this stuff". Many of them, like Aesop's Fables, show how the shrewd and the cautious survive at the expense of those who possess far nobler virtues.

This is all very well for adults, but what about the fables that Manoj Das retells for children with enormous success?

His story, *A Bride Inside a Casket and Other Tales*, was published in June by Times Books International.

He says: "I started writing children's stories out of my love for children. I do not feel happy about the stuff that they are fed."

"Of course many of the fables depict a very down-to-earth view of the world. But I try to avoid stories that show the darker side of life. There is no harm in children learning that it pays to be prudent and circumspect!"

In fact many of his earlier stories have elements of the "darker side of life".

These were mainly written when, as he admits, "I was a Marxist, and I was very concerned about the suffering I saw around me."

"Among the pessimistic, cynical stories I wrote then is *A Trip Into the Jungle*, which illustrates the bestial aspect of man. My approach changed when I recovered my faith in humanity and its future."

This transformation came 18 years ago when this erstwhile politically active student leader, "an undiluted materialist", came into contact with Sri Aurobindo's vision of man's destiny.

Aurobindo, too, had been a passionate revolutionary in his youth, but had eventually realised that the "only viable change comes through inner, spiritual regeneration".

Manoj Das explains

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Courteous and polite, Manoj Das is serious about what he does

that Sri Aurobindo's beliefs "transcend religious or sectarian differences; in fact he did not subscribe to institutionalised religion."

"The essence of his revelation is that the evolutionary process by which man has attained the present level of material and intellectual progress will continue until man reaches a level of spiritual perfection and total harmony."

"He will then be a traveller not from darkness to light, but from light to light."

This faith in the spiritual perfectability of man mellows the tone of Manoj Das' satirical stories, and cynicism is absent from those that end tragically.

"The sustaining ele-

ment in them is the strength and love one discovers in sorrow," he explains.

Manoj Das and his colleagues attempt to impart a harmonious lifestyle in their school and college.

It is an extraordinary place, "not in the least career-oriented".

"We do not award any degrees or diplomas, nor do we reject any child as a failure," he says. "Every child is unique and we encourage the best development of each child."

Apart from teaching responsibilities, he also keeps busy, writing regularly for newspapers in India and abroad.

Articles by him have appeared in *Hemisphere*, an Australian journal, which in 1979, on the occasion of his second visit to Singapore, commissioned an account from him of *Singapore Revisited*.

He is back and, as always, takes an avid interest in everything around him, including reading Singapore writers. He finds them "promising".

Singapore readers might well enjoy his writings and enter the enchanting world of wily jackals, wise kings and wistful princesses — old tales, some buried in our consciousness.

— Manoj Das.