

The many writers in Manoj Das

A man of many avatars, Manoj Das is a legend. The recipient of the prestigious Saraswati Samman award talks to **Debjani Dutta** about his bi-lingual writings and his discerning readership

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ing professor at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore, under the directorship of Raja Ramanna, along with noted names like I K Gujral, General K Sundarji and S Gopal. He conducted refresher courses in different subjects for senior executives of the public and private sectors. His book, *Sri Aurobindo on Education* (National Council for Teacher Education) is essential reading material for teacher training programmes. He also regularly teaches at the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education, Pondicherry. A couple of Universities have conferred on him honorary Emeritus Professorship.

And still some remember him as the able editor of *The Heritage*, the pride of India's magazine journalism, where he spent five years (1985-1989). Though a resident of Pondicherry for the past 38 years, Manoj Das is a legend in Orissa, a popularity well-earned, as the discerning in his home state say. He was in his twenties when an opinion survey of the elite readership by a reputed journal, *Dagora*, revealed that he made the most original contribution to post-Independence literature in Oriya, along with veterans Gopinath Mohanty and Sochi Routroy.

Not only was he the first short story writer in Orissa to receive the Sahitya Akademi Award (1972), but the only writer to have received every prestigious award of his home state —

including the famous Sahitya Bharati Award, of which he was the first recipient, and the Governor's Plaque of Honour.

He is also special because his early life had been as picturesque as his writing. He was a Marxist student leader, had courted jail and played an active role in the Afro-Asian Students Conference in Bandung, Indonesia (1956).

Excerpts from the interview *The New Sunday Express* had with this successful bi-lingual writer.

● **Of your two readerships — Oriya and English — which do you find more receptive?**

MD: I have receptive readers in

both, but surely the collective response is much better formed and dependable in Oriya. I'm afraid the general readership in Indo-Anglian literature, (there is, of course, a discerning minority), is swayed by the glitter of publicity and not always by the quality of the work. It is different in Indian languages. There are solid blocks of readers who still value art, perception and authenticity of situations and characters.

● **Why do you say 'still'? Do you suspect that their number may dwindle?**

Allow me to answer your question with a meaningful example. Last week a journal asked me how I visualised the future of

Children's literature in India. I told them how I helplessly observe the older generation try any number of gimmicks to destroy the child. The institution of entertainment is reduced to a hell-hole of vulgarity and the quest for knowledge to unabashed gambling. And all these sport the brand name of progress and are patronised by the likes of you and I and inevitably influence the impressionable minds. How much can children's literature, even when expertly written and magnificently produced, be truly effective? No literature can be seriously effective in isolation from the total cultural milieu! And today's child is the reader of the literature for the grown up tomorrow!

● **Are you pessimistic?**

Frankly, I should be, but for my exposure to Sri Aurobindo who assures us that all human calculations fail before the evolutionary force behind our life.

And he foresees man as an evolving being, despite all signs to the contrary, proceeding towards a meaningful future. I believe the child will withstand the silliness of the grown-up and the latter will survive his own hypocrisy.

● **A year ago you were given the BAPASI (Book-sellers And Publishers Association of South India) Award as the best English author for 1998, while the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister, M Karunanidhi, was their choice for Tamil. This award is given only to South Indian writers like R K Narayan, S Swaminathan, etc. What do you feel about being accepted as one belonging to the South?**

That was a noble gesture by BAPASI. There is no contradiction between my belonging to Orissa and my belonging to South India, for both are India.

● **Many say that a national award like the Saraswati Samman or the Jnanpith should have come to you years earlier. How do you react to such observations? How do you react to awards in general?**

Awards are decided by others and not by the awardee. So I have no comment to make on the first part of the question. So far as my reaction to awards in general is concerned, there are two aspects to it. Alone in my silence, I am aloof; I know that a rose will not look more beautiful if we hang a notice saying that it is beautiful. The same with a work of literature. But the second aspect of the reaction is, I find my readers feeling reassured and vindicated. They feel happy that the writing which they valued is also valued by an agency consciously evaluating merit. Their happiness gives me a sense of satisfaction. Not that awards cannot be influenced or misguided. But a few of them, among which I count the Saraswati Samman, are above board.

THERE are several qualities about Manoj Das, who recently won the Saraswati Samman, considered India's most prestigious award for creative writing, soon after a Padma Shri. His wide circle of readers enjoyed his writing in English. It included Graham Greene, who in his last days, loved reading Das' works. Several academic publications in the West discovered an authentic artist of Indian ethos in him, while he remained unaware of his stature as the foremost writer of fiction — mostly short stories — in his mother tongue Oriya. The Saraswati Samman was, in fact, awarded for his Oriya novel *Amruta Phala* (The Nectar Fruit). The novel is a daring portrayal of two characters, Bhartrihari and Amarnath, and their worlds — one belonging to the first century and the other to our times — and showing how the human quest for light and knowledge had remained the same over the millennia.

He had personal columns in a couple or more national newspapers. There were several who knew him as a significant commentator with a rare insight into topical events. There were still others who had taken him to be primarily a children's writer, for two among his several books in this genre, published by the National Book Trust in 1970, are probably the largest selling books of the kind.

On another plane, he is an Aurobindonian scholar. He compiled the early phase of India's freedom struggle from valuable documents from the archives in London and Edinburgh in a book titled *Sri Aurobindo in the First Decade of the Century* (1971). It is a source book for researchers in history, a pioneering work for which he received the first 'Sri Aurobindo Puraskar' instituted by Sri Aurobindo Bhavan, an institution maintained by the Government of West Bengal.

In yet another circle, he is an educationist. His orientation to a programme launched by the Ministry of Education, Singapore, saw him visiting the island-republic twice a year for three years, addressing over a hundred teachers. In India, he was a visit-