

Many of your readers know that early Manoj Das believed in Marxian approach both in life and literature. He had a left bias and a greater concern for suffering humanity. But today and over two decades there has been a complete transformation in approach - a journey from political to spiritual. Could you please justify and elaborate the change in attitude?

Concern for the suffering humanity was what had led me to Marxism. It is the same concern that led me to spirituality. I have no quarrel with Marxism or any political philosophy. But I stand convinced that no ideal can deliver the desired goods as long as the human consciousness remains in the state in which it is today. True spirituality is nothing but a science of consciousness. My "change in attitude" is in keeping with my progressive quest for the meaning of life as a whole - including the meaning of suffering.

Is there any singular significant incident in your life that prompted to reject the former and accept the later?

If I have to refer to any specific incident, it is Khrushchev's 'Personality Cult' report at the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party. Our faith in Stalin was unqualified and complete. Khrushchev shook the faith. His narration of Stalin's tyranny and lies made me realise that no theory is safe against its application by ambitious and imperfect human agencies.

But this disillusionment was only one of the factors leading to my change of attitude. The other factors were positive ones, results of my seeking.

Literature, social history, futuristic studies and the magical development of science and technology over the years portray and foretell a gloomy destiny for humankind. On the other hand Sri Aurobindo has shown consistent confidence that mankind is in a steady meditation towards the better and a new and meaningful life awaits man. I don't understand this!

Man, indeed, has made a mess of his present. Consequently, he visualises a gloomy future. But I believe that some power greater than man's capacity to disfigure himself shall prevail. There are as many reasons to believe that man is capable of transcending his present predicament as there are to think that man will write a 'finis' to his existence. But I trust, "there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." Such a thing is the will of the supreme.

Do you mean that a spiritual faith could bring a change to our present predicament strengthened by our so called

scientific and technological progress of scientific truth and material growth? This is again in connection with Sri Aurobindo's prediction....

Yes, but it must be a faith supported by an aspiration to grow beyond mind; we must know that all our scientific discoveries are in a way an exploration of the unknown. Nothing need be dismissed; nothing need be shunned in an ascetic manner; but all our endeavours can be an offering towards the fulfilment of human destiny - the spiritual destiny. Spirituality is not asceticism or rejection of the world, but giving a Godward turn to everything. This is quite possible.

Don't you feel that despite all our claims of knowledge, beauty and power, man today has become the cheapest of living objects on earth?

'Cheapest' in relation to what? Is it not in relation to his own knowledge of his true value? He can decide to be otherwise.

A fish from the bottom of water levels struggles to rise up to surface and see the light and the Sun. But in moments it gets suffocated and therefore, sinks back. In the same way, I feel, 'we' congregate, tear apart the dark clouds of exploitation, revolt against and win. And in moments 'we' realise that we have receded to our fond place of suffering and the victory is 'theirs'. Don't you agree us? If not, why?

I agree and don't agree. What you say may appear to be true within a given frame of time. But if you look back into the total past, you will see that man has taken tremendous forward strides. Even the semblance of democracy and socialism we have today, the freedom of expression we enjoy despite temporary setbacks, are heavens when compared to the tyranny and chaos that ruled as-say-in the Middle Ages.

Coming back to your stories, in many of them you have satirically and most pungently attacked our socio-political system, mostly the people in power - their arrogance and ignorance, their garrulity and stupidity etc and made your readers laugh at them hah ha, hah ha, and hah ah... this I have seen in the 'Mystery of the Missing Cap'. Do you have any alternative system to suggest?

Our liberation from the prevailing gloom does not depend on any alternative 'system', but in exercising our potential capacity to rise above our propensity for hypocrisy and fear of our own conscience which make us cowards before ourselves. A story like "Mystery of the Missing Cap" portrays on one hand a funny, farcical situation that can arise when a good man forgets his Swadharma and takes recourse to a lie. In his

A staunch Marxist-turned-spiritual sage, MANOJ DAS, a professor of English at Pondicherry ashram is one of the powerful story writers of India. Various compared to R K Narayan and Raja Rao in the Indo-Anglican literary scenario and to Saki and 'O' Henry among western writers, Manoj Das's writings are typically his own. His ingenious use of images and idioms, description and drama leave a well-known taste in the mind-- the taste of Indian life and Indian ways. There is, underlying his writings, a 'moral nexus, a tough ethical core'. To the discerning reader this stand-point could reflect the philosophy of the story-teller, Manoj Das, the man. He is the editor of 'Heritage' magazine. Haraprasad Paricha Patnaik, a poet and critic of repute, provides here an insight into the writer's views on the anomalies of human existence.

## "Fear of our conscience makes us cowards..."

tears and the tears of the Minister (whose ego had been temporarily inflated), and in the fact that both the characters were soon forgotten politically, we see the signs of their redemption.

Don't you find Mr. Das that we are fast losing the sense of humour from our lives - that we are not able to laugh or weep aloud - that smile has become rare on our lips? And in some of your stories you have amply suggested this. Why is the situation so?

Healthy smiles and violence do not go together. At the moment we are in favour of giving a free hand to our base passions. That has made us diffident to smile. This is a passing phase. We must resolve to be a degree less grave than the graveyard. If healthy and happy smiles return to us, the destructive passions that dominate us would

be subdued.

In some of your stories you have taken fantasy as the theme medium. Is it an extension of reality or a counterpart of it? Please elucidate. Let us take the case of, for example, 'Operations Bride'.

It is an extension of reality so far as the theme is concerned. The fantasy is only a technique to drive home a point of contemporary relevance.

One personal question. No, no question, a curiosity. As a writer of eminence, have you not experienced that language is a great barrier for expression? That language has often played mischief or failed to communicate the subtle most feelings?

It is not a barrier, but a challenge. Great is the power of language - of any developed language - to let even a most complex emo-

tion to find its expression. Art lies in handling the language - through the right use of a poignant phrase - through new combinations of crisis and association of ideas. How to express Caesar's shock at his discovery that his assassins included his dear friend and 'angel' Brutus? Well - as Mark Antony put it - (I'm not quoting) - look how Caesar's blood come out to resolve if indeed it was Brutus who held the dagger! Blood would have come out in any case. But mark the charming exploitation of the situation to highlight a certain emotion. Even when we try through the language to express an intricate or sublime situation but fail, or we leave something unexpressed, the vibrations of our effort (through the language) communicates the idea unsaid. Speech is an emanation of the supreme; speech is Saraswati.

How would you account for a sense

of history and tradition in every responsible artist? And in light of that don't you consider much of our (Oriya) stories today are incipid, in consequential or sentimental notings, and are not deeply rooted?

I very much admire Eliot's essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent". (By the way, I am not very much fascinated by his poetry, though I admire his poetic talent; but that is a different matter). So far as the second part of your question is concerned, we are not to judge the glory of a literature by its mass, but by its highest achievements, however few. The highest achievements in Oriya literature are commendable.

The last question Mr. Das. What is the secret of your happiness? Please don't speak aloud but whisper so that I alone could borrow from you?

I have stopped evaluating myself through a comparison with fellow human beings. That is an unmistakable clue to happiness. But am I happy in the sense you apply the idea? I don't know. My happiest moments are those when I have succeeded in being truthful against odds; when I have felt grateful for someones' kindness - which I know comes from only one source - the Divine. Thank you.

