

MY childhood was spent in a cluster of remote villages miles away from the railway station, away too, from the solitary seasonal bus stop. Between our house surrounded by rolling meadows dotted by gardens orchards and palm trees were two ancient lakes, one abounding in red lotuses and the other in white ones. Life was idyllic, the people innocent, exuding a spontaneous heart warming goodwill. This is Manoj Das talking about his childhood, but he could well be describing the backdrop to one of his short fictions that are so much appreciated in the country and abroad for their authentic portrayal of the Indian scene. Those ancient twin lakes could also hold the magic clue to his equally popular fables and fairy tales for children. Manoj Das could even be using those lines

chronised in meaning and form that the reader is left confused as to the tale from the truth. Manoj Das, if comparable to Narayan in realistic yarn-spinning is also Hardy in his skilled treatment of life's little ironies. The author's poker-faced comic perception of life, whether he is talking about the pretentious life style of politicians or the blatant hypocrisy of powers-that-be or even expressing his deep sympathies with the underdog, (in understatement of course) he often has the reader's laughter verging on tears of in reverse order. All through the narrative, the writer maintains a direct one-to-one relationship with the reader, as if he were talking to him alone. The underlying message, profound yet subtle never intrudes. It surfaces only after the narrative is over.

Writer of Two Worlds

Manipadma Jena

in a telling comparison to what life and men have become since pre-independence in one of his regular newspaper columns.

Author, feature writer and columnist in many newspapers here and abroad and erstwhile editor of the very popular 'Heritage' magazine, Manoj Das is a many-faceted, much awarded man of letters. A Russell, the noted British critic, observed, "There is little doubt that Manoj Das is a great story-teller of the sub-continent and he has too few peers, no matter what yardstick is applied to measure his ability as an artist....."

The late Martha Foley who edited the annual collection of best American stories for many years in the seventies, included in the 1975 Catalogue of outstanding stories, five short stories by an Indian author published that year in prestigious anthologies and magazines in the US. The Indian author was none other than Manoj Das.

It is of course, the authority of the authentic portrayal of the Indian scene which has won him a discriminating world audience. His style too is in no mean measure responsible for his success as a writer. Manoj Das is the master of the perfect blend of realism and the fantastic which he uses to drive home points of social and human import. He uses it in a manner so vivid, so well syn-

We have very few writers in the country today who have been so well accepted in two languages. His rating in Oriya literature is high. Way back in 1960, when he was only in his twenties, a local newspaper Survey revealed that Manoj Das was the youngest to be acknowledged as one of the foremost influences on post independence Oriya literature. His home state has honoured him with not one but two (a rare event) Sahitya Akademi awards, in 1965 for his short stories, and recently in 1989 for his essays.

● **Why did you take up writing in English when you had already established yourself as a writer of repute in Oriya?**

● Some time in 1950 some one brought to my notice a passage about Indian rural atmosphere, the rural people and their psychology. It was written by an Indian and published abroad. What I read it made me feel very embarrassed, it was so purely an arbitrary distortion of reality. I was in a position to judge because most of my childhood has been spent in a remote village. It was a kind of protest which urged me to write about Indian villages. It was an attempt to bring the true picture to a wider readership.

● **Though a powerful poet in Oriya having begun when you only a student of Class IX, you not attempted poetry in English.**

Why?

● Because I am not yet sure that poetry can be written in any other language that is not the poet's mother-tongue. Because poetry is the language of your sub-conscious. The words in which you dreamt, wondered, loved and explored the world, constitute the finest medium of poetic expression.

● **Does experience alone constitute creative writing?**

● It so happens that an incident, character or even a dialogue moves you or you may find these symbolic, something behind which there could be a world of revelations. And, the elements which constitute a short story are triggered off. If a writer were to go through the experience of all he narrates, an entire life time would not be sufficient to gather experience for a single novel."

● **Are they translations when we see the same story simultaneously in two languages?**

● No. If the theme continues to inspire me I rewrite them in the other language. Since the story is already in my consciousness it may appear like a translation but I feel if one did not know me for a bi-lingual writer he would not feel it to be a translation.

● **Who have been your literary influence here and abroad?**

● Fakir Mohan Senapati, the father of Oriya short story was an early influence. Somadeva, the author of Kathasarit Sagar and Vishnu Sharma, the writer of Panchatantra have had a profound influence on my writing. Chekov, O'Henry and Maupassant as also Shakespeare have had their impact too. But unfortunately I am not a prolific reader, so although anything excellent does have an impact, it is never very pronounced.

Of his manifold genres of creative expressions — poetry, essays, short stories, children's literature, Manoj Das has an old connection with journalistic writing too. His regular newspaper columns in the regional publications as well as in national English dailies were widely appreciated. A weekly column in the Hindustan Times, 'The Banyan Tree' was a most popular feature. 'Kete Diganta', a column in Oriya now compiled in two volumes is still top in the sales chart. He edited the prestigious cultural monthly 'The Heritage' (1985-1989).

● **What aspects of journalistic writing appeal to him?**

● A creative writer is also a social thinker, a social critic. His field is not entirely limited to creative writing, he may like to share his reflections on contemporary themes and that is where feature writing comes

handy.

Being born just before independence, Manoj Das has lived through the country's transitional phase of turmoil at an impressionable age. Haunting him was an inner search for a panacea for human suffering. The exploration took the form of poetry in the school lad (1949). In the early sixties, he read Sri Aurobindo. In 1963 he left for the Ashram in Pondicherry, a visionary-in-the-making.

● **Does your spiritual mode of life curb your fiction writing?**

● Spirituality is so vast, nothing is outside it. We often confuse spirituality with religious dogmas, creeds or rituals. Spirituality in fact, is that which records human progress. In particular the progress of the human consciousness tries to put, without rejecting, all experiences good or bad in the right perspective. So spirituality does not contradict literary inspiration, it supports it. Great literature, even the beginning of literature like the Vedas, the 'Ramayana' and the 'Mahabharata' all incorporate a greater vision, a mystic touch.

In his college days, during his search for a greater vision for humankind, he found himself caught in the political vortex of the fifties. He became a Marxist.

● **Do you still hold those political convictions?**

● Every great political or social theory has a great truth in it, but it is not the whole truth. Marxism is grounded on the basic truth which is also a spiritual truth that 'all men are equal'. The problem arises while translating this truth in the social context through hard physical realities. What is necessary for their true realisation is a change in the human consciousness and not a change in social environment. Real equality is a spiritual achievement as yet to be reached by man. He must continue to struggle at the social level till a higher phase of evolution brings to him a new awakening. Much has already happened in this direction. Hundred years ago the concept of socialism would not have had meant anything to anybody. But today there is no constitution in the world which does not accept socialism as a goal.

His sotries are subtle satires of our existing social-political system. The arrogance and ignorance of men in power are fusilladed with brilliant humour. In 'Mystery of the Missing Cap' or in 'A Night in the Life of a Mayor' the message of our propensity for hypocrisy and the bitter truth that we are cowards before our own consciences is brought home in a hilariously farcical fashion.