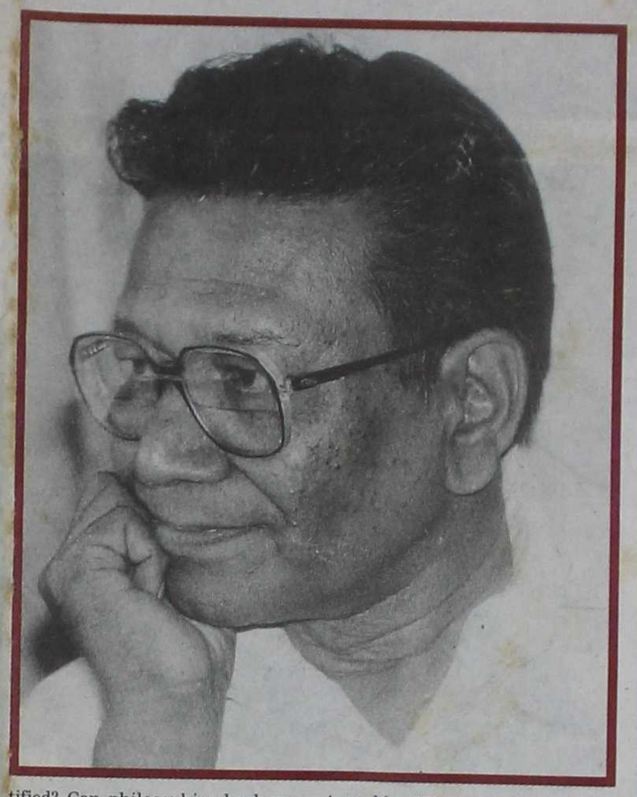
ARTICULATIONS

Inspired from within

His writings are like a searchlight focused into the dark nooks of the human sub-conscious. Austere simplicity marks his writing which he uses in a very Indian way with a choice of warm earthly images. Besides being a social critic he has, through his stories, stressed the divinity and psychic splendour inherent in man. P RAJA profiles Manoj Das, this year's Padmashri award winner who has also bagged the Birla Foundation's Saraswathi Samman award



A jolly group of so called ultra-modern, sophisticated men and women go for a hunting expedition and intend to combine it with a fun of a picnic. Their motives had been to turn primitive for a night, as men and women were, they believed a million years ago to gorge, to romp and to be violent. They reach their destination - a deserted bungalow inside the jungle. After a round of light refreshment and drink, they prepare to go out for hunting. Shyamal, the driver of their vehicle, refuses to accompany them. Mrs Mity too stays back, and the rest go for a hunt. Mrs Mity taking advantage of the loneliness, tempts the driver to a play of passion. The driver obliges her, but mechanically and without any sense of participation or any emotional involvement. She feels humiliated and doubly challenged. When the hunting group returns to the bungalow bringing with them a wounded boar, Mrs Mity brings a wild charge of attempted molestation against Shyamal. The driver is beaten black and blue till he swoons away. They then throw him into the dungeon where they had deposited the boar. Returning into the high walled kitchen garden, they light a fire, sit around it and drink. They drag out the boar and throw it into the fire and eat the half-roasted pork. Then they all fall into a stupor. The morning breaks out. Let me quote what happened then:

Mrs Mity sat up and looked through the window. It was still dark.

From nowhere, a chill of terror crept into her and spread into her whole being and oozed out in a sweat.

She called and woke up others...

Raja Sahib was the first to speak. "Good morning, everybody, we better arrange for tea now. Let me see what happened to that rogue."

He advanced towards the room into which Shyamal had been thrown.

"Please don't!" Mrs Mity shrieked and stopped Raja Sahib from advancing.

"B-b -But why?" stuttered the surprised Raja.

"I don't know. But suppose you see the boar instead of Shyamal?" she said. Her eyet were wild.

"But we roasted and ate up the boar, didn't we?"

"But suppose you see the boar instead of Shyamal?"

"But we didn't we? ate the boar!"

"But suppose you see the boar instead of Shyamal?"

The deadly silence was broken by a gust of wind that threw a handful of dry leaves into the hall.

Someone said, "But we can go to the kitchen garden. Much of the boar should be still there!"

"For heaven's sake, let us not!" cried out both Mrs Mity and Mrs Chakodi, "If you ind the remains to be not of the boar?"

The sepulchral silence was back. There was a long howl by Jackals behind the bungalow. Each could see the others shivering.

The crew leaves the bungalow without the driver Shyamal.

This is the gist of one of the earliest short stories of ManoJ Das titled "*A Trip into the Jungle*". Some of you might have seen its award winning Hindi film version *Aranvaka*, directed by A.K. Bir. This story is a typical example of whip- crack ending which O Henry had used with facility to surprise the readers if not to shock them. But in Manoj Das the technique culminates in a powerful searchlight focused into the dark nooks of human sub-conscious and feelings of guilt.

In his short story "*A Night in the Life of a Mayor*", we meet the mayor who is quite proud of his achievements in life. He laughs at his old professor, who is upset over a stray cow chewing up his grand daughter's psychology notebooks.

The same evening the mayor was having a dip in the river at a lonely spot leaving his trouser and his shirt on the bank. In the water he was obliged to take off his underwear too and it slipped off his hands. Imagine his predicament when, crawling ashore, he finds the notorious cow moving away, his half-eaten clothes still clinging to its mouth.

His open car on the bank soon rouses suspicion in some passing officers. The police arrive. The naked mayor lets himself be drifted away resting on a small canoe. He had not been alone for a long time. Under the starry sky he has a dialogue with himself. At dawn a little girl comes to his rescue by sacrificing her soiled frock for him, and then, upon learning that he was a big man, by fetching a towel for him.

On his way to the town, the first thing the mayor decides to do is to apologise to his professor. He had realized to what helplessness one could be reduced any moment. "I believe, I earned my adulthood last night", he resolves to say.

Manoj Das is most at home with stories dealing with human psychology. Treated on a par with O.Henry, Chekov and Maupassant, he has successfully explored the deepest recesses of the human mind in his fiction, both short and long.

Manoj Das writes with the kind of austere simplicity which he uses in a very Indian way with a choice of warm earthly images. He has a clear lucid way of handling dialogues - he creates conversation that sounds real and this he manages to do even through the lips of such stock types as the politician with his inflated ego, the doctor with his neuroses and a Raja with only a past. In most of his stories he is not only a story writer but also a story teller. His English has its peculiar charm. It is at once chaste and yet has the Indian flavour in the most delicate sense of the term.

Hence it is no wonder that his fictional writings have fascinated the sophisticated Western readership, through publications such as *The Ascent* (Department of English, University of Illinois), *The Carlton Miscellany* (Carlton College, Minnesota), *The Malahat Review* (Victoria University, British Columbia, Canada) and the Avant-garde journal *The New York Smith* which introduced him as "one of the foremost of the new generation of Indian writers" way back in the early seventies.

Pondicherry can boast of having such a writer of eminence as one of its residents. Born in the affluent, feudal family in the seashore village Sankhari, North Balasore, Orissa on Feb. 27, 1934 as the second son to the late Madhusudan Das and the late Smt Kadambini Devi, herself a gifted poet, the first son being Dr Manmothnath Das, the well known historian of India and now a Parliamentariane A cnild prodigy, he showed an immense interest in writing right from a tender age. When he began contributing to Oriya periodicals he was barely 14. At 15, his first collection of poems Satabdira Artanada saw the light of the day, when he was a IX standard student at Balasore Zilla School. At 16, he edited *Diganta*, a cultural monthly devoted to creative writing. The next year when he matriculated his first collection of short stories in Oriya, *Samudra Kshudha*, was published.

The kindling of talent

What actually drove Manoj Das to take up the pen is an interesting two part story in itself. A devastating cyclone followed by a terrible famine were the calamities he saw in his native area at a tender age of seven. Manoj Das's house was the most affluent one in a cluster of remote villages miles away from the solitary seasonal bus-stop or the railway station. Between his house surrounded by prolific gardens and orchards and the sea, lay an ever-green meadow, studded with hundreds of palm trees and marked by two ancient lakes one abounding in red lotuses and the other in white ones. But suddenly one night a gang of dacoits invaded his house. In a matter of few minutes the house was stripped of its legendary gold and other wealth.

Both these traumatic experiences woke young Manoj Das to several posers like: Why must man suffer? Why should there be so much inequality in the society? Years later his questions were to mature into: What is it that sustains man through travails and torments of life? Is it the dream of happiness? Can man ever be happy in the true sense of the term? It is this quest that made him turn a Marxist, for he felt sure that that way was to be secured the panacea for human misery.

The tumultuous college days were marked by his active participation in the politics of the time, convening public meetings, organising rallies, and holding protest marches, as a student leader and President of College Union and later Puri College. After graduation, he joined the law college at Cuttack of which he was the unopposed President once again, but he found himself behind bars for nis political inflammatory speeches In 1956 he went to Bandung Indonesia, to participate in the Afro-Asian Students Conference where he met the leader of Partai Kommunist of Indonesia (PKI), Mr DN Aidit. That was Khruschev's de-stalinization era and there was A lot of furore and confusion in the international Communist movement arena.

It was only during his college days, Manoj Das began contributing to English dailies and periodicals. After taking his MA. degree from Ravenshaw College, Cuttack, he Joined the Christ College, Cuttack, as Lecturer in English. And that was in 1959. That same year he married PratiJna Devi of the erstwhile Raj family of Kujang, whose parents were well known freedom fighters.

In the early 60's, he underwent a phase of internal dilemma as the realisation dawned upon him that the external conditions were not the sole cause of human suffering. On the other hand, often they were the external projections of problems in the realms of deeper consciousness of man. This gave rise to a few questions in him. Can the hidden source of maladies be identified? Can philosophies lead one to their discovery? In the course of quest to identify the esoteric cause of all maladies, his explorations in spiritual lores he read Sri Aurobindo. The Yogi's visualisation of man as an evolving being and his observation that the state of consciousness, namely mind, that dominates man today is but a transitional phase and man can transcendit and rise to a higher phase in evolution, brought him a new awakening and optimism.

In one of his evening chats with me, he said: "I am convinced that our civilisation is undergoing an evolutionary crisis of consciousness. The lack of morals and a total degeneration in values are clearly showing in all the vistas of our crumbling existence. This crisis occurred earlier too in the long history of mankind. But I am an optimist at heart as I believe in Sri Aurobindo's faith in the intrinsic capability of man to overcome this crisis and rise to a new phase in evolution -- to transcend into a suprahuman stage where there will be a qualitative transformation in his consciousness."

After a short stint of four years of English teaching at Cuttack, he joined Sri Aurobindo Ashram in 1963. Since then he has been a Professor of English Literature at Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education, Pondicherry.

Recognised as the most prolific contributor to the various genres of the post-Independence Oriya literature, he has till date fifteen collections of short stories, three full-length novels, ten volumes of poems, a volume of essays, two travelogues and two volumes of Belles-Lettres. The Dagora Silver Jubilee award (1962) was followed by the Orissa Sahitya Akademi award (1965), the Prajatantra Visuv Milan Awards in 1971 and again in 1986, the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1972, the Sarala Award in 1980, the Sambalpur University Bharat Nayak Award in 1987, the Orissa Sahitya Akademi Award for a second time -- a rare event -- for his essays in 1989, Utkal Pratibha Award in 1996, the Sahitya Bharati Award, of which he was chosen to be the first recipient in 1996, the Bharatiya Bhasha Parishad Award in 1996, Sri Aurobindo Puraskar in 1997, etc.

Most of his fictional writings are available for the readers both in his mother-tongue, Oriya as well as his chosen tongue, English. And so I once asked him, "You are a bilingual writer. In which language do you think while formulating a story?" He answered: "In the language of silence... A fiction writer is first moved by experience, or an inspiration. I let this experience or inspiration become a feeling in me, a process that goes on in silence. When the feeling is well-formulated, I sit down to write. In which language I should write, depends on some immediate factors. If I have promised a story to my Oriya Publishers, I write in Oriya... But I do not translate one into another. If the theme continues to inspire me, I try a fresh execution" (*Literature Alive*, The British Council, June 1988).

Apart from teaching English literature and freelancing for various dailies and magazines, and writing a regular column in *Thought* (1968-70), he was also editing *World Union*. It was during this hectic period of writing, his first collection of short stories in English appeared. Published in 1967 by Higginbothams Pvt Ltd, Madras, Manoj Das's *A Song for Sunday and Other Stories*, bagged very rave reviews. Many were the writers who read the book and encouraged Manoj Das.

Since then Manoj Das has eleven collections of short stories. Through his two hundred and fifty eight short stories, he has brought about a new awareness about the sweetness and serenity in general and the rural Indian life in particular. He has been a crusader against the invasion of India's intellectual climate by decadent values. He has not only been a "Social critic of the first order", (as M V Kamath had said of him), but also what is more important, he has stressed the divinity and psychic splendour inherent in man, through his stories. The pretentious life-styles of pundits and the ignorance of villagers seem to have provided much of the inspiration to the author. He delights in making digs at pompous politicians and depicts their behaviour by putting them into ridiculously oversized clothes or cutting them to size.

In his ghost stories the funniest aspect is the absence of ghosts. One of the earliest ghost stories of Manoj Das is "*Farewell to a Ghost*". The deserted house once constructed by the Fringhee Indigo planters has been the abode of a century-old girl's spirit. The villagers have looked upon her as an unfortunate daughter of theirs and have never failed to offer her share of food, on festive occasions, of course, with a warning that she was expected to behave. But the authorities now propose to demolish the house. Where will the ghost go? After prolonged discussions the villagers commission an exorcist to do the needful. The women weep, when one rainy morning, the exorcist leads the ghost to a solitary tree in the meadow. At the end the narrator sees the tree when it is crumbling down, struck by lightning. No character in the story sees the ghost, nor is the reader made to see it.

A poet at heart Manoj Das combines the old art of storytelling with modern ideas and techniques. The method he adopts goes back to the oral tradition. There is poetry and drama in the superb style of narrative that has earned a place for Manoj Das among the very best of storytellers. "Where do all the butterflies go during a storm", "The red sun, as though shot at, sank down behind the hills", "The summer noon descended on the stubborn hamlet like a medieval school teacher" are some of the opening sentences quickening the imagination of the reader with more than what meets the eye.

When Manoj Das's short stories were bagging awards and rewards for their author who richly deserved them, a weekly column "The Banyan Tree" and a fortnightly column "Tides of Time" that he wrote for *The Hindustan Times*, Delhi and Hindu, Madras respectively were received with great eclat. The experience he gained as editor of *World Union* and later Sri Aurobindo's *Action* in his early days in the ashram was most appropriately put to use when he edited *The Heritage*, a cultural monthly, for the **Chandamama Group of Publications**, Chennai. In spite of his tight schedule as editor and columnist, he found time for his creative writing. His first novel *Cyclones* was published in 1987 simultaneously by three countries by three different publishers, viz. Sterling (Delhi), O.U.P. (U.K.) and Facet (USA).

About his foray into novel writing, I asked Manoj Das: "Why did you turn to novel writing after confining yourself to the short story for more than two decades?" Here is his answer which I recorded for *The Journal of Life, Art and Literature* (Vol. 3: No. 1, July 1992): "There was no 'turn'. Different themes must have different forms. No doubt, my prime preoccupation is with short stories; but I have written several novelettes too. From short story to novelette, from novelette to novel is a natural transition".

His next novel *A Tiger at Twilight* published by Penguin India (1991) is an enlarged version of his novelette of the same title published in *The Heritage*. The novel captures a real but unusual milieu, a valley nestling amidst hills and forests with a solitary castle of a former Raja, the Raja's unexpected return to his erstwhile Rajya, and its impact on men and beasts around him.

Writing for children

It is not often that a writer who is famous for his works for an adult readership can also prove efficient in writing for the young. In Oriya literature Manoj Das is a living legend. In Indo-Anglian fiction he is one of our serious writers who has not fallen prey to vulgar commercialism. When Chandamama Publications, Chennai, branched out and ventured into book publishing, their choice fell on Manoj Das. And when they brought out their first six books for children, Viz. *Legend of the Golden Valley, The Fourth Friend, A Strange Prophecy and Other Tales from the Jatakas, The Golden Deer and Other Tales from the Jatakas, The Magic Tree and other Tales and Equal to a Thousand and Other Tales*, all authored by Manoj Das and published in 1996, they were widely acclaimed. It is to be noted that his is not any new entry into children's literature. In fact two of his books of this class *Stories of Light and Delight* (1970) and *Books For Ever* (1973), both published by **National Book Trust**, India, have continued to be popular for more than the past twenty-five years, undergoing numerous reprints.

Manoj Das's stories for children are mostly folklore retold. But they have a typical Manoj Das touch. His fairy tales are often witty and spiced ' with gentle sarcasm. Humorous, yet thought provoking, Manoj Das's style seldom pulls us into the depths of moral comment.

Hundreds of essays, reviews and features that belong to the non-fiction genre remain scattered in a plethora of newspapers and magazines, and Manoj Das with his auriferous pen is only sixty four years young.

Aurobindo is his favourite author

I went to Pondicherrry after a gap of almost two years and relived the magic that place holds for me. I knew that Manoj Das, the poet writer whose short stories and novels have delighted many a heart by their lilting prose, lived there. When a meeting was arranged, I was very happy. I met the author at the Ashram that has been his home for the last 38 years.

Manoj Das was already a poet before he began writing prose. And it is poetry that peeps from every corner of his writings, be they short stories on the little Lord Krishna (published in the All India Magazine) or a novellette. I remember reading '*Tiger at Twilight*', and was held captive by the lyrical quality of the prose. Manoj Das says he owes this to the beauty of a remote village in Orrisa, where his house was flanked by endless green meadows and lakes with lotuses growing in them.

We were in his study and all I could see was books. Books on the floor, till the ceiling, in bookshelves and on the table. To a query on his favourite author, he replied, 'Sri Aurobindo'. "Because of his mastery over English prose and ideas. Churchill was a great historian, but then he was just that, Shakespeare was a dramatist par excellence, but his writings were not as varied."

When somebody once asked him if he were to read only a single book in his life, what should it be? Manoj Das asked him to read '*Savitri*'! And if he were to read just one more? He was asked to read '*Life Divine*' because that is the only book that contains answers to all questions on life.

The maid brought in cups of fragrant Darjeeling tea and we heard stories of that very special friendship he shares with Ruskin Bond. Among his other favourites are Shakespeare, Pandit Vishnu Sharma who gave us the Panchatantra, Oriya writer Fakir Mohan Senapaty, Ved Mehta, Mulk Raj Anand and Graham Greene. Incidentally Graham Greene was fascinated by the writings of Manoj Das. I asked him the cliched question that every ignorant must ask, "How did you like the '*God of Small Things*'"? "I did not like it", was the candid reply, " forty percent of it is eroticism, it commits violence against the English language and is calculated to sell. It is not a great work of literature." He has not read Jhumpa Lahiri's collection of short stories.

Even today, the best of literature exist in India, distributed among our various languages, says he. Only we do not have faithful translators! He told us about one of his books in Oriya '*Akashara Ishara*', when translated into English, literally, it would read as 'Signals from the sky', however, 'Signals' do not convey the same meaning that 'Ishara' does. Hence, he has given the book a different name! Says the writer, "every language has its own Saraswati and one has to be a devotee of the language." He was once invited to a workshop where writers were being taught to translate works from other languages. He found that very few of them were actually interested in sincerely learning the craft.

At present he is busy retouching his books for the Penguin edition and writing his childhood memoirs. While recounting to us the columns that he wrote for the *Shankar's Weekly*, he remarked, "You are young. This happened a long time ago."

That is true, when compared to such great men, I am but a child.

Papiya Bhattacharya

Most 'eagerly awaited' author

Dinesh Rathod tells the tale of how a professor of mathematics penned a million dollar novel

IT began with a news agency report, about an Indian professor of mathematics at the University of Maryland being offered a five-million-dollar advance for his debut novel. Then came the amendment that, no, in fact the US rights went for a lesser figure -- $350,000. Thereafter, the hype picked up with a stream of gushy teasers in the international press and on the net. The venerable Time magazine declared *The death of Vishnu* to be "one of the most eagerly awaited books" of the new millennium.

Yet, when Manil Suri visited Bombay recently to release his novel, the reception was muted. Except for two book-reading sessions, one at the American Centre and the other at a bookstore, the city could not care much for the man who grew up in a run down building at Kemps' Corner.

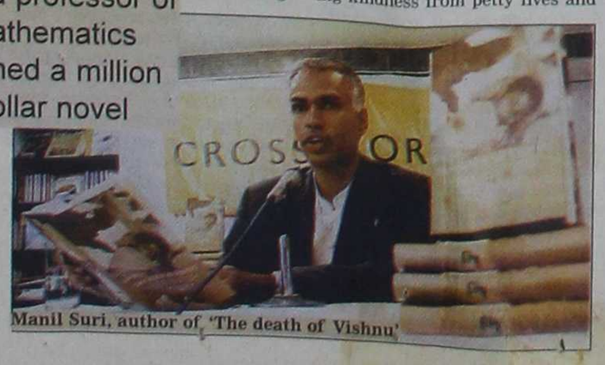
The novel too is set there. "Vishnu was a real person," the author insists. "He lived on our building landing and lay around chewing paan. He ran errands for my mother and greeted me with a 'salaam baba'. In 1994, he fell sick, and although there was some talk about getting an ambulance, he just died."

In the novel, as vishnu lies comatose below the staircase other characters stir to life. There is a Mrs Asrani who derives karmic fulfilment from giving Vishnu his morning tea. The bodily stink from the landing also draws Mrs Pathak who does her bit by nourishing Vishnu with leftovers.

As confusion prevails, Vishnu's life whirs by on a private screen. It is a gentle awakening. Writes Suri: "The light shines through the landing window. It plays on Vishnu's face. It passes through his closed eyelids and whispers to him in red. The red is everywhere, blanketing the ground, colouring the breeze."

If at first it is the red of Holi, evoking painful memories of a violent father, soon it transforms into the red of his old lover's room. But throughout this flood of memories, he hears echoes of his mother's words: "You are Vishnu, keeper of the universe, keeper of the sun..."

Therein lies a clue to the spirit of the novel. Vishnu emerges as the keeper of the building, extracting kindness from petty lives and playing catalyst in spiritual awakenings. So even as he visits his past in that kaleidoscopic red, stories are coaxed out of the flats above.



Manil Suri, author of 'The death of Vishnu'

Clearly, these too have been drawn from Suri's first-hand experience: "When my parents arrived in Bombay soon after Partition (in 1947), they moved into a single room of a large flat. There were constant skirmishes over the common kitchen and bathroom. My childhood was a fight for space."

Suri's father was an assistant to music directors Laxmikant-Pyarelal and Madan Mohan. His mother was briefly secretary to Indira Gandhi and then a teacher at Clare Road Convent. Manil, himself, went to Campion School, Jaihind College and the Institute of Science.

"In those days, everyone did medicine and engineering," recalls the 41-year-old author. "So I vaguely considered research. In my class at the Institute of Science, seven out of 12 students were trying to go abroad. I did too. And I landed in the United States, at Carnegie Mellon."

The next stop was at the University of Maryland, where he teaches "everything from calculus up". Whenever he found time, he wrote letters to his mother and on an eventful week, at least four bulging envelopes took the journey from Maryland to Bombay.

"My mother saved all 2,500 letters, counted every word, compiled statistics and approached the Guinness Book," says Suri, who has woven a similar anecdote in the novel. "When they turned her down, she approached the Limca Book of Records. And there we are -- Most Letters from son to Mother!"

In 1992, he started writing a novel with the death of Vishnu planned as the ending. But the beginning "took off in its own direction" and the characters turned increasing bizarre and complex. He abandoned the project, wondering if he should just concentrate on mathematics.

But Vishnu was saved from a second demise by a string of coincides -- a writing workshop, a fresh burst of confidence and the Pathaks and Asranis started talking again. He sent the final draft to his agent in January 2000 and left for Bombay on a holiday, not expecting things to move in months. "Three days later, my agent e-mailed me," he exclaims. "A number of publishers were interested and an auction had been planned. My parents and I would sit by the phone and wait for the entertainment to start. Finally I accepted a $350,000 advance from W.W. Norton." The rest is history.

Maharaja Features