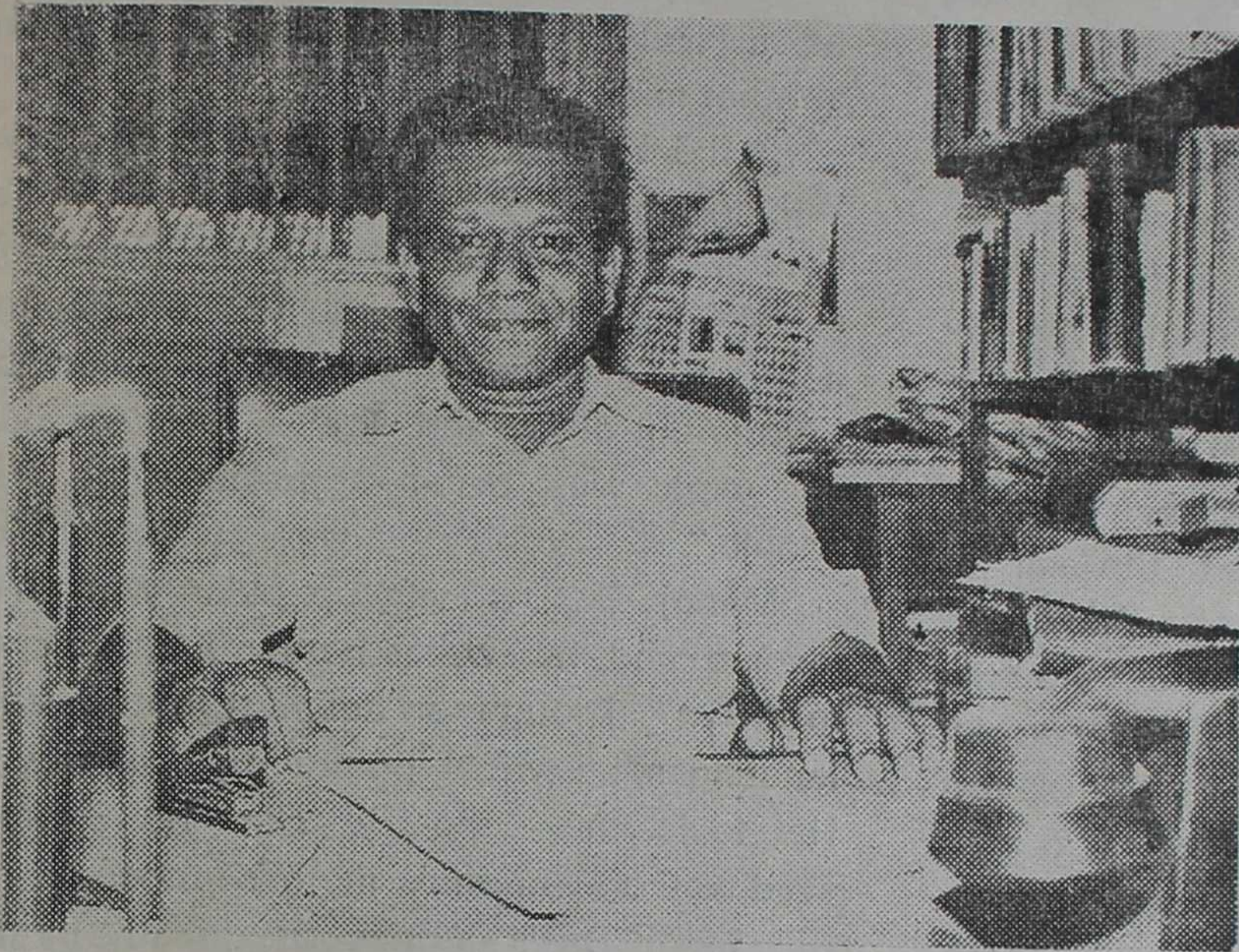


MANOJ DAS

AT HOME IN PONDICHERRY



[Being an english language publication from Orissa we just had to feature Manojbabu—our leading english writer. Here is the writeup sent in by our man in Pondy. —E. D.]

In a remote village of Balasore district, named Sankhari, Manoj Das was born on the twenty seventh of February, 1934. He showed an immense interest in writing right from a tender age. Today, he is one of our most popular writers. Sri Das is read widely all over the country and his writings have also reached thousands in the west. He is the envy of many a writer as he possesses a rare, natural ability to rouse the literary interests of readers from the age of eight to eighty. He was awarded the Central Sahitya Akademi Award in 1972, and is also the recipient of the Orissa Sahitya Akademi Award and the Prajatantra Vishuv Milan Award in 1965 and 1971 respectively. Manoj Das was a professor in English literature for some time but later he joined the ashram at Pondicherry set up by the

Mother and Sri Aurobindo. Prof. Das teaches English literature to the students in the ashram's centre of education.

He lives on Dharmaradja Covil Street and is a resident of Pondicherry for the last fourteen years. I went to meet him one pleasant evening and we spent an hour together. I sat in one of the four cane chairs that were arranged in a circle on his verandah, while he occupied the one just in front of mine. A magazine and a couple of newspapers were lying on the tea-poy. Against the walls of the verandah were massive almirahs containing volumes and volumes of books. In one of the rooms attached to the verandah, I could hear the constant tip-tap of a typewriter. It was very quiet otherwise. Prof. Das caught me eyeing his almirahs and explained hurriedly that he

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had not even read half the books arranged neatly on those shelves. Also he was a very slow reader and it would take him his entire lifetime to go through all of these books.

We were comfortably seated and Prof. Das answered my first query—how he spent a day in his life. An early riser, Manoj Das is in his kitchen by four in the morning preparing the first cup of tea himself. He always does so, though his wife stays with him. Soon he is on the fields or on the running track doing exercises. By six-thirty he has a bath and goes to the ashram samadhi to offer his prayers. Next, he prepares for his classes. For the following three hours, he is busy with his classes. Then, after a simple lunch and a bit of rest he is in his study room attending to mail, reviewing books, and all his urgent work. At six in the evening, he leaves his desk. He goes out, sits a while at the samadhi and returns home.

He goes back to work again. At this time, he does some light writing, writes for Chandamama or any article, etc.

"I always write for children," he smiled. "It gives me joy to know that I have contributed something to their world, no matter how little it is. I feel it is a duty to write for them," and naturally his stories for children are exciting and colourful.

After dinner, he spends two more hours at his desk.

"I do all the serious work at night. Sometimes I attempt at creative writing or do any kind of serious and difficult work that demands quiet and concentration. And then I go to bed," and he slid down a bit on his chair.

For a few moments we were quiet. Even the typewriter was still now. After a minute or so I broke the silence.

"Did you find it difficult to be accepted as a writer?" He responded only after another minute had elapsed.

"I did not make any positive effort, really. Writing always fascinated me and I felt a natural urge to write. When I was a student in college, I used to write for newspapers and sometimes I was given regular columns. I wrote out of joy and soon I realised that my work was being appreciated by the people."

Manoj Das is very popular with his readers and he writes both in English and in Oriya. Though an adept at both these languages, he writes poetry only in Oriya. He feels that, "poetry can be expressed well only in one's mother-tongue."

Manoj Das's stories are greatly influenced by Indian literature—mythology and folklore. Many of his characters are drawn from the past or are the persons he has met in life.

"I am proud of our ancient heritage. It is studded with gems all through the ages and its glory and magnanimity have left me baffled!" A state of excitement had gripped him and his voice had become a bit louder. He gesticulated with his hands all the time he spoke. Without a stop, I asked him about the future of Indo-Anglian writing. How would our literature be in times to come.

"I'll tell you about the present form of writing" he said. "Indian writers tend to be very superficial and their writings are governed by commercial motives."

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tantric bomb) by his enemy and therefore suffers a sudden ailment or misfortune. Of course the inflicted person hires a sorcerer who can overcome the bomb and the merry-go-round keeps on turning.

How does a common villager become a sorcerer? First he has to find an established *gunia* who will accept him as a disciple. Then he has to undergo frightening courses of instruction at the burning grounds and learn to recite mantras without any mistakes. When he is considered ready he will sit for his exams at the burning grounds and approach the deity for power and boons. He will take with him a lot of sweets as offering and maybe a chicken or some small animal for sacrificial purposes. He has to recite a hundred and eight verses of mantras and by the time he finishes these, his sweets too would all have been finished by greedy little spirits. Finally the deity would appear and demand some sacrifice and sometimes the neophyte has to cut his skin and symbolically offer a few drops of his own blood. Only then are the powers granted. But if there is even a slight mistake in performing the rites or reciting the mantras the consequences are disastrous to the aspirant. In Matia's village of Fakirpada, mentioned earlier, there is a dhobi who attempted to become a sorcerer but midway through the ritual he panicked and forgot the mantras. The poor man was being beaten to death by the 'betalas'-(little spirits) but escaped with his life due to the intervention of his guru who was nearby. The dhobi lost his robust health soon after this harrowing experience and now cannot venture out even in daylight to any place where there are no other human beings around. These failures are known as 'khandis' and the little spirits always lie in wait for them. That is, if there is any truth in this whole affair, as any villager will vehemently affirm. □

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I asked him how the future would be like. "Well, potentially, the future of our writing is great. Indian culture should be presented to the entire world, and English is the only channel of communication. There are certain truths that are found only in Indian culture, and English shall help the people to get a glimpse of these truths. Certainly, the future is bright if such attitudes can be taken up by Indian writers."

He relaxed on his chair and seemed more comfortable now. I asked him why he stayed in Pondicherry and led a simple life in the ashram. Without any hesitation he replied, "I am very content here. I see no reason why I should stay anywhere else. Here, I have come in contact with the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, and I believe it is one true benefit I have earned."

"So you shall never go back to Orissa?"

"I don't think about it anymore. Maybe I will, maybe not. But I am quite satisfied here."

Prof. Das's recent accomplishment was "Crocodile's Lady and Other Stories." He is pleased with the success it brought him. At present, he has just finished writing "Fantasies and Fables for Adults." He expects it shall do well too.

Before leaving, I asked him for a word of advice to young, aspiring, writers of today.

"A writer should always steer clear of false influences and ideas. He must choose the right path. Indian tradition should never be neglected. Sooner or later, he is bound to be accepted in the literary world, but he should be true to himself."

—MAURICE (Sept '77)