

ORISSA'S LITERARY GENIUS

He is still chasing his rainbow. But its arc has changed in time. He was a columnist in leading newspapers and magazines, he is one of India's ablest interpreters of literary and cultural heritage and his literary works in Oriya and English have made him a hugely successful bi-lingual writer in the country.

But for the last one decade Manoj Das, who was recently conferred Sahitya Akademy's highest honour – a Fellowship "reserved for immortals of literature," has busied himself with projects like Sahitya Akademy's Mythical, legendary and literary antiquities of India and editing the historical *Yogic and Mystic Experiences*. He is planning on an English novel pegged on India in transition and his quest today is a spiritual one – a far cry from his days as a Communist.

"Chasing the rainbow began in infancy and the chase continues. Only the meaning has changed from time to time. Everybody is driven by an urge to chase a rainbow – it is a dream or an ideal. Today my rainbow is to know myself and I ask myself simple questions like why was I born, why do I suffer, why do chances and coincidences occur to overshadow one's personal way and why does one die," says the litterateur who was conferred the Padmashri in 2000, recounting the opportunities and events he enjoyed in his 74 years.

He frowned as he reflected on

One of Orissa's famous sons, Manoj Das is a stalwart of Oriya and English literature. SWATI DAS profiles the veteran litterateur as he shares nuggets from his journey

current Indian writers. "Literature is an expression. There are plenty of literary talents in India. But there are not enough opportunities for these talents to surface. Today's writing has become commercialised. My anguish is most of them (writers) are not reflections of the genius of India – they do not project the Indian genius. They lack vision. Hype and publicity play a major role than serious writing or reviews. These books are believed by people outside (the country)," says the writer who began writing in English only after reading a book where a "cynical" writer made a "poor" portrayal of rural India.

Das was a regular columnist for English and Oriya dailies *The Times of India*, *The Hindustan Times*, *The Hindu*, *Samaj* and *Dharitri*. But his favourites were *The Illustrated Weekly*, *The Statesman* and *The Imprint*, where his writings were a regular feature. He was the editor of the English monthly *The Heritage* (1985-89) and served the Ministry of Education, Singapore as its author-consultant (1981-85).

His *Stories of Lights and Delights* in 1970 published by National Book Trust is still the largest selling

children's book. Along with his friend Ruskin Bond, he worked for *Chandamama* (1970s-80s), churning out stories for children. Even today, *Chandamama* bears the name of the two authors.

Das captivated readers with simplicity of his language and style, born out of a charming rustic childhood in a village by the sea in Orissa. Since 1963, attracted by Sri Aurobindo's philosophy, he has made Puducherry (Pondicherry) his home. Like all other villages and towns Pondicherry has changed. When he came, not a single hotel existed. Now they have mushroomed. The former French colony is crowded and polluted. The (Sri Aurobindo) Ashram is teeming with tourists.

"Yet there is something spiritual and mystic about Pondicherry that will never change – an inner Pondicherry. The city is harmonious and people are courteous," says the writer. He teaches English Literature and works of Aurobindo at the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education, while his wife Pratijna Devi teaches psychology.

"I stopped writing columns (*The Hindu*) 10 years back. Deadlines were becoming too tedious for me," he says. Looking for newspapers at a newsstand in New Delhi one morning few years ago, he noticed *The Pioneer* with a blurb "Three short stories of Manoj Das". He was surprised.

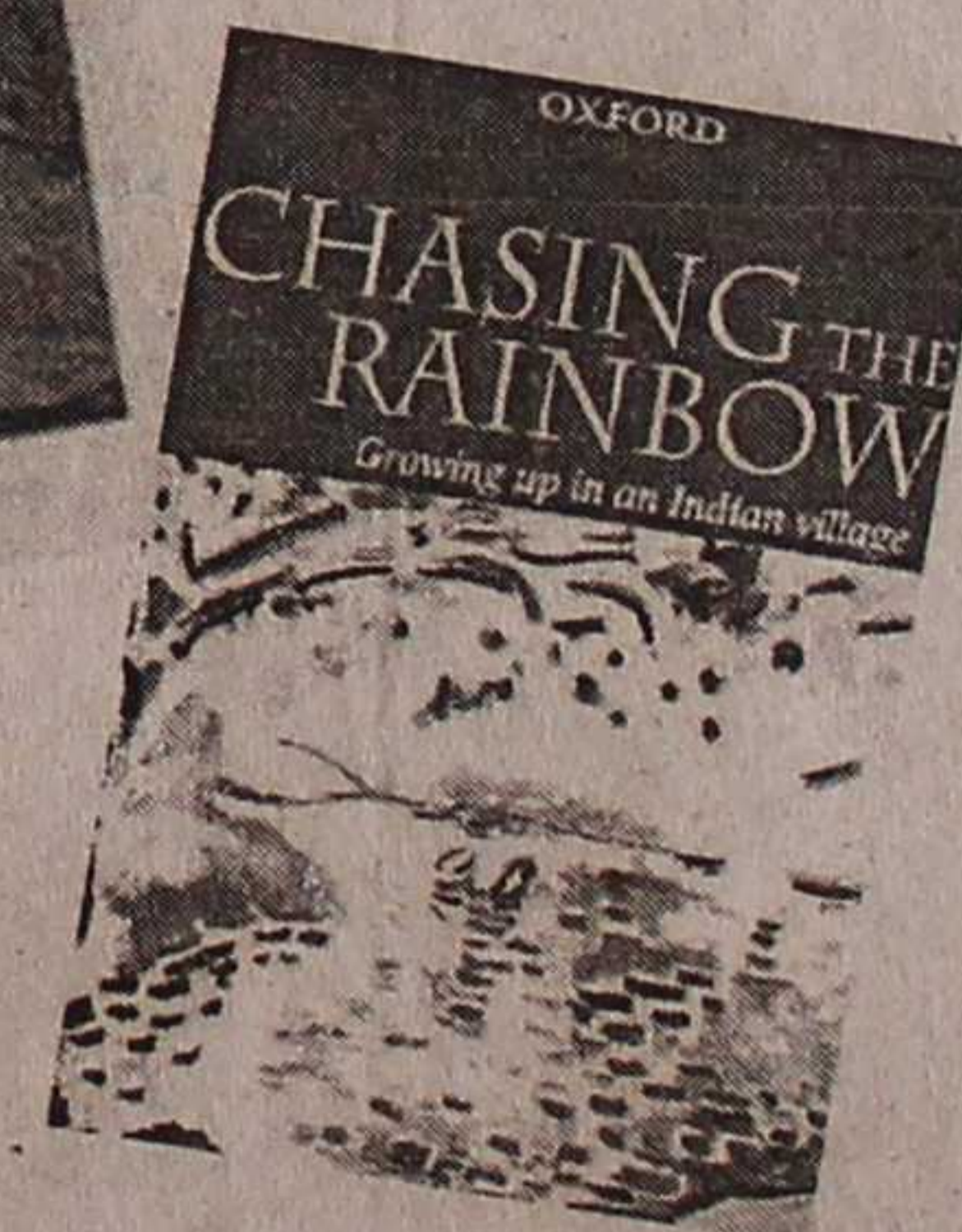
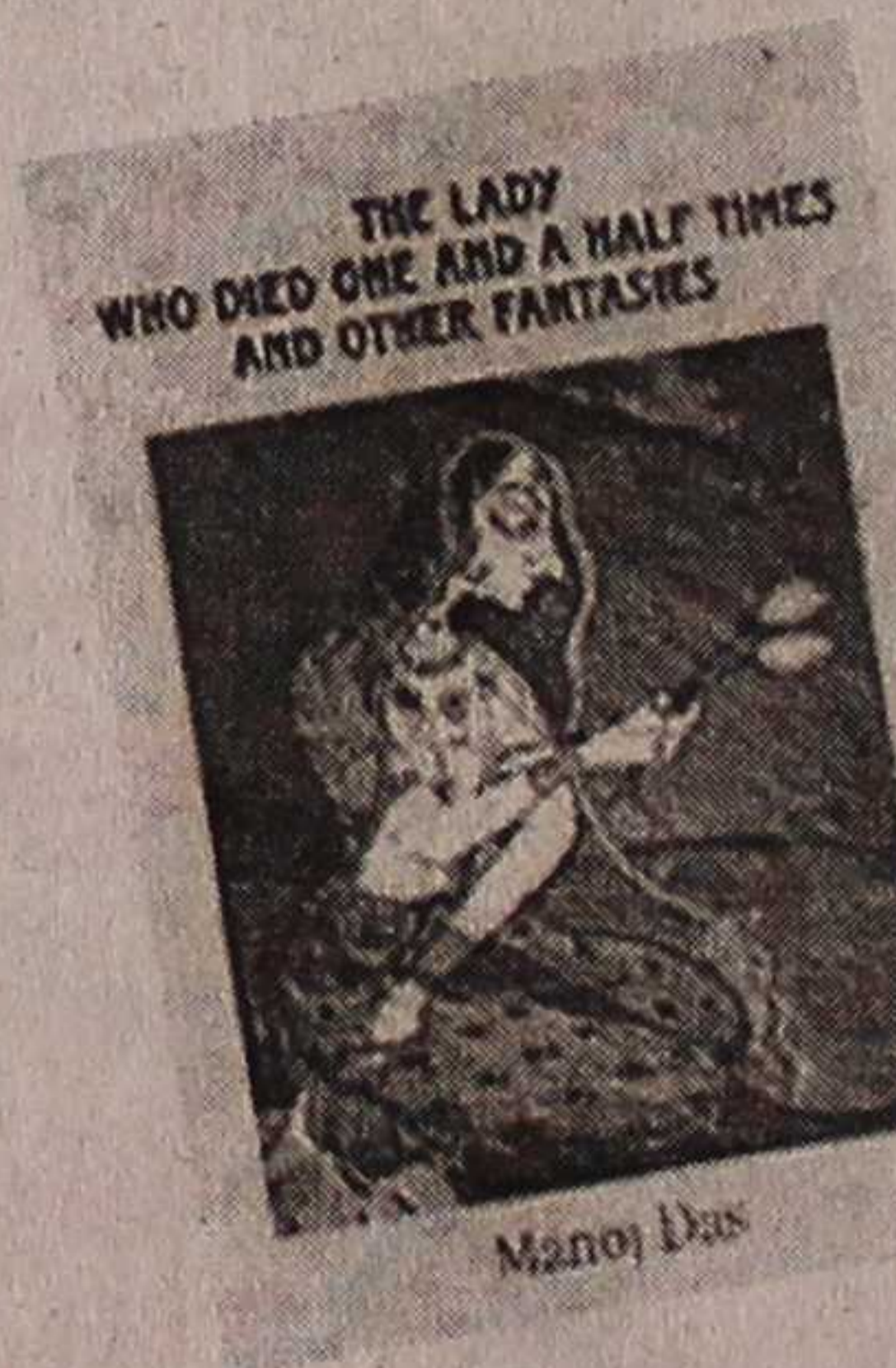
"Today there are hardly any newspapers or magazines that encourage creative writing. There are no short stories, poems or essays in them. This is why we are unable to tap the literary talent in the country. It is a betrayal of the creativity and of young Indian writers who need a forum to reveal their talents," he said



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regional writers. Das himself had benefited from this. But only two journals publish translated writings today – *Anubhat Patrika* in Bengali and *Vipula* in Telugu.

Das was decorated



unhappily.

"Journalism has gained from literature. Literature has given good journalists to this country. But they (journalists) do not give space for creative writing. Ironically, it is journalism that can give the best that the nation has," said the writer.

"True literary genius can be found in regional languages," he observed. Translation of literary works from one language to another provides exposure for young writers – especially

with Saraswati Samman and Orissa's Utkal Ratna. His awards include Sahitya Akademi Award, Orissa Sahitya Akademi Award (twice), Sahitya Bharati Award (Orissa), Bharatiya Bhasha Parishad Award (Kolkata) and BAPASI (Booksellers and Publishers Association of South

India) Award. Among the honours: Professor Emeritus by Berhampur University and D Litt. (Honoris Causa) from two universities – Utkal and Fakir Mohan. In 2000, he led the Indian writers' delegation to China. Among his western admirers are scholars Graham Greene and HRF Keating.

The litterateur was born in the coastal village of Shankhari in Balasore district of Orissa, bordering West Bengal. His father Madhusudan Das was one of the few Oriya zamindars of the region who travelled on horseback and his mother Kadambini Devi a poet who travelled in a palanquin. He grew up running around the green meadows in-between tall palms, munching on delicious berries – water berries, barriers from cane trees, berries from creepers on sand dunes etc.

He was witness to the killer cyclone in 1942, followed by the great famine. His house was attacked twice by dacoits and his family watched helplessly as the dacoits plundered the house. His childhood has been recorded in his autobiographical *Chasing The Rainbow – Growing Up In An Indian Village*.

He often narrated his observations to his friends in school and gradually began to write them down. His first book in Oriya was published when he was only 14. At 15, he launched his first Oriya literary journal Diganta. He completed his schooling in Jamalpur and college in Balasore, where he emerged as a popular revolutionary youth leader. He also worked as an English lecturer in Cuttack before moving to Puducherry.

He has written 40 books each in English and Oriya.