

PROFILE

A cyclone in the mind

From a card-carrying Communist to a votary of Sri Aurobindo's mystical teachings, Manoj Das has finally discovered the "miracle of language". Nilova Roy Chaudhury met the bi-lingual author who has just won the prestigious Saraswati Samman

WORDS flow as in a stream from him, the gentle cadence rising and falling as he conjures up the most visual of images through his speech.

As he speaks, of devastation wrought by cyclones in his childhood in a remote village close to the Orissa-Bengal border, and the destruction of the most recent super-cyclone of 1999, the images appear before the listener, giving him the feel of being transported to the place described.

Manoj Das, a doyen of Indo-Anglian and Oriya literature, whose facility with the English language is incredible, is a wonderfully graphic speaker. Das did not have the advantage of an English-medium education, which makes his ease with the language all the more remarkable.

A prolific writer and Sahitya Akademi awardee, Das was recently given the Padma Shri by the government for his services to Indian literature, and has been selected for this year's Saraswati Samman award for his Oriya novel, *Amrita Phala* (the nectar fruit). The novel deals with man's existentialist dilemma and poses the question, how much does modern man differ from his ancestor in his primeval longing for truth, bliss and immortality?

"Sankhari village, where I was born (in 1934) was endowed with extraordinary natural beauty,"



Manoj Das: The memory of the cyclone in 1942 — the picture of so many starving people — still rankles

Das recalls. There were two natural lakes teeming with lotuses, one red and one white, dominating the vast green meadows between his home, the one *pucca* building in the area, and the sea. Sankhari village is located in northern Balasore district of Orissa, adjoining Midnapore district in Bengal.

A devastating cyclone swept through the village when he was eight. Only his house survived. The subsequent misery of hundreds of famine-afflicted people, many collapsing and dying of hunger by the wayside, left him traumatised. "The vision of so many starving people really rankled," recalls Das. His recent English novel, *Cyclones*, recounts in some measure the destruction wrought by the cyclone in 1942, set against the backdrop of pre-Partition India, while simultaneously evoking the reactions of intense storms, both internal and external, and their impact on the mind and development of the protagonist of the novel, the idealist scion of a zamindar family, Sandip Chowdhury.

Speaking about the difference that most struck him about the 1999 cyclone (*vis-a-vis* the 1942 one), the author said, "Trees are the guardians of villages. In 1999, not a single tree in the coastal

villages remained erect, leaving them completely desolate. Entire villages were orphaned." Part of the most affluent family in the area, Das's home was raided by dacoits one night and the family's riches looted, suddenly reducing the inherited wealth, so much so that the future appeared bleak. This was another jolt to the impressionable young mind, one that gradually helped him to become detached from material goods. But the most telling blow, according to the author, one that left him groping for the real truth behind the facade of reality, was, surprisingly, the death of Stalin, the Soviet dictator. Like most young men and women of the age, when in college Das became a card-holding member of the Communist Party, probably the youngest to be so actively involved in the students' union. By this time he had begun to write poetry. His first collection of poems, *Shatabdira Artanada*, in Oriya, was published in 1949, when the author was a student in class IX. In 1956, involved as he was in the students' and peasants' demonstrations, (he had to go underground for a while and was in jail in 1955 on charges of sedition and attempting to overthrow the government) Das

was included in the Indian delegation to the Afro-Asian Students' conference at Bandung in Indonesia.

At Bandung he heard on the radio Nikita Krushchev speaking on the horrors perpetrated by Stalin. "Comrade Stalin could do no wrong for us followers, he almost had the place of God," recalls Das, "and to hear of those horrors left us shell-shocked." "There is no state of non-belief," says Das, and, after the mental upheaval caused by Stalin's fall from grace, he searched for various causes to believe in and pondered over the nature of suffering, till he read some of the writings by Sri Aurobindo. "His exposition of Man as a transitory, evolving being, and my quest into the nature of suffering and the meaning of life drew me to the Mother at the Aurobindo Ashram at Pondicherry in 1963." Since then he has mostly lived there, as a member of the teaching faculty. He travels outside to give lectures in various universities or to collect doctorates and other honours, and is also a member of the general board of the Sahitya Akademi.

During this period of quest, Das discovered what he calls "the miracle of language and the miracle of communication which emanates from mystic silence." He took to writing short stories, winning rapid recognition, and found his main vocation. In 1959, he revived a periodical, *Diganta*, as a monthly publication, making it a key forum for creative ideas. When *Dagora*, a distinguished Oriya journal, conducted its silver jubilee survey, Manoj Das was acknowledged as among the foremost forces in current literature, on the basis of his widely-popular short stories.

Since then, Das has been the recipient of numerous literary honours, including the Orissa Sahitya Akademi Award in 1965 and again in 1989, the Sarala Award in 1980, besides the most recent recognition, the Saraswati Samman, which was conferred on him last month. Manoj Das has been a prolific writer over the years, with over 20 books of stories in English, including the delightful *Stories of Light and Delight* for children, over a dozen story collections in Oriya, besides novels, collections of poems, travelogues and belles lettres, inviting immense critical and popular acclaim. He has also written authoritative treatises on Sri Aurobindo, besides writing a regular column for several national dailies, including *The Statesman*.

Das counts Graham Greene and HRF Keating among his fans, and several of his books are now part of the syllabi in universities teaching modern Indian literature.