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Sahitya Akademi

invites you to

meet the author

Manoj Das





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?

A devastating cyclone in 1942, followed by a terrible famine in his native region—the northern Balasore of Orissa and the adjoining Midnapore district of Bengal—woke Manoj to these questions at the tender age of seven. As much as the external events can mould one's quest, the experiences of human misery all around him have certainly played their role in setting before him the priorities of life. It must however be emphasised that Manoj Das believes that external events can only serve as a scope for the fulfilment of one's inner needs, the psychic demand, for the same set of circumstances can arouse totally different emotions in two individuals.

Yet another traumatic experience must have wrought its impact on his creative sensibility in its budding. His was the most affluent house in a cluster of remote villages miles away from the solitary seasonal bus-stop or the railway station. Manoj's childhood had been idyllic, amidst villagers remarkable for their innocence and spontaneous goodwill. 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.

How fickle indeed was luck! — the young Manoj could not but have wondered.

When a student at Balasore Zilla School, he turned a Marxist, for that way was to be secured the panacea for human misery—he felt sure. Poetry had already started surging up in him and his first collection of poems, *Shatabdira Artanada* (1949) had been published when he was in Class IX. Next year he brought out a periodical—*Diganta*. (He revived this magazine in 1959 as a regular monthly and it became a splendid medium of creative ideas. After he left Orissa for Sri Aurobindo Ashram at Pondicherry, it continued to be published, though as occasional anthologies, under the editorship of the noted poet Sachi Routroy.)

In his college days Manoj Das found himself caught up in the political vortex of the fifties—willingly or willy-nilly—leading student's and peasant's demonstrations, spending a term in jail at Cuttack and, in 1956, taking an active part in the Afro-Asian Students Conferences at Bandung.

Meanwhile he had taken to short story writing—winning rapid recognition. When *Dagora*, a distinguished Oriya journal, conducted a survey on the occasion of its Silver Jubilee in 1962 to find out who, according to critics, contributed most to different genres of post-Independence Oriya literature, Manoj Das was the youngest to be acknowledged as one of the foremost forces in current writing—for his short stories. (The *Dagora* Silver Jubilee Award was followed by several other recognitions: The Orissa Sahitya Akademi Award in 1965, the Prajatantra Visuv Milan Awards in 1971 and 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, etc.)

His understanding of the problems of suffering had entered a new phase by the early sixties. The external situations, he stood convinced, were not the sole cause of suffering. On the other hand they were often, if not always, the projection of something that was



Receiving Sahitya Akademi Award (1972) from Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterji.

amiss in the consciousness of man. Can the hidden source of maladies be identified? Can philosophies lead one to their discovery? He wondered and began his exploration in that realm in the course of which he read Sri Aurobindo. The Master'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 transcend it and rise to a higher phase in evolution, brought him a new awakening and optimism.

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

Even since his first collection of short stories in English was published in 1967, he has been considered a powerful Indo-Anglian writer. As a British critic, A. Russell, wrote, "There is little doubt that Manoj Das is a great storyteller to the sub-continent and he has too few peers, no matter what yardstick is applied to measure his ability as an artist ... He shows how powerfully all artifices of story telling can be used to write a story in realist genre without any attempt at being faithful to the photographic details of facts. His world has the fullness of human psyche: with its dreams and fantasies, its awe and wonder, the height of sublimity can

be courted by the depth of the fictive. He proves that reality is richer than what realists conceived it to be."

If Graham Greene found great pleasure in the elements of "mystery" in his stories, another famous writer, H.R.F. Keating, wonders which of his stories appeals to him most, for "every five minutes my mind changes," he writes, paying tribute to the excellence in every individual story of Manoj Das.

Why did Manoj Das take to writing in English? To a question to this effect in an interview, he says, "At one stage I felt inspired to write in English because I was haunted by the feeling—if I do not sound presumptuous—that much of the Indo-Anglian fiction that claimed to project the Indian life and situation was not doing justice to its claim. Born in a village, born just before Independence and hence living through the transition at an impressionable age, I thought that I could present through English a chunk of genuine India. Well, right or wrong, one is entitled to one's faith in oneself." (*The Times of India*, 18 May 1980).

Another question and his answer to it is relevant here.

"You are a bilingual writer. In which language do you think while formulating a story?"

"In the language of silence, if I do not sound vague. Let me explain. A fiction writer is first moved by

experience or inspiration. I allow this experience or inspiration to 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 should I write? Well, that depends on some immediate factors. If I have promised a story to an English magazine, or if the magazine I edit, *The Heritage*, needs a story, I write in English. If I have promised a story to my Oriya publishers, I write in Oriya. Most of my stories figure in both the languages." (*Literature Alive*, The British Council, June 1988)

Although Manoj Das says that he only strayed into children's literature, his books of that genre (such as *Stories of Light and Delight*, NBT) are among the best selling books. His regular weekly column in *The Hindustan Times*, "The Banyan Tree", was a most popular feature. His manifold activities included his exploration in the archives of London and Edinburgh (resulting in his work *Sri Aurobindo in the First Decade of the Century*) and visiting Singapore twice every year during 1982 and 1985 as a consultant to the island-republic's ministry of education, and editing the prestigious monthly *The Heritage* (1985-1989).

He is acknowledged as an authentic interpreter of India's cultural and spiritual heritage.

A SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

IN ENGLISH

COLLECTION OF STORIES

- A Song for Sunday and Other Stories. Madras : Higginbothams, 1967, 105 p. 18 cm.
- Short Stories by Manoj Das. Madras : Triveni Publishers, 1969, 139 p. 18.5 cm.
- The Crocodile's Lady and Other Stories. New Delhi : Sterling Publishers, 1975, 194 p. 19 cm.
- Fables and Fantasies for Adults. New Delhi : Orient Paperbacks, 1978, 133 p. 16 cm.
- Man Who Lifted the Mountain and Other Stories. Fareham : Spectre Press, 1979, 22 p. 21 cm.
- The Vengeance and Other Stories. New Delhi : Sterling Publishers, 1980, 106 p. 21.5 cm.
- The Submerged Valley and Other Stories. Malmerbury : Batstone Books, 1986, 159 p. 18 cm.
- The Dusky Horizon and Other Stories. New Delhi : B.R. Publishing Corp., 1989, 140 p. 22.5 cm.

FOR CHILDREN

- Temples of India, Bombay : India Book House, 1970, 68 p. 18 cm.
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At a convocation

Tales from Many Lands,
Bombay : India Book House,
1972, 60 p. 18.5 cm.

Persian Tales of Wit and
Delight, Bombay : India Book
House, 1972, 60 p. 18.5 cm.

Books For Ever, New Delhi :
National Book Trust, 1973, 64 p.
20 cm.

Rivers of India, Bombay : India
Book House, 1975, 58 p. 18 cm.

A Bride Inside a Casket
and Other Stories, Singapore :
Times Books International,
1981, 71 p. 21 cm.

International Edition,
London : W.H. Allen, 1985, 94 p.
18 cm.

MISCELLANEOUS

Sri Aurobindo in the First Decade
of the Century, Pondicherry : Sri
Aurobindo Ashram Trust, 1972,
207 p. 20 cm.

Sri Aurobindo, New Delhi : Sahitya
Akademi, 1972, 82 p. 22 cm.

NOVEL

Cyclones, New Delhi : London :
New York : Sterling Publishers,
Orient University Press, Facet
Books International, 1987, 182 p.
22 cm.

IN ORIYA

COLLECTION OF STORIES

(1st Editions only)

Samudrara Kshudha,
Balasore : N.U. Press, 1951, 24
p. 24 cm.

Jibanara Swada, Cuttack :
Nabayug Granthalaya, 1953, 58
p. 18 cm.



At home

Bishakanyara Kahani, Puri :
1954, 84 p. 18 cm.

Aranyaka, Cuttack : Friends
Publishers, 1961, 118 p. 18 cm.

Sesha Vasantara Chithi,
Cuttack : Vidyapuri, 1966, 116 p.
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Cuttack : Friends Publishers,
1971, 400 p. 22 cm.

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Cuttack : Grantha Mandir, 1974,
110 p. 21 cm.

Abu Purusha, Cuttack :
Grantha Mandir, 1975, 89 p. 21
cm.

Dhumrava Diganta,
Cuttack : Grantha Mandir, 1977,
91 p. 21 cm.

Manoj Panchavimsati,
Cuttack : Grantha Mandir, 1983,
141 p. 21 cm.

Vinna Manisha, Cuttack :
Friends Publishers, 1987, 126 p.
21 cm.

Bulldozers, Bhubaneswar :
Chaturanga Prakashani, 1989,
117 p. 21 cm.

COLLECTION OF POEMS

Satabdira Artanada,
Balasore : N.U. Press, 1949, 36
p. 15 cm.

Biplavi Fakirmohan,
Balasore : 1949.

Padadhvani, Cuttack :
Navayug Granthalaya, 1954, 64
p. 18 cm.

Nandavati Majhi, Cuttack,
Dasarathi Pustakalaya, 1957, 28
p. 18 cm.

Upanibesha, Cuttack :
Jagannath Rath, 1966, 64 p. 22
cm.

TRAVELOGUES

Indonesia Anubhuti,
Cuttack : Janashakti Pustaka-
laya, 1957, 143 p. 18 cm.

Dura Durantar, Cuttack :
Grantha Mandir, 1973, 130 p. 21
cm.

BELLES-LETTRES

Kete Diganta, Vol. I. Cuttack :
Grantha Mandir, 1986, 256 p. 21
cm.

Kete Diganta. Vol. II,
Cuttack : Grantha Mandir, 1986.
418 p. 21 cm.



With environmentalist Sundarlal Bahuguna

CHRONOLOGY

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|---------|--|---------|--|
| 1934 | Born in the sea-shore village, Sankhari, Orissa. | 1963 | Joins Sri Aurobindo Ashram at Pondicherry. Teaches English Literature at Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education. |
| 1948 | Begins contributing to periodicals. | 1965 | Orissa Sahitya Akademi Award for short stories. |
| 1949 | Publication of the first collection of poems. | 1967-68 | Edits <i>World Union</i> . Publication of the first collection of short stories in English. |
| 1950 | Edits <i>Diganta</i> . | 1968-70 | Weekly column in <i>Thought</i> . |
| 1951 | Matriculates from Balasore Zilla School. | 1969-71 | Edits <i>Sri Aurobindo's Action</i> . |
| 1952-54 | Student leader; President of Balasore College Union; Vice-President of the State Students Federation; goes over to Puri College. | 1971 | Prajantra Visuv Milan Award for short stories. Visits U.K., research in the archives in London and Edinburgh. |
| 1954 | Begins contributing to English periodicals. | 1972 | Sahitya Akademi Award for short stories. |
| 1955 | Graduates from Puri College, admitted to L.L. B. course at Cuttack, jailed for political inflammatory speeches. | 1980 | Sarala Award. |
| 1956 | Participation in Afro-Asian Students Conference at Bandung, Indonesia; President of the Law College Union, Utkal University. | 1981-85 | Author-Consultant to the Ministry of Education, Govt. of Singapore. Visits the republic twice a year for taking classes of the teachers for Ethical Studies programme. |
| 1957 | Admission to M.A. in Ravenshaw College; General Secretary of the State Students Federation. | 1983-89 | Weekly column, "The Banyan Tree", in <i>The Hindustan Times</i> . |
| 1959 | Lecturer in English, Christ College, Cuttack. Marriage. Revival of <i>Diganta</i> . | 1985-89 | Edits <i>The Heritage</i> . |
| 1962 | Dagora Silver Jubilee | 1986 | Visuv Grand Award. |
| | | 1989 | Orissa Sahitya Akademi Award for essays. |