

MANOJ DAS : A BILINGUAL AWARD - WINNER

An Interview* by Dr. P. Raja

Pondicherry, just a speck on the map of India, we are surprised to note, continues to be the home of rare yogis, scholars, writers and intellectuals. While history books tell us of sage Agastya and his ashram here, our grandparents and parents have given us eyewitness reports of the *darshans* they had of the Mahayogis Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, and saints like Siddhananda Swamikal and Kambalisamy. Our beloved teachers were elated and excited whenever they reminisced about Subramania Bharathi and Bharathidasan, whom they had the privilege of seeing in flesh and blood when the two immortal poets walked hand in hand on the promenade along the sea. Sahitya Akademi award winners Prapanjan and Ki. Rajanarayanan are among those that Pondicherry looks up to. But today Pondicherrians can take pride for their fellow-citizen Prof. Manoj Das has just been conferred the Padmashri by the President of India. He is believed to be one of those writers whose impact on the readers is deep.

The first Pondicherrian and perhaps the first bilingual writer in the whole of Tamilnadu to be honoured with the Padmashri & Saraswati Samman awards, Prof. Manoj Das is on the English faculty of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education, Pondicherry.

First and foremost a poet, Prof. Manoj Das is an internationally renowned short story writer, novelist, essayist, book critic, columnist, editor, biographer of Sri Aurobindo, researcher and also an enchanting teller of tales for children. A bi-lingual writer, he wields his pen both in his mother tongue, Oriya, and his chosen tongue, English, with equal ease. No wonder he has published about 40 books in Oriya and nearly the same number of books in English. In fact, we need a computer to keep track of his writings, for he started his writing career when he was barely 14, and at 15 he had his first book published.

How old is Prof. Manoj Das? One may be tempted to ask. Well! He is sixty six years young and delightfully breathes the air of Pondicherry ever since he joined the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in his late twenties. His works are internationally acclaimed, published in noted magazines and anthologised in the West, gathered between covers by eminent publishers and praised by distinguished writers like Graham Greene and H.R.F. Keating. Recognised as an able interpreter of Indian literature and culture, he is an optimist who believes in a transformed future of mankind and his writings and talks exude this faith. Here is an excerpt from the interview I had with him after the announcement of the awards :

P. Raja : *You are a rare writer to receive the State Sahitya Akademi award twice. You were also the youngest as well as the first one to receive the Central Sahitya Akademi award for short stories. Orissa, the*

place of your birth, honoured you by giving both its highest awards for creating writing – the Sarala award and the Sahitya Bharathi award among numerous other accolades. And in 1999 you received the BAPASI (Book-sellers and Publishers Association of South India) award as the best English writer of the year along with the present Chief Minister of Tamilnadu, Kalaingar Karunanidhi who received it for Tamil. And now Padmashri award. Can you share with us your feelings about these awards?

Manoj Das : Any writer who receives awards will always say, "well! I did not look forward to any award. It just came." I have no alternative to repeating it, except adding that it is indeed a fact with me. I have always thought about the founding fathers of Indian literature – Vyasa, Valmiki, Thiruvalluvar. What award did they receive? They gave us what they could from the highest peaks of their genius.. What award did Sri Aurobindo receive? Certainly awards could not have inspired them to write what they have written. It was a kind of divine propensity. I do not have any claim to come anywhere near the frontiers of their genius. But I have always written out of a spontaneous feeling. So far as creative writing is concerned, it is something that I could not do without. I took it for granted that writing is one of the natural functions of my life right from my childhood. So far as writings like newspaper columns are concerned, I write it with a social commitment. When awards come, I can certainly say that I am happy. But happiness is a relative term. I just feel sure that my writing is being recognised by some people. That is the satisfaction I get out of it. The Padmashri is not exactly an award, but a special national honour.

P.Raja : *Film makers, it is said, are of two types. One makes commercially successful movies for filling up their coffers. The other makes art movies to fill up their reception halls with awards. What is said of film makers is true of writers too. What do you write for?*

Manoj Das : As I told you, writing for me had been one of my very normal functions in life. And certainly when I write with a social commitment so far as my newspaper columns were concerned, there is no question of expecting any kind of commercial gain out of them. It is a social commitment, because I am a member of the society. As you know flowers bloom on their own. Some flowers are sold in the market. They bring money. And so far as my creative writing is concerned, apart from my basic inspiration which I believe comes from Providence, some flowers go to deities. I offer them to our heritage... I offer them to the Indian literary tradition, to the people of India who deserve much better writing because they have been lucky to be fed by the loftiest literary tradition. So I write

because I must write. And when awards come or when commercially I get something gross in terms of financial benefit, they are welcome, and that's all.

P. Raja : Bilingual writers are only a handful. How would you account for this?

Manoj Das : Well! I believe it is due to the absence of any literary organisation in India to promote it. In some of the advanced countries, they have trained translators. But we do not have... So what happens is, if somebody wants to write beyond his mother tongue, the only language he can take recourse to is English, unless he is also well-versed in another Indian language. And the two idioms are quite different. I mean, we can just translate a work into English but that does not become a part of literature. But I believe that every language has a soul of its own, a presiding aspect of Goddess Saraswathi. And once a writer establishes a kind of rapport with the soul of that language, then the language lets itself to be explored by the writer for his expression. Maybe many people have not tried to submit themselves to that kind of discipline. I did it out of a provocation. I was writing in my mother tongue, Oriya, but, someday someone brought to my notice a piece of writing in English which was acknowledged abroad as an authentic Indian village scene. I found it to be fake. I felt that injustice was being done to India. And that provoked me to write in English because I knew that born and brought up in a village at an impressionable age I can present an authentic atmosphere of the rural life, the rural air of India. And I wrote in English. Since it has been accepted by the people I have been writing.

P.Raja : What lured you to Pondicherry?

Manoj Das : Certainly the presence of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. A darshan I had of the Mother gave me some experience which inspired me to stay on here. And 38 years have passed. I have no regrets. I am grateful to the soil of Pondicherry. It has sheltered me.

P. Raja: What sustains your interest in Pondicherry?

Manoj Das : I love Pondicherry. When I came 38 years ago, Pondicherry was a cosy town. I was told by my local friends, in a lighter vein, that two kinds of spirit bring people here. One is the gross means of intoxication. The other is the spiritual spirit. But times have changed, of course. While nobody comes for the first, more and more people come here for the spirit in the second sense. And there are other pragmatic reasons. Now Pondicherry is a very important place. It has developed incredibly fast. People come here for many different reasons. But I believe Pondicherry has become overcrowded and the authorities must do something about it. But that relates to the external Pondicherry. There is an inner Pondicherry, something that is unique – the Pondicherry of Agastya, Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. Once you develop a link with the inner

Pondicherry, you realize how blessed you are. But outwardly also, the people of Pondicherry are kind, courteous and cultured. Pondicherry has got an atmosphere of its own which is definitely unique. □

*Courtesy : All India Radio, Pondicherry. Dr. P. Raja, 74-Poincare St, Olandai-Keerapalayam, Pondicherry – 605 004 (India).

GANAPATHY

V. Sathvamoorthy

Hi, it is I Ganapathy
A god revered by Hindus
I get things done, good at it.
Before you do anything
You think about me and
Pray to me and it will be done.

There was one schoolgirl
In one of the villages in India.
She was studying plus two –
You know what I mean.
I helped her to succeed
In plus two, that was easy.
I made her study that was it.
She was very happy for having
Passed the exam in the first class.

I thought she came to thank me.
I was listening very carefully
To what she has to say to me.
She did not thank me
But went straight and asked me to
Get her a seat in a medical college.

That was the job of MLAs and
Ministers of the ruling party
Not a job for a stone god
At the end of a small village.

So I told my little girl
Have mercy and leave me alone
So that I can help others
Who can be helped with my powers?
So she let it go at that
And I continued with my job.

Dr. V. Satyamoorthy, is a Baltimore – based computer professional. His father, Prof. K. Sheshadri, a regular IBC supporter and a well-known Political Science scholar, has sent it as he belived : it to be "worth publishing".