

## AN INTERVIEW WITH MANOJ DAS

(Continued from the issue of April 1998)

P. Raja: You spoke about inspiration. Will you explain the idea?

Manoj Das: That is a profound subject. I have written an article in the Sunday magazine section of *The Hindu* (Oct. 6, 1996) showing five streams of literature. I wondered what impelled a Vyasa or Valmiki to write. They had no claim to amenities or rewards as we writers have. They wrote out of their inspiration. Then there are works designed to achieve a worthy goal, like the *Panchatantra*, or the *Jatakas* or *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or Mulk Raj Anand's *Two Leaves and a Bud*. They are inspired works, stimulated by a purpose in the social context. Then there are works which entertain and project life in its vicissitudes. They too are fine—from the *Kathasaritasagara* to many classic novels of our time.

But then comes the fourth stream, literature subordinated to pure commercial motive—with pornography for its forte. The fifth stream is hardly literature—literature for utility. Like art being at the service of decorating a drawing room, certainly nothing wrong, literature here is used to glorify advertising, political manifesto, etc.

As you can easily see, in the first three streams inspiration plays a vital role—along with motivation in the second and the third streams. Of course, the quality of inspiration can be different from stream to stream and then from work to work. But so far as the fourth and fifth streams are concerned, there is nothing but motivation.

Inspiration, needless to say, is much more relevant to poetry. And there are planes and planes of inspiration. Let me show a passage in Sri Aurobindo's epic *Savitri*:

The genius too receives from some high fount  
Concealed in a supernal secrecy  
The work that gives him an immortal name.  
The word, the form, the charm, the glory and grace  
Are missioned sparks from a stupendous Fire;  
A sample from the laboratory of God  
Of which he holds the patent upon earth,  
Comes to him wrapped in golden coverings;  
He listens for Inspiration's postman knock  
And takes delivery of the priceless gift  
A little spoilt by the receiver mind  
Or mixed with the manufacture of his brain;  
When least defaced, then is it most divine. (p. 542)

P. Raja: How do you view the current scene in Indo-Anglian creativity? Don't you think that it is dominated by the third or the second streams you have referred to?

Manoj Das: There is nothing wrong in the third stream dominating the scene. But if the fourth does that, the literary atmosphere gets reduced to that of titillation,

hedonism and snobbery. I'm afraid we are on the verge of such a vulgarisation.

P. Raja: What is the way out?

Manoj Das: The only answer I can give is, those conscious of the situation should be true to themselves. A truly gifted writer must take the vulgarised atmosphere as a challenge to his spirit. He or she must not stoop to cash in on it, but stand above it.

P. Raja: Wouldn't he be left out of the race?

Manoj Das: Race for what?

P. Raja: For recognition...

Manoj Das: Of what worth? Do you believe the readers respect writers who titillate them? They are amused. They look upon them as cheap entertainers only.

P. Raja: Are you sure? Don't people adore the cheap entertainers—say—the filmstars?

Manoj Das: I don't think anybody, apart from fools, adores them. They are fascinated and infatuated. Fascination and infatuation are a very complex law. A fat lot of elements coexist usually—inferiority complex, illusion, envy for the very object of fascination, possessiveness, coveting the person, so on and so forth, but nothing sane and sound, nothing rational. That does not mean that fascination is something supra-rational; it is infrarational.

P. Raja: In any case, if a good writer is not recognised, what effect can he have on the milieu?

Manoj Das: A good writer will not go totally unrecognised, but his circle will be smaller in comparison. In every age, those who keep up and champion the true spirit of any tradition, any discipline, are in the minority. Yes, on second thought, I must hasten to add that in principle a good writer can also go totally ignored. In that case we have to take it as his fate!

P. Raja: I believe you are a good writer who is also recognised...

Manoj Das: Thank you. But, again, by a relatively smaller circle...

P. Raja: You were the first writer in Oriya to receive the Sahitya Akademi Award for short stories, way back in 1972. Your contribution to Oriya short story has been much more after that. After the veteran, the late Surendra Mohanty, you were the second writer to receive the prestigious Sarala Award in 1980.

You have been the first recipient of the recently instituted Sahitya Bharati Award carrying the highest amount so far. Evidently Orissa knows that yours is the highest contribution to contemporary Oriya literature after the late Gopinath Mohanty and the trend-setting poet Sochi Routray, both of whom have been recipients of the Jnanpith Award. Why were you denied some bigger awards given on an all-India basis, which went to a couple of other Oriya writers? I know you through your English writing alone. I can say that no award is too big for you. But in what I have just stated, I have only echoed the sentiments of several Oriya scholars. What have you to say to that?

Manoj Das: How can I say anything at all? Besides, all said and done, those who got such so-called bigger awards might have deserved them. What I can say would sound hackneyed any way—that awards are determined not by any clear measuring rod. They depend on many factors and, I believe most of those, if not all, who receive

awards deserve them, though some who deserve do not receive. So far as I am concerned, believe me, I am least anxious to bag any award.

P. Raja: What motivates you to write?

Manoj Das: My best stories and all my poems (the latter only in Oriya) are written out of creative inspiration; some are written out of simple creative joy; some are out of a commitment to society. The columns I wrote for the newspapers were motivated by the last. My books for the young are mostly out of a sense of duty towards and love for the young. But there are also creative works among my books for children.

P. Raja: For example?

Manoj Das: *The Fourth Friend*, *Legend of the Golden Valley*.

P. Raja: Your novels *Cyclones* and *A Tiger at Twilight* are quite different from each other, yet each is unique, unlike any other novel of the recent years. *Cyclones* is an authentic picture of the transitional rural India of the late forties—with the crumbling feudalism, the collapsing colonialism and the metamorphosis of a remote, little village into a thick town. The change that comes in the consciousness of the villagers is an absorbing realism. But what have you tried to show through the protagonist, Sudhir?

Manoj Das: The spirit of India that is capable of transcending all such changes—if I must be pinned down to defining the character.

P. Raja: *A Tiger at Twilight* reads like a fairytale whereas every situation, every character in it is entirely credible. What have you tried to achieve in it?

Manoj Das: A fusion of the real and the fantastic, resulting in a certain kind of allegory.

P. Raja: You are committed to spirituality. Doesn't that encumber your creative freedom?

Manoj Das: Spirituality brings a touch of freedom from all sorts of encumbrances. It broadens one's understanding and horizon. It cannot be a limiting factor.

P. Raja: Let me be very specific. Can you now write a story like "A Trip into the Jungle" which A. K. Bir made into a powerful film in Hindi as "Aranyaka"—showing the darkness in man?

Manoj Das: No writer can stop at any milestone. I wrote that story at a transitional point in my own quest. I had lost faith in all political and philosophical doctrines, but had not got any alternative faith to support me. A disenchantment with and contempt for man inspired that story. I do not subscribe to that cynicism any more.

P. Raja: What changed your idea of man?

Manoj Das: The vision of Sri Aurobindo—telling us that man is a transitional being, capable of transforming himself, albeit with the intervention of a higher power, the supramental. At the moment we are passing through an evolutionary crisis.

P. Raja: So you are no longer a cynic, but an optimist!

Manoj Das: Can a writer ever be genuinely a cynic? What for and for whom should he write? Every writer is fundamentally an optimist.

(Concluded)

(Courtesy: *Bhavan's Journal*, April 1997)