

Quest for Truth of Life Continues



Oriya writer Manoj Das has been declared the winner of Saraswati Samman for the year 2000 for his Oriya novel Amrita Phala (The Nectar Fruit). The award, instituted by the K.K. Birla Foundation, carries a cash prize of Rs 5 lakh and is given annually to an outstanding literary work, in an Indian language, published in the last ten years preceding the year in which the award is given. The award-winning novel, published in 1996, deals with how much man today differs from his ancestors in his primeval longing for truth, light, bliss and immortality. The quest for an answer to this eternal question forms the theme of this work.

Born in Orissa, in 1934, Manoj Das writes both in English and Oriya. Among the milestones of his life, his first collection of poems was published in 1949 and that of stories in 1951. Till now, he has more than 80 published works to his credit. Currently, he teaches English at Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education at

Pondicherry. The National Book Trust has published two collections of his short stories—Books Forever, Stories of Light and Delight—and the third, a folktale entitled A Bride inside the Casket and other Stories is under publication. Among several honours he has received, the latest is Padma Shri conferred on him on 22 March 2001.

Excerpts from an interview with Shri Bijan Sutar:

Tell us something about your award-winning Amrita Phala.

Though difficult, let me try to present its theme. How much does man today differ from his ancestor in regard to the primeval human longing for truth, light, bliss and immortality? This question is the unpronounced basis of the novel. The story begins with the protagonist Amarnath, a budding entrepreneur (who had sacrificed his love for literature and his quest for the meaning of life at the altar of his thriving business empire), chancing upon a manuscript narrating the life and spiritual adventures of Bhartrihari, the legendary king of Ujjain who turned into a yogi. At the instance of Baladev, a mystic friend of his, Amarnath begins to decipher chapter after chapter of the archaic work. As he does so, his own life unfolds, striking an uncanny but entirely credible similarity between Bhartrihari and himself, not in regard to external events, but so far as their inner significance is concerned.

The novel portrays, almost in parallel lines, the life of Bhartrihari and that of Amarnath, with the alternate chapters devoted to one of them, revealing the under-

currents beneath the trials and conflicts of Bhartrihari of the past and Amarnath of the present. The crisis of our times are symptoms of the same problems of consciousness as those encountered by Bhartrihari some two thousand years ago. But the novel also explores deeper—both the past and the present. And how much does the modern man really understand the deeper and occult psychological imports at work behind his predicament?

What inspired you to write such a book which analyses the present generation?

Of course, the fact that I belong to the present generation! But I believe that 'time' is an indivisible reality at a certain plane. The most important of human experiences, as well as human quest, has not gone through any qualitative change over the centuries.

The environment of which place motivates you more for writing: Pondicherry or your native place?

I think what had motivated me was not any place but a natural urge for writing inherent in me. No doubt, Pondicherry has been an ideal environment for me and has

influenced the direction and quality of my writing.

At what age did you start writing?

I remember having composed a satirical verse targeting somebody, probably at the age of six. But that was no writing. I contributed a poem to a hand-written magazine when a student of Class VI. My first piece was published in a newspaper when I was thirteen and my first book was published when I was fourteen.

Among your publications which one is closest to your heart?

In my consciousness all my creative writing, indeed all together, is only one entity—and close to my heart.

You write both poetry and fiction. Which do you enjoy more when writing?

My answer to the question preceding this is also the answer to this. By the way, while I write fiction in both Oriya and English, I write poetry only in Oriya, my mother tongue.

Themes of your novels are mostly rural oriented. Do they reflect the experiences of your childhood?

That is right.

You have written extensively for children. What inspires you to write books for them?

The children.

How do you visualise the future of children's literature in India?

Frankly, too difficult a question to answer. As I helplessly observe the older generation growing utterly silly in their conduct in politics, commerce and other professions—the entertainment being reduced to a hell-hole of vulgarity, when gambling—that the banana plant has no thorns is heralded as 'knowledge' deserving a lakh of rupees, thereby generously breeding in the young a dangerous covetousness for easy money with far-reaching consequences—and all this sporting the brand name of modernism or progress and patronised by the likes of you and I—and inevitably influencing the impressionable minds—how much can the children's literature, even when expertly written and magnificently produced, be really effective?

However, I trust in the evolutionary nisis working behind all such stupidity, falsehood and hypocrisy of our time and imaginative children's literature, added by this invisible force, has a future. Future alone will show what that future is.

What have you to say about the popularity of Harry Potter among Indian children?

I have no idea about it.