



# A story-teller par excellence

For a writer who has wielded the quill both in English and Oriya with equal facility for more than four decades and who has a Sahitya Akademi award among his honours, 56-year-old Manoj Das is remarkably unassuming.

This was evident from his answers to questions from the audience and his facility in exchanging pleasantries with it at the end of a one-hour lecture he delivered at the Birla Academy of Art and Culture on the invitation of Sahitya Akademi on August 8.

Das expatiated with eloquence and wit upon the sensibilities that shaped his work. He is, like most other writers, admittedly influenced by childhood experiences, chiefly traumatic ones—a devastating cyclone and a dacoity at his affluent home ensconced in the idyllic environs of a remote Orissa village.

Das narrates the agonising experience of a Nobel Prize winning South American poet that triggered off what Wordsworth called “a spontane-

ous overflow of powerful emotions”. He attributes the poet’s homages to motherhood to this sight of a hapless, pregnant woman being jeered by a bunch of rowdy passers-by.

Of course, Das is quick to add that a circumstance, however harrowing it may be, does not necessarily make every person a creative genius. The kernel of creativity has to be there—it only awaits the right moment to sprout.

That brings him to the idea of the subconscious and auto-psychoanalysis. Das cites the legend of a couple of lovers whose efforts to elope in a boat are sabotaged by the girl’s brothers. The brothers get envious of the stranger who tries to take away their beloved sister who has for so long been with them. This, Das says, is a manifestation of a bizarre possessiveness.

While in school, Manoj Das took to Marxism as a panacea for all human misery. In college, he led students and peasant movements. But he never exploited literature to propagate

his ideology.

Manoj Das’ body of work is substantial.

He began with a collection of poems, *Shatabdra Artanada*, in 1949. It was followed by innumerable short stories, both in Oriya and English, a novel, essays and books for children.

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

Das, incidentally, writes in English to present a slice of Indian life for English audiences. A British critic, A. Russell wrote: “... Das is a great story-teller to the sub-continent.... 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.”

Angshuman Das