

Language of silence

The stories of Manoj Das have the fullness of the human psyche. An interview

WHILE formulating a story, I think in the language of silence. Let me explain. I allow this experience or inspiration to become a feeling in me, a process that goes 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 used to edit till recently, *Heritage*, needed a story, I would be writing 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," says Manoj Das.

Das is a bilingual Indian author of more than 50 publications, the winner of Sahitya Akademi (1972) and Sarala Awards (1980). He has won the Oriya Sahitya Akademi award twice — in 1965 and 1989, along with several other awards and recognitions. His highly applauded creations include collections of stories and poems, travelogues, novels, children's literature or philosophical writings — in each of the two languages he writes in — English and Oriya.

Storyteller

Ever since his first collection of short stories in English was published in 1967, he has been considered a powerful Indo-Anglican writer. As a British critic, A. Russell, wrote, "There is little doubt that Manoj Das is a great storyteller of 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 articles of storytelling can be used to write a story in the realist genre without any attempt at being faithful to the photographic details of the 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 the reality is richer than what the realists conceive 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 Das take to writing in English? "At one stage," he says, "I felt inspired to write in English because I was haunted by the feeling that much of the Indo-Anglican fiction that claimed to project the Indian life and situation, was not doing to its claim. I hope I do not sound presumptuous. Born in a village, born just before Independence, and living through the transition at an impressionable

age, I thought I could present a chunk of genuine India. Well! right or wrong, one is entitled to one's faith in oneself."

Aurobindo bhakta

An acknowledged and authentic interpreter of India's culture and heritage as he is, the elegant drawing room of his cute little cottage in Pondicherry, where he had come to stay in 1963, drawn to the spiritual teachings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, exhibits in its splendid silence the robustness of his readings through the hundreds of books on diverse aspects kept in an orderly manner. And the man sitting across the glasstopped table is in himself a store-house of information, experiences and creative expressions.

When a student at the Balasore Zilla School he turned a Marxist, for he felt that was the only way to secure a panacea for human misery. In his college days, Manoj Das found himself caught in the political vortex of the '50s — willingly or willy nilly — leading students' and peasants' demonstrations; spending a term in jail at Cuttack and in 1956, taking an active part in the Afro-Asian Students' Conference at Bandung.

Though he has some regard for socialism as an ideal theoretical premise, Manoj Das puts forward his criticism regarding its practice the world over. He says that the mighty experiment in the erstwhile Soviet Union ought to inform us that socialism cannot be forced down a man's throat before he has realised socialism in his consciousness. Also, its champions cannot ignore the vital truth that creation is characterised by multiplicity and variety and the inevitable psychological need for freedom for one's growth. Freedom being the secret of one's creativity, when this is denied, creativity becomes stunted and distorted. Freedom often breeds anarchy and vulgarity and Soviet literature has been free from such elements. But it is not by choice; its purity is dubious. Freedom from socialist realism may pave the way for an onrush of ugliness but perhaps that is a price worth paying, he feels.

Rejecting realism

Rejecting the concept of socialist realism and calling it an adjective that failed, Manoj Das says that realism is an ever expanding experience and its scope varies from writer to writer. If some climbers have set up three camps, one at the base of the mountain, one at the middle and one at the top, the camper at the base may still find it dusky enough to lie inside his sleeping bag while the middle climber may sit up to face a charming dawn while the climber at the top may already be basking in the early morning sun. One,



Manoj Das: exploring a rich 'reality'

therefore, does not have the right to dismiss the experiences of the other two as unreal.

Dubbing one's freedom of whims, misused as licentiousness, as an illusory one, the writer says that the real freedom is that of the inner spirit, which no social structure or system can curb or deform. In ancient India, one could subscribe to different faiths. One of the world's atheists, Charvaka has been given the status of a rishi in spiritual India. The Avadhutas did not subscribe to any cult at all whatsoever. The tradition has to be revived in the modern context. But two things need to be guarded. "My freedom should not take away the legitimate freedom of others. And, my claims to freedom should be based on inner growth," Das asserts.

Free spirit

As an indomitable expression of human freedom, he strongly advocates the freedom of the press and laments that while over one-sixth of the world's writers are waking up to a new thrill of freedom from fear, the creative genius of over one-sixth of India lies stupefied in terror — fundamentalist or state-perpetrated. He points out that the whole creation is by itself an expression. Hence, the law of expression is a basic potency inherent in nature that can never be neutralised. Even when it is an expression of untruth, it must find its release in order to be contradicted and surpassed. But when suppressed it will make it ten-fold more powerful. Its appearance to strike with the vigour of nemesis is only a question of time. Freedom is God's religion. Infinity cannot be without freedom. "Must man's religion impose a curfew on infinity?" he asks.

Lamenting the fact that basic human consciousness is gradually being dulled today by vulgarisation, consumerism, brutalisation of politics and values at the collective level — Manoj Das observes that cut-throat consumerism is a culture devoted to

stimulating so many hungers and its survival depends on keeping the hungers alive, for, to satisfy them would be self-defeating to it. In this context, he judges the role of the growing eroticism in literature today. Elaborating on this point, he observes that erotic sculpture is not novel to India. But, interestingly, and intriguingly, it was to be seen either on the outer walls of a temple or in a form where its eroticism was totally subdued by its art. It was never known to have created any law and order problem, unlike today.

On the question of man-woman relationships, he observes that the current rampant growth of hedonism or a pleasure-seeking attitude has largely defeated the quest for the purpose of life. The purpose for him is to seek answers to queries like: Who am I? Why am I born? Why shall I die? Whatever be such goals, once determined, the pursuit of them should be the primary activity of a human life.

Personal choice

If some people find it conducive to their way of development and thought, they may go for anything like living together or having children outside wedlock. "Let people have the freedom to decide the choice of their life, and everything will fall in place so long as the sight of the basic purpose of life is not lost," he observes.

Manoj Das has absolute faith in the human genius. He holds that man has not basically altered or become worse, but the rapid change in science and technology has rendered him worse. "Hence, a thrust towards a qualitatively superior human consciousness is needed. A collective aspiration for the supramental consciousness is essential today," he notes.

He ends the two-hour talk echoing the words of a Russian writer, Yevtushenko, "I am merely a forerunner of a mysterious somebody, more gifted, more honest than I."