

AN ADULTHOOD EARNED

HE is a famous figure in Oriya literature. He writes brilliant short stories in English. He won the central Sahitya Akademi award in 1972. He now teaches English Literature at the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education, Pondicherry. His name is Manoj Das.

And it is not unfamiliar to readers of JS. He had contributed several short stories to the magazine, and they have proved popular not only at home, but also abroad. Manoj Das has been published in many magazines and journals in the West, and "The New York Smith" introduced him as "one of the foremost of the new generation of Indian writers."

In his college days, Manoj Das was a zealous Marxist, a fiery orator and an active student leader, who spent a term in jail. In his late twenties, he was voted by the readers of the Oriya monthly, *Dagora*, as one of the writers who had made the greatest contribution to Post-Independence Oriya literature. And in the spring of '63, there was a stir in political and literary circles when Manoj Das chucked up his job, wound up his press and left Orissa to join Sri Aurobindo Ashram at Pondicherry.

The intelligentsia thought that Oriya literature had lost a creative talent. But the last few years have proved that these fears were unfounded. Several collections of his short stories have been published, the most recent being "The Crocodile's Lady" (Sterling Paperbacks, Rs 5.50).

In any collection of short stories, there are bound to be some that stand out more than others. The 18 stories in this collection are no exception. The first three stories, "Farewell to a Ghost", "Mystery of the Missing Gap" and "The Crocodile's Lady" are brilliant. Equally absorbing are "The Concubine", "Operation Bride" (a whimsical little fairy tale) and "The last I heard of them". "Return of the Native" is often quoted as one of his best in-depth studies.

Manoj Das writes with equal ease in both Oriya and English but he says he

never translates from one language into the other. His English has a peculiar Indian flavour, but is effective in evoking the atmosphere of the villages in which most of his stories are set. In his short stories, the author explores what he calls the essential helplessness of man, set against the hostile circumstances of life. However reminiscent that may sound of Hardy, critics prefer



to compare him to O. Henry for his subtle humour and his understanding of the human mind.

He is especially at home when dealing with child-psychology, as can be seen in "A Letter from the Last Spring". Manoj Das has written for children as well as about them, but with "The Crocodile's Lady" he has, in the words of a character in one of his stories, "earned his adulthood" as a writer.

MAMTA CHAUDHRY

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