

## A Storm Rages

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### CYCLONES

by Manoj Das

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Manoj Das has to his credit, in more than one sense of that term, several collections of short stories, published in England and the United States, and much acclaimed there. He won prizes for literature, not only in his state, Orissa, but also in the wider context of India — a Sahitya Akademi award as far back as 1972. One turns to his first novel therefore with great expectations, and one is not disappointed.

The scene of this novel is a village in Orissa, in the district of Balasore to be more precise, though this is not stated in so many words. The time is the last two years of the Second World War and the eve of Indian independence, 1944 to 46. It cannot be said that the villagers in this back of beyond are only men harrowing clods, a maid and her wight whispering by, hardly affected by war's annals and bound to outlast them. A policy of scorched earth on land has its counterpart of burnt boats in a place criss-crossed by streams and right on a shallow sea, and when the boats are burnt the difficulties for the poor villagers are infinitely more than for the Japanese expected to arrive any moment and

actually not turning up!

Hari Chowdhury the feudal lord lives in a world of his own and when his zamindari slips through his fingers because of his invincible laziness seems hardly aware of what is happening. If he cannot get a son by his wife Durgavati he must marry again. "Five years passed and Hari had no greater success with his second wife". Thereupon his first wife who had been away from him all this time sent him a message. "She had given birth to a male child, proving beyond doubt that it was not she who was at fault for not producing an heir for the Chaudhuries. If ever Hari's second wife became a mother, Hari ought not to be under the illusion that he had any hand in it". The "hand" in this context is a little ham-handed, but the world that is portrayed is not only bizarre but entirely convincing for that very reason.

This is the secret of Manoj Das' style. He can present characters and situations with a dead-pan "So it was", and we listen like a three-year old, the mariner hath his will. Many things happen in the course of the novel. A local Congress high-up has plans to make a fortune for himself with a textile mill; Government wants to dam a river first to make an air strip and a dock, then to create a minor port; contractor Navin Chandra Dey who throws the hero Sudhir Babu into a frenzy has his head mysteriously cut off, and Sudhir comes under suspicion as the most likely murderer; Reena, a sophisticated girl and the sister of Sudhir's former classmate has evidently made up her mind to have him for her husband; Sudhir, it turns out, though he inherited the Chaudhuri zamindari, is no relation of Hari Chaudhuri at all, but the illegitimate son of his *gumastha*; he loves Geeta, his



neighbour, but cannot marry her because of an old family feud and the dead hand of Geeta's father turning her head away from him; a Hindu-Muslim riot where the Hindu partners of a joint firm sell daggers to the Hindus and the Muslim partners sell them to the Muslims against an anticipated, and no doubt eagerly awaited riot — who said Hindu-Muslim unity has fallen to pieces? And the novel ends via a whorehouse in a circus ground where Sudhir decides to play the part of a defaulting acrobat and jumps from a great height through a burning ring!

"Loose ends galore!" you may say — which the novelist seems to say is what life is. *Cyclones*, the name of the novel, refers not only to a devastating storm in the early pages of the novel but also to the life and activities of the various characters in it making their panoramic entries and exits. The neatly knotted novel *a la* Hardy is no doubt out, but does this mean that in any novel of today we should not be so old-fashioned as to look for a plot, a beginning, a middle and an end, the beginning leading through a logical middle to an inevitable end? Perhaps not, except in who-dunnits and spy stories.

If the characters in *Cyclones* do not stand out like a Michael Henchard or a Maggie Tulliver, it is only because the normal run of the men and women who inhabit our towns and villages is not made that way. They are less people who act than those to whom things happen. They go with the current which is so much easier than going against it, or even just standing still.

A foreign admirer of Das commends him for being not like Saki or O'Henry, but

just Manoj Das. "Indeed it would be a serious defect if he wrote like an Englishman or an American... he writes a spontaneous English, quite free from imported literary idioms". That he does not write "like Charles Lamb or George Eliot" is certainly a plus point. No intelligent man with a sense of modern English prose style would want him to write that way. But I cannot agree that Das' use of the language is perfect and leaves nothing to be desired. A sentence like "Sudhir cried out within himself", like the earlier "no hand in it" grates on a sensitive ear. But the dead-pan, "Generally when the villagers sensed a storm that might prove more than a match for their capacity to protect their animals, they let them loose" is a rich enough compensation.



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### MUSIC IN INDIA: THE CLASSICAL TRADITIONS

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