

## ARTICULATIONS

# Mystical and spicy

## MYSTERY OF THE MISSING CAP AND OTHER SHORT STORIES

By Manoj Das. Sahitya Akademi, Rabindra Bhavan,  
35, Feroze Shah Road, New Delhi 110 001.  
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becoming brevity; humorous dimensions; a pinch of mystical spice; a touch of tears; a perfect evocation of the coastal locale in Orissa. You have all these in different combinations in Manoj Das's short stories which are also wonderfully intelligible. These elements have not deserted him during a career spanning nearly half a century.

*Mystery of the Missing Cap and Other Short Stories* fetched him the Sahitya Akademi Award in

1972. He began writing in 1949. A student activist for Marxism, Manoj tasted jail experience too. In 1965, he found his spiritual haven in the Sri Aruobindo Ashram at Pondicherry where he has resided ever since. He keeps up a rigorous schedule of teaching, travel and writing. A much sought-after columnist, Manoj is a poet and a novelist as well.

However his genius is best attuned to the short story. Here he has been at home all these years.

Again, he is at home only to Orissa as far as the contextual background is concerned. Orissa is his piece of ivory and what wonderful figurines has he carved out of this beautiful, emotive, famous (in myth and history) and sorrowing land! Manoj is certainly the Master of the Unexpected. An expert in giving titles and in the interior stitching of action and names. He never lets us guess what we are in for when we begin to read. Will I end up with smiles,

or spluttering laughter or unshed tears or a philosophic calm? I wouldn't know even if I happen to be reading the story for the umpteenth time. Now, haven't I read the anthology-favourite, *Mystery of the Missing Cap* ten, twenty, thirty times during the last thirty years? Yet, it remains quite new, up-to-date, utterly contemporaneous. The insincerity of our political bosses, the innocence of the common man, the ready resourcefulness of the political

animal: it is all here, and aren't our ministers the direct descendents of the self-important money-glad Babu Virkishore, the Hon'ble Minister of Fisheries and Fine Arts? Other ancestors of the present-day politicians, power peddlers and money-grabbers can also be met elsewhere in Manoj's fictional panorama, and the entire clan of the rapacious is admirably symbolised by Thieffou in *Man Who Lifted the Mountain*.

If there is biting satire in Manoj's pen, there are also tears of anguish. Rarely have I come across such a perfectly-crafted story as *Catching the Thief*. It is motherhood burdened by the sorrow and struggle in Time that rises before us as we read the last sentence: "This was once his sweet cherub, Anu, whose full name was Annapurna." There are other hungerers too that destroy the poor mothers in a million ways. In *Hunger* written when Manoj was in his teens, the beast in man leaps out as we hope in vain for Shobha to escape with her little Satu.

Finally, the superb fabulist. The encapsulating of fantasy and horror in a seemingly realistic tale with the style suffering no jerks has been perfected by him. You can note the Manoj touch in *The Last I heard of Them*, *The Sage of Tarungiri* and *The Tryst*. The goblins of the mind come out for a devil's dance in such tales. Sometimes the conclusion could be amusement lit by relief as when Mahindra Mishra ceases to be 'the lost cat' or Dambudhar wakes up after a night of drunken snoring. More often the goblin dance careers off into the terror and frenzy of destruction and self-destruction as in *Choop Saitan* and *The Poison Girl*. Forty-two stories. Each recreating a complete experience. And the priceless pearl among them, *The Intimate Demon*, harvested from an in-depth knowledge of child-psychology:

"She was asleep, my little cherub, after a solemn understanding with me that a tiny real monkey must be procured for her as soon as possible, since she was, for the first time in her life, out to live without her mother, for a week." So begins the brief tale. By the time we conclude, "But I was waking up to a chunk of darkness and a demon lurking somewhere inside," we have crossed the first step in Raman Maharsi's call: "Who am I?" *Mystery of the Missing Cap* is a volume that should not be found missing from one's personal library.