A class of his own

by Vinita Kaul

MASTER of that difficult genre of stories — satire—the Oriya storyteller, Manoj Das, is undoubtedly in a class by himself. The recipient of critical acclaim from a number of Indian and foreign literary critics, perhaps the greatest tribute has been paid to him by K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, the doyen of Indo-Anglian literary criticism and history, when the latter brackets him with such classic storytellers as Tagore, Premchand and Mulk Raj Anand.

Though I wouldn't quite accord him such an accolade, there is no denying the fact that he is, besides being an accomplished storyteller, an author who brings refreshing insights into the idiosyncrasies of human nature, highlighting with subtle finesse man's constant preoccupation with his own sense of importance. And deflates with desired aplomb that unbearable pomposity which we humans consciously and sometimes not-so-consciously flaunt before those whom we consider inferior to ourselves, less ranking in worth and importance.

BULLDOZERS AND FABLES AND FANTASIES FOR ADULTS: by Manoj Das; B. R. Publishing Corporation; pp 154; Rs. 120.

Thus the thread of an almost invisible satire runs like a fine skein throughout the 'fabric' of his finely spun, very human stories, providing one with a quiet laugh ever so often. Not slapstick humour but an adult dig in the ribs for those who are able to comprehend and appreciate his unusual sense of wit, suitably. His account of human frailties (and foibles) are definitely for those with a keen perception, for those able to discern the sublime from the ridiculous. And to be able to accept that such shortcomings in human beings are as necessary for a (balanced) personality as qualities of excellence.

In "Bulldozers" — the title story — the author weaves an intricate and subtle tale incorporating within a broad framework, a diverse range of characters held together for the most part by their desire for social recognition; and expected pandering to the ego which at times assumes ridiculous proportions. Perhaps the only two souls who emerge as stable, sincere individuals in earnest pursuit of a more lasting happiness and free of epaenetic expectations from society at large, are Ravi, the secretary-cum-librarian of Roy Institute (where many a human drama and farce are unwittingly enacted) and Geeta, the testy Dasji's grand-daughter. It is, therefore, ironic that these two noble souls (if one may call them so), suffer the bitterest blow through a peculiar twist of fate and their dreams crumble (akin to the house of their dream) with irrevocable finality in the wake of the relentless bulldozer which reduces their future abode to rubble. Or, perhaps, one should have foreseen that Ravi's acquisition of a dwelling place seemed to be singularly without complications and deceptively easy to possess, thereby raising the inevitable query as to whether there would be a twist to the tale; whether, typical of Manoj Das's penchant for the unexpected, here too the unexpected would take place. In a piece of clever connivance thus the simple Ravi and his soulmate, Geeta, are deprived not only of a promising start to their married life but also receive a serious blow to the well being of their mental and physical faculties. While admiring Manoj Das' constant and skilful juxtapositioning of conflicting situations, the reader is however left in a sombre and thought- provoking frame of mind.

Thus, whether it is a novella like "Bulldozers" or "Sharma and the Wonderful Lump" which may also be classified similarly, or a brief tale of less than a dozen printed pages (and sometimes half the amount), Manoj Das makes full use of his tremendous fund of knowledge (of human nature) and a simple yet marvellously captivating style and wit, to provide the reader with a feast of humour, a constantly moving panorama of life, titillating and stimulating the mind.