

To Sri P Raja

with fond wishes

Pymada Lakshmi

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Book Review :

CYCLONES

(A Novel by MANOJ DAS)

(Sterling Publishers Private Ltd., New Delhi 110 016. 1987. Rs. 125)

"It used to be the task of the cuckoos to herald the advent of spring into the valley of Kusumpu. Almost the first coo emanating from the grove of the Chowdhuries made a dozen voices restless. The boys raised a sporadic riot of songs; the girls hummed, smiling at one another".

Thus begins *Cyclones*, a novel by the eminent Oriya writer, Manoj Das, a novel that desperately tries to catch some of the forgotten innocence and joy of rural India. Independence is just two years away. The Second World War has entered the last phase. The centuries-old calm of Kusumpur lies shattered for the cluster of Krishnachura trees in the village have been felled down for building an emergency air strip. No more red Krishnachura blossoms for decorating the hair of the village girls, nor cuckoos to herald the advent of spring.

The lone tiled house in the village belongs to Sudhir, the adopted son of the late zamindar, Hari Chowdhury. Sudhir has been educated in the town. Having come into his broken inheritance on the disappearance of Hari Chowdhury, Sudhir is unsure of his moorings as yet. Just then a cyclone devastates the entire countryside. Kusumpur village is shattered, all the mud houses crumble, and the people who manage to escape the storm's fury take refuge in Sudhir's home. The arch rival of the Chowdhuries, Roy, also comes with his daughter Geeta. The unspoken romance between Geeta and Sudhir is, of course, doomed from the beginning and remains a sad elegy within the confines of the novel.

Natural disasters mean relief work. A group of young men and women descend upon Kusumpur with bags of rice and

bundles of clothes. This is another kind of invasion. The idealist among them, Shyam, decides to work with the villagers for their betterment. The rapacious Kamal, however, quietly plans to develop a real estate business and a brewery in the village. The vapid Reena is rudderless and ends up as the glamorous devotee of the jet-set Swamy, Vikashananda.

Meanwhile, the attempt to build the emergency air-strip and a dock repairing war ships has assumed a threatening air. It would mean the filling up of the river Kheya. The villagers led by Shyam and Sudhir oppose the move to silt up the tributary. A contractor is killed and Sudhir takes shelter in a forest hermitage for a while. Time moves forward inexorably and Sudhir gets in and out of experiences including a Hindu-Muslim riot and a spell in prison. Presently, elections are on the people and the wily Sethji from the town drags Sudhir to the limelight as a candidate. Manoj Das deals with the political peccadillos of the prosperous merchant with his characteristic dry humour. As for instance when the Sethji assures the wavering Sudhir who has some scruples about the basics of truth and honesty.

"All we have to do, speaking frankly though confidentially, is to be ready with funds. Kusumpur should give us a good yield, just as it has always yielded a bumper crop. My humble enterprises on the very land you have offered us will take care of that. With you as my collaborator in politics, I can foresee my dreams materialising, one by one!"

Sethji is of course the father of Kamal and Reena.

Sudhir, the cultured young man not yet sure of himself is initiated into the mystery of bold decision-making at last when to save a volatile situation in the village fair, he takes the place of an acrobat to plunge from the top of a pole into the pool below. Manoj Das perhaps hints that independent India will yet survive because of its native intelligence. For Sudhir manages to throw down his own burning shirt and himself slithers down to safety. The time has now come for deciding his future course of action as well. Must he make use of his so-called jail-going to get into the political bandwagon and proceed towards perks, power and prosperity? Or must he listen to the voice of decency within his heart? Even as the skies become clearer and the moon emerges above Kusumpur, Sudhir's confusions are at an end. "His mind seemed to have become clear of all clouds. There emerged only one face, that of Soumyadev. He knew that it was the face of his own peace."

It is the presence of Soumyadev that raises the novel to the regions of spiritual quest. Sudhir is presented as a seeker trying to understand the truth of his existence. He must make the move from ignorance to knowledge, from darkness to light.

"He was in the dark about his origin. He did not know who his parents were. Of the multitudes of homes in the world, why should he have been transplanted on the family-tree of the Chowdhuries? Why should Hari Chowdhury disappear? And why should he be obliged to flee Kusumpur just when he had begun to love it?"

Even as he is being overwhelmed by "a bitter sense of helplessness", he meets Soumyadev. Suddenly, his inner being is bathed in "a cool shower of jasmine flowers", the fever and fret of life recede from him and he gains a rare calm of mind. Soumyadev's cave-ashram in the forest is no doubt based on the Bhawani Mandir envisaged by Sri Aurobindo. The Guru himself is distantly modelled on Sri Aurobindo. Soumyadev's firm rejection of miraculism is spiritual common sense. Why should anybody materialise a stone or suspend a pebble in the air, he asks Reena.

"Then, my child, why don't you begin marvelling at the fact what the earth with all its sand and stones and jewels had materialised? Why don't you begin marvelling at the fact that the sun, more than a million times bigger than the earth, remains suspended in nothingness? You will develop faith in God only if you start seeing these real miracles".

Later, as Sudhir stumbles forward in his journey of self-realisation, the Guru's presence steadies him and leads him on the right path. When he learns that he was but the illegitimate child of a servant girl, the first reaction is one of shatred and pity, of disillusionment and discovery — each of them equally poignant". At that very moment his eyes fall upon a fading picture of Soumyadev. Serenity floods back into him. The scene takes us back to Upanishadic times when Satyakama announced with utter serenity that he is the son of the servant maid Jabala.

And, the concluding scene. Sudhir has done his acrobatics; people have fled thinking the man on the top of the pole has plunged to his fiery death. Geeta, imprisoned by the vow of her dead father, rejects Sudhir. What next? Not material success, then. Soumyadev's face illumines Sudhir's mental vision. The cyclone is over. Sudhir will take to spiritual life.

This significant novel of poetic cadences has a host of memorable characters. The family **gumasthaji**, Brindavan; the gentle Vishnupriya; the practical Ravi; the eccentric Roy. Duryodhana's chatterings and Shobhananda's melancholy, allow us dramatic participation in the narrative as well. There are also passages instinct with tragic power as when the Vaishnavas sing to the accompaniment of mridangams and cymbals when Brindavan prepares to meet his Maker with graceful resignation. The novel as a whole is a congruous lament for the loss of rural innocence and for the irreversible progress of urban conglomerations peopled by perfect specimens of humbug. As always with Manoj Das, his English style has creative force with an intense sympathy for the frailties of human nature. You should read this meaningful novel for its wonderful evocation of the Orissa countryside, for its rich memories of pre-Independent India and of course, for the competent telling of an absorbing tale.

—Prema Nandakumar