

AN AUTHENTIC STORY TELLER

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Story-telling is an age-old art.

This is a critique on one such story teller. The author, a lecturer in English, is a freelance journalist whose contributions appear in English and language periodicals.

A ZEALOUS Marxist and a fiery student-leader in his college days, he made his audience spell-bound by his oratorical skill. He was a rebel who courted jail with a smile. At the same time he made his literary debut with the publication of a book in his mother tongue, Oriya, when he was barely 14 summers old. As a school boy he edited **Diganta** (a journal of progressive revolutionary writing), which grew as a leading magazine of culture and ideas in Oriya. The central Sahitya Akademi honoured him with its much coveted award.

This Marxist-turned-spiritualist now lives in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and teaches English literature to the students of several nations at the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education, Pondicherry. Familiar to the readers of Oriya and Indo-Ang-

lian literatures, he is one among the few gifted writers of India who can wield the pen both in his mother tongue and in English with equal ease. He has to his credit more than 25 books both in Oriya and in English.

He is none other than Manoj Das.

No sensible compiler of an anthology of Indo-Anglian short stories can afford to drop out Manoj Das, for the **Imprint** of India wrote of him, "There are only a few good story-tellers left in the world today. One of them is Manoj Das." When Martha Foley prepared her famous annual list of best stories published in the U.S.A. and Canada in 1975, she included five short stories by Manoj Das and the five stories were all that Manoj Das had published during that year in some of the prestigious magazines and antholo-

gies of the U.S.A. No wonder that one of his stories has been included in the Vol. XVIII of **Winter's Tales**. And one is really proud to note that he is the only Indian writer so far to enter into that prestigious anthology.

Manoj Das's first collection of short stories in English, **A Song for Sunday and Other Stories** (Higginbothams), appeared in 1965. Many were the writers who had read and encouraged him. One among them was the doyen of letters, Shri K.P.S. Menon. "Praising my short stories," acknowledged Manoj Das in an interview given to the magazine of the Jawaharlal Institute of Postgraduate Medical Education and Research, "Mr. Menon commented, 'My old magistrate used to say (he was an Englishman) that an Indian writer in English appears like a man playing a piano not with his fingers but with sticks. But nobody would say so about your writing in English'."

Since then he has five more collections of short stories: **Short Stories by Manoj Das** (Triveni Publishers, 1969); **The Crocodile's Lady** (Sterling Publishers, 1975); **Fables and Fantasies for Adults** (Orient Paperbacks, 1978); **Man Who Lifted the Mountain and Other Fantasies** (Spectre Press, England, 1979) and **The Vengeance and Other Stories** (Sterling Publishers,

1980) and that led him to the rank of established Indo-Anglian writers. When the editors of the academic circles abroad look for an Indian short story, their choice generally is a story by Manoj Das. Obviously they find in him a significant story teller who while giving an authentic portrayal of the Indian scene, presents his characters in an entirely credible frame.

The short stories of Manoj Das covers a wide range. In his six collections, he has stories with hard core realism, stories of psychological import, satires in the garb of folk tales as well as stories of man's encounter with supra or infra human elements. Almost every story by Manoj Das has a humorous frame. But nowhere he tries to preach; in fact he dislikes the idea of preaching through creative writing. His stories comment on certain aspects of life. His targets, often, are the pompous politicians and pretentious pundits and they can't but wince at his digs. "An authentic story-teller, he is also the social critic of the first order." The way in which he depicts the eternal and unchanging human passions and foibles is inimitable.

His characters are original and they have life in the round, since he discovers and never invents the plots. He says, "An insignificant incident, a gesture, a frown, might communicate to

the writer a lot while they might not mean much to another."

He combines the old art of story telling with modern ideas and techniques. He is also a poet at heart. When another writer would have said 'pin-drop silence' or 'graveyard silence,' Manoj Das would say "such was the silence that even a spider could have been heard spinning its web."

Young and old are charmed by his style for besides an extensive knowledge of adult human nature he is no stranger to the psychology of children and adolescents.

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