

# The flavour never fades

**E**ARLY this month Sahitya Academy invited Manoj Das to Calcutta. The distinguished educationist and litterateur from Sri Aurovindo International Centre of Education, Pondicherry spoke to an intellectual gathering at the Birla Academy Auditorium. For an hour the speaker kept the audience spellbound narrating the richness of ancient Indian literature. When he finished a young polemist whispered to a professor by his

side, "Did he say anything new?" "No, he did not", answered the professor. "But mark the novelty in his words, observe the freshness in the parables and fables he narrates, and you will get to know why every time he speaks he sounds new, why the stories he wrote many many years ago are still new to the readers who have already read them many times over."

Manoj Das the story teller is too well-known. For the last forty years he has been delighting readers in India and the world over. His critics find his style vivaciously entertaining and the-

atically his stories reveal the reality that ordinarily escapes human attention. His stories always tell something new. "May be in his stories you encounter yourself, maybe Das persuades you to ask a few questions to yourself. If you find the answer his story becomes your favourite, and if you do not you cannot but reach back to it again and again till you find the answer. That is the magic of Manoj Das", observes an avid reader of his stories.

Balasore in Orissa and the adjoining Midnapore in Bengal. The whole area lay in pitiable ruins. A terrible famine followed and the happy inhabitants of the fertile coastal belt were reduced to utter penury. There was the shadow of death everywhere, all around there were cries of helplessness and despair.

Manoj Das, the son of the most affluent family in a cluster of remote villages in Balasore, was not least affected by these calamities.

the same time, he started writing stories and launched in 1950 a periodical — Diganta — to discuss the philosophy of existence. The 1950s were a hectic decade for him. He took part in politics as a student leader, he led students and peasants demonstrations, he spent a jail term in Cuttack, and he participated in Afro-Asian students conference at Bandung. But while doing all these he pondered and pondered over the basic questions of human existence. Whether he

powerfully all artifices of story telling can be used to write a story in realist genre without any attempt at being faithful to the photographic details of fact. His world has the fullness of human psyche: with its dreams and fantasies, its awe and wonder, the height of sublimity can be courted by the depth of the fictive. He proves that reality is richer than what realists conceived it to be."

Readers conversant with Das's style will readily see the element of realism in his stories. Along with realism the subtle presence of 'mystery' and 'magic' elevates his stories to a level where they look colourful and candid. That is perhaps the reason why Das's writings get universal acceptance — by the young and the old, in the country and outside.

But how does he conceive the theme, how does he select the medium and draw the frame to put it so succinctly?

Das says although he writes in two languages he thinks "in the language of silence." In such thinking there is no dichotomy but harmony. He explains that "a fiction writer is first moved by experience and inspiration. I allow this experience or inspiration to become a feeling in me, a process that goes on in silence. When the feeling is well-formulated, I sit down to write. In which language should I write? Well, that depends on some immediate factors. If I have promised a story to an English magazine...I write in English. If I have promised a story to my Oriya publishers, I write in Oriya. Most of my stories figure in both the languages."

That is Manoj Das, whose control over the medium and the message, over the art and the plot, makes him dear to both his readers and reviewers.

## LITERATURE

By K.K. Mohanty

But he was aware of the crises outside. The plight of men, the grim struggle for sheer physical existence, the pale faces showing resignation to fate posed him serious questions: What is it that sustains man through travails and torments of life? Is it the dream of happiness? Can man ever be happy in the true sense of the term?

Yes, Manoj Das pondered over these questions when he was just seven, and seven years later in 1949 as a student of class nine when he published the first collection of his poems — Satabdira Artanada — he tried to answer these questions. His poems described poverty — the poverty that breeds hunger and helplessness, and the poverty in human thinking that toss man in emotional turmoil. The first type of poverty needs economic solution, the second's solution is non-economic. What is it after all?

The question did inspire Das and he wrote poems — he has four volumes of poem collections, the last one published in 1967 — probing the path of happiness. At

has answered the questions in the hundreds of scintillating short stories he wrote, in his captivating travelogues, and in his absorbing English novel — The Cyclone — it is difficult to say. But his writings do inspire the reader to ask these questions to himself and introspect on their answer. To his critics that is the magic of Manoj Das.

That is the mystery in his stories too. If Graham Greene finds pleasure in the element of 'mystery' in his stories, another famous writer H.R.F. Keating wonders which of his stories appeals to him most. "Every five minutes my mind changes", he writes, paying tributes to the excellence in every individual story of Manoj Das.

Manoj Das is a leading Indo-Anglian writer. He is bilingual, writing in his mother tongue Oriya as well as English with equal flair. British critic A. Russel describes Das as "a great story teller to the sub-continent". Appreciating his style and depth Russel goes on to add that "he shows how

