

The award of Padmashri to Manoj Das can be a boost to bi-lingual writers. It is also a recognition of the creative mind faithful to the Indian psyche, says P. RAJA.



ONCE, when I asked Professor Manoj Das in which language he thought before writing a piece, since he is a bilingual writer, his quick answer was rather stunning: "In the language of silence, if I do not sound presumptuous." He hastened to explain, "The creative process ought to be allowed some mystery. Inspiration surely precedes

articulation through any language. This is absolutely true in regard to good poetry and substantially true in regard to good fiction. Without this element of inspiration, which is beyond language to begin with,

# Thinking through silence

literature can hardly have a throbbing soul."

He further clarified that what he said did not apply to reflective writing, the columns he wrote for newspapers. "For such writing you must think and think clearly in the language in which you propose to write; it is probably provocation, in a constructive sense of the term, more than inspiration, which should spur you on," he said.

Manoj Das is first and foremost a creative writer whose projection of the Indian psyche through his short stories and novels is so spontaneous that it impresses both the Indian and the Western reader with its authenticity. Graham Greene, who happened to read his short stories during the last phase of his life, wrote, Manoj Das's

stories "will certainly take a place on my shelves beside the stories of Narayan. I imagine Orissa is far from Malgudi, but there is the same quality in his stories, with perhaps an added mystery."

Mystery in a wide and subtle sense, mystery of life, indeed, is the core of Manoj Das's appeal. Born in a remote village in Orissa and born before Independence, he has thoroughly utilised in his fiction his experiences, gathered at an impressionable age, of the epoch-making transitions through which the country was passing. Thus we meet in his works lively characters caught up in the vortex of India's passage from the colonial era to freedom, the impact of the end of the princely states and the feudal system, and the

mutation of several patches of rural India into clumsy bazaars. We see in one of his classic stories, "Mystery of the Missing Cap" (once published in *The Hindu*) a typical village elder fired by an ambition to experience a ride on the hitherto unknown wave of politics, finds himself a psychological wreck when required to put up with an unexpected stranger – the institution of falsehood. In his novel, *Cyclones*, the study of the minds of folks when their village grows into a hick town, is penetrating.

His other novel, *A Tiger at Twilight*, is in a class by itself. Twenty years after the princely states had merged with India, a Raja, who had lived all that time in a distant city, snapping his ties with his native land,

suddenly appears in one of his castles in a hilly area belonging to his erstwhile principality. It so happens that a tiger has turned into a man-eater at the same time. The simple people of the region, mostly hill tribes, expect their former Raja to save them from the menace and the Raja, an accomplished hunter, accepts the challenge.

But he is keen to kill two tigers at one shot: the man-eater and a man who had led the fight against the princely rule during the freedom struggle and who is contesting an election. Through a chain of breathtaking but entirely credible developments, Manoj Das lays bare such aspects of mice and men, which could come as revelations to characters themselves. A subtle allegory runs side by side with gross realism and their synthesis is an emotional as well as intellectual feast for the reader.

But the most noteworthy merit in Manoj Das's fiction is that contempo-

rary issues, however significant they may be – and the author does full justice to them in their historical perspective – are not the themes of his works. It is life with all its complexity, all its treacherous nether-currents as well as its promises, which he lays bare with a disarming poignancy. He also has an uncanny capacity for presenting the serious and the serene in a manner that is amusing, often arousing a lasting mirth.

Manoj Das had been decorated with a Padma Award. A student of mysticism that he is, awards may not be of any considerable consequence to him. But it is a recognition of a kind of writing which is under threat from an onrush of stuff dominated by scintillating style and doses of dubious realism. His success as a bi-lingual writer is an assurance to many that one need not neglect one's mother-tongue for finding a place in the Indo-Anglian literary world. ●