

## ◆ Changing Tastes

# Manoj Das: A Significant Story-teller

**T**HE late Martha Foley, who edited the annual collection of the best American stories for many years, included, in perhaps what was her last catalogues of outstanding stories, five short stories by an Indian author. The list was for the year 1975 and all the five stories, which were published during that year in some of the most prestigious magazines and anthologies of the U.S.A., were by Manoj Das.

It is not as if other Indian writers do not get published in the States; but when the editors of exclusive academic circles look for an Indian story — be it for the inaugural issue of *Ascent*, of the English Department of the Illinois University, or the magnificently edited and produced international issue of *The New Orleans Review* brought out by the University of Loyola — their choice is a story by Manoj Das. Obviously they find in him a significant storyteller who, while depicting an authentic portrayal of the Indian scene, presents his characters in an entirely credible frame.

A critic wrote in 1976: "Once a reader of Morley's Kitty Foyle wrote to a Philadelphia newspaper that he had lived on Griscom Street all his life but had never known a family named Foyle. This complaint is inconsequential. For, what is important about a novel or a story is not its veracity but vividness, which in the above case so carried away the reader that he was left confused about the actual and the real. Similar will be the experience with Manoj Das's stories in which he conveys reality — the facts plus his feelings — through excellent designs, and that too in a way that his schemes are never explicit, his frameworks never show. The result has been almost a perfect assimilation of meaning into form."

Though realism is his forte — even when it is strangely interspersed with a dab or two of the supernatural like in *A Farewell to a Ghost* (published here in *The Illustrated Weekly* and abroad first in one of Canada's distinctive publications, *The Malahat Review*, brought out by the University of Victoria) — his creative world refuses to be limited to any particular theory or thought. He could write a fantasy with as much ease as a story of stark realism.

Reviewing his latest book, *Man Who Lifted the Mountain*, published by the Spectre Press, U.K., Adrian Cole, himself a writer of fantasies, says: "There is more than a little Arabian Night quality to the stories, and all are punctuated with flashes of very tasteful imagery. We are given a number of insights into the Indian way of things which the author delivers unobtrusively and unprejudicially. Not only did I enjoy the flavour of the stories, but

Manoj Das, who is known for his authentic portrayal of the Indian scene, is interviewed by P. RAJA.



also I enjoyed their characters which are very real." (*Fantasy Media*, Oct.-Nov., 1979).

In Das's work, his characters, actions, events and situations effectively awaken in the reader the response the author seeks to without him having to state so. He successfully employs a variety of techniques — derived from fantasy, folktale and fable — to drive home his point.

"Must a story have a point?" I asked him.

He replied: "If by point is meant a flat message definable in the vocabulary of the logical positivist, a modern story need not have any. But I doubt if there is any creative fiction which is without a subtle message. Hemingway won't have to say — even won't have to know, unless he cared — what his message is in *The Old Man and the Sea*. Nevertheless we get it: the *raison d'être* of the human struggle cannot be decided in terms of palpable results. Struggle is the other name of life."

"You were a Marxist in your younger days," I said, "and went through incarceration too. I understand that your early stories

reflected a Marxist slant. Would you say they still do?" "I was a Marxist by political conviction," he replied, "And the problem of human suffering concerned me then, as it does now. People associated the depiction of human suffering in my stories with my political conviction and imagined that they had a Marxist slant. For that matter, a well-meaning Bengali critic described me as an existentialist. I believe that life is far greater than any theory. Literature projects life and strives to project what is more than life."

"What is more than life?"

"What I mean is, life, as we experience it today, is not really 'whole.' Life is an evolving spirit. A writer can derive inspiration not only from a contemporary situation but also from a hitherto unmanifest spark hidden in life. He might even foresee — that is why he is a seer. He might even prophesy — that is why he is a prophet. For heaven's sake, do not imagine that I claim these qualities for myself. I wish I were anywhere near them. I am stating a principle in which I believe."

Manoj Das's mother tongue is

Oriya. Years ago, K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, in his *Indian Writing in English*, described him as the first writer from Orissa to publish a collection of stories in English. His status in Oriya literature is high. In 1960, when the premier Oriya monthly, *Dagora*, conducted an opinion poll to decide who had made the greatest contributions to post-independence Oriya literature, among the veterans voted — like Gopinath Mohanty, Surendra Mohanty and Sochi Routroy — was Manoj Das, then in his mid-twenties. Manoj Das gratefully acknowledges the encouragement he has received from his home state: it gave him the Orissa Sahitya Akademi Award in 1965; the Visuv Milan Award in 1971, and he received the national Sahitya Akademi Award in 1972.

"Why did you switch to writing in English?"

"It is not that I switched from writing in Oriya to writing in English. At one stage I felt inspired to write in English because I was haunted by the feeling — if I do not sound presumptuous — that much of the Indo-Anglian fiction that claimed to project the Indian life and situation was not doing justice to its claim. I thought, born in a village, born just before Independence and hence living through the transition at an impressionable age, I could present, through English, a chunk of genuine India. Well, right or wrong, one is entitled to one's faith in oneself!"

What are the problems of a bilingual writer?"

"In poetry, many. In prose there aren't really any. Sometimes I write a story first in English, sometimes first in Oriya. But I do not translate one into another. If the theme continues to inspire me, I try a fresh execution."

"Has your writing been influenced by anyone?"

"The heritage of Indian fiction — the great yarn-spinners of yore like Vishnu Sharma and Somadeva — constitute the influence of which I am conscious. Fakir Mohan, the father of the Oriya short story, was also an early influence. Then there is Sri Aurobindo. He has given me a new vision of man. But I cannot say — it is too early to say — how far that vision is manifest in my creative writing. I do not think it is expressed much. It is not really necessary. My faith in his futuristic vision sustains me. That is enough."

"You believe in mysticism. Won't this belief curb your creativity?"

"It ought to be the other way round. Mysticism is expected to give you a touch of inner freedom, a touch that snaps many a bond to taboos and limitations. But do I bring mysticism into my stories at the cost of the natural demands of fiction at its own plane? Never."

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