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Interview with Literary Legend Manoj Das Speaks to P.V. Laxmi Prasad

Manoj Das is a well-known bilingual short story writer in Odiya and English. He has published 45 collections so far. He is the recipient of Sahitya Academy Award and Padma Shree Award from the Government Award. He is the winner of NTR National Award for his Creative contribution. I am humbled to present the text of interview I held with Manoj Das.

Q 1) *Please tell us the family background?*

Ans: I was born in a charming village on the sea in the eastern coast of Odisha in 1934. My ancestors owned large tracts of land in the Sundarbans of Bengal – the home of the Royal Bengal tiger. My grandfather, Madanmohan Das, was a legend for his philanthropy. My father, Shri Madhusudan Das, was an influential man. My mother, Kadambini Devi, was a poet. I had one brother, older by ten years. He was M.N. Das, the noted historian, author, educationist (he was the Vice-Chancellor of Utkal University) and Parliamentarian. I have narrated my childhood in *Chasing the Rainbow: Growing up in an Indian Village*, published by the Oxford University Press.

Q 2) *When & where did your passion for story – writing originate?*

Ans: I never looked upon my creative writing as something outside my normal activities. I cannot remember when I began telling stories to my friends at the Primary school. However, the time of my first published short story was 1949. I was fourteen then. Entitled *Samudrar Kshudha* (Hunger of the Sea) the story is often discussed at the Post-graduate level in different universities of my home state.

Q 3) *How would you define a short-story?*

Ans: That is beyond my scope. I am a creative writer, not a critic or a theoretician. The genre of Short Story is differently defined by different authorities. Each definition can be justified. Like fiction in general, it is also a projection of life – life of not external realities only, but of life with all its promises, its subtlety and hidden dimensions. Generally speaking, while the novel often shows the growth of a character or characters, the short story is built around an incident through which it may of course reveal a glimpse of a character that is meaningful.

Q 4) *It is commonly held that a short story-writer introduces a very limited numbers of persons, cannot afford the space for the leisurely analysis and sustained development*

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of character, and cannot undertake to develop as dense and detailed a social milieu as does the novelist. Has Manoj Das ever deviated from this concept of story-writing and extended his stories beyond boundaries?

Ans: As I said earlier, every definition has a truth in it. This too is a concept that had its worth. No, I do not think I have transcended this prescription. If I have in some stories, in a subtle way, that can be pointed out only by a discerning critic. I should not be expected to comment on the specialness – if any – of my stories.

Q 5) *Do you think that the narrative often gives the artistry in a good short-story higher visibility than the artistry in the more loosely structured novel?*

Ans: In a good Short Story – yes.

Q 6) *How did you feel writing bilingual stories in Oriya and English? Where did you feel at ease while writing?*

Ans: I feel at ease in both.

Q 7) *Would you justify the quote that “it is easier to write a novel than to write a short-story. What difficulties do they pose for a story writer? What of them have you faced as a story-writer?*

Ans: Such statements are relative in nature. What is meant probably is you have elaborate scope in a novel to establish a point of view and present a saga. A short story, for the very pragmatic factor of its length, is limited to one point – an idea emanating from an action, a character or an incident. What is important is the impact of a work of fiction on the consciousness of the reader. Sometimes a novel’s impact may not last after giving some transient relief, amusement or a truth; sometimes a short story can leave an impact that may last for life. Much depends on the quality or the level of the writer’s consciousness behind the creation, of course apart from his artistic skill.

Q 8) *You were known to be a Marxist youth leader at one point of time. What motivated you to believe in the theory of Marxism?*

Ans: I became a so-called Marxist when I had only an outline idea of Marxism. I witnessed the depth of human suffering when I was a small boy – as I have described in my *Chasing the Rainbow*. When I came to the town for study in a High School I came in contact with some prominent and sincere Marxists and I felt that in their theory lay the solution to the problem of human suffering. Later I read Marxism in original as well as elucidations on Marxian thoughts by their able exponents. Well, like any philosophy or doctrine or theory, Marxism too has its share of truth. But by and by I realized that the

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problem of human suffering is much too complex to find a solution through mere political or any kind of external amendment. It had much to do with the evolution in general and the individual evolution in particular.

Q 9) *When did you publish your first collection of stories? How well was it received?*

Ans: In 1950. The most renowned writer of the day, Shri Kalindi Charan Panigrahi (Fellow of the Sahitya Akademi) spoke on it from the All India Radio describing it as a surprisingly original work and Prof. Pathani Pattanayak, an eminent critic, rated it as a remarkable work in the foremost weekly of the time, the *Matrubhumi*. Though I lived in a frontier town, Balasore and had no familiarity with the literary world of Odisha's cultural capital, Cuttack, it received excellent reviews in the Press there.

Q 10) *You are known to have published a collection of poems. Anything to share with readers?*

Ans: More than one collection. Readers can share poetry only by reading it, not by a statement from the poet. But I do not write poems in English. I believe that poetry can best be written in one's mother-tongue.

Q 11) *How many stories have you written so far? What and who do they primarily deal with?*

Ans: One hundred, approximately. Their range is vast. From stark realism to psychological complexities, from characters caught in whirlpools of socio-political transitions to those facing existential crisis, my stories deal with several strains of situations and characters. Last but not the least, they stress the inherent potentiality in human consciousness.

Q 12) *How many story collections have you published so far? What about publishing industry in the early 70s?*

Ans: It is difficult to give a specific number of titles – because so many of the same stories are found in different collections. For example, when a collection entitled *Farewell to a Ghost* (Penguin) was exhausted, a bigger collection containing the same bunch along with more stories from another earlier anthology called the *The Submerged Valley and other Stories* (Batstone Books, U.K.) was issued under the title *Selected Fiction*.

Q 13) *Which of your story-collections do you think has been reader-impressed?*

Ans: I have a devoted and, I believe, serious readership in English. They love my stories in general – whatever be the title of the book.

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Q 14) *You have named the collections as ‘Farewell to a Ghost’, and “The lady who died one and a half times and other fantasies”. Any specific reasons behind such titles? What do they represent for the readers?*

Ans: The same stories have been also published by other titles. For example some of the stories in *The Lady who Died One and Half Times* were earlier published in a smaller volume in the U.K. entitled *The Man who Lifted the Mountain*. The title of an anthology is chosen according to the title of an individual story either because that story is quite significant according to the author or the publishers’ editor or simply because it is appealing or because it may arouse the reader’s curiosity. For example, one of my collections bears the title, *Mystery of the Missing Cap* (Sahitya Akademi).

Q 15) *What do you think is the benchmark of a creative writer? How does a creative writer reflect his ideas to his readers in the art of story-writing?*

Ans: It is the genuineness of the creative writer’s inspiration, matched by his natural skill to translate the inspiration into short stories that creates credibility at its own plane – even if it is fantasy. The art of storytelling being an art it cannot be articulated in purely logical terms. Either it is there in a writer or it is not there.

Q 16) *You have been the recipient of accolades: a) The Sahitya Akademi Award b) The Saraswati Samman Award c) The Padma Shree Award by the Govt of India. What was your immediate reaction? Do you think that Indian writers are genuinely honored?*

Ans: There is no rule as such. A highly deserving writer may not receive a certain award; one who does not deserve may manage to get it. We live in a world where many forces work simultaneously – forces right and forces wrong. In the ultimate analysis it is the significance of a creative work that matters.

17 Q) *As a prominent story writer, you are known to have dealt with serious themes in “Satirical and humorous” veins. Did you ever think of such experimentations before you took to writing? Did they come to you naturally?*

Ans: Once I have got the inspiration for a story, the form, style and the point of view (First person or Third person or Omniscient point of view) through which the text should be articulated flashes in my vision spontaneously.

18 Q) *Manoj Das, led by the quest for mysticism, has travelled a significant way throughout the nation. Any travelogues for the benefit of readers?*

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Ans: Your question seems to include my travel at two planes: plane of inner quest and the plane of travel in its normal sense. Well, I have not written any travelogue as such in English. But one of my books, *My Little India* (National Book Trust), which has proved to be popular, is often looked upon as a travelogue.

19 Q) Could you please throw some light on your sojourn from Odisha to Pondicherry?

Ans: It will not be easy for me to do so in brief. My quest for a panacea for human predicament – the phenomenon of suffering in particular, led me to read several authentic philosophical and spiritual works. Prior to that I had realized that the human predicament cannot be ended by political or administrative or constitutional changes however revolutionary they may be. Man must transcend the present stage of consciousness. I found as solution to this problem the spiritual ways of individual liberation, *Moksha* and *Nirvana*. They were surely profound solutions. But they could not totally satisfy me. They were only for individuals. What about the world? It is when I studied Sri Aurobindo I developed the conviction that mankind has a spiritual future in evolutionary terms. The present man is still steeped in ignorance – in illusions and wrong values. But these unfortunate traits can be transformed. Sri Aurobindo visualizes a future when it is no longer the mind, which had practically exhausted itself, would dominate our life, but a new power will lead us into a new phase in evolution – a power he terms the Supermind.

20 Q) What spiritual values have you imbibed from Sri Aurobindo Ashram?

Ans: The scope and opportunity the Mother created in Sri Aurobindo Ashram for our spiritual progress is immense. Each Sadhak could imbibe only according to his or her aspiration and opening to the Truth Sri Aurobindo and the Mother revealed. Like everybody else, I too have been rewarded with the splendour of Grace. But how much I wish that I were more sincere and more open! In other words I have squandered away the opportunities given to me more than I have put them to proper spiritual benefit.

21 Q) What is your advice to aspiring story-writers in India?

Ans: I had not sought any writer's advice; I don't think anybody's advice can help anybody to grow into a writer. You cannot direct a bud how to bloom. However, to respect your question, all I can say is: Seek the right inspiration; to your inspiration be true, not to your impulse or gross motivation. Thank you.