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## A Dialogue with Shri Manoj Das

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Born in a coastal village of Orissa in 1934, Manoj Das grew up as a gifted child with all exuberance. As ‘morning shows the day’, the splendor and shine of Shri Das emancipated in his childhood. Indeed, he has witnessed it all - censorship, human squalor, deceitful life style, malevolent and benevolent qualities of nature, pastoral and urban life and so on with a pen in his hand. Not just a pen but the sentinel of his conscience, a reflection of social-realism and a voice of insurgency.

He started his career as a teacher of English in a college at Cuttack before he came over to Sri Aurobindo Ashram at Pondicherry in 1963 where he continued to be a professor at the Sri Aurobinda International Centre of Education for more than three decades. But his conviction to writing stories set in motion in his school days.

His contribution to Odia and English literature has established him as a celebrated bilingual writer in India. He has received the coveted awards like Padma Shree, Sahitya Akademi Award and the Saraswati Samman. The only person to be conferred the D.Litt. (*Honoris Causa*) by the Utkal University of Culture in its very first convocation was Prof. Manoj Das. His works both in English and Oriya have served as the fertile areas for the researchers and scholars working for their Ph.D. and D.Litt in several universities of India and abroad.

Well! I had an opportunity to exchange dialogue with Padma Sree Manoj Das at his Pondicherry residence sometime in November 2014 related to life and literature. Hope this dialogue will get readers approbation.

**Q:** You are a bilingual writer, writing in Odia and in English. Would you mind telling the readers your favorite language?

**A:** Odia is my mother tongue; my love for it is inborn and natural. The classical Odia is a highly expressive language. If we read Sarala Das’s *Mahabharata* and Jagannath Das’s *Bhagavata*, we realize how flexible, how rich in shades of meaning its vocabulary is. Well, I love and adore the language history gave us – I mean English – and marvel at its vast treasure of words and phrases and their subtle nuances. Considering the age of the language, its splendour appears to be a miracle.

**Q:** What sort of writing you like most? Classical or modern and why?

**A:** What is classical today was modern in days gone by – I mean when those works were produced. Some of the modern works would in course of time be elevated to the rank of classical, I am sure. I or anybody liking a book depends on many factors, one of which could be the classical status of the book just as another could be the contemporary importance of a modern book – unless by the term modern you mean a genre not just related to time but to ideas or

experimentalism which you believe qualifies a work as modern. I am unable to appreciate literature from such a point of view. A work that appeals to my sensibility is a work I like.

**Q:** What is your favorite book and who is your favorite author?

**A:** Must you limit my preference to a single book and a single author by using the singular? I like so many books for so many different reasons! If I like Valmiki's *Ramayana* for its sweet poetry and sweeter theme, I like Vyasa's *Mahabharata* for its grand epic vista, characterization, daring probe into the mysteries of man's psychological constitution and above all for its philosophical and spiritual content culminating in the Gita. If I like Vishnu Sharma's *Panchatantra* for combining realism with fantasy in a unique way, I like Somadeva's *Kathasaritsagara* for its striking delineation of the intricacies of life, if I like Shakespeare's plays for their masterly handling of the nature of mice and men and incredible fusion of ideas with language, I like Fakir Mohan Senapati for his breaking new grounds in an old language. But if you must oblige me to name a single book and a single author, my answer is, the epic *Savitri* and its author Sri Aurobindo.

**Q:** People say that Manoj Das is a man of divine spirit. Do your writings reflect it?

**A:** They perhaps mean that I am a seeker of the spiritual values. In fact each one is a seeker in this sense; some are consciously so whereas most are unconsciously so. Don't you think that whether my writing reflects that spirit of quest or not is to be identified not by me, but by my readers and critics? So far as I am concerned, I do not bring in such high elements consciously into my writing, unless it is an essay on a subject that belongs to the spiritual realm.

**Q:** Some of your writings are creative, some others are reflective. Your reflective writings are more powerful than the other. Why?

**A:** It is your subjective estimate. I do not think that estimate to be correct. I make bold to say so first because of my own conviction and also because of the response I receive from my readers. Reflective writings, unless it is on a philosophical or spiritual theory, are reflections on some issues important during a certain range of time. A creative writing, say a short story or a novel, if it is a genuinely inspired piece, is certain to contain an element of timelessness. I know of readers who have read some of my stories so many times that the text had been imprinted on their memory, so much so that they could recite an entire story before me or others. Such a phenomenon is possible because the spirit of the story had stirred their inner self – at least some layer of it. Coming to my reflective essays many may appreciate them, but the appreciation emanates from their intellectual plane. That is how it should be. This law applies not to my reflective essays alone, but to even those of great essayists.

**Q:** Have you attempted writing critical essays? How do you distinguish creative writing and critical writing?

**A:** I have written essays – without bothering to know whether they were critical or not. The difference between creative writing and critical writing is, I believe, that which everybody knows! Poetry, fiction, play – these are creative writing; Creative elements can of course be traced in belles-letters, essays, travelogues, etc. Inspiration plays the most important role in creative writing; intellect plays the most important role in critical writing.

**Q:** Why did you choose short story and novel as the principal genre of your writing but not play and essay?

**A:** I could have written plays. But I feared that unless I saw through its production, I would not feel satisfied. And that is a process that was bound to consume much time. I could not have spared that much time. Why I write short stories and novels? The inspiration was there for doing so. Essays? Well, I believe I have written quite a few.

**Q:** What do you give importance to in your writings: plot, theme, character or style?

**A:** It is like asking one whether one gives importance to one's body or mind or life or soul. But, surely, the most important element in a personality is the soul. In creative writing, it is the inspired spirit.

**Q:** You are the recipient of coveted awards like Padma Shri, Saraswati Samman, Central Sahitya Academy award and many more. Would you please express your feeling on receipt of such awards?

**A:** I wonder if they could have made any difference to my writing!

**Q:** It is said that Manoj Das is a Marxist turned democratic thinker. What is your comment on this?

**A:** Right, from a certain angle.

**Q:** Your combat against feudalism in many of your works like "*Cyclone and A Tiger at Twilight*" has made you a philanthropist. Would you agree to it?

**A:** Agree? I am surprised! Why philanthropist? And where is the combat? If anything, I have portrayed with deep sympathy that part of the feudal world which was helpless during a great transitional period in the history of India.

**Q:** Manoj Das is a born genius or cultivated genius?

**A:** Am I at all a genius? Much depends on the scope of that wonderful word - I mean the scope of its significance in your vocabulary. Be it as it may, genius cannot be cultivated; talent can be.

**Q:** Like many other writers you deal with village life, rustic characters, village community, rural setting and so on. Do you think that your treatment of village life is distinctly different from others?

**A:** That again is for the discerning readers and critics to decide.

**Q:** How do you see the future of Indian writings in English?

**A:** I am no prophet.

**Q:** Indian drama is deficient and writers are not taking interest in writing plays compared to other genres. What is the reason behind it?

**A:** I have no knowledge enough to respond.

**Q:** Are you really nostalgic about your golden past, your childhood?

**A:** Undoubtedly I am. *Chasing the Rainbow: Growing up in an Indian Village* ought to endorse my answer.

**Q:** There are so many great writers in Odisha who have enriched Indian literature. Why have not any of their writings been considered as foundational text in India?

**A:** This too is a question beyond me. I do not know if it applies to Odia language alone or to several other Indian languages. Once again much depends on what you mean by “Foundational text”.

**Q:** Who is your role model?

**A:** Do I need one? Am I not unique like anyone else? What I know is I have to grow in keeping with how much I had evolved within, in my earlier incarnation and how much I have evolved in this life. Providence is the only guide I trust.

**Q:** You are a great writer and a great orator. What is your strength?

**A:** Are you sure of your assumption? My *Swadharna* is my strength in whatever worthwhile I do.

**Q:** How do you like to be remembered by the people of Odisha and India?

**A:** How can I like or dislike when I am no more? So far as the present life is concerned, you know as much as I know how people view me. Even so, the estimates would always be relative. Impressions cannot be measured either by a yard-stick or by a weighing machine.

**Q:** What is your message to the young writers of our generation?

**A:** None. If at all I have any that must remain ingrained in my writing. Thanks.

**CRB:** Thanks a lot for spending your wonderful time!