



*Journal of Advances and
Scholarly Researches in
Allied Education*

*Vol. V, Issue No. X, April-
2013, ISSN 2230-7540*

**TREATMENT OF RURAL INDIA IN THE SHORT
STORIES OF MANOJ DAS**

AN
INTERNATIONALLY
INDEXED PEER
REVIEWED &
REFEREED JOURNAL

Treatment of Rural India in the Short Stories of Manoj Das

Dr. Ambuj Sharma*

Professor, Department of English, Gurukula Kangri Vishwavidyalaya, Haridwar

Abstract – A writer deals with his backdrop and humans around him in his literary work. Manoj Das, who has been compared with O’Henry by many scholars, is undoubtedly a very distinguished writer of India in English. He is a bilingual writer as he writes in Oriya as well as English Manoj Das’s literary works which are basically set in rural villages not only depict the community life as a whole but the nature as significant force. His works show his observation of nature. Nature plays crucial role sometimes in the stories of Das. It has been employed skill fully by the writer. Nature and human beings are interconnected with each other. It affects the life of humans sometimes positively. This is the force that offers solace, solitude and what not. European Romantic poets also used nature as a significant motif in their poetry. Even as Wordsworth says, ‘It is “a friend, teacher and guide” for us. The present paper is an attempt to highlight the use of nature in the works, particularly in short stories of Manoj Das. It is to discuss here the role of nature in Das’ stories.

----- X -----

Manoj Das emerged as a famous bilingual writer- as he wrote in Odia, his mother tongue, and obviously in English. At an early age he started writing short stories in Odia. He also wrote poems in Odia and realised that poetry is at its best when written in one’s mother tongue. He did not translate his stories in to other language. If he originally wrote a story in Odia, He wrote the same story in English instead of translating the same. If he wrote a story in English, he wrote it again in Odia. He was of the opinion that ‘genuine’ works of fiction lacked ‘capable’ translators:

As I stated earlier, the genuine Indian works of fiction in our different languages are yet to find capable translators. And there lies a privilege I enjoy as a bilingual writer. Stories this volume contain are there in my mother-tongue too. I cannot remember which ones were first written in Odia and which ones in English. I have not exactly translated any of them from one language into the other. If a story written in Odia was to be rendered in English, I read the original one and kept it aside and wrote it in English as if I were writing it for the first ever time. I applied the same principle for the transmutation of a story originally written in English into Odia. (Das xiii)

Das was born in a village on the sea which was blessed with scenic beauty- the presence of lakes full of white and red lotuses, green meadows, lovely forests and hills like- sand dunes covered by creepers rich with varieties of delicious berries. This scenic beauty passed into his personality and became the integral part of his fiction. His own house was situated in Sunder Bans, the dwelling place of Royal Bengal Tigers. He had a picturesque childhood which enabled

him to portray his experiences as a youth in his stories. The first hand depiction of nature separates him from his contemporary fictionist.

His stories abound in such heart touching scenic beauty. He begins a story in the style of a Nature poet. He is always keen to depict every objects of Nature in a lucid manner:

... I was blessed with an extraordinary environment, dreamy and lyrical. My village on the sea was surrounded by sand-dunes making it inaccessible even to bullock carts. There were two natural lakes between the village and the sea, one teeming with white and the other with red lotuses. The vast grassy meadow around the lakes studded with palm trees was so homely and inviting that one cloudy afternoon I ran across it hoping to touch the end of the rainbow spanning it. Each house in the village, even that of the poorest widow, enjoyed at least a patch of kitchen garden, a pond and the boon of ever-green trees around it...(Das ix)

The beauty of Nature haunted Das in his childhood and it continued to haunt him forever. In his stories he gives a vivid and realistic picture of nature. In **The General**, he gives a picture of mesmerizing of spring:

That April a highly exaggerated spring had burst upon our valley. In and around our small town most of the trees had overdone their display and consequently now looked dumbfounded. A little moonlight was incentive enough for the cuckoos to begin cooing at

midnight, infusing a new though disturbing element into a thousand dreams. (29)

In **The Murderer**, he draws a true picture of a chilly and cloudy night: "The night was somewhat chilly. From time to time the wind howled in the bamboo grove at the back of our house. An already battered moon tried to cope with another threatening cloud."(34)

In **The Submerged Valley**, Das has given a human touch to the trees. The trees behave like human beings:

The trees that stood in front of our school used to appear as human to us as the wandering bull of Lord Shiva. One of the trees looked as if it was kneeling in meditation. Two more were never tired of chattering to each other. If the teacher had scolded or thrashed us, they seemed to be sympathizing with us. At the approach of a vacation they seemed to be talking of the many sweet moments in store for us. (71)

Das's depiction of Nature creates a suitable atmosphere according to the story. Through the proper selection of words, he makes the stories more realistic. In **Farewell to a Ghost**, he makes the atmosphere as fascinating as a fairy-tale island. (81)

In **The Birds**, he gives a vivid picture of the sinking red sun: 'while the red sun as though shot at, sank down behind the hills'. In **Son and Father**, he draws a beautiful picture of meadow, green trees and dwarf rocks: "The meadow extended up to the hills. Lush green palm trees stood in a scattered fashion, like a lyric broken in to haphazard lines. There were dwarf rocks and bushes and shrubs galore for erratic punctuation marks". (133)

Manoj Das has depicted rural India in most of his stories. He spent his childhood and youth in the village which made him acquire the first-hand knowledge of the emotions, traditions, beliefs, superstitions, likes and dislikes of the villagers. Folklore was a natural part of rural India. *Panchatantra*, *Jatakas* and *Kathasaritsagar* influenced him deeply:

Folklore was an intrinsic part of the rural atmosphere in my childhood. Their classic compendiums, the *Panchatantra*, the *Jatakas* and the *Kathasaritsagara* continue to fascinate me. Some of their stories would coax me to spin in my imagination a development beyond the points where they stopped. I cannot call that exercise inspiration- a force that had led me on to write most of my original stories. (xv)

In most of his stories the locale is a village. Even if the locale is urban, there is still a tinge of rural India in his stories. The author himself spent a long period in the village faraway from modernization. In **The Crocodile's Lady**, when a renowned sociologist from the west Doctor Batstone comes on a mission to see the real rural India, he utters the words, 'wonderful,

fantastic!' Doctor Batstone is surprised to see that the roads were full of sand and mud. "After fifty miles the jeep had to be abandoned in favour of bullock-cart, and when the cart get stuck in stretch of mud, we had to plod on to reach our village" (15) The villagers were living far away from modern cities:

There was no need to ask him what was wonderful or fantastic. That one could drive for eighty miles without meeting a single automobile was wonderful. That a hundred cattle could march through fenceless paddy fields with absolute abstinence, obeying a tiny tot's hooting was as fantastic as the Pied Pipe's magic. Wonderful was the huge rainbow, fantastic the revelation that ninety-seven per cent of our villagers lived quite contented without having seen a locomotive or a cinema. (15)

In **The Submerged Valley**, when the land of the villages is taken away by the government, they organize a procession to protest, they are not able to conjure up courage to protest and are afraid of seeing cars and motorcycles in the town and fail to raise slogans:

After holding a few unreported meetings in the village, a few hundred villagers arrived in the town bringing their own food along, and went around in a procession. It was a pitiable show. The cars and motorcycles scared them and they were too shy to raise slogans. The placards they held were written in a raw hand, with glaring spelling errors. (73)

In **Mystery of the Missing Cap**, when the rustic children look at the minister they are curious to welcome him and consider him as a super human being. They feel whether the minister is like the other human beings and they are anxious to know 'What does a minister eat? What does he think? Does he sleep? Does he ever suffer from colic or cold as ordinary mortals do? (117) When they walk with the minister, they feel themselves dwarf and guilty: 'We, the half-naked, pot-bellied, uncivilised kids walked parallel to the minister at a safe distance and could not help feeling extremely small and guilty. (118)

In **The Bull of Babulpur**, the writer again depicts the backwardness and innocence of the villagers. When Priyanath Boral comes to the village by jeep, the villagers looks at the car with amazement and curiosity:

Babulpur had never experienced the advent of the wonder that was an automobile. The raw, sandy road, luckily, was broad and relatively smooth. Kids ran before and behind the car, celebrating the hair-raising event with ecstatic shouts. Folks gossiping and sharing the *hookah* on the middle of the road hurriedly cleared away, amazement writ large on their faces. Drowsy dogs stood up reluctantly and then realising the gravity of the situation ran away and barked furiously from yards afar. (222)

In **The Gold Medal**, Das gives a vivacious picture of the entertainment of the villagers, when Jai Jagannath opera comes to their village, they are overwhelmed with joy and receive the party with great enthusiasm and delight. "A score of villagers stood under the peepal tree ready to receive the party. From the branches of the banyan tree a troop of monkeys looked on with curiosity. Broad smiles brightened the familiar faces".

The villagers are keenly interested in super natural powers and ghost stories. They believe in the existence of ghost. Das was acquainted with the likes and dislikes of the village folks. In his childhood he lived amongst the villagers. He might have heard such ghost stories as child. He has reflected those experiences in many stories. In "The Crocodile's Lady" Doctor Batstone, a famous sociologist from the west enquires of the villagers whether they believed in ghost or not. The people started shaking their heads. The professor was not able to get the real meaning of their gestures and came to the conclusion that they didn't. But when the villagers started sharing their experience about ghosts, he was wonder struck Shombhudas, a money lender tells his story:

Will you believe, Sahib, that he was my cousin, my very own father's own maternal uncle's own son-in-law's own nephew? And hadn't I done everything for him, from sharing my pillow with him to doing half the shopping for his marriage? Yet who in this wide world does not know that this treacherous brother-in-law of mine, I mean his ghost, chose to harass me out of all the thousands and millions of people of my village, within a week of his death? (16)

The second Pandit of school shows his own experience with doctor Batstone: "No Sahib, you after all, are a stranger to them and visitor from across the seven seas to boot. How much do you know about the native ghost? You ought not to trust them. If they get a chance they twist the neck of even the exorcists." One of the villagers tells the story of illustrations Mahatma Languly Baba' show he was reborn when he was thrown in the cremation ground by the people as they thought he was dead.

In **Farewell to a Ghost**, the whole story is about illegitimate daughter of an Englishman by a tribal woman. That girl was kidnapped by three English men and was kept in the deserted villa. The three English men left her alone in the villa and died mysteriously. A little fellow, keeper of that villa wanted the hidden gold and money which the girl knew. The rascal keeper got the hidden wealth and stabbed her. The villagers felt that the girl became a ghost. The villagers believed that the ghost was harmless to them and they paid due respect and reverence to it:

Neither the fate of the feringhees nor that of the girl's murderer interested us. It was only the girl that mattered-I mean her ghost. We always thought of her as one of us, although we knew quite well how

different she was. Apart from being a ghost he was of alien blood, blood from shores beyond the seven seas. We could not help being a little more respectful towards her on that account, though we knew that blood had lost much of its relevance once she had become a ghost. (83)

The villagers have a natural inclination to superstitions as has been depicted in Das's stories. In **The Crocodile's Lady**, the villagers feel that so long as the crocodile's lady is with them, the crocodiles cannot do any harm to them. They believed that the crocodile once took her in the deep water and married her and after long ten years she reappeared and became the crocodile's lady. When the professor asked her what did exactly happen to her, she murmured:

'After the crocodile caught me, my son, he took me down, down, down-seven palm trees deep! I did not know what to do....'

... There was no change in her tone. She continued, 'Under the seven palm trees deep water, my son, when I regained my consciousness, I saw the crocodile intently staring into my eyes. I don't know what happened to me. I could not take my eyes away from his....' (19)

In **The Owl**, Das has shown villagers' deep faith in superstition. They feel that the howling of jackals is in auspicious and creates a melancholic atmosphere which can be removed by blowing the conch shells. They believe that the owl is a co-resident of their deity and is the saviour of the village. When the paralysed son of Zamidar shoots and declares that he has killed the owl, they foresee some catastrophe:

What might happen if one killed the owl? asked the young Zamindar. 'We were raising the same question, Sir, what might not happen?'

'Shut up!' yelled the zamindar. 'Tell me clearly what might happen.'

'Catastrophe,' quipped Balbhadra Das. (25)

The village pundit tells that his own son mimicked the owl and did not return even after five years. Surprisingly, the Zamindar's son dies after shooting the owl, but the hooting of the owl-'tu-whit' is heard from the temple once again: 'O God! The owl is not dead, after all!' muttered Balbhadra Das, his bewildered voice cracking. (28)

In **The Tree**, when the flood comes and the banyan tree is about to fall, Shrikant Das, a village, feels that it was a result of the sins, the villagers had committed. He feels that if the tree is collapsing, it is overburdened with the heavy weight of their sins.

'Harken, you all! Not only these boys, but we all have our shares of sins. And if the tree had decided to collapse, it was because it cannot bear the burden of

our sins any longer. Let each one of us confess his sins, addressing the spirit of the tree, silently in our hearts! Let us pray to be pardoned! *Hari bo!* Glory to God! (50)

Bishu Jena, a village old man falls into trance and proclaims himself to be a representative of the Bunyan Goddess, where cymbals, drums and conch shells are played close to his ears, he goes in a trance, starts shivering and becomes the voice of the Bunyan Goddess.

'I will be born again- again!' he said. He closed his mouth and eyes and resumed shivering. The instruments were played again. Again his lips parted and the instruments stopped. 'I will be born as a thousand trees – here, there, everywhere!'

'*Hari bo! Hari bo!* Hearken to the tree-god's message. He will be reborn as a thousand trees!' (53)

In the **Farewell to a Ghost**, the villagers have a belief that the ghost of the unlucky girl will safeguard them from any forthcoming danger. They offer her different dishes on the occasion of birth, death, wedding or other important occasions. No ceremony is complete till the due share is offered to the ghost. The food is offered in earthen pots with earthen lamps with due respect. They are put between the villa and the banyan tree and an humble request is made:

Unhappy girl, here is your share of the feast which has been held by the benevolent so-and –so on such – and-such occasion. Be satisfied with this. And, we ask you to guard the village from evil to the extent of your capacity. We have never tried to dislodge you or disturb you, have, have we? No. Why not? Because we look upon you as one of our unlucky daughters. God grant you peace! (84)

In **The Miracle**, Haridas's son Bulu, totally dumb, with one eye bigger than the other and incapable of understanding anything, becomes Bulubaba in the Company of Braj Sadhu. The people start offering him money. Number of followers begins to swell around him. The people consider him as an 'avatar'. Bulu Baba also starts curing some patients of gout and celiac. Navin Ray, on the other hand tries to 'redeeming the earth from its superstitious with a bang.

Das has portrayed the exploitation of the poor villagers by the feudal lords and money lenders in his stories. Dabu Sahukaris'an evil genius'in **The Murderer**, He snatched the houses and the lands of so many villagers and tortured them. He was cruel-hearted and heart-less exploiter of the poor villagers:

Dabu Sahukar, no doubt, was an evil genius. Many could recite the long list of unlucky men who had lost their houses and lands to him. To be alert enough to escape Dabu Sahukar's trap was considered the height of prudence. People dreaded him as much as they dreaded an eclipse or the hour of Saturn.

It seems Dabu Sahukar enjoyed terrifying people. For no reason whatsoever he could snarl at a passer- by bringing one's blood down to a freezing point. A notorious arsonist was on his payroll. To incur Dabu Sahukar's displeasure meant to be prepared to see one's house going up in flames, sooner or later. (35)

In **The Strategy**, the money lender Vanbihari is the real exploiter who has exploited the poor debtors mercilessly. In **The Kite**, the Mahajan, the real tyrant of the village tortures Kunja's mother when she denies selling her land to the rascal. 'When the news reached Kunja how his mother was dragged by her miserable lock of thinning white hair, whipped and almost disrobed when she collapsed'.(198) Kunja could not control his anger and killed the tyrant with the sacred weapon of Lord Shiva.

Manoj Das has portrayed the rural India in a number of stories in a convincing manner. Here he has shown the real emotions of the villagers. The beauty of the landscape of his native village enables him to portray the scenic beauty in his stories. He has successfully depicted the feelings, traditions and the ways of life of the village folk in his stories on the basis of his first-hand experience. His treatment of rural India is undoubtedly unalloyed and lucid.

WORKS CITED

- Das, Manoj (2015). *The Bridge in the Moonlit Night, and Other Stories*, National Book Trust, New Delhi.
- *Mystery of the Missing Cap and Other Stories*, New Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 1998.
- *Selected Fiction*, New Delhi, Penguin Books, 2001.
- *Tales told by Mystics*, New Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 2017.
- P. Raja (1993). *Many Worlds of Manoj Das*, Delhi, B.R.Publishing Corporation.
- Sarbeswar Samal (1997). *Manoj Das, A Critical Study*, Cuttack, Kitab Mahal.

Corresponding Author

Dr. Ambuj Sharma*

Professor, Department of English, Gurukula Kangri Vishwavidyalaya, Haridwar