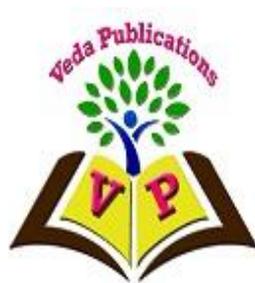


**SIGNIFICANCE OF RURAL CULTURE IN THE SHORT FICTION OF MANOJ DAS**M.Narasimha Rao<sup>1\*</sup>, Prof. K.Ratna Shiela Mani<sup>2</sup><sup>1\*</sup>(Research Scholar, Acharya Nagarjuna University.)<sup>2</sup>(Research Supervisor, Department of English, Acharya Nagarjuna University.)

Email Id : vediksm@gmail.com

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2022.9107>**ABSTRACT**

A brief survey of Indian Short Fiction in English indicates that there is a wide scope for its study. Manoj Das has presented a serene and simple way of life of rural community in India in his fiction which is rapidly disappearing. He is one of the foremost short story writers in Post-Independent India and an outstanding bilingual writer both in English and Oriya at ease. He depicts very effectively and skillfully the way of life of people living in villages, their values, norms, beliefs, attitudes, traditions, customs, superstitions, religion, etc., in his stories. He is a keen observer of the changing socio-political and cultural scenario in the post independent India.

The stories of Manoj Das are so subtle and suggestive that they have a concealed element of didacticism, a zeal for social reform as he is keenly interested in fostering and promoting the qualitative life of the rural people of India. Hence, in this paper I presented my views and opinions from Indian perspective keeping in mind the life of the rural people with all their day to day activities and problems as portrayed by Manoj Das. In spite of their penury, the cultural values and conventional ways are not given up. Thus, the author preserves the rich Indian cultural heritage in spite of his depicting the follies and foibles of human life.

**Keywords:** *Rural Culture, India, Problems, Foibles of human life.*



A brief survey of Indian Short Fiction in English indicates that there is a wide scope for its study. The writer of short fiction, selected for the present study is Manoj Das. He is one of the foremost short story writers in Post-Independent India and an outstanding bilingual writer both in English and Oriya at ease. He depicts very effectively and skillfully the way of life of people living in villages, their values, norms, beliefs, attitudes, traditions, customs, superstitions, religion and so on, in his stories. He is a keen observer of the changing socio-political and cultural scenario in the post independent India.

Manoj Das has presented a serene and simple way of life of rural community in India in his fiction which is rapidly disappearing. He has expressed his strong love for his native village in his writings.

“ I, though born and brought up in a village at an impressionable age, can present an authentic atmosphere of the rural life, the rural air of India” said Manoj Das in an interview given to *The Times of India* (May 18, 1980).

He has drawn on his experiences to create an authentic picture of rural life of the times. The customs, rituals, beliefs and superstitions of the village community of India have found an expression in his short fiction. I deal with two important stories entitled, *The Bull of Babulpur* and *Mystery of the Missing Cap*.

In these short stories Das portrays vividly and interestingly a traditional and semi-urban society and presents its collective image or identity. Keeping himself within the bounds of 'ideal probability', he has beautifully described the loss of community life

and lack of rustic existence under the impact of modernism.

The story, “The Bull of Babulpur”, presents the conflict between rural life represented by the bull and the urban culture represented by Mr. Boral the criminal lawyer. Manoj Das depicts a slick criminal lawyer who, seized by a whim, decides to spend a couple of days every fortnight in Babulpur, a village of his maternal grandfather. He drives to the village, but his passage is blocked by a bull – “verily the symbol of free, immortal and invincible universal soul”- sitting serenely and ruminating in the middle of the road. In fact a bull is reputed for its nobility, honesty and sincerity. In this context, the bull refuses to be driven off the road. Being nearly defeated and demoralized by the defiance and the popularity of the bull, Mr. Boral now sees the prospects of following a new formula though he decided earlier asceticism and criminal law. This new element is of his life style, politics as he plans to seek election to the State Legislative Assembly.

The outline sketch of the story does not provide us with the feel of the pulsation of the rural life and culture, and glimpses of the ethos of the community which form the essential texture of Indian life. Therefore, “The Bull of Babulpur” lays its foundations broad and deep in things which most constantly and seriously appeal to us in our struggle and fortune. The placid village was a stir at the approach of Mr. Boral's car:

“Kids ran before and behind the car celebrating the hair – raising event with ecstatic shouts. Folks gossiping and sharing hookah on the middle of the road hurriedly cleared away, amazement writ large on their



faces. Drowsy dogs stood up reluctantly and then realizing the seriousness of the situation ran and barked furiously from yards away". (DHOS,40).

Another important aspect of the story "the Bull of Babulpur" is the authenticity of characterization – a remarkable achievement within the limited framework of the short story. It is interesting to study how Manoj Das exposes the hypocrisy, shrewdness and the opportunistic tendency of Mr. Boral.

These aspects of drowsy dogs, village children gathering to see the automobile – reveal the rural aspect of the story and the writer blends the setting of the story and the events so judiciously that they cannot be separated. Therefore, the rural atmosphere forms the very texture and structure of the story. The examples given are very appropriate and beautiful. Manoj Das describes the advent of the automobile in the following manner.

"The car advanced triumphantly, bellowing and honking. But that the path of ascetic meditation was not all strewn with rose petals, became evident only a furlong away from the destination".

The author is interested in the progress and prosperity of their community and therefore, he describes the scenic examples to exhibit the rural atmosphere. The comments of people about the bull's response are appropriate and natural. An elderly villager heartily laughed and said that this monarch-like bull does not know fear and it would not care to obey even a lieutenant governor. It moves according to its own whims and fancies. Boral felt extremely dejected, disappointed and even felt mortified but he did not show it naturally.

When he sought the help of his uncle for the clearance of the bull from the road, he could not help it. He commented that the owner of the bull is Lord Shiva, Sri Sri Babuleswar, the presiding deity of the village as Kenchamma in "Kanthapura". Boral did not like the comments of his uncle or the villagers, though he wanted to enjoy peace and quietness in a village. His ego was not satisfied because he was disappointed by the apathy and indifference shown by the villagers to his visit as they continued their routine activities as usual. He suddenly and rudely woke up to the fact that he had a formidable rival – Lord Shiva – and here lay His most arrogant viceroy. The lawyer thought that a bull cannot and should not block the public road. He became furious. He was sure that the legal point he raised was incontestable. But another old villager disarmed him quietly and in a most casual manner saying that this whole universe is Lord's Compound.

Boral is an expert as a criminal lawyer blessed with the gift of the gab. Controlling his answer, he behaves in a more sophisticated manner. He also recalls how his grandfather told a story in which how a cat was killed by the bridegroom to teach his wife the quality of obedience. The author introduces the constables only to show their helplessness wherever and whenever people in large numbers participate in an event. The transformation in the character of the protagonist is most pertinent to the theme of the story. Thus, the author Manoj Das raises the story to a higher level of spirituality, theism and inculcating decency, dignity and decorum into the hearts and minds of people. Some critics may see caricature in talking about politics but it is not



correct. The story is about humility and law-abiding nature.

The bull returning to its original point suggests that man's journey of life returns after the completion, from where it has begun that is, life is cyclic – Birth -Life - Death and again Birth. The highlights in the story are – A story which intellectualizes and inspires the readers to spiritual levels of reflection and contemplation. A dormant wayward and lethargic bull on the road blocking the pedestrians' way becomes an icon of worship and reverence. It is Lord Basava of every temple as people carefully meditate on it and in course of time worshipped by all and sundry. The metamorphosis in the people caused by the theme is appropriate and realistic. This is not an ordinary fable but a slice of life as preached by Lord Krishna to Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita. It is an epitome of *Panchatantra*, the genesis of all didactic stories. It is a theistic story par excellence.

Another story which captures the rural scene and gives a glimpse of the socio-political picture and atmosphere of the Post-Independent India is "Mystery of the Missing Cap". It is a realistic story which describes comically the visit of a minister to a village in Orissa. The rural scene is so vividly and realistically portrayed as to make the story a living socio-political document of the Post-Independent phase of the Oriyan community in particular and the Indian community in general. A distinct and unmistakable Oriya flavour permeates the whole story. In those days the ministers were held in great respect and the story shows the reverential attitude of the village folk towards the ministers.

In the story, "Mystery of the Missing Cap", the writer shows versatility of his genius in weaving the tale. The Protagonists are Moharana and Babu Virkishore. The latter was the honourable Minister of Fisheries and Fine Arts of the Stage. Moharana was a wealthy and happy man who had a pukka house in an area of twenty villages. He was generous by nature and an ideal host with two ponds full of choice fish and a number of pampered cows. There was development and progress in the area after India attained Independence. Moreover people had great respect in those days for ministers and patriots. Whenever the ministers visited the village, they warmly welcomed with great esteem and garlanded them profusely. Moharana began to make proper arrangements for the reception of a minister to his village. When he arrived, there was wonderful reception which pleased the guests enormously. Then Moharana and his friends looked ecstatic.

The writer presents an interesting, delightful and humorous picture of the minister's physical personality. For ordinary people it was the experience of a lifetime of inviting an august minister to their village. The minister and his entourage were treated to tender coconut water, followed by the most luxurious lunch with about twenty dishes, ghee-baked rice with nuts and cloves. After sumptuous lunch the minister retired to the cabin set up for him. Though it was summer, the cabin's window being open to a big pond and grove, there was enough air to lull even an elephant to a sound sleep. Volunteers had been posted to see that no noise whatever was made anywhere in the village to disturb the ministerial repose.



A dramatic incident took place that is; a mischievous Jhandoo bounced towards the window and picked up the cap of the minister. Evidently, there was a deep-rooted conspiracy. It was a grave occurrence. It may have devastating effects on the political situation of our country. He was well-guarded by his well-wishers, friends and followers. He woke up and gave his public appearance with his bald head which wore an aura of martyrdom. His niece garlanded him singing a song of praise with orchestra. Sri Moharana spoke a few words in his maiden speech and that pleased the audience. The minister ignored the loss of his cap and his big clean head shone like a satellite. He advised the audience not to care about the stealing of his cap as there was nothing sacred about the cap. He showed some coins to the tune of one hundred and one rupees to the audience which he accepted from the public. He decided to remain bare headed for the whole night. When the minister was about to depart the rascal Jhandoo (not real one) returned the cap. Here he recollects the episode of how a monkey was nurtured in his house when he was a boy. When the meeting was going on the Jhandoo sat down between the minister and Sri Moharana. He put the cap on his own head, then, taking it off, offered it to the minister in a most genial gesture. The story ends with the crying of the minister and Moharana who was planning to participate in active politics and become a powerful minister. Thus, this episode of the cap had changed the lives of many leaders.

This story has scope for multiple interpretations. We have to understand that the cap stands for a political leader or a political portfolio. Similarly it is not a monkey but a powerful man who

wants to wield power. The story is symbolic reflecting the political and social scenario of the village.

### CONCLUSION

Manoj Das is genuinely interested in the upliftment of the poorer sections of people in particular Orissa and in general India. Therefore, the stories contain possible solutions for the development of the people who are afflicted with financial problems. He wants to enlighten them on various aspects of life in order to improve their quality of life, style of living and attitudinal behaviour. "Manoj Das 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", says Graham Greene, (Blurb).

A British critic A. Russell says, "There is little doubt that Manoj Das is a great story-teller of the sub-continent and he has too few peers, no matter what yardstick is applied to measure his ability as an artist." (Blurb).

Thus, the stories of Manoj Das are so subtle and suggestive that they have a concealed element of didacticism, a zeal for social reform as he is keenly interested in fostering and promoting the qualitative life of the rural people of India. Hence, in this paper I presented my views and opinions from Indian perspective keeping in mind the life of the rural people with all their day to day activities and problems as portrayed by Manoj Das. In spite of their penury, the cultural values and conventional ways are not given up. Thus, the author preserves the rich Indian cultural heritage in spite of his depicting the follies and foibles of human life.

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