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**meet the author**

Jagannath Prasad Das



*All that I want to say, let me try to say in poetry.*

— J.P. Das

Jagannath Prasad Das is a writer who has dominated the Oriya literary scene for the last three decades, in many fields—poetry, fiction, drama and criticism. Born in Puri district in Orissa in 1936, he wrote and published poetry while in his teens and was a familiar name in the early fifties. However, in 1955, he stopped writing when, after his graduation from the Ravenshaw College, Cuttack, he moved to Allahabad for further studies and later joined the Indian Administrative Service.

After a fifteen year hiatus—and a brief flirtation with painting—he started writing again and published his first collection of poems in 1971. This volume, *Pratham Purush*, came as a breath of fresh air to the Oriya poetic scene, which had alienated readers who has found contemporary poetry obscure and abstruse. Das's poems were welcomed for the emotional clarity and honesty of experience,

and a total lack of cerebration or intellection. The book appeared in Hindi (Allahabad, 1974) and English (Arnold-Heinemann, 1976) translations and brought the poet national recognition.

Starting with this memorable collection, Das has so far written eleven collections of poetry (eight of which have been published in Hindi translation) and is an important figure in the Indian poetry scene. According to one assessment, 'If contemporary Oriya poetry has acquired a new dimension and sophistication in terms of vision, technical integrity and innovative use of the creative medium, it was because of Das's contribution. An unusual blending of the sense of beauty and the sense of joy in living and loving makes his poetry extremely readable and accessible. His passion for the diverse facets of life and existence makes his poetry vibrant and rejuvenating. The sense of rhythm that he tries to capture in his



*Bhubaneswar, 1971*



*Acting (in beard) in one of his plays, 1971*

poetry is very close to the colloquial speech.’ (*Kavya Bharati*, 1997).

His collection of poems *Ahnik* (1990) was given the Sahitya Akademi award—though he did not accept the award. The Akademi has published the Hindi, Bangla, Assamese and English translations of the book.

Das’s first play *Suryasta Purbaru* (*Before the Sunset*) was published in 1972. It was staged in its Bangla version the same year in Calcutta (Theatre Guild, Director Shyamal Sen) and was hailed as a ‘sensitive sophisticated and most intelligently contrived drama’ (*Hindustan Standard*). In 1976, the Hindi translation of the play was published and produced in Delhi (Dishantar, Directed by Ramgopal Bajaj, with Om Puri in the main role) to rave reviews. The play has since been translated into many languages and is considered a classic in modern Indian drama. His later plays have also achieved similar success.

It was rather late that Das came to the world of fiction, writing his first story in 1980. He has since then published eight collections of short stories. As a story teller, he has been called ‘the quintessential raconteur, with an instinctive mastery of the form that this genre imposes.... he invariably manages to hold the reader in thrall from the opening sentence, leading him on through convoluted corridors and depositing him on the threshold of some unforeseen mystery’ (Bikram K. Das). Some of his short stories have been successfully adapted for stage, radio and television.

An M.A. in Political Science, Das holds a Ph.D. in Art History. He had taken a fellowship to do research on the Chitrakars of Puri and published *Puri Paintings* in 1982. His other works on Orissan art include *Chitra-Pothi* (1985) and *Palm-leaf Miniatures* (with Prof. Joanna Williams of Berkeley University, 1991). These are considered pioneering works on Orissan art.



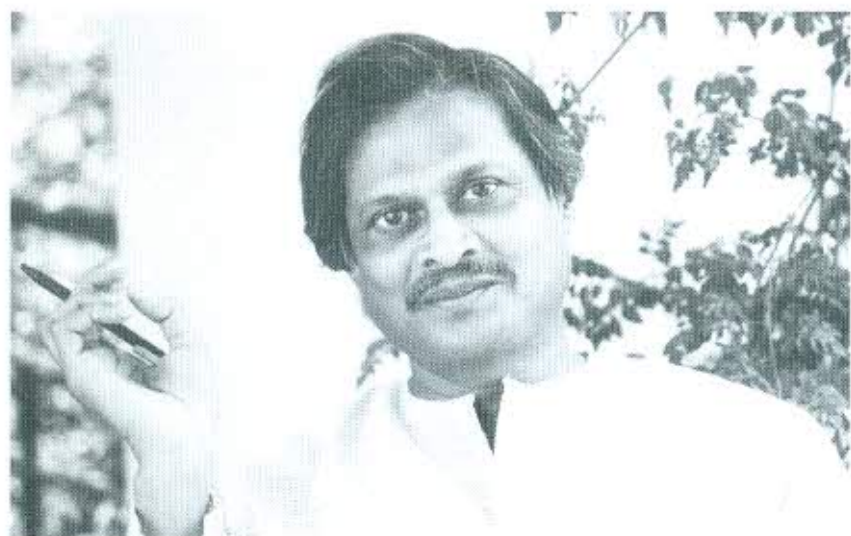
*Puri, 1981*

In his service career Das did several assignments in the Government of Orissa—of which he considers his stint in Kalahandi from 1963 to 1966 a memorable one—and came to Delhi in 1973 to work in the Government of India. He left the IAS in 1984 to devote himself fulltime to creative writing and research. He has stayed on in Delhi which he now considers his home and work place.

Among Das's later writings, an important work is the historical novel *Desh Kaal Patra* (1992) which portrays the transformation

of Orissa's traditional society in the second half of the nineteenth century under the impact of colonialism. Constructing a counter discourse which gives a voice to the colonized, the book "seeks to construct an alternative narrative in which the colonized is not only written about, he is seen as shaping his own destiny (*The Book Review* xviii No. 10). The book has been selected by the National Book Trust for translation into all Indian Languages.

Writing about Das's creative writings, mention must be made



*Bhopal, 1991*

of his poems for children (*Alimalika* 1993) and nonsense verses (*Alukuchi-Malukuchi* 1993). These short verses were written by him when he was bedridden in 1991 and are a pleasant addition to the varied oeuvre of his creative writings.

Besides translating some of his own works, Das has also translated other poetry into English and the publications include : Catherine Clement's *Growing an Indian Star* (with the poet, 1991), Oriya women poets' *Under a Silent Sun* (with Arlene Zide, 1992), and Gulzar's *Autumn Moon* (1999). For English readers he has also edited Oriya Short Stories (1983) and *Kavita 93* (with K. Satchidanandan, 1993).

Closely associated with cinema, he has been on the Boards of the Children's Film Society (1985–1990) and the Orissa Film



*In a Sahitya Akademi Seminar, 1994*

Development Corporation (1988–1993) and has served as Member of Jury of national and international film awards. He has also edited a book *Films for Children* (1987).

## A Select Bibliography of Works in English Translation

### Poetic Works

- First Person.* Tr. Deba Patnaik, Arnold-Heinemann, 1976  
*Love is a Season.* Tr. Poet, Arnold-Heinemann, 1978  
*Timescapes.* Tr. Poet, Arnold-Heinemann, 1980  
*Silences.* Tr. Poet, Vikas, 1989  
*Diurnal Rites.* Tr. H. Panda, Sahitya Akademi, 1994  
*The Unreal City.* Tr. Durga P. Panda, Har-Anand, 1997.  
*Lovelines.* Tr. Poet with Paul St-Pierre, Virgo, 2001

### Short Stories

- The Magic Deer.* Tr. Author, Vikas, 1983  
*The Forbidden Street.* Tr. Author, Vikas, 1988  
*Spider's Web.* Tr. KK &

Leelawati Mahapatra, Vikas, 1983

- The Prostitute.* Tr. Bibhuti Mishra & Others, Har-Anand, 1995  
*The Pukka Sahib.* Tr. Bikram K. Das, Harper Collins, 2001.

### Plays

- Before the Sunset.* Tr. Author, Arnold-Heinemann, 1978.  
*Two Plays.* Tr. Author, Writers Workshop, 1983  
*The Underlog.* Tr. Ravi Baswani, Vikas, 1984  
*Absurd Play.* Tr. Author, Writers Workshop, 1989  
*Sundardas.* Tr. Paul St-Pierre & Others, National School of Drama & Har-Anand, 2002  
*Miss X.* Tr. Author, Rupa & Co., 2002

## Chronology

1936	Birth	1992	Publication of <i>Desh Kaal Patra</i> , historical novel
1957	Took Master's degree and taught in Allahabad University.	1993	Publication of <i>Alimalika</i> and <i>Alukuchi-Malukuchi</i> , children's poems and nonsense verses
1958	Joined the Indian Administrative Service	1994	Emeritus fellow, Department of Culture, Government of India
1960	Wrote two short plays	1996	K.K. Birla Foundation Fellowship
1970	Exhibition of Paintings	1998	Sarla Award for <i>Priya Vidushak</i>
1971	Published <i>Pratham Purush</i> , a collection of poems	1999	Publication of <i>Autumn Moon</i> , translation
1972	Wrote <i>Suryasta Purbaru</i> , a play	2000	Nandikar Award for Theatre
1979	Homi Bhabha Fellowship	2001	Publication of <i>Lovelines</i> (poems) and <i>Pukka Sahib</i> (short stories)
1980	Published first short story "Shabdbhedh"	2002	Publication of <i>Sundardas</i> , a play
1982	<i>Puri Paintings</i> published		
1984	Left the IAS. Vishuv Award		
1990	Short story <i>Interview</i> made into telefilm		
1991	<i>Ahnik</i> , collection of poems gets Sahitya Akademi award		



*New Delhi, 2001*