

Conversations with Manoharrai Sardessai

Q. How did you become interested in writing poetry?

A. It all started with a song! I sang in praise of my little sister who was three years old. She was active and playful. She used to play with a little puppy. She was too much attached to it. I sang a song in Konkani. However, my first literary activity was in prose.

Q. It was in Marathi. My father had taken me to Miramar. I described the beautiful scene at Miramar and my father was all praise for it. How were you affected by your early upbringing?

A. There was a congenial atmosphere for literary activity in my home. My father was an established Marathi writer. He knew French and Portuguese. At home I was surrounded by heaps of books. I read the poems of eminent Marathi poets like B.R. Tambe, Madhav Julian, B.B. Borkar and Damodar Kare. In fact I was with B.B. Borkar for two years. No wonder I came under his powerful influence. B.B. Borkar and his companion poet Damodar Kare used to converse only in poetry. That influenced me to a great extent. Naturally I developed an aptitude for literature—especially for poetry. After completion of my school education I was sent to Sangli. I got admitted to the Science course in 1942. But during quite India movement of 1942 I came to Goa and joined Lawande's movement. At that time I came under the influence of Shenoy Goembab and I brought out a manuscript magazine *Nabat* in Konkani which carried the first cartoon of Laxman Pai.

Q. Were you contemporaries?

A. He was not only a contemporary but one of my best companions. At that time I wrote articles

in Marathi for *Jeevan Kala* the magazine edited by Vasant Kare. I had interest in writing poems too. I used to participate in a poetry competition. Though my poetry was appreciated, I did not get any prize!

Q. How was it?

A. Well, my father was the judge for the competition. He told me later that I had a talent but he could not give me any prize. He told me, if I give you the prize how would the public view it? Once I told him not to be a judge

Dr. F A Fernandes of the English Department of the University of Goa, interviews the noted multi-lingual litterateur.

next time! But any way I was never discouraged. In that period I wrote a number of poems in Marathi imitating Tambe and Madhav Julian. But I never published them. When I joined Wilson College in Bombay, I founded the Konkani Sahitya Mandal. The Konkani Bhasha Mandal had started *Sad*, a quarterly magazine in 1953 in Bombay. I wrote some articles for the magazine. Even at that time I wrote short stories in Marathi for *Manohar*, *Kirloskar*, *Hansa*, *Navayuga* and *Loksatta*.. I contributed English articles to *Bharat Jyoti*. I contributed poems to *Abhiruchi* and *Deepagraha* of Janaradhan Shinkre who was later the editor of *Pradeep*.

Q. Did you earn anything by your writing?

A. Of course, I earned some pocket money.

Q. When did you discover yourself as a poet?

A. When I was in Paris for my higher studies, I was nostalgic about Goa. There I wrote all

poems in Konkani and really discovered a poet in me. I wrote all original poems. Earlier my poetry was mostly imitative.

Q : Were you Influenced by the French poets ?

A : No particular poet influenced me as such. But I got interested in French poets Paeluard and Jacques — both were very popular I admired both for their being people's poets !

Q. It means you enjoy the poetry of others.

A: Of course, I enjoy poetry, No

doubt a poet writes in isolation, but he cannot live in isolation. For me, to write poem I have to be in a poetic atmosphere, then only that internal urge would find an outlet in some form or the other.

Q. Prof. Armando Menezes has observed that Zato Zuio is reminiscent in its discontinuity and epigrammatic character of Tagore's *Stray Birds*.

A. No doubt, I read Tagore, but I had no intention of imitating him.

Q. Are you a solitary writer or have you benefitted from instructions at writer's workshops?

A. There were no workshops in those days. I had to learn that art of writing on my own.

Q. Do you think workshops, seminars and literary groups are important to writers?

A I believe so. Every art has its technique which should be studied.

Q. Do you have a schedule of work?

A. No, I do not have. Short poems.



I write in my mind whenever they come to my mind. Later on I jot them down on paper.

Q. I would like to ask you about the craft of poetry. I understand some poets put down on paper the first inspirational rush of a

poem — everything that comes into the mind — and then revise. I wonder if you work in a similar way.

A. No question of draft. When I am inspired I write down the entire poem. Rarely I may change

a word somewhere but in any case it is not at all a revision. There are some poems which I am told to 'compose. For example, All India Radio may give me a theme and tell me to write a poem — a lyric or something like that. When I feel that I am fit for that 'mission' I produce a poem. In this manner I have composed some poems for an anthology of a school or a college text. Some poets may dislike the idea of 'making a poem', but I feel sometimes you have to do it for a worthy cause, it could be social or educational. Even in such poetry if one is deeply involved that poem could be without any air of artificiality. What I am asserting is that I do not believe in hundred percent inspiration. I have composed some poems for the cause of the Konkani movement and my society and I am not at all sorry for it.

Q: Would you narrate any interesting event when you were told to 'make' a poem?

A. Oh, yes. Once there was a session of the All India Women's Conference in Goa. Its president Kamala Chattopadhyay requested me to compose a poem on *needle*. I agreed, I took the needle as a symbol of unity, communal harmony and my poem *Apurbai Suie Baie* came into existence, and she liked it.

Q. When you work with poetry, do you speak your poems aloud? Do you listen to them? How important is the auditory part?

A. Yes, when I write I feel like reciting my poetry. I recite it to my friends, to my family and even to myself.

Q. I want to ask you about titling poems. What do you think the

title should do for the poem?

A: I do not attach much importance to titles. Titles are just meant for identification, classification. Otherwise, you know, what is in a name? In fact a good title has to be a part of a poem, but very often it is not. In many cases I have noted that the first line of a poem is generally taken as a title.

Q. Your poems in Zato - Zuio and Pissolim are untitled. Why do you prefer to leave a poem untitled?

A. Well, as far as my poems in the collections you have referred to just now are concerned, I say that every poem is title in itself.

Q. Do you write primarily for yourself or have you a definite desire to communicate to others?

A. Poetry, I believe, is a means of self-expression, but it is also communication. A poet is a member of the society and is committed to make the life of his fellow beings fuller, richer and more beautiful.

Q. What are your views on the state of contemporary poetry?

A. In Konkani literature there is no dearth of poets. They are so many, it would be wrong on my part to say that all are great. You see, the generation of B.B. Borkar, R.V. Pandit and myself is almost over. The one who followed us, namely Nagesh Karmali is still a committed poet. For us, poetry meant an instrument to expose social injustice and evil. Social awareness was our predominant theme. Of course, other themes like love, romance, nature were not excluded. Anyway we did not believe in pure poetry or poetry for the sake of poetry.

In those days the social atmos-

phere was like that. But today committed poets are few, especially in my cast I used poetry to defend the dignity of my people. I have made full use of my poetic talent for worthy cause. In this I have followed my master Shenoy Goybab. I loved my native land Goa from the depths of my heart. I do not think I am parochial. In order to be universal a poet had to be regional. I believe that poetry should inspire the people to bring about a social change. It has that potential. Now there are new trends emerging, one is that of abstract poetry. I feel poetry should not be obscure. It defeats its own purpose. I remember a latin poet who says "I try to be brief but I become obscure". Well, there should be suggestivity, implied meaning and all that, but without clarity of thought what is the use of a poem?

Q. What is your idea of a good poem?

A. I wish I could define a good poem. I am sorry I cannot. However I can state certain traits that go to make a good poem I think poetry is the highest form of literature since it expresses the most in the fewest possible of words. A good poem should possess this quality of terseness, it should mean, it should say much more than quality of terseness, it should mean, it should say much more than the sum of its words. A poem should lend itself to be recited, to be sung. It is only by continuing the oral tradition of the hoary past that it will survive in the future. Looking at the works with the wide-eyed wonderment of a child a poet should not merely offer words but, going beyond words reveal the music and magic of words, and above all present a vision of a better world, the kingdom to come.