

Beyond the Self: The Social Dimension of Co-operation in the Short Stories of Manoj Das

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Abstract

This paper aims to highlight the theme of cooperation in the short stories of Manoj Das. In the short stories of Manoj Das, the theme of cooperation bears a benchmark for the artistic excellence of narratives. Cooperation reflects the essence of collective endeavour towards a shared goal. Das, a noted Indo-Anglian writer, exquisitely handles the narratives that signify the significance of cooperation among individuals. Through his timeless short stories, Das portrays characters who go beyond the domain of personal agendas to work collectively for a common goal. In the present world, amidst increasing individualism and fragmentation, the exploration of this theme of this facet carries significant value. By going through Das's short stories, readers can attain profound insights into the values of unity, solidarity, and mutual support. As the decay of the value of cooperation is clearly felt and found in the present world, therefore, the study of this perspective is the need of the hour.

Keywords: Concept; Co-operation; Social; Story; Unity; Value.

Introduction

Society is a system made up of interrelationships or interdependence among a large group of people living together in an organised way. Moreover, people in a society live together with a shared culture, social interaction, and interrelationships. Sociologist P. Gisbert says the following words in connection with 'society' in *Fundamentals of Sociology*: "Society, in general, consists in the complicated network of social relationships by which every human being is interconnected with his fellow men" (10). Social ethics also discusses the need to maintain relations between individuals and society for an individual's living a social life in a significant way. A society guides the individuals about how they should act for living a

meaningful life and for the betterment of a society. Dr. R.N. Sharma underscores the relation between individual and society in *Indian ethics* with the words as follows: "The most important concept in social ethics is the relation between the individual and society" (255). Rahmat Ali says the following words in *A Compact Guide to Introductory Sociology* about society: "A society is a group of people with a common and distinct culture. The people occupy a particular territorial area, having a feeling of unity and integrity, and regard themselves as an entity different from others. It is, in fact, the dominant form of social organisation" (5).

Out of several social elements, 'cooperation' is a vital element that acts as a binding force among the people in a family and a society. 'Cooperation' is an associative process that occurs when two or more individuals work together to accomplish a common objective. P. Gisbert says the following words in describing the term 'cooperation' in *Fundamentals of Sociology*: "Cooperation is the most elementary process of social life without which society is impossible. It essentially consists in a form of interaction whereby individuals and groups pool their energies together for the promotion of common ends or objectives" (50). The Oxford *Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines the term 'cooperation' as "the fact of doing something together or of working together towards a shared aim" (338). The term "cooperation" is defined by the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* as: "The act of working together with someone or doing what they ask you" (334). William P. Scott defines the term 'cooperation' in the *Dictionary of Sociology* as: "Social interaction in which individuals or groups engage in joint action to achieve a common goal" (78).

Rahmat Ali says the following words in *A Compact Guide to Introductory Sociology*: "Cooperation is an integrated social process, creating positive relations and bonds of interdependence between people. It is referred to as a collaborative effort between people to strive towards some goal of common interest. It takes place when people foresee better chance of their survival or of getting the things they want by combining their efforts" (10). Cooperation is not always a joint action. An individual working for someone else's reaching the goal is also an act of his cooperation. Raimo Tuomela says the following words in the interpretation of the term 'cooperation': "We can cooperate to build a house or to write a book. In such cases, cooperation is a joint action. In some other cases, cooperation can fall short of being a joint action; e.g., the drivers in the street cooperate by following traffic rules, but they do not always act jointly" (87). Tuomela, moreover, says the following words about cooperation in *Cooperation: A philosophical study*: "It is a platitude that cooperation is collective activity:

we speak of two or more agents cooperating in order to achieve their ends or their shared collective end" (4). The following words underscore the need for cooperation in social life: "Cooperation is an important part of our everyday lives. Practically every feature of modern social life, from the taxes we pay to the street signs we follow, involves multiple parties working together toward shared goals" (Brown, Ch. 14). Frank Robotika says the following words about cooperation: "Membership in a cooperative rest upon a personal basis rather than upon an impersonal financial basis. People will voluntarily coalesce on the basis of their community of interest, personal qualifications, and ability and willingness to assume the obligations implicit in mutual undertakings, particularly with respect to patronage, risks, and costs" (99).

Manoj Das, one of the renowned short story writers in the history of Indian English literature, showcases social values through his invaluable short stories. The essence of cooperation in Das's short stories carries a great value. It may be the collective effort of the villagers in "Mystery of Missing Cap" to welcome the minister or an individual's effort to help others in "The Brothers." He is undoubtedly a great fighter against the decadence of social values. Jasbinder Kaur states the following words in *World's Great Authors and Poets* about Das: "Manoj Das has been a crusader against the invasion of India's intellectual climate by decadent values" (198). So, Manoj Das's short stories are remarkable from the point of view of fostering social awareness about the values of cooperation. One of the recurring themes in his short stories is the concept of cooperation—both within the family and the broader society. Cooperation in his works is not only a practical tool for overcoming different challenges but also a deep philosophical element, reflecting the interconnectedness of human lives and the complexities of social existence.

Literature Review and Research Gap

Through a meticulous literature review, it has been observed that the social dimension of cooperation in the short stories has not been studied in the previous researches. The social dimension of cooperation in the short stories of Manoj Das is a new approach to study. Since it carries a great value in a society, the researcher takes a special interest in conducting a study on it.

Research Methodology

The field of this research is based on qualitative approaches, as non-nu-

merical data, i.e., text, is the source of information for conducting the research. There is no point in the quantification of anything anywhere. Close reading, textual analysis, and biographical studies are the approaches used in this research. Moreover, behavioural approaches like feelings, attitudes, and actions to explore themes, motifs, etc. of the characters are the tools of the research in the field chosen.

Aims and Objectives

1. To explore the importance of cooperation in family and community life.
2. To assess the role of selflessness and duty in fostering cooperation.
3. To examine the impact of collective action on overcoming several challenges.

Rationale of the Research

This research explores the role of cooperation in fostering community spirit and solidarity both within the family and the broader society. By examining collective actions and emotional connections, it aims to highlight how cooperation strengthens social bonds, preserves cultural identity, and enhances individual and collective well-being, especially in times of crisis or change.

The Theme of Cooperation in the Short Stories of Manoj Das

“The Brothers” is a short story that mainly casts light on the cooperation of Saroj and his wife for the wellbeing of their family. Saroj is the central character of the story, whose sacrifice saved his family from destruction. He dedicates his own joy to making his family members happy. When his brother’s son, Ravi became motherless, Saroj got married so that his wife would take the responsibility of the infant. The narrator uses the following words to showcase the cooperation of Saroj: “It was Saroj who had to marry early so that his wife would take charge of Bhuvan’s infant son” (185). The cooperation interpreted here is not only between Saroj and his wife but also between Saroj and his family. Saroj’s marriage at an early age shows his deep sense of duty and cooperation with the family’s needs. Saroj’s early marriage was not for his personal joy but a dedication for his family. In the meantime, twenty-five years since Saroj’s marriage has passed. Saroj reviews his wife’s sincere cooperation with his family members. He finds that his wife performs her duty well. Now Ravi is a bright

young man due to her care and cooperation. The following words illustrate the care and cooperation of Saroj's wife for the family: "As Saroj reviewed the past twenty-five years, he found that his wife had discharged her duty well. Ravi, the nephew, had grown up to be a bright young man" (185). Saroj recognises the unwavering cooperation of his wife in building the career of Ravi. When Saroj and Ravi sat for tea. Their conversation mainly focused on Ravi's father, who is now suffering from a deteriorating mental condition. Ravi in a low voice, says to his uncle, Saroj, to lead the former's father to Ranchi. When Ravi says that they can get the cooperation of Dr. Bibhas Chowdhry. Ravi comments that he would contact Dr. Bibhas Chowdhury.

The following words reveal the cooperation between Saroj and Ravi: "Saroj and Ravi sat down for tea. 'We must lead Father somehow to Ranchi,' said Ravi, lowering his voice. 'Dr. Bibhas Chowdhury, who had great respect for Father, is now the superintendent of the asylum there. Father will never subject himself to any treatment here.' 'Let me contact Bibhas over the phone tonight,' said Saroj. 'Is Brother's condition that alarming?'" (186). The discussion between Saroj and Ravi about Bhuvan's mental condition also showcases cooperation, though it is about addressing a crisis. Saroj and Ravi are working together to find out the solution to Bhuvan's mental condition. Saroj's eagerness to reach out to Dr. Bibhas Chowdhury reflects his cooperative nature, since he is prepared to take responsibility for his brother's well-being, just as he had done with Ravi years earlier. Saroj asks his brother to accompany him to the new place of his work. He says that his brother can use his earned money for the poor people. The following words of Saroj reflect his cooperation in the process of the mental recovery of Bhuvan: "Brother, you must accompany me to my new place of work. I will earn. You'll use my money for the needy" (189). Saroj's financial support, emotional care, and physical care for the family members show Saroj's role as a pillar of cooperation.

"Bhola Grandpa and the Tiger" depicts the cooperation that Bhola Grandpa receives from the narrator's father and the other villagers. Bhola Grandpa is portrayed as an old man who is very forgetful by nature. He once went to a fair with his grandson, but to utter shock and embarrassment, he left his grandson in the fair. When the matter came to the knowledge of the narrator's father, he suddenly sent keen-eyed escorts to the fair. It shows the cooperation of the narrator's father for Bhola Grandpa. The following words cast light on the narrator's father's sense of cooperation for Bhola Grandpa: "Father chose two keen-eyed escorts from our party and directed them to go back with Bhola Grandpa to the fair" (78).

In "Mystery of the Missing Cap," Shri Moharana is the central character. He is acclaimed for his sense of hospitality and community spirit. When assigned the task of providing proper hospitality to Babu Virkishore, he leaves no stone unturned. He sought the cooperation of the villagers. To provide the utmost hospitality to the minister, a preparatory committee was formed, and Shri Moharana remained the chairman of the committee. The following words underscore the sense of cooperation among the villagers: "A reception was arranged for Babu Virkishore with Shri Moharana as the Chairman of the Preparatory Committee" (2). The seamstress, with her handy expertise, wholeheartedly extended her cooperation. She delicately embroidered a pair of herons holding two big fish onto the linen cover of the cane chair, which was planned to be offered to the esteemed minister to sit on. Her contribution shows her sense of hospitality as well as her sense of cooperation. The cooperation of the village seamstress in the process is expressed in the following words in the story: "Shri Moharana's huge ancestral cane chair was laid with a linen cover on which the most gifted village seamstress had laced a pair of herons holding two ornamented fish in their beaks" (2). The villagers extended their cooperation with Shri Moharana. All the people in the village, irrespective of age or physical condition, joined hands for the success of the welcome ceremony. After the minister's arrival, they gathered eagerly, raising their slogans in his honour. The following words cast light on the sense of cooperation of the villagers:

The minister got down from the jeep as soon as it reached the very first welcome arch on the outskirts of the village. He was profusely garlanded by Shri Moharana... While hundreds applauded and shouted *Babu Virkishore ki jai* [Victory to Babu Virkishore] and *Bharatmata ki jai* [Victory to India] (3).

The community spirit and cooperation of the villagers were evident from the congregation of about five thousand people near the stage. It augments the grandeur of the ceremony and the sense of solidarity among the villagers. Their united presence reflects their sense of community love and cooperation. The following words highlight the community feelings of the villagers and their sense of cooperation: "Not less than five thousand people had gathered in front of a specially constructed stage when the minister ascended it" (5). The preparatory committee tried their best for the proper management of all the things. It could be possible only for their sense of cooperation. They arranged a dinner for the respected villagers. It reflects a collective effort towards amazing the success of the minister's reception.

In "The Submerged Valley," the essence of cooperation among the villagers is found through the spirit of collective action during different adversities. As the government took the decision to construct a dam in the village, the village would be submerged in water. As a result, the villagers united to prevent the ensuing project. The very togetherness reflects shared responsibility and interconnectedness. Despite the fact that the narrator's father was not directly involved in the dam construction, the villagers recognised that he had the power to prevent the work. Hence, they tried to persuade the narrator's father to intervene in the matter. The narrator says the following words in this context: "Although Father was not connected with the project, my mother and the villagers prevailed upon him to exert his influence to forestall its execution" (25).

In another incident, solidarity among the villagers is depicted. The villagers sought the cooperation of the narrator's family. They placed rain-soaked umbrellas and bales on the narrator's verandah and earnestly drew the sympathy of the narrator's father. This activity not only highlights the villagers' deep-rooted connection to their land but also underscores their collective effort to preserve their heritage against ensuing change. The narrator says the following words in respect of the cooperation of the villagers: "Heaping their rain-soaked umbrellas and bales on our verandah, once a delegation of elderly villagers recounted to Father the glory of our ancestral area....." (25). The villagers' collective efforts in organising meetings and subsequently executing the decision to hold protests in the town exemplify the depth of their cooperation and solidarity. Their collective action not only amplifies their voices but also underscores the profound impact that can be achieved through collaboration and cooperation in times of need. The narrator highlights the cooperation of the villagers with the following words: "The next two years were marked by radical developments. After holding a few unreported meetings in the village, a few hundred villagers arrived in the town bringing their own food along and went round in a procession" (26). As representatives from among the villagers met with the leaders of the ruling party, their arguments may have lacked the same strength as before, but their ceaseless engagement signified the spirit of cooperation and determination. This interaction underscores the villagers' ongoing efforts to advocate for their interests through peaceful and diplomatic means, highlighting their belief in the power of dialogue and negotiation. The narrator says the following words in this respect: "Their representatives met the leaders of the ruling party, but their arguments lacked the earlier vigour" (26). In a crucial moment just before their departure, the villagers demonstrated some heart-splitting actions. The villagers rolled on the ground, cried piteously, beat their

heads, and smeared themselves with ashes, which revealed a depth of emotion and solidarity that transcends words. The villagers' actions speak volumes about the strength of their connections and their strong commitment to one another. The narrator says the following words in this respect: "We heard that on the eve of their departure, the villagers rolled on the ground, crying and beating their heads against it and smearing themselves with dust" (27).

"Farewell to a Ghost" is such a story that shows the cooperation among the villagers. When the villagers came to know that a child was missing, all the villagers took it very seriously and got together for a discussion about how to trace him. Moreover, they sprinkled Ganga water on their heads and kept some pieces of iron to keep away from the ghosts. The very togetherness and maintenance of the same principles show the community's feelings and cooperation among the villagers. The following words reflect the sense of cooperation of the villagers very clearly:

When the villagers discussed the missing lad,... A dozen brave men of our village entered the villa the next morning. They had sprinkled on their heads the sacred Ganga water and hidden pieces of iron under their girdles to check the ghost from coming too close to them (37).

The story sheds light on the cooperation of elders of the village. When the government decided to demolish the dilapidated villa and use the land for different purposes, the elders of the village started a discussion to address the issue. The narrator says the following words to showcase the cooperation of the villagers: "The government had decided to demolish the crumbling villa and use the land for some other purpose. No wonder that we forgot our studies and hid behind the school to listen to the elders discussing the issue in the evening" (41). The discussion among the villagers continued for a long time. All the villagers agreed that something had to be done for the girl in the haunted house. The villagers appealed to the government to delay the demolition work. It shows good understanding and cooperation among the villagers. The narrator says the following words:

The discussion continued for a long time. All agreed that something had to be done for the girl..... At the request of the villagers the demotion work was delayed for a few days (42).

The cooperation of the villagers to drive away the ghost is really eye-catch-

ing. All the villagers procured some food for the girl. All the villagers, irrespective of age and sex, gathered near the village. Almost all the villagers got into the haunted house. They arranged the presents in a semi-circle manner on the varendah. The narrator says the following words in this regard:

Almost every family had brought some little food – rice, bananas, coconuts, sweetmeats or cakes -to offer the girl. Nobody was barred from witnessing the ceremony and so the villagers pressed near the villa. For many, particularly women and children, it was their very first entry into the haunted compound..... The presents were arranged in a semi-circle on the verandah (42).

The villagers extended their cooperation with the priest in driving away the ghost. They walked without caring about the drizzle or heavy rain. They did everything as per the directions of the priest. The priest turned back after walking about a kilometre and then walked faster. All the villagers, including children, menfolk, and womenfolk, did the same. The following words can be quoted from the story in this context:

All followed the priest. The village was left behind and we walked through the meadow for nearly a kilometre, braving the drizzle and the fear of a heavy rain..... He turned back and we did the same. We boys walked with the women while the menfolk, surrounding the priest, strode faster and ahead of us (44).

In “The Naked,” there is a depiction of the cooperation of Bhanu Singh and other people to provide proper treatment to a group of foreigners who were to spend some time in the old palace. Bhanu Singh was determined to discharge his duty very sincerely. Six men and women also extended their cooperation with Bhanu Singh to make the arrangement so nice. Those people were cleaning the palace. The following words in the story reflect the sense of cooperation between Bhanu Singh and some other people: “Bhanu Singh had resolved to discharge his duty with great diligence. Half a dozen men and women were already at work inside the mansion, scrubbing the floors and dusting the walls” (9). Bhanu Singh also sought cooperation from the headmaster of the village school. He asked the headmaster to send fifty smart boys and girls to garland the guests. The following words highlight the cooperation that Bhanu Singh had sought from the headmaster: “Can you supply fifty boys and girls to garland them as soon as they alight from the lorry? The kids should look smart and clean” (9). Bhanu Singh, moreover, sought cooperation

from many people, and among them, Majumdar was one. When Majumdar was about to leave the place, Bhanu Singh grabbed his shoulder and requested that not leave him in a critical situation. The narrator says the following words in this context:

Majumdar turned to go. But Bhanu Singh grabbed him by the shoulder. 'Take leave of me, eh? As if we had never been friends! Can you leave me in the lurch and just walk out on me? Is it not your sacred duty, at this juncture, to advise me as to what I should do? (10).

Bhanu Singh's style of approach clearly signifies his sense of inclination for collective effort.

"The General" is one of the outstanding short stories of Manoj Das which exhibits the sense of cooperation among a group of young men. In a small town, a group of young men chalks out a plan to stage a play. They seek cooperation from General Valla, a retired military officer. They propose him to act in the play, and he also accepts the proposal. When they reach his house, they find three dogs attacking them. By means of their sincere understanding and cooperation, they become able to silence the dogs. The following words showcase the sense of cooperation among the young men: "Three large dogs began barking at us from the other side of the gate. But the season was in our favour. We tried to rouse their conscience through choice words and, in the process, attracted their master's attention" (29). Instead of getting panicky or running away, they try to calm the dogs by using soothing words to silence the dogs. Their collective effort not only calms the dogs but also attracts the attention of their master, General Valla. It illustrates their unity and teamwork. General Valla is undoubtedly a man of very good understanding. He also extends his cooperation by calming the dogs, providing hospitality to the narrator along with his team, and accepting their proposal. The following words signify the sense of cooperation of General Valla:

Our ordeal, however, came to an end with the general ordering his dogs to behave like gentlemen. He then called out to his cook to bring us tea and biscuits. Then, in many words, most of them swallowed up by his laughs, he indicated his acceptance of our proposal. We left his bungalow feeling overwhelmed (30).

The general expresses his cooperation in a number of ways. Cooperation is demonstrated by the general's enthusiasm to converse with the

guests and by providing tea and biscuits. Giving his dogs good instructions demonstrates his sense of hospitality. Later, the drama planned was staged. The actors played so well in the drama due to the practices under the supervision of the general. The success of a drama depends on several factors and the cooperation is one of the major factors. The cooperation of all the members and general Valla is expressed as: "Despite our great anxiety we acted out our roles rather well, no doubt because of our rehearsals held under the general's" (33).

Conclusion

Thus, the short stories of Manoj Das are acclaimed for the portrayal of the characters having a collective spirit. It is a benchmark trait in short stories like "The Brothers," "Bhola Grandpa and the Tiger," "Mystery of the Missing Cap," "Farewell to a Ghost," "The Submerged Valley," "The Naked," "The General," "Catching a Thief" etc. In "The Brothers, Saroj's sacrifice and support for his family reflect a profound sense of cooperation that transcends individual interests. Similarly, in stories like "Mystery of the Missing Cap," "The Submerged Valley," and "Farewell to a Ghost," the villagers showcase their cooperation, respectively, for providing proper treatment to the minister, protecting the heritage, and dealing with the supernatural occurrences. The stories like "The Naked" and "The General," such stories in which individuals work collectively to accomplish a common objective. In "Bhola Grandpa and the Tiger," Bhola Grandpa receives cooperation from the narrator's father and other villagers. "Catching a Thief" shows the cooperation of the villagers to catch a thief. The undivided cooperation among the characters in different challenges is evident in all these stories. Manoj Das leaves a remarkable mark of the spirit of cooperation in his timeless short stories.

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