## Puja Special

## A festival of religious sublimity and The Durga story in Bengali poetry enlivened sociability

In course of time, "Baroari Puja" (collective worshipping by all sorts of people) took over the central stage of Durga Puja and these Pujas now dominate the scene everywhere, rural and urban alike. In older days, Jatra gan, theatres, musical soirees, magic shows and other forms of recreations used to draw huge crowds from all walks of life, who enjoyed the Puja days in festive mood. These were, in fact, unions of all sections of the people and served as an ideal occasion demonstrating social cohesion, harmony and good neighbourliness. This is the true spirit of eternal Bengali culture in its undisguised manifestation.

JUSTICE GOUR GOPAL SAHA

URGA Puja is perhaps the most colourful and most widely celebrated festival of the Hindus the world over. In fact, it is the main festival of the Bengalee Hindus transcending religious and geographical confines in the sense that from time immemorial, indiscriminate of cast and creed they have been taking part in this gala festival with open heart and a ready sense of togetherness to make it a loving occasion of harmony, peace and good neighbourliness. Bengali culture and Bengali literature indeed owe a lot to this prodigious socio-

religious extravaganza. The history of origin of Durga Puja, worshipping of Goddess Durga, is somewhat submerged in obscurity. While some religious pundits say that Goddess Durga is being worshipped till before the dawn of recorded history, others have it to say that Raja Surath and Baisya Samadhi introduced Durga Puja in its present form in this part of the globe about 2000 years ago. Bereft of power and wealth at the hands of their kith and kins, Raja Surath and Baisya Samadhi moved around in the wilderness in search of ways to regain their lost fortunes and ultimately met Maharishi Medhosh and sought his blessings to get over their vicissitudes. Following Maharishi Medhosh's advice, they worshipped Goddess Durga with due solemnity and devotion and recovered their lost fortunes by the grace of Devi Durga. Celestial gods and goddesses on numerous occasions invoked Devi Durga's help under trying circumstances to withstand the onslaughts of the demons and devil incarnates. She came to be known as 'Mahishamardini" as she annihilated mighty Demon King

Leaving aside the question of legends, it is widely believed by the Hindus that Lord Rama worshipped Goddess Duga soliciting her blessing to destroy Demon King Ravana, in the month of Aswin, although this part of the year is not considered auspicious for worshipping celestial gods and goddesses, but it had to be done untimely due to exigency of circumstances. The celebration of Durga Puja during the autumn is thus invocation of Devi Durga for adoration. Earlier Durga Puja used to be celebrated only during the spring and it is known as "Basanti Puja". Durja Puja and Basanti Puja is worshipping of one and the same Goddess Durga, at two different

points of time of the year. There is abundance of mythological support to hold that Devi Durga is an incarnation of the allpervading and all-powerful entity designed by Lord Visnu, the absolute and supreme entity regulating the entire universe. Devi Durga is an embodiment of highest purity, serenity and sublimity and an endearing symbol of beauty, power, excellence, compassion. benediction, affluence and all that is great and good. It is widely believed by the Hindus that securing the pleasure of Devi Durga means wealth and well-being to the worshippers and this is precisely the reason for almost universal adoration of Goddess Durga by all sections of the Hindu commu-

The social and economic significance of Durga Puja can hardly be over -- exaggerated. It involves the service of cross-sections of the people, beginning from the potters, craftsmen, drummers, painters, blacksmiths, gardeners, cleaners, decorators, artists and artisans and a host of others down to the high priests. Durga Puja invariably generates brisk economic activities for a large number of people, especially in the rural areas, for a large part of the year. In fact, during the older days, rural economy of Bengal substantially revolved round Durga Puja, which was usually celebrated by the Zaminders, Talukders, rich businessmen, and other affluent people, spending huge sums of money, displaying high pomp and grandeurs as marks of social respectability and financial sustainability. But with the lapse of time, the landed aristocracy disappeared from the scene and the emerging rich generation shifted to towns and cities leaving the villages to their fate

In course of time, "Baroari Puja" (collective worshipping by all sorts of people) took over the central stage of Durga Puja and these Pujas now dominate the scene everywhere, rural and urban alike. In older days, Jatra gan, theatres, musical soirees, magic shows and other forms of recreations used to draw huge crowds from all walks of life, who enjoyed the Puja days in festive mood. These were, in fact, unions of all sections of the people and served as an ideal occasion demonstrating social cohesion. harmony and good neighbourliness. This is the true spirit of eternal Bengali culture in its undisguised manifestation, of which angladesh can legitimately take pride in.

Sanatan Dharma or Hinduism as is popularly known cannot be traced to a specific starting point in history and it does not have a founder. Nor is it based on a particular "holy book" as the basic spiritual guide. It is, in fact, the cumulative realisation of the Supreme Truth by the 'Debarshis', 'Rajarshis' and the highly devel-

oped spiritual personalities of the world that act as the driving spirit of Hinduism. Of necessity, it is universal in character and magnanimous in contents. The Vedas, the Upanishads, and the Bhagwat Gita are, no doubt, sacred texts of the Hindus but they go beyond them in search of the Ultimate Reality. The Hindus believe that the entire cosmos is subject to the vicissitudes of time and consequently whatever has an origin at a point of time has an inevitable end. The process of creation (Shristi) and dissolution (Pralaya) of the universe is a periodic cycle in which the entire cosmos manifests at the

time of creation and withdraws at the time of dissolution. Everything but the Infinite is conditioned by time. The process continues till liberation (Mukti or salvation) from the cycle of birth and death is According to Hindu belief this cycle of births and re-births, that all souls experience, is called "transmigration" except the Infinite, which is beyond creation or destruction. This Absolute Truth or Ultimate Reality is spoken of as the Indestructible, the Supreme Being, the Almighty etc. From this we get a clear idea to the questions of cycle of life and death, the nature of the soul, the Universe and the Creator

> ultimate understanding of man's relationship with God. Hinduism believes in the unison of the creation. It is built upon diversity and holds within itself an amazing, even bewildering variety of teachers and teachings from the most primitive forms to the most abstract spiritual philosophies and

> the unity of the creation and the

reasons for joys and sufferings.

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practices. It has always remained open to new teachings and revelations on one hand, and yet has not cut itself off from the older traditions on the other. The Hindus recognise that in today's emerging global era we must learn to adapt ourselves to properly handle the great diversity of human beings and their diverse cultures and inhibitions. A pluralistic religious view visualises that there are many religions and different religious paths and they appeal to different individuals according to their varying levels of mental development, which are bound to be diverse and ever changing. Hinduism includes the entire humanity and excludes none. "Basudhaiva Kutumbakam", meaning the whole human race is my relation, is the basic philosophy of Hinduism.

We are often perplexed by the question as to whether religions are complementary to each other and are equally true. The answer to this fractious sentiment in religious communities lies in one's bigotry, each claiming to represent the only right path to God. Truth, which is the kernel of any religion, is one and the same: doctrines, however, differ considerably since they are the applications of the truth by human beings under different situations. It is thus clear that religions form a unity, and only this unity provides the right perspective of the Ultimate Truth. The various religions are merely alternative paths to the same transcendental finality. Sree Ramakrishana espoused it in a very clear and lucid manner by saying: "Jato mot toto

The essence of religions being the same viz. to win over the pleasure of the Almighty and to do good to the humanity, it is imperative that all belonging to the humankind must make sincere efforts to remove all kinds of hatred, jealousy and misunderstandings about others in the name of religion and work hand in hand to ensure peaceful and respectful co-existence of religions for achieving harmony peace and progress the world

# and songs

Nazrul composed brilliant songs on goddess Kali and Durga. He composed the most of Agamani songs and poems. The poem for which he was arrested and put to jail was the greatest of Bengali Agamani ones. Nazrul followed the Agamani tradition set by Ramprasad where the focal point is the mother-daughter relation. He also followed the post Ramprasad development of Agamani theme where Durga is welcomed as Anandamayee or goodess of joy. He opened the third Agamani song where he welcomed Durga as the demon-killer and created an allegory of fighting out the British colonialists. The mellow tearful or joyous Agamani songs turned into exploding compositions of heroic sentiment.

#### KARUNAMAYA GOSWAMI

HE Durga story is an important component of Indian classical mythological literature which took a finished shape, as some scholars reasonably believe, by the beginning of the 7th century BC. During the subsequent centuries the classical mythological literature flourished lavishly and even formed a close relation with the great epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The Durga story occupies an important place in the Ramayana. Durga Puja as an elaborate festival was initially celebrated in the spring. But as the Ramavana episode goes, Lord Rama had to reschedule it in the autumn to obtain the goddess's blessing to ensure his victory in the Lankan war. The Ramayana instance of the Durga Puja in the autumn got the most enthusiastic following and in course of time turned out to be the biggest religious festival of the Bengal

Religiocentricity worked as a great force of inspiration for the art forms to grow allover the world at the initial stage. Bengal could be no exception. Bengali literature covers the largest art area here. Until the close of the eighteenth century it was geetasahitya: literature meant to be sung. Whatever may be the length of writing it was all for singing. It was poetry given to music. If we trace from the 10th century AD. then the first 250 years of Bengali poetry is all about the Buddhistic themes, the foremost being Nirvana: extinction of the birthrebirth cycle. The Buddhistic writings were countered by Jayadeva by the second half of the 12th century with his mellifluous songs on the Radha-Krishna lovelore. We

get the beginning of the great Vaishnavite poetry and music which established its clear sway overall the other genres and continued to rule over the Bengali literary domain till the end of the 18th century. The mainstream Vaishnava writings were lyrical in nature. But side by side we get narrative writings commonly known as Mangala Kavya or Mangala

Mangala means bliss. Mangala Gaan is song of bliss. Mangala Kavya covers a wide variety of narrative songs on a host of subjects. But commonly by Managla Kayva we mean narrative compositions written in praise of two power cult goddesses and one power cult god. The power-cult goddesses are Manasa and Chandi, and the god is the Sun. Narrative songs written in praise of Manasa and Chandi are known as Manasa Mangala and Chandi Mangala and the narrative composition on the Sun god is Dharma Mangala

Manasa Mangala is the earliest form of Mangala trilogy. Manasa Mangala poets are believed to emerge from the early decades of the 14th century. Chandi Mangala was composed a little later. The first full length Chandi Mangala text was available by the first half of the 15th century. Chandi is the other name of Durga. Durga is known by some other names. She was Chandi at the moment she killed the demon Malishasura. The story of Chandi Mangala establishes the all pervasive power of the goddess Durga and narrates how she puts a person to countless sufferings who wants to undermine her prowess and grants infinite happiness to him or her who is her devotee.

Mukundaram Chakrabarti, the greatest of the Chandi Mangala poets was born in the first half of the

16th century. When Sukumar Sen, a great Indologist says that the Mangala style composition in Bengali came to a certain degree of maturity in the 16th century, he perhaps refers to Mukundaram's excellence as a narrative poet. It is with Chandi Mangala that the Durga story in its diverse dimension got into Bengali poetry and gradually into every other art form. The Mangala Kavya tradition came to a close by the end of the 18th century and Bharat Chandra Roy (1712-1760) was the poet-composer who closed the Mangala Kavya chapter with his noted verse narrative Annadamangal which is also a

Durga story. Meanwhile, the Durga story, particularly the Shiva-Durga relation as narrated in the Puranas was adopted in the Kavi musical presentations. As the Kavi poets with their parties moved from Kolkata to the remote rural areas in Bengal, the Durga story was picked up in different folk genres.

But the most important job in respect of making the Durga story an inseparable part of the mainstream urban Bengali songs was done by Kavi Ranjan Ramprasad Sen (1720-1781). Like the Vaishnava Padavali poets he also burst the narrative composition on the power-cult goddesses into hundreds of lyrical songs which we term as Shaktapadavali. He fared equally well in composing songs on goddess Kali and Durga. Ramprasad Sen did not stick to what was presented about Durga by the Chandi Mangala poets or by the makers of mythological poetry in Sanskrit. In his songs which he called Agamani Ramprasad did not present Durga as an all-powerful goddess, he called her Uma, daughter of Himalaya and Menaka, married to Shiva who lived in

He created the character of Uma in the image of a young daughter from a cover middle class Bengali Hindu family married to an elderly husband who, was for various reasons a little indifferent to her. The mother's anxiety for the daughter is endless. Ramprasad interpreted the story allegorically. Durga's descending to the earth for being worshiped for three days is like Uma's coming back after a year to her paternal home to be with her anguished mother Menaka for less than a week. Agamani means coming. Agamani means related to coming. Ramprasad called his Durga songs Agamani because the songs spoke of Uma's coming back to her mother from her husband's home at Kailasa. This mellow version of the Durga story in the form of Bengali songs got an instant

popularity. Agamani songs were composed in all the prevalent urban genres in a huge scale. The folk composers started to explore the theme in their own way. Agamani songs in diverse genres became an inseparable part of Durga Puja.

Agamani songs in Bengali folk music stream flourished like anything throughout the 19th century and some decades much later. But in the urban stream their smooth sailing was partly obstructed when Raja Rammohan Roy invited Brahma sangeet, songs in praise of one indivisible God which absolutely got an upper hand in the Bengali urban devotional song genre by virtue of very large participation in the song trend by the major Bengali poet-composers including the greater of them all Rabindranath Tagore. The traditional Hindu devotional songs suffered a setback. The teachings of Shri Ramakrishna (1836-1886) and Swami Vivekanand (1863-1902) formed a new background for their rejuvenation which took the real shape in the works of Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976).

Nazrul composed brilliant songs on goddess Kali and Durga. He composed the most of Agamani songs and poems. The poem for which he was arrested and put to jail was the greatest of Bengali Agamani ones. Nazrul followed the Agamani tradition set by Ramprasad where the focal point is the motherdaughter relation. He also followed the post Ramprasad development of Agamani theme where Durga is welcomed as Anandamayee or goodess of joy. He opened the third Agamani song where he welcomed Durga as the demon-killer and created an allegory of fighting out the British colonialists. The mellow tearful or joyous Agamani songs turned into exploding compositions of heroic sentiment. Nazrul was perhaps the first and the last of the Bengali poet-composers who presented the Agamani songs in every conceivable dimension. Poet Nazrul's developments in Agamani song genre again followed the trend set by Ramprasad. For the second half of the last century Agamani writing was all the more done in the folk area while the urban poetcomposers remained preoccupied about working for the media in the big cities

As for today a significant portion of creative efforts is found to be invested into the iconographical area of the Durga story, but music and literature do still remain inseparably related to the Puja event.

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### **Worship of Divine Mother**

Hinduism believes goddess Durga as Divine Mother since her grace is boundless, her mercy is illimitable, her knowledge is infinite, her power is immeasurable, her glory is ineffable and her splendour is indescribable. She gives material prosperity as well as spiritual freedom. Hinduism is a religion of faith and philosophy which needs study in depth to realise its essence.

**DHIRAJ KUMAR NATH** 

HY Hindus worship God in the form of divine mother is a frequently asked question by many. Hindus worship divine mother in many popular forms such as Durga, Kali, Uma, Santoshi, Jagadhatri, Annapurna, Gouri, Gayatri etc. Of course, Durga, Gouri, Parbati, Uma, are manifestations of the same Goddess according to different mythologies and incarnations. Hindus believe in the male and female aspects of nature and worship the supreme reality in the form of Father. Mother. Saviour. Lord Krishna declares in the Holy Bhagawad Gita: "I am the father and mother of the universe and the creator of all. I am the Highest to be known, the Purifier, the holy Owm and Vedas" [BG 9.17]

The natural love and affection between a mother and her child is the best expression of Lord's eternal love and tenderness for His creation. All created forms generate from the womb of mother; the creative power [Shakti] of God is recognised as the female principle or the motherly aspect of nature. Thus, we all are children of Divine Mother. We are contained by her before our birth and nourished by her throughout our existence. Hindus believe in the motherly aspect of God in nature, full of beauty, kindness and tenderness and thus find motherly instinct of the Creator. This is the way, a devotee unites with God like a child with its mother. A child always feels safe and secure in the lap of mother. Equally, a devotee finds best place in the presence of divine Mother. In Hinduism, Divine mother is the manifestation of energy and thus She prevails as source of energy, love and wisdom -- omnipotence, omnipresence. A child believes its mother to be all powerful and capable of doing anything it. Similarly, a Hindu devotee finds the divine Mother to be all merciful, all powerful and eternally guiding and protecting the devotee with her supernatural power and eternal love.

Hindu priests or Rhishis were aware that human cells generate and develop their bone, brain, flesh, skin, marrow and blood. Out of six, a newly born baby gets three like blood, flesh and skin from mother and bone, brain and marrow from father. Thus Hindus worship great father Brahma, supreme reality Lord Krishna, and the destroyer of the universe Lord Shiva in male images and Goddess Durga, Kali, Annapurna etc. in female manifestations with equal devotion.

Worship is the expression of love to the Saviour, of reverence towards Him. of aspiration to reach Him in conscious communion, of longing to be united with Him. Puja is the general simple form of our worship. An image is used, matras are chanted, flowers are offered, and in these outer forms the inner devotion finds expression, and then rises beyond the forms to the object thus served.

Hindus worship Divine Mother in the form of Shakti, incomprehensible for her gracious as well as terrifying aspect. Mother Durga

universe and is a symbol of female dynamism. Goddess Durga, the wife of Shiva, was created out of flames that issued from the mouths of Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva and other gods and embodying their collective energy (Shakti). They created her to slay the buffalodemon Mahisasura, whom they were unable to overcome .She is unusually depicted riding on a lion each of her ten arms bearing weapons. The worship in this form of mother goddess Durga dates back a few thousand years. Sri Ramchandra of Ramavana worshipped Durga to fight against Ravana and undertook the great expedition to Lanka on the day of Dussera, known as Bijaya

represents the infinite power of

History of Durga Puja in Bengal dates back to the Mughal era in the 16th century. The first Durga Puja was organised by Raja Kangshanarayan of Taherpur, Rajshahi followed by Raja Jagathnarayan of Bhaduria. By the mid 18th century, this festival emerged as occasion for the nouveau riche of Kolkata to exhibit their wealth . They used to invite Europeans almost every evening of Navoratri (nine nights), to grace the function arranged in their honour of which dances and theater were common. Over the years, rather century, the festival became

sarvojanin i.e. of all people. In Bangladesh, Durgapuja is celebrated by Hindus as the biggest festival from the night of Sashthi until the Bijaya Dhasami.

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Philosophically, ten heads of Ravana are passion, pride, anger, greed, infatuation, lust, hatred, jealousy, selfishness, and crookedness. Dussera is interpreted as Dasa-hara which means cutting of 10 heads of Ravana that is overcoming all these evils.

Hinduism displays a few characteristics that are generally unique and unlike other religion. It has no founder, nor it has any prophet. It is not creedal, nor based on any particular doctrine, dogma or practice. It is not a system of theology nor a single code. The concept of God is not central. It is in fact based on philosophy, a way of life, which is eternal. Gospel or Truth emanated in this world from God through the voices of saints. Those voices heard, recorded, remembered carried and transformed eventually into religious belief, faith and philos-

Hinduism is a religion of faith and philosophy which needs study in depth to realise its essence, enough insights to comprehend its virtues, much wisdom and intellect to be exposed to its ideals and values

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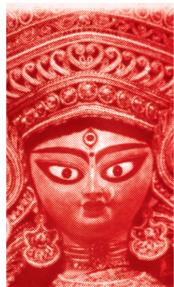
## The concept of Durga

Two different concepts of Durga are in vogue in Bengal, one of which is that of Mahishasuramardini, the destructor of the demon. The second is that of Durga as Uma, Gouri or Parvati, the daughter of the Himalaya, who, as the wife of Lord Shiva and the mother of Lakshmi, Saraswati, Ganesha and Kartika, radiates the peaceful ambience of divine mother. In this second sense, Durga Puja represents her home-coming from the Himalayan abode of her divine spouse, Lord Shiva.

PREM RANJAN DEV

ODDESS Durga, the divine mother and the symbol of Shakti (power) is also the symbol of the Hindu mother supremacy. The worship of Durga as supreme mother is an important feature of Hindu religion. The concept of Durga as supreme Goddess symbolising eternal power took a long time to evolve through many ancient scriptures and traditions.

The concept of Durga as mother' might also have evolved



in Bengal under the influence of some cults from Assam, and Burma, where matriarchal traditions had strong roots Alternatively, this tradition might have traveled to Bengal along with the Dravidians, who came from Mohenjodaro and Harappa, where a similar custom was believed to have prevailed.

Tracing history we find that a somewhat identical practice was in vogue in Sumer (the territory roughly falling between the Euphrates and the Tigris rivers in the Middle East). It is believed that the people of Sumer hailed from the eastern and north eastern regions of India and might have taken with them the custom of worshipping the 'mother.' The Bengalees, it is claimed, were good sea-farers and traders in ancient times and travelled to the island of Crete in the Mediterranean. Some of these Bengalees were said to have colonised in Crete, where they introduced the worship of the Goddess. According to Dinesh Chandra Sen, the noted Bengalee historian, the concept of Mahishasura took shape over a period of time in the wake of the conquest of India by Alexander the Great, who had a head-gear sporting the horns of a buffalo.

Durga is also the symbol of Prakriti, the primordial matter or substance, which provides the basis for all that exists in the uni-

verse. Since she fights all the forces of evil, the Goddess, as worshipped in Bengal, has been invested with ten arms equipped with a wide range of weapons. However, in the different scriptures, the number of arms (varies) from two to as many as thirty-two, the latter number serving as a reminder of the vast sweep of her powers. The Markandeya Purana narrates all these powers in series of Shlokas verses of which an oftrecited one reads: "Ya Devi Sarvabhutesu Shaktirupena Sangsthita, Namastaysai Namastasyai Namo Namah" (O goddess omnipresent, we pray to

We find in the Chandi that in ancient time. King Suratha being deprived of his kingdom by his own ministers retired to the woods where he chanced to meet merchant Samadhi who also had been deprived of his property by his kins. But both felt that despite the raw deal they had received from their own people, they still felt concerned about the welfare of the latter. Anxious to find out the cause of their deep attachment to those who had treated them so badly, they approached sage Medhas. Explaining the cause of their delusion, the sage told them that it was goddess Mahamaya who created illusions and aroused in their hearts the feeling of attachment even to their ungrateful kinsmen. In the Chandi, we are given a vivid description of the manifestation of Mahamaya that is known as Mahishasuramardini.

The concept of Durga as a symbol of 'Maya' or illusion is also brought out in a legend of the Vishnu Purana. It is said that at a time when the two demon brothers. Madhu and Kaitava, posed a threat to infant Krishna, at the instance of Vishnu, Durga managed to delude the demons with her 'Maya'.

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cepts the scriptures, literary works as well as folklores have all made their respective contributions.

In the evolution of these con-

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