

# The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

## Rejoicing for the Goddess of Abundance

By Fayza Haq

THE worship of Durga in autumn all over Bengal is really not so much to celebrate a victory as to show a measure of thanksgiving. It is interpreted as a metaphysical explanation of elaboration in "asvin" or autumn, which is unusually enjoyable in Bengal. If the monsoon has been in time there has been a rich harvest. Generally in early October the days are pleasant with limited heat and humidity. The nights are cool and the grass is full of dew in the mornings, while soft clouds are seen in the sky. In the rice fields the sheaves of paddy bring happiness to the farmers.

This is a suitable time for thanksgiving, and so the great goddess of abundance and life, Durga is worshipped by the Hindus with much rejoicing. Apart from food of different kinds ranging from coconut "laru" to "luchi", "paesh", "khichuri" and vegetables of all sorts, she is also celebrated with blaring film music in keeping with the festive mood. New clothes are also a must.

Goddess Durga, represented in a tableau, where she is destroying the buffalo demon, is worshipped by the Hindus every year in early autumn. The time of the year is not without other significance. The month of "asvin" (September to October) was naturally suitable in ancient India for waging battles. The heavy monsoons were unsuitable for the movements of the armies across the wet land and most kings waited for autumn to resume military expeditions. It was traditional for the kings to invoke the goddess Durga to bring victory at this time.

There is also the tradition that Rama worshipped Durga before undertaking his venture against Ravana in Lanka, where his wife Sita had been kidnapped. While the devotional episode is treated as a later incident, there is plenty of historical evidences to show that rulers did pray to Durga in au-

turn, before declaring war. Obviously both sides worshipped the goddess with equal ardour, but Durga naturally rewarded only one. In any case Ram decided to worship the goddess in autumn rather than in spring.

That she is the omnipotent and omniscient goddess of prosperity is clearly apparent in the image of the goddess worshipped by the Hindu Bengalis. She is seen on her

**Durga is worshipped by the Hindus with much rejoicing. Apart from food of different kind ranging from coconut 'laru' to 'luchi', 'paesh', 'khichuri' and vegetables of all sorts, she is also celebrated with blaring film music in keeping with the festive mood.**

lion as she appears to destroy the buffalo monster — and hence she gets the other popular name Mahishashurmardini. In Bengal Durga is accompanied by her children, her two sons Ganesh and Kartik and the two daughters Lakshmi and Saraswati. All of them are important gods and goddesses. Ganesh is the remover of problems, Kartik is the ancient war god, whose role as the demon destroyer, his mother is sometimes seen as usurping.

Durga, represented in a tableau, where she is destroying the buffalo demon, is worshipped by the Hindus every year in early autumn. The time of the year is not without other significance.

Lakshmi and Saraswati, the goddesses of material and intellectual wealth respectively, are the older ones of the five children and their origin go back to the Vedic period. In comparison Durga does not make any appearance before the early centuries of the Christian era, at least as far as archaeological proofs go. Considering the popularity of the tableau celebrated in Bengal, it is difficult to imagine the group of five images did not exist five centuries ago.

By putting them together and making them all members of a single family, the Bengali Hindus, have the worship of five in one.

There is also the original legend that the king of the gods Indra had the problem of the "ashurs" fighting with the "devs". Among the "ashurs", Mohishashur became powerful by become the disciple of Siva. Siva in turn gave him such blessings that he could not be defeated by anybody. After becoming "amar" (invincible) Mohishashur began fighting with the "devs". He tried to annex the entire "swarga" or paradise of the gods. In a battle that ensued Indra left swarga with the other "devs" to find how they could defeat the villain Mahishashur.

All the gods went to Brahma (the creator) and told him about their plight. Brahma in turn asked them to go to lord Siva who advised them to make a power having strength from different gods. All the

gods then contributed to the making of a power to fight Mahishashur.

The goddess Durga was then created as a symbol of good power taking strength

from many gods. Lord Siva gave the "trishul", Vishnu gave his "chakra", Lakhi gave her "padma" and so on. In this manner Durga was made omnipotent.

In all her ten hands she had weapons, as well as a third eye on her forehead to fight the menacing monster. A great battle ensued in which the invincible Mahishashur changed his form many times to avoid imminent defeat. Finally he became a buffalo but the goddess Durga cut off his head and so restored Indra's kingdom the "swarga".

After the thirteenth century Bengal was taken over by the Muslim in many regions and it is the Muslims who ruled the state continuously until the British took over in 1757. Following the Muslim conquest, the Hindu rulers of Bengal were reduced to zamindars, and rarely entered into war.

To compensate for the reduction of the importance of the goddess Durga, the Bengalis increasingly viewed her as a universal mother of abundance and prosperity. In central Bengal, where agriculture is the base of economy, the autumn harvest was the most important event in the peasant's life. It was naturally considered the best time to give thanksgiving to the primitive goddess.

An important fact of the worship of the goddess is that during the ten days of the festival she is supposed to be re-

turning to her parent's home with her children and without her husband Siva, which is why he is not included in the images. His symbolic presence, nevertheless, is shown by a small painted image on top of the traditional images.

This is a little similar to the universally observed custom of Christmas, where children are united with the families, and there is an exchange of presents.

**Activities associated with the 'puja' begin months before inside rows of Narsingdi, Savar, Narayanganj and hosts of other concentrations of traditional sculptors. Here hundreds of families of clay modelers keep alive a centuries old art. They are poor and are known as 'Pals.'**

When exactly the worship of the goddess began in Calcutta is not known but it is assumed that it was soon after Calcutta became a property of John Company. The festival of Durga then became a social event for the rich Bengalis in the city. It is said that the British rulers also joined the festivals with the great feasts and the unavoidable "nautch". It is only in the nineteenth century that the eagerness of the British to join the festival diminished when the missionaries strongly

objected to their participating in the "heathen festival".

Activities associated with the "puja" begin months before inside rows of Narsingdi, Savar, Narayanganj and hosts of other concentrations of traditional sculptors. Here hundreds of families of clay modelers keep alive a centuries old art. They are poor and are known as "Pals". Customs and tastes change every year and the modelers have to adjust to changed fancies.

On the tenth day or 'tithi' or Asvin new moon — the ultimate day of the long festival, Vijaya greetings are exchanged between friends and relatives who offer each other sweets in the customary fashion. Business is quick at the sweetmeat and confectioner's shops. The final rituals are performed in the different "puja pandals" in the morning as sleepy devotees, after a night of fun, watch on as the priests tear apart the threads binding the goddess Durga's feet to the traditional earthen pots.

Images of the goddess are brought out in the afternoon from the "mandaps" where they have been worshipped for the past four days. Amid the sound of conches, the images are put on waiting push carts and lorries for the journey to the Buriganga or other "ghats" for the immersion. Entire families with their children, shout praises, as the images are finally immersed. The ceremony continues till late in night and organisers of the big "puja" pandals in the city like the Dhakeshwari Mandir and the Ramkrishna Mission like to save the pandals for visitor from the suburbs.

Thus Durga, also known as Uma, Parvati, Chandri, Bhagabati, Maha Maya and Adyaa Shakti is worshipped once a year. The radio and TV in Bangladesh give adequate coverage on the tenth day's proceedings — the jubiliations of Vijaya yielding to the dirges of Visarjan or sacrifice.



Tableau of Goddess Durga at a city 'mandap'.

FEMINISTS are apt to describe men as low-down and lecherous. I must admit there is some truth in this. Of course, I am a happy exception to this sombre rule and so are you, assuming you are a man. But a brief look at the lifestyle and attitudes of our buddies makes it apparent that too many men do fit this description.

Given this sad piece of truth it is a wonder that any sensible woman contemplates marriage with one of us all. But they do. They go to the altar radiant in their fanciest attire just to try and make something of our benighted lives for us.

Are we grateful? Sometimes. But I think there is not enough perception in the masculine world of just how wonderful the wisely presence is.

The old saying: "Behind every successful man is a woman" predates the feminist movement and no doubt goes back to our more perceptive cave-man ancestors who worshipped primitive fertility goddesses. But no one ever queries it. Could Bob Hawke function without Hazel? Could Ferdinand Marcos have man-

## REFLECTIONS The Wedlock Balance Sheet

By David Cooke

aged without Imelda? Could George Bush do without Barbara? I doubt it. In business and professional life the same rule applies.

Just look at the advantages! Since this is a materialistic society, I shall attempt to quantify the advantages in fiscal terms. It is interesting to see how a grey-suited accountant might approach this challenge.

In my case I pay my very competent wife a nominal salary as my personal assistant. But at the start of my professional life she worked for zlich, gladly and without complaint. She would do so again if times get really tough. She

works out of hours if necessary and is always available, so reckon the unpaid advantages at a very nominal HK\$150,000 p.a.

She does most of the cooking and it's gourmet quality. So add in a chef's wages at, say, \$90,000 p.a. She does the cleaning and other housework which would have to be worth a cool \$90,000 p.a. and when I am sick she nurses me and soothes my fevered brow — say, three 10 hour days at \$120 per hour which comes to \$3,600 per annum.

Should one discuss the usually taboo bedroom bit? Why not? It certainly has a value

and we can agree that this is a very materialistic age even if every woman is not a "material girl" like Madonna. But it poses difficulties of a moral type. Should one really discuss the wifely contribution here in fiscal terms?

Perhaps not, but since we are in the mood for a rather unromantic approach lets do it anyway. In my case I would, for sentimental reasons, put a very high figure on the replacement cost of my present wife. She just happens to be a former top model. But to keep this argument in perspective let's ring a local escort service and get a quote for a run of the mill sleeping partner. I did. It was a surprisingly high figure.

The quote from Harwood Lane ("Sydney's Finest") was \$1,500 for the first hour and \$1,260 for each hour after that. I was assured by the Madam that a reduced fee after 2 a.m. could be negotiated with the manager, but assuming this averaged out at \$1,200 per hour an eight hour night comes to a hefty A\$9,600! The annual rate comes out at, let me see (I can't seem to hold my calculator steady for some reason) Wow! Assuming a year of uninterrupted whoopee nights the staggering total is \$3,204,000. Can that be right? Yep, I've checked it.

O.K. Suppose we allow a discount for bulk. Let me rephrase that. It is a common commercial practice to reduce the price for big orders. So suppose we bring it down by 50%. That still comes to a whopping A\$1,602,000! This is mind boggling. I have already got a total of \$1,935,600 and we have not touched on child minding and gardening!

Of course, if you marry a lady doctor or an accountant, as many men do these days, then the fiscal value zooms even higher.

By Arrangement with Executive.

## Theatre Champion Keeps Folk Traditions Alive

Indian theatre has a long and fascinating history. More often than not, however, theatre is identified with the urban setting. K V Subbanna, exponent of people's theatre, has challenged this. Ploughing a lonely furrow in the remote village of Heggodu, he has enlightened the villagers with creative theatre. The honour of the Magsaysay Award, reports Gemini News Service, may highlight the achievements of a remarkable personality little known even within India. by A. J. Singh

INDIAN playwright Kunduguru Vibhuti Subbanna says that even if he were offered the Noble Prize he would not accept it. However, the 59-year-old who has brought enlightened theatre to a remote village in Southern India had no problem accepting the prestigious 1991 Magsaysay Award for Journalism, Literature and Creative Communication.

"Because it is not given for individual excellence but for a social phenomenon, for an attitude rather than an achievement," says the bristly-white-bearded Subbanna.

An affable farmer and a graduate from Mysore University, Subbanna is in love with life and aesthetics. In 1949, he and his friends launched a theatre revival movement at Heggodu, a remote village 350 kilometres from Bangalore.

The resounding success of his experiment for four decades has shown how theatre can be taken back to where it belongs — to the countryside. And by following Subbanna's example other developing countries can infuse life into their moribund theatre.

An age old and simple means of communication, the theatre has been pushed to the brink in developing nations by the onslaught of commercial films and television.

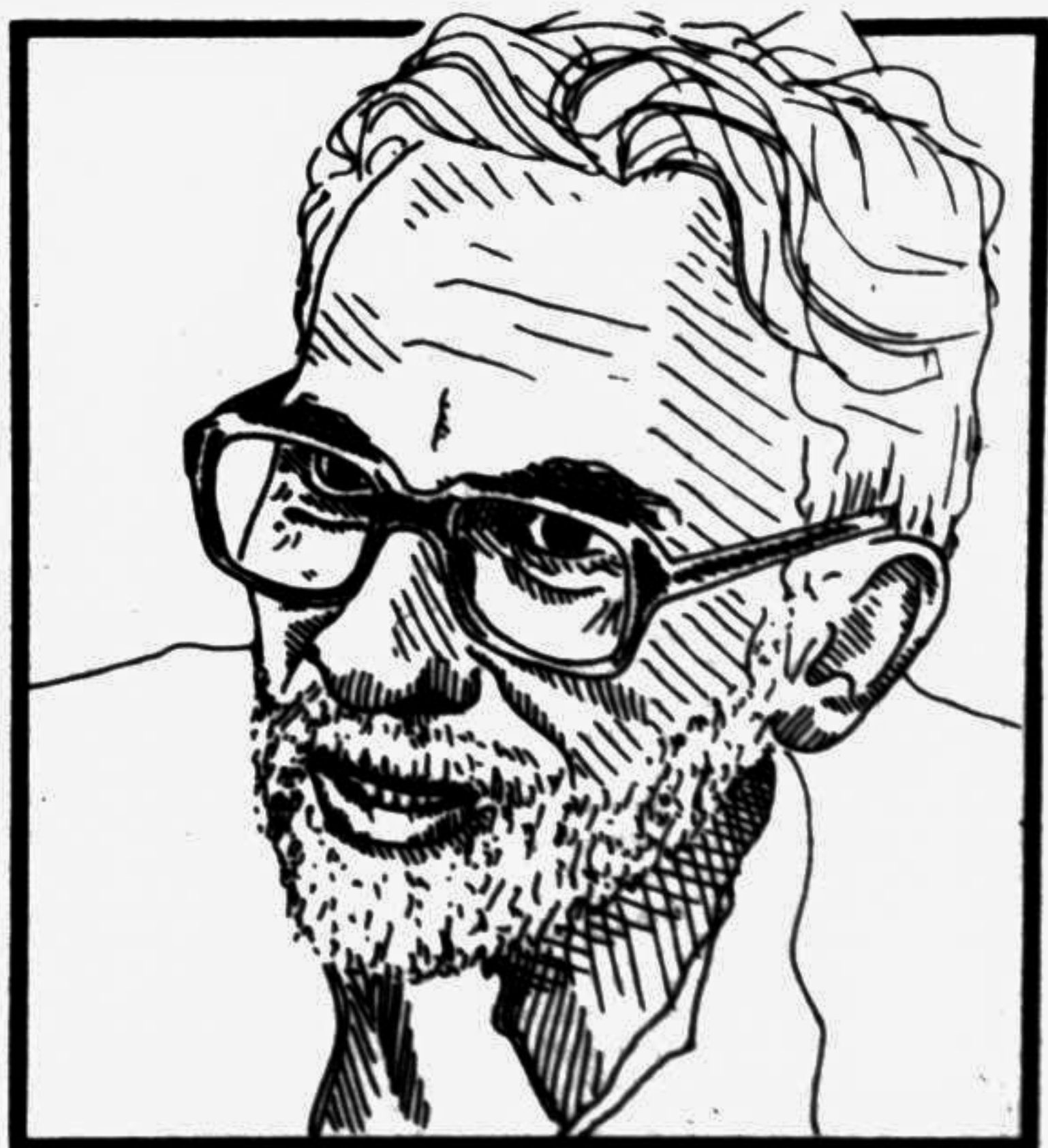
Saddened at the decline of the theatre from Indian villages, Subbanna founded an institution called Ninasam.

From humble beginnings, Ninasam has quietly enriched the aesthetic life of the rural folk and influenced the theatre movement in the south Indian state of Karnataka.

Subbanna is a Brahmin by birth, a socialist by conviction and an artist by temperament. He decided to remain close to his roots after completing his studies in the university.

He says: "I did not have to face any crossroads. I was born in Heggodu and I do not think I could outgrow it. This place is good enough for me."

His teeth stained by the constant chewing of paan (betel-leaf) and a towel slung



K.V. SUBBANNA

over his kurta (long shirt made of home-spun cloth), Subbanna could easily be mistaken for just another villager.

The frail and diminutive Subbanna is an intellectual in the real sense. He has an instinctive understanding of the needs of his immediate community and its milieu.

Fired by the drive to organise things, he is convinced that he cannot progress in his intellectual pursuits unless he takes his community along with him in his quest.

The beginning of Ninasam was small. All the actors were farmers from the region. They gathered at the end of each day's toil in their fields to discuss theatricals.

As Ninasam flourished the state government began to feel its force and the impact of its message on the rural masses. By 1970, financial grants from Bangalore as well as New Delhi began pouring in.

With these Subbanna built a theatre — Shivarama Karanth

Rangamandira — at Heggodu. It is India's only technically equipped rural theatre with 800 seats. Heggodu's population is only 700.

After that a film society, Chittrasamaja, was launched for organising rural film festivals and film appreciation courses for villagers. Soon, a training institute Ninasam Theatre Institute (NTI) was set up. It was open to anyone who had completed 10 years of schooling.

To provide an employment outlet to the trained professionals who came out of NTI's first course Subbanna launched Trugata, a travelling repertory in 1985. To date, Trugata has performed 579 shows of 219 plays all over Karnataka, mostly to village audiences.

Additionally, Chittrasamaja has screened to villagers Indian and international film classics such as Battleship Potemkin, Bicycle Thieves, Rashomon and Pather Pan-

See Page 10

## No Holidays Please, We are Japanese

Japan has shown phenomenal economic growth in the past 20 years, making it the world's most dynamic economy. However, this has been achieved at a cost. In their zeal for work the Japanese, reports Gemini News Service, sometimes deny themselves the simple joys of life, to the extent that many have to be cajoled to take what should be a well-deserved holiday. by Philip Short

duction, and follow the lead provided by Japan's big corporations which are already encouraging their employees to take longer vacations.

One reason why all this encouragement is likely to go unheeded is that Japan's obedient workers need the extra cash provided by overtime to make ends meet.

Explains one writer on labour issues: "Corporations are supposed to be making lots of money, but they are not distributing their riches to the workers."

This claim is supported by a Labour Ministry survey on overtime, which showed that overtime pay accounted for 16 per cent of each unionised worker's income, and in some cases as much as 30 per cent.

Average monthly overtime totalled 28.8 hours, rising as high as 50 hours, and the Trade Union Confederation (TUC) survey of its own members yielded discouraging results for the less-hours lobby — 55 per cent chose higher pay over 24 per cent opting for fewer hours.

The most convincing reason why the shortening of working hours is almost doomed to fail is the national guilt complex felt by all those darning enough simply to clock in and out.

Says Sougo Yoshimaya of the TUC: "There is unspoken peer pressure and fear that superiors might think that they are not doing their share if they go home on the dot."

The reluctance to take time off is particularly pronounced among older managers whose

careers coincide with the period of the high-growth post-war economic boom. These are the workers who believe that time spent at work is what matters, not actual results.

At Toyota Motors, the personnel department has introduced a policy designed to make managers take ten consecutive days off per year. The move is seen as being partly in response to the Karoshi, or sudden death from overwork, of then vice-chairman Tutomu Oshimo in the summer of last year.

Even if employees are cajoled into taking holidays, many are at a loss to know what to do with themselves.

The National Recreation Association of Japan is a non-profit association which, according to spokesman Akira Asano, focuses on "helping

middle-aged men who have worked away most of their adult life discard their sense of guilt in having spare time and enjoying themselves."

Already in Japan there are those who are still suffering from the trauma of only working five and a half days a week. These are the "weekend depressives" who cannot cope with being away from the workplace, and who telephone

the National Institute for Mental Health for guidance.

Addiction to work could also be responsible for demographic change. Under the headline "Unattractive Men Cause Declining Population in Japan," a social commentator and novelist recently wrote an article claiming that marriage is no longer appealing to Japanese women because of their drone-like prospective spouses.

Keiko Higuchi, a professor of women's studies at Tokyo Kasei University is more scathing in her criticism of the status quo, saying: "Unless people put their private lives before corporate ones, their whole life will yield nothing."