

Puja Special

Towards a Secular Festival

by Waheedul Haque

the shift has suited the Bengal climate as well as the psyche! So much so that one can suspect the *akaal-bodhan* episode to be an interpolation by a Bengali trying to justify the convenient shift. And perhaps from that point — the shifting of the puja season — the puja itself together with the deity worshipped started being Bengalised. To the best of what living memory can scarp up, the great Durga Puja festival of Hindus has always been a pe-

culiarly Bengali institution, with Durga and her other manifestations of Uma, Parvati or Sati enticed away from the all India Hindu pantheon to be set on a loving seat in the Bengali mind. The Bengali genius has always been, it seems, very adept in this job of naturalising subcontinental divinities as intrinsically and essentially Bengalee characters — a glorious example of which is Ramprasad's Tara or Kali.

The genius of the people, this wet and swampy malaria-infested land, redeemed by the mighty flow of the world's greatest rivers as also by a shining and mellow and dry half-year from the onset of autumn to the end of winter, did not stop at that. The puja began its transformation from a strictly religious ritual to a festival of the human milieu — cutting across narrow communal bounds understandably for reasons more mundane and secular than religious. But where? With the introduction of the *shorbojanin* or *sharbojanin* puja? A date for this new wave can be found, of course. But this event, rather than heralding the transformation was indeed a result of a process of the latter continuing, may be, for centuries. From spring to autumn and from the dark recesses of the sanctum of a temple to the open dazzle of an autumn landscape, Devi has been making a long sojourn, steady but sure, and never stopping.

It is rather easy and almost cast to read in Durga's genesis and her demolition of the demons Mahisha, Madhu and Kaitabha, the allegory of good triumphing over evil, light over darkness, Ahura Mazda over Ahiriman. Those to whose intellect the allegorical aspect appeals are only a miserable few and rather than joining the eternal battle between good and evil on the side of the former, they keep on congratulating themselves yearly on the brilliance of their mind. The majority are those who do not see the allegory and take Devi and Mahisha as characters in a true story enacted at some point of our hoary past. And how are they helped in society and in the seclusion of their personality development by the yearly commemoration of one ancient bisexual engagement? What do anyone caring to indulge in sets of special feelings on the occasion of the puja gain by way of social and individual

material and moral-spiritual development? Plainly, what's the use of it? Was it Lenin who said if you want to make a man ineffective, canonise him, and then went on to be canonised himself? And ineffectiveness? What chance Devi stands to be able to inspire the devotees to a war against evil? Very slim if, at all — for both those who get the allegory and those that don't. And how would the puja elevate one in one's inner life, make him at one with all mankind and the universe and transcend sorrow and pain and death? Nothing in the elaborate regimen of rites followed from the *bodhon* on *shashthi* to *bisharjan* on the *dashami* on the tenth day of the *Ashwin* new moon, that can be expected to work improvement in the 'self' of the devotees of Devi.

The Lakshmi puja or the one addressed to Saraswati are quite explicitly reward-oriented in that the puja is offered more as a prayer for wealth or proficiency in the arts and learning rather than puja proper which is wholly a tendering of reverence with flowers. In the pristine *jajnyas* of the newly arrived Aryan-speaking Caucasoids, the war and wealth-minded nomadic tribes from the Eurasian plains invoked and placated gods to seek of them victory in war and wealth of cows and streams of progeny and fall of enemy citadels. The puja signifies a shift, no doubt as a result of influences of the eastern Indian Vedantic speculations, away from material craving as also from magical belief, as shown by Frazer, that gods were bound to respond and oblige if the rituals were gone through without a flaw. In the changeover from bloody sacrifices and fiery *ahuti*s of the *jajnyas* to the offering of flowers in the puja, a switching over to spirituality was discernible. Durga or Devi is come from the Vedic — and not Vedantic — times and the cravings her worship occasioned were quite material. But is this known to the puja enthusiasts of today? Is the puja — specially the communal or *shorbojanin* edition of it — offered indeed with the age-old desiderata of *rupa, jaya, yasha, arogya, saubhagya* so on and so forth? To my mind it must be centuries that celebration of Devi's triumph was commemorated in the puja form with the idea of realising some heart's desire or worldly need — exactly as Ramachandra is said to have done seeking to overcome

Ravana's resistance. Why has then over the years this particular puja to Durga has grown and grown to overshadow all of the myriad others, so much so that the lone word puja now signifies, first of all, this autumnal social festivity and not the class comprising ritual worship of any of the proverbial 330 million divinities? It cannot surely have happened because millions were charmed by the allegory represented by Durga and her intimate team and fired by the idea of joining the fray against evil. Then what was the magic that lay behind the autumnal puja gaining preeminence? Durga is but a transformation of *Chandi*, harking back to *Adyashakti* or the matriarchal roots of the subcontinental society leaving an imprint by way of religio-philosophical formulation of the mother principle engendering the universe and living forms and human society. How could her celebration become almost universal in a land enveloped by the many splendoured and multi-stream *Vaishnavite* surge — the triumph of Bhagavat-dharma that is, over at least six hundred years? This latter religious sweep was incorrigibly patriarchal in tamper although championing love and renouncing violence. How could Durga become such a dear deity beloved more than even Radha without recalling whom neither a song nor a dance could be performed till very recently?

For too long Indian society was relentlessly being scattered as if driven by some hidden yet most powerful centrifuge. Society was coming off, getting sort of unstuck, to a state of non-society, which is no state indeed for a society. Religions exist in society. Good if they exist for society also. Bad if they run counter. For much too long religion as a unique phenomenon of man was, in the subcontinental context, running counter to society, a sad fact so very well understood by Vivekananda. Society here was for centuries pining for some bonding action, some centripetal force to come into play to halt the degeneration and set the society on a path of regeneration. The social revolution wrought by Shri Chaitanya sweeping the entire eastern Indian region into one great egalitarian surge. The good work had all but been spent out and social stagnation once again set snug on the back of the people when, five hundred years later, Vivekananda arrived on the scene. Society by that time has again been fragmented as if into smithereens, beyond any powers of even a genius of times

Continued on page 10

The Concept of Mother Durga and Her Retinue

by Dr Mahanambrata Brahmachari

EIGHT figures are there in the setup of Mother Durga, as she is worshipped. The mother remains in the middle as the presiding deity. Lakshmi and Ganesh are on her right; Saraswati and Kartik, on the left. A lion is beneath her feet and the demon Mahisasur (in the form of a buffalo) in front somewhat on her left and Kalabou, on her extreme right. Let me now try to explain the philosophical significance underlying these figures, separately.

Mother Durga

The Mother attained the name 'Durga' on killing a demon named 'Durgam' mention of which can be found in the sacred book 'Sri Sri Chandik'. The demon Durgam inflicts sorrows and sufferings upon living beings. The Mother kills the demon and relieves them of afflictions.

Though symbolic, in reality it is people's blind selfishness and ignorance, in the matter of spiritual attainment, that cause them to suffer enormously, being under the spell of Maya (delusion). Mother Durga destroys the ignorance by her sword of knowledge and arouses good intention among people.

The term 'Durga' also signi-

same time graceful. The profound grace in her is the source of her universal motherhood.

Lakshmi

Sri Lakshmi emerged out of the cosmic ocean when the gods and demons churned it using Vasuki Nag (serpent) as the rope and Mandar hill as the axis. Ocean is called the mine of gems. Nature is also an ocean. The cultivation of land of nature yields us crops. Forest gives us wealth and the mines underneath give us gold. Commerce and business are also a form of churning ocean.

Lakshmi is the goddess of wealth and prosperity. Devoid of riches makes one unfortunate and that of character makes one wretched. To the Sadhak (worshipper) spiritual attainment is his wealth. So he worships 'Lakshmi and Narayan'.

Lakshmi is the means of our livelihood. River is another form of Lakshmi. It is said that on being cursed, Lakshmi turned into river which has made the land rich with sufficient water, sweet fruits and bumper crops.

Lakshmi's vehicle is owl, which is blind at day time. 'Riches usually make people blind and unconcerned of

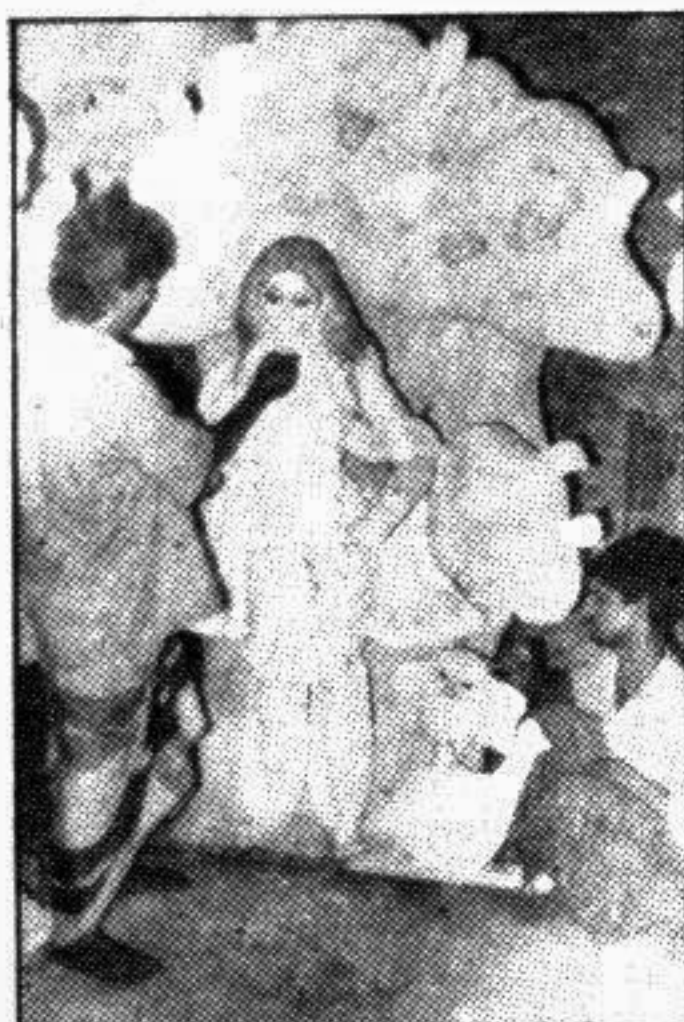
the endless sky, symbolising infiniteness. The infinite Lord Vishnu coming to this finite world lost head. An elephant's head was cut and joined to the truncated neck of Ganesh.

Ganesh literally means 'god of gana' or masses. He is worshipped particularly by businessmen and workers for success in trade. He is also the leader of the masses and is called Ganapati. Masses have appetite but no brain which is signified by his big belly and head of a beast.

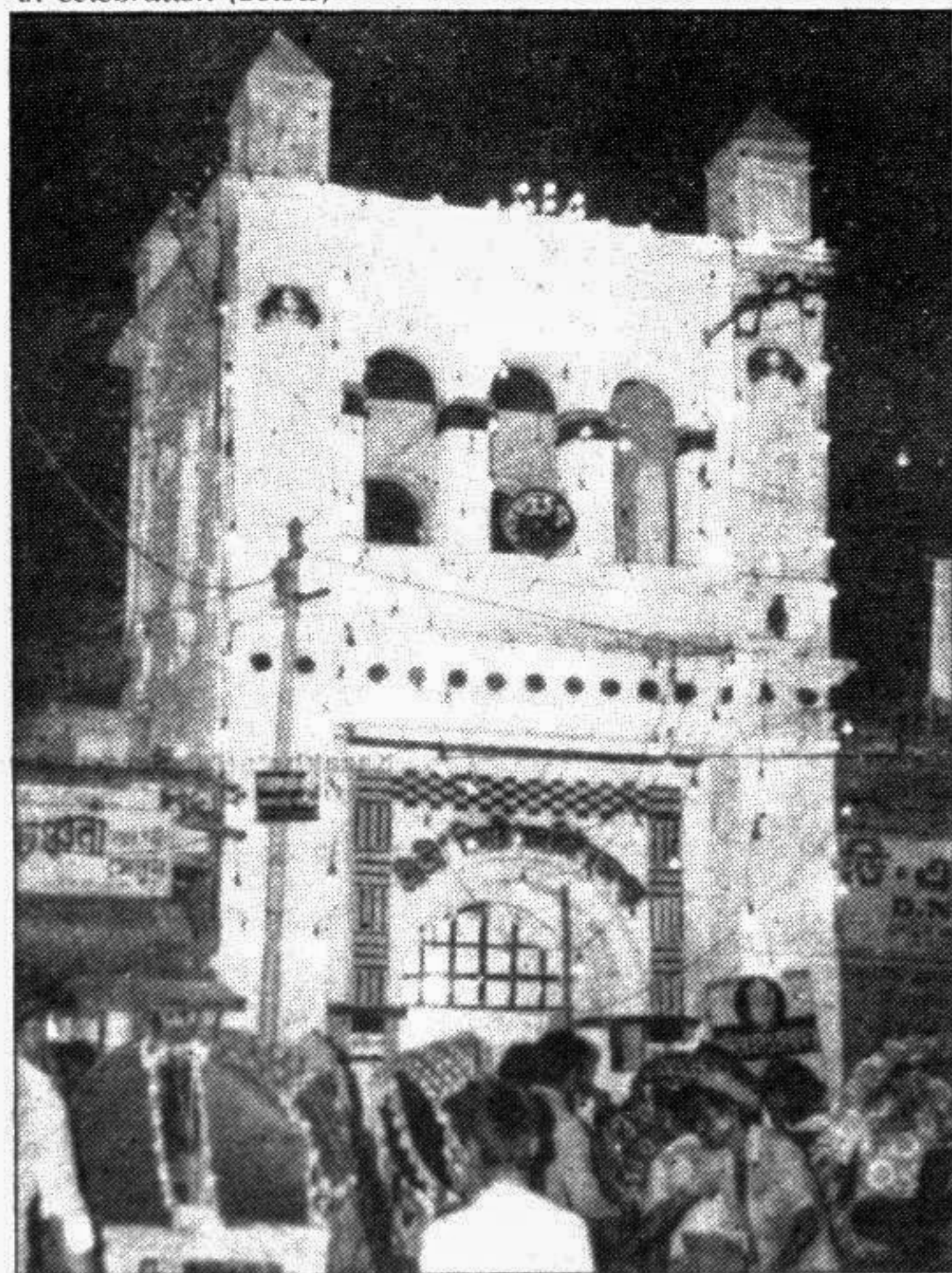
Though Ganesh has the head of an elephant, his vehicle is rat, a small creature which is symbolic of unity between big and small, rich and poor, high and low, which alone can ensure peace and prosperity in our individual, social stance and salvation to his devotees and frees them from the bondage of Maya. The rat possesses sharp teeth to cut those bondages.

Saraswati

Devi Saraswati represents the Mother's Jnana-Sakti or power of knowledge and wisdom. As the goddess of learning, she holds in her two hands a book and a Bina (stringed musical instrument). The book symbolises Sabda-Brahma and the Bina, sweet



A deity in the making (left), ready for puja (right), a 'mandap' in celebration (below)



My Most Fascinating Experience

by Fayza Haq

BEING well acquainted with mosques, where both men and women prey together, such as in the Maldives (whether it be Male or an island adjacent to Gan), played in my childhood at the steps of a cathedral; and seeing Hindu puja festivals only during a brief glance in 'The Jewel in the Crown' in the recent past, my great desire had been to witness a Hindu Puja in its actuality.

I got this opportunity four years back, when I saw the Durga Puja in Mirzapur, Tangail, arranged by the Kumudini Welfare Trust. I was then tired and harassed, trying to combine two professions at a time, while keeping an eye on my home front at Dhanmondi as well. I had barely survived correcting copies for a page of broadsheet, had scribbled down some essential notes on what I felt was a run-of-the-mill art exhibition. My hair was askew, my clothes were crumpled,

and my moccasin heels worn out, when an individual, who was merely an acquaintance, stopped by, and asked me if I wanted to see the Durga Puja. This was a mania in my graph of existence at that juncture in life.

Who could blame me, an impulsive person, who leaps to a non-pareil unknown panacea, when given the opportunity? When I arrived at Mirzapur, I was weary and perplexed, hoping to stop and enjoy the various Durga Pujas, that I could see all along, from Dhanmondi to Ghazipur. The images of the goddess Durga and the various other gods and evil elements that had been personified, painted, and decorated so well with fairy-lights, attracted me. Being fatigued both physically and mentally, I wished to heavens that I could have cajoled my escort to halt and enjoy myself to my heart's content to any one of them.

However, my gallant at hand had been invited to the puja, arranged by the Kumudini Welfare Trust, and I gave in to him, not asserting my basic belief that both genders are equal, given equal opportunities and requisite atmosphere.

I was eventually delighted at my chaperone's decision to witness the puja at the place where he had been invited. That is, at Mirzapur. I had some idea that the well-known philanthropist, the late R.P. Shaha, had schools, colleges, hostels, hospitals, and beautifully decorated double-decker boats, that had once lined Narayanganj, as my mother had told me some facts about him in my twenties. What actually goes on at the Durga Puja, the most important festival for Hindus, was something, I then felt, that I should not miss. This was because, having arrived at the puja scene, my chaperone and I both with

different religions and separate nationalities) were treated like some VIPs. Our jeep was parked at an allotted place, we were guided and helped to elongated boat. There were many expatriates in the careful and splendid arrangement for the spectators. There were sofas, chairs, and other comfortable seats, bright lights and delightful environment of a river, trees and shrubs. The spectators appeared to be looking on both speechlessly and breathlessly. There were hushed interchanges of whispers, but flashing and clicking of cameras were all the dominating sounds and sights coming from the onlooking viewers.

Meanwhile, on the stage were presented a series of exotic, well-rehearsed dances by teen-aged girls, with accompanying music. Comparing theirs with some of the adult performances that I have had the opportunity to witness on TV, so far, left the latter in the shades. The *murchhana* and *mudra* of the faces, limbs, waistline and bosom were in unquestionable exactitude, which was surely an admirable feat for girls and teenagers, who had been performing.

The dances with the oil lamps, which brought back memories of Alladin's magic lamp (of my secure and contented childhood), the foot-steps which were in perfect cohesion with the music, with numerous *taals*, were incredible. I felt. The dancers, as I knew already, were students of the school there, and their dancing had been only a pastime, and not surely an essential part of their curriculum. The performance lasted for hours, as variations of dance displays were presented. There were no breaks or hesitations, no flaw in the timing between one dance and another. One witnessed the *mantras* and another. As one believes that God holds up the earth for people of all religions and nationalities there mustn't be

bars of any type, whether they be based on religion, race, colour or any other prejudices. One found the exquisite prayer to the goddess Kali, in the form of dances and *mantras*, as an experience one never had before (even though one had, somewhat travelled extensively, and India having been only a stop-over of certain flights that I have occasions to experience).

After the unique cultural-religious rituals, I crossed over the *ghat* and the riverside (with, of course, the gallant male escort) and I could have gone home fully contented and at peace but more surprises and delights awaited us.

We had an opportunity to examine the libraries and there too, we were treated almost as VIPs. The individuals there were gentle, elegant, suave and intelligent who were teachers at Kumudini Welfare Trust school. They insisted that we should have a meal; and what followed was a feast that I had not the occasion to actually witness in my life. Beautifully decorated porcelain, dazzling forks and spoons, laid out on the table that almost bordered the entire massive hall, were naturally welcoming. The repeated helpings of delectable meals, with the desert, in the form of sweetsmeats, overwhelmed us altogether. The adjoining toilets were as clean and this was where we refreshed ourselves further.

In the 'finale' of my experience of the puja, we were even asked to spend the night at the Kumudini Trust guest rooms. My escort asked me, 'Would you?' I replied, 'I have not my nighty or toothpaste.'

I had not any other essentials that a woman journalist often carries both at home and overseas. Besides, I knew my mother would not rest until I was safely home, by some not normally accepted Bangladesh hour for a lady's time to come back home each day.

It is no wonder that this Durga Puja experience has left an indelible mark on my mind

fies 'incomprehensible', that is, the spiritual truth about her is very difficult to be comprehended. Only her celestial grace enables one to know her. Mother Durga wages war against the demons out of compassion for her offsprings, the living beings. The Mother has ten hands, signifying innumerable ones, holding various weapons to protect her countless offsprings.

Five right hands the right holding a trident, a sword, a discus, a sharp pointed arrow and shakti each and five left hands holding a shield, a bow, a fether, a hook and an axe each. And each weapon has its own significance. The Mother destroys our material, ethereal and subtle bodies with her three-pronged trident and gives us saintly bodies. The sword is symbolic of knowledge that destroys our ignorance. Mother has placed her right leg on the back of the lion and the toes of her left leg on the shoulder (or chest) of the demon. She is the Mother of the universe; she creates as 'Brahmani', preserves as 'Vaisnabi Sakti' and dissolves as 'Shivani'.

Shiva rests in her face, Vishnu in her hands and Brahma in her legs. Moon on her chest, the Regent of Death (Yama) in her hair, Indra (king of gods) in her waist. The energy of Varuna is on her thighs, that of earth on her posterior, that of Kuver in her nose, that of Sun in her toes and that of Basus in her fingers and of Agni (god of fire) in her three eyes. The Mother is the embodiment of energies of all the gods. The various gods are limbs of her celestial body.

Although the Mother is all powerful, she is affectionate too. She is fierce and at the

others. All good intentions to render help and services to helpless and needy, relatives and neighbours vanish as soon as one gets wealth. He turns blind like an owl.

But there are people who do not lose their sight on getting riches. To them the owl gives advice, saying 'oh, be blind, don't look at those people who have amassed riches out of falsehood, theft and other vile means. Look, I am a messenger of Yama. If you make money by unfair means, Yama, the Regent of Death will punish you. Think of death; nothing will go ultimately with you. So, don't adopt unfair means to earn money.'

Those who are striving after spiritual attainment are being reminded by the owl of the message of the Geeta wherein Lord Krishna tells Arjuna that a yogi remains awake in the sphere of realisation of God, over which all others sleep and that he sleeps over the sphere of worldly pleasures and pursuits in which all others remain awake.

Ganesh

Sri Ganesh holds in his four hands a conch, a wheel, a club and a lotus which are also found in the hands of Lord Vishnu. In fact, Ganesh is a part incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Parvati, the Mother worshipped Lord Vishnu to get him as her son at the instance of Shiva. Vishnu also cherished a desire to be the son of the Universal Mother. This has been narrated in Brahma Balibarta Purana.

Ganesh, immediately after birth, lost his head at the evil glance of Soni (Saturn). In ancient days, Soni was considered as the last of nine planets. As it was the remotest from the sun, it had, as if, encircled

music and rhythm or Nada-Brahma. As an embodiment of goodness and purity she has white complexion and clothes. White is indicative of spiritual revelation. Anybody in pursuit of supreme knowledge must have to be pure in body, mind and soul.

The vehicle of Saraswati is a white swan which takes the milk only if mixed with water. The wise and conscientious accept only the real object rejecting all that are unreal and transitory. Swan or hangsha or 'Sho hong' means literally 'I am one with God' which is being pronounced always in the process of breathing in and out.

Brahman, the ultimate Being is boundless and limitless while living beings are very much limited within small bounds. Brahman is vast like an ocean while a living being is a tiny drop of water.

The swan reminds us always this principle of difference and non-difference between god and living beings. A Sadhaka or worshipper with the realisation of this principle becomes a Parama-hansa, who like a swan living in water, lives in this world without being contaminated with worldly matters.

Kartik

Kartik of Karticeya is the god of powers and chivalry. He is the offspring of Shiva and Mother Sakti, Hara and Parvati, born out of deepest meditation. When Mother Sati sacrificed herself in the Yajna of Prajapati Daksha, Siva became mad and began to dance with her dead body on his shoulder. Vishnu cut the dead body of Sati into pieces with his chakra (wheel). When Shiva became aware of this, he ab-

Continued on page 10

