

DURGA PUJA SPECIAL

Durga: The Divine Motherhood

by Dr Mahanambra Brahmachari

THE relation between the individual, the whole and the part, the Creator and the created, God and man, had been a pristine subject of religio-philosophical search on the part of the spiritual giants of human civilisation. Of all their findings are presented in the sacred literatures of various nations, one, that constitutes the closest, the deepest and the most profoundly soothed relationship, is the Motherhood of Divinity. To conceive of the Supreme Godhead as the Great Mother having a cozy lap to pacify all that languish, and unnumbered arms to embrace all that there are. This relationship is pre-eminently human and significantly alleviating. Ostensibly, this is the contribution of the Tantra Sastra of ancient India.

Tantric and Vedic are the two living streams of methodical thinking flowing across the Indian soil throughout the centuries even as the Ganges and the Brahmaputra, having one origin, the Himalayan range and one goal, the Bay of Bengal,

wind opposite courses, the eastern and the western sides of this subcontinent. These two type of works, Agama and Nigama, as they are often called, form the most significant parts of our ancient lore. The sacredness and authoritativeness of both are venerated with reverence by the men of penetrating insights.

The Tantric and Vedic mode of thinking may be linked to scientific and philosophic ways of modern days. Both endeavour to find out the central truth underlying the manifoldness of the world, but their procedures are different, one having analytic and the other synthetic technique. Upanishads, the philosophic portions of the Vedas, unify these and long for an integral view of the same through intuitive realisation.

Tantras, on the other hand separate the Universe into component parts by analytic dissection and attempt to see the whole through parts. Vedas give us the Universality of thought, while the Tantras give a searching factorisation of all kinds of

facts under the Sun.

Sometimes the Tantras and the Vedas hold diametrically opposite views, but often times, they embrace each other and by mutual endeavours, enrich the cultural trends of India. The unification of the Tantras and the Vedas, of Saktivada and Purushabhad, of the Chandi and the Gita, in our civilisation be- speaks a profound integrality achieved by our early Seers.

Saktivada

The essential teachings of the Vedas are integrated in the Bhagavata Gita and those of the Tantras are epitomised in the Chandi. To say a few words about the essential features of Tantras literature: its first article of truth consists in Saktivada.

Saktivada means that Sakti is a Reality and it does exist. This is an undisputable theory. Nobody can deny it since its very denial presupposes its existence. Usually the postulates of sciences are to be taken for granted, to begin with. But the postulate of Tantras lies in the undeniability of Saktivada. It constitutes the solid rock of Tantra's ideological structure. A Tantric devotee is proud of the fact that Tantra asserts of nothing that is not based on man's experience. Veracity of

any event may be questioned. Even the idea of God, soul, rebirth, heaven, hell, virtue, vice may be challenged, but the overwhelming reality of Sakti is beyond question and criticism.

The second thesis of Tantra lies in the unitary existence of Sakti. Not only does Sakti exist but it alone exists. There is nothing under the Sun that is not a specification of conglomeration of Sakti in some form or other. Every object that one comes in contact with physically or mentally is a collected mass of energy.

Sakti is One

The third article of Tantra is the oneness of all Saktis. Manifest though it appears, actually its existence is unique and unimpeachable. Manifest kinds of energy are manifest in innumerable objects, but this is apparent. Deep analysis brings out the fact that one and only One Sakti, i.e. Mahasakti stands out in the whole universe. All the sciences proclaim in unison the fact that there is one and only one energy that functions throughout the entire universe. The same energy that makes our heart throb accounts for the huge movements of the stars in the galaxies. All sciences of modern times unite to extol Mahasakti. But, of

course, unlike a Sakti devotee they do not worship her in the laboratories. This reason is obvious. The modern science aims at controlling the Mahasakti for pragmatic purposes. Scientist would pay no adoration to the Mahasakti, since according to modern science Sakti (energy) is void of feeling, lifeless and unconscious matter. Matter has been transformed into energy by science but it is unconscious nevertheless and nobody cares to pay homage to a dead object. Here again Tantra parts company and differs with modern science.

Ma Mahasakti

According to Tantra Sastra, the Mahasakti is a fully conscious Spirit and hence is an object of worship and veneration. Instead of controlling, Tantra endeavours to establish communion with Sakti. Sakti, for a Tantric is not only conscious but benignly gracious also. The kindly disposition and heartfelt affection of the Sakti is deeply personal and unfathomably profound. No phrase of dictionary can adequately give expression to this gracious aspect of the Sakti. One single term and that one only possesses magically curative power is "Ma". This is the most magnificent of all design-

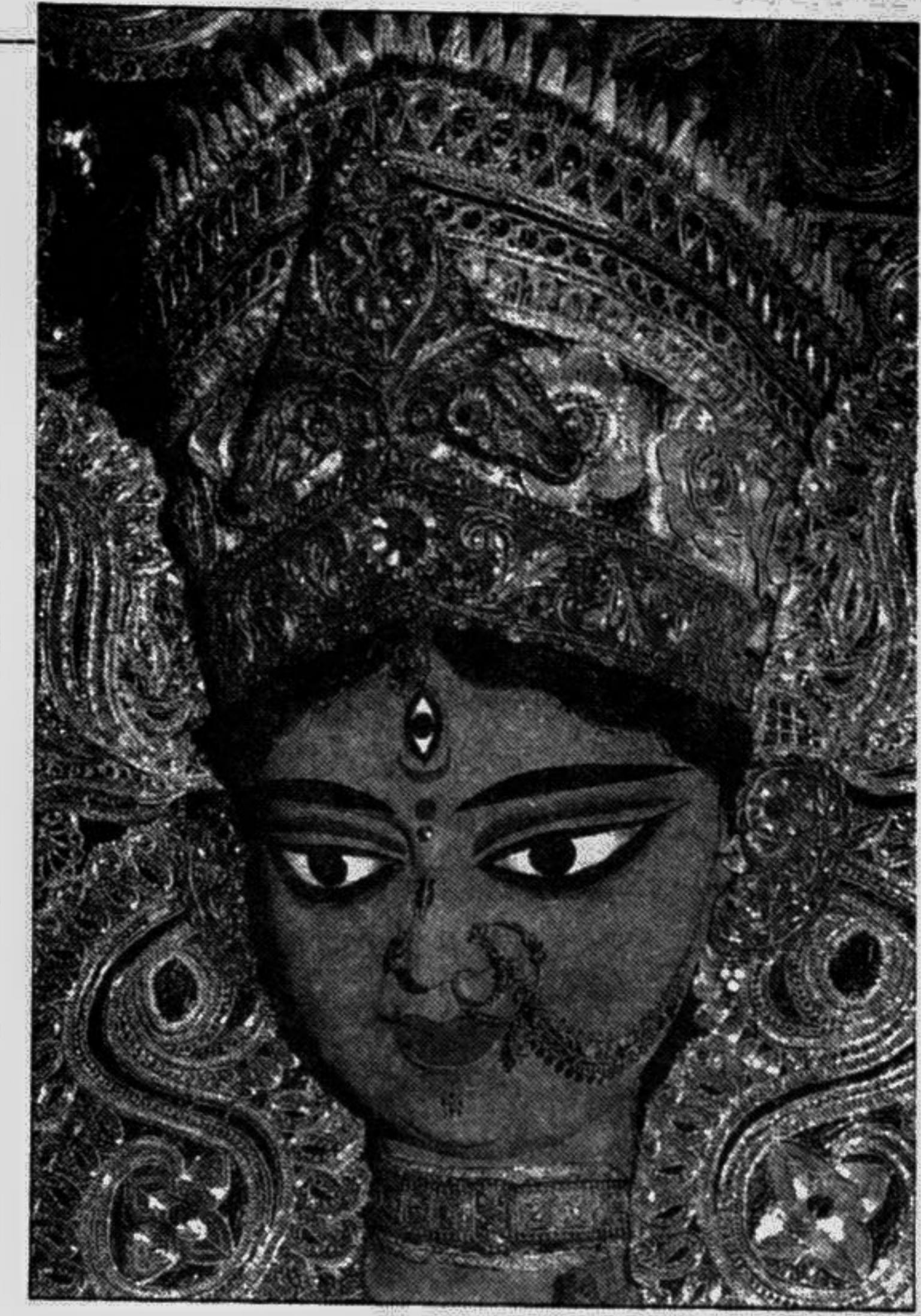
nations of the Great Sakti.

Mahasakti is the Highest Being, the Brahman of the Upanishads. She is supremely motherly according to Tantra. The Great Mother is the source and goal of the entire universe. She is all-existent, all-consciousness and supreme beatitude. She is an object of highest love and adoration. Devilish Sumbha and Nisumtha wanted to control the Mother and the outcome was total frustration and ultimate destruction. Modern science apparently is taking recourse to this Asuric way in attempting to control the forces of nature. The Tantra Sastra longs for establishing communion with Her through loving Puja, i.e. worship.

Mother Durga

Before manifestation of this creation the entire universe existed in Her bosom. This potential form of Her is Mahakalika. In Her we live, move and have our being. This sustaining power of the mother is Mahalakshmi. We are all tending to Her as our final abode. This ultimate end of all life is Mahasaraswati.

Mother Durga is the all-absorbing unity of these three aspects. She is our Mother, our Creator, upholder and comforter. Let us invoke Her solemnly and pray for our ultimate refuge in Her Holy Sanctuary.



Durga Puja: The Autumnal Festival

by Md Nazmul Huda Khan

THE deep dense black clouds gradually start going. Monotonous patterning like crying of a depressed mourning mother too declines. Patches of cotton white clouds under the azure sky enjoy playful trips over hills and dales. Their jubilance is occasionally marred by their tidal black counterparts causing drizzles or a short shower. And the sun plays hide and seek. This is Sharath, the playful autumn following the dampening monsoon.

The Sharath or autumn makes its emergence felt in pearls of dew dazzling on blades of green grass and tree leaves in the morning sunbeam and dropping sheeni petals (fragrant white flower blooming on small trees) carpeting the ground. All these features of beauty stirred the poetic strings of Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore and

he thus sang:

"Sharate aaj kon authiti elo
praner darey
Ananda gan garay bhrday
ananda gan garay
Neel akashay nirab katha
shishir veja baykulata
Beje uthuk aaji tomar
beenar tarrey tarey."

Meaning — "Behold the guest at the step of my soul today this autumn! Let my heart sing songs of joy! Let the bursting silence of the azure sky, and the dew-drenched exuberance/Break on today on your strings of harp."

And here comes the greatest festival of the Bengali Hindu community — Durga Puja: The queen of seasons — autumn, amidst its splendour, hosts Mahayana Mahashakti Mata Durga — the power of powers — with all her grandeur and merriment. Mother Durga — the giver of all peace and happiness

(sarpa shantidain) comes to the devotees along with Kamala-Binapazni (lover of song) bestower of knowledge Saraswati, siddhidata (given of success), Ganesha, handsome Katrika — the protector, and bestower of wealth, Lakshmi. Amidst all her associates Durga Mata stands before her devotees in solemn mirthful and at the same time extreme wrathful mood annihilating the sinner Ausara. And the devotee prays: "Rupangdehi, jayangdehi, yashodehi dishi zahi" (Give me light, give me success, give me fame eliminating the ills)

The orchestra of drums and flutes, conch and symbols fill the whole atmosphere as if an awakening from slumber is announced. Devotees and onlookers, irrespective of caste, creed and status throng the colourful puja pandals. Colourfully

dressed in their new clothes they visit near and dear ones and friends, offer sweets and special foods amidst exuberance. The pandal premises become attractive with such rituals as aarati and dances and throng with mantras frequently chanted by the priests in a typical traditional manner with all solemnity. The dazzles of illumination add further glamour to the occasion.

This is Sharadiya Sarbojanin Durgotsav (the autumnal general Durga Puja festival). The moon is brighter than ever in this season, as if the participants are in a glow of beatitude vibrant with the music in the air. The five-day festival begins on the Sasthi (the sixth day) of the Suklapaksha (moonlit fortnight) and the rituals continue through Saptami, Ashtami, Navami and Dashami. But Dashami comes with heavy

heart for the devotees: The moment of bisharjan (immersion) of the protima (icon).

The devotees' souls ache as the parting bells ring. The sorrows mount to the same degree of ecstasy that was at the advent of Shasthi. Yet they have to find solace: "Gachha, gachha parang sthanang swasthanang Paramanewari. Sangbatsar batitew punaragamanyachar" meaning "the goddess of the goddesses, well go to your scared own abode, but come again as usual next year." The devotees return home with the hope for a next year.

This day is called 'Bijoya Dashami' — all kiths and kin, friends and acquaintances, neighbours and strangers, forgetting their differences, if any, congregate and embrace each other. They are victorious and happy in subjugating the sinner Ausara and thus fill their hearts with complacence. Thus Bijoya stands as the occasion of fraternity and friendship.

As the story goes, Raimachandra was the first to perform Durga Puja in the autumn while he was preparing to fight Ravana who had eloped Sita. And on the day of Dashami, Ravana was eliminated and the Bijaya came. Thus the day is called 'Bijoya Dashami.'

Markandeya Purana says that Durga emerged in the mundane world to eliminate the devils. She had subjugated the commander-in-chief of the devils, Mahisasura and his accomplices to free the world from evils. After the rains the dark clouds move away and the autumn comes with all its light beauty and splendour, as if coinciding with the significance of Sharadiya Durgotsav.



The Poor Teach Politicians a Lesson in Democracy

FROM the day campaigning began in India's third general election in three years, the media and political analysts embarked on an exercise to fathom out what these elections were about. It would perhaps have been a more profitable exercise to ask what the elections were not about.

At the risk of oversimplification, it has become abundantly clear to most observers that the elections to the 13th Lok Sabha — lower house of parliament — were not about the day-to-day problems faced by the majority of Indians.

Two examples illustrate this point.

Mahona, an obscure village with a population of about 2,000 decided to boycott the polls. Villagers resolved to not allow any poll activity surmised, while every politician coveted their votes none was interested in their problems.

Mahona is like many other villages in India, a country that is home to the largest number of poor people on earth.

The village suffers from poverty, non-development, poor sanitation, low literacy and unemployment. And it falls under the very parliamentary constituency that had elected Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee as its representative in 1996 and 1998. He had been

re-elected in the just-concluded elections and is resuming his prime Ministership.

At the other end of the scale, Vajpayee's rival Sonia Gandhi fought and won the election from Bellary in Karanataka state. Her Congress party has never lost this seat, which means that it has now won it 13 times in a row.

Yet Bellary, according to the recently-released Karnataka human development report, occupies the lowest place in the state in terms of human development indicators such as literacy, access to clean water, sanitation, women's status and employment.

It is also one of the poorest districts in the country.

But it was not the poverty of their constituents that came out in politicians' campaigns. In both Vajpayee's Lucknow constituency and Bellary, the main subjects presented to voters were: India's conflict with Pakistan, various real or alleged financial scams, Vajpayee's personal life, the Italian

origin of Congress president Sonia Gandhi and the need for political stability.

Niraja Gopal Jayal, who teaches political science at Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi, points out that the same slogans are dusted out and aired in all elections. These include Secularism, Nationalism, Stability and Security, none of which, she observes wryly, "can suffer the indignity of expression in the lower-case."

Without doubt, these represent critical issues, but few of these big words actually speak to life as it is lived by the ordinary men and women who are the pillars of India's democracy.

Similarly, though in apparent contrast to this, a virtual conspiracy of silence has prevailed on the question of the economic reforms, arguably one of the most critical national issues of the 1990s. The reforms have never been submitted to the electorate for its ratification.

Indeed, few political parties

have questioned the liberalisation of the Indian economy even though the issue is of direct relevance to India's poor — moves to privatisate state-owned corporations, for instance, carry the risk of huge unemployment.

Statistics available for 1998 reveal that while the number of people living under the poverty line came down from 45 per cent of total population in 1950 to 36 per cent in the mid-1990s in absolute terms their ranks nearly doubled from 164 million to 320 million, 76 per cent of whom are in rural areas.

The government spends barely two per cent of its yearly earnings on health services while the figure for developed countries ranges from 12 to 14 per cent. The United Nations Development Programme estimates it will take 56 years to achieve universal literacy in India.

It is not as if political parties

are unmindful of these issues. It is just that the issues find a place only in the election manifesto.

festos — pious declarations of intent that are forgotten before the ink dries up.

The Vajpayee government came to power in March 1998 promising to create 10 million jobs in a year. Even though it ruled for more than 18 months, not one question was raised in the course of the poll campaign demanding an explanation for its failure to keep the promise.

The relatively small left-wing parties who did raise the issue, pointing out that the gap between the rich and the poor has widened over the past decades, failed to make a dent on others' campaign agenda. These parties are confined to the three outlying states of Kerala, West Bengal and Tripura.

The fact that voter turnout failed to reach above 65 per cent in any state is a powerful sign that the Indian voter is becoming increasingly disinterested in elections, although there is enough evidence that they continue to put their faith in democracy.

Rather, what these Indian elections have again proved is that the so-called illiterate and poor masses possess their own knowledge systems. And they employ these tools deftly to warn politicians that unless issues of poverty are addressed, no political party will enjoy their total confidence.

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The author is New Delhi-based journalist working for Deutsche Welle radio.

THE low-lying plains of Bangladesh including different wetlands have a rich endowment of diversified flora and fauna. The Chanda Beel area in Gopalganj is unique in terms of its rich diversity of flora and fauna. The Beel supports the livelihood and subsistence needs of thousands of people. The pressure of human society and its activities are increasingly putting stress on the beel-ecosystem and the rich biodiversity of this wetland is under threat. Land use, siltation, unplanned utilisation and management practices of its resources may lead to an ecological disaster, unless appropriate measures are taken.

People and the knowledge they possess, attitude they display and practice they demonstrate are key to bringing about changes in the management of the ecosystem. The present situation warrants the establishment and mainstreaming of participatory environmental practices in the area by enhancing the access by poor and women to productive resources and capacity building for sustainable productivity of these resources. The Sustainable Environment Management Programme (SEMP) aims to do the above. Implemented by the Ministry of Environment and Forest and funded by UNDP, the SEMP component is participation. This involves:

• Assessment of the human and natural ecosystem well-being;
• Planning of activities and their management; and
• Implementation of activities to address conservation and sustainable management of resources.

Activities under the programme have been initiated, through preliminary introduction with local community and

COMMUNITY-BASED RESOURCES MANAGEMENT

Helping People Help Themselves

by Nasimul Haque

IUCN-Bangladesh has been assigned to execute Community Based Haor and Floodplains Resource Management in selected wetlands sites. BCAS has been appointed to undertake the initiative in the Chanda Beel area as a part of the Madhupur Floodplains System.

Over the past decade, BCAS has pioneered the effort in compiling knowledge, undertaking studies, building awareness, assessing needs and motivating people of the Chanda Beel area to develop and undertake actions to address environmental issues and concerns. Our continued efforts have led to the establishment of several facilities, including a Wetland Center, and a pool of staff with developed capacity for mobilisation. The approach considered for the implementation of SEMP component is participation. This involves:

• Assessment of the human and natural ecosystem well-being;
• Planning of activities and their management; and
• Implementation of activities to address conservation and sustainable management of resources.

Activities under the programme have been initiated, through preliminary introduction with local community and

leveling of understanding on goals and requirements. Baseline information on the area has been compiled. A framework to assess and diagnose the situation using Participatory Tools and Techniques including Mapping, Trend Analysis, Ranking, Transacts, Focused Group Discussions, etc. are being field tested.

As a part of its awareness campaign, the project has launched several interesting initiatives which include bringing out a local Bengali monthly wall magazine named *Jolabhumti Barta*. The purpose is to facilitate communication among local people on Wetland and Sustainable Resource Management issues. The project is in the process of scoping areas with local stakeholders to undertake intervention measures that address conservation and sustainable use of wetland resources. As a part of this process, three plant nurseries are to be established this year at three different locations nominated by the local communities.

BCAS commemorated the World Environment Day on 5th June this year at Chanda Beel, organising several events in the communities as well as its Wetlands Center at Baniachar.

— BCAS Feature

Human Rights: Indian Perspective

NHRC and People's Movements

R M Pal writes from New Delhi

THE National Human Rights Commission has not implemented one of the most important statutory obligations, Section 12 (i) of the Protection of Human Rights Act, 1993, states clearly. The Commission shall... encourage the efforts of non-governmental organisations and institutions working in the field of human rights' which means that the Commission must have regular interaction with activists and dissident intellectuals involved in people's movements — now known as non-governmental organisations (NGOs). It is here that the Commission has failed; and this failure has caused tremendous damage to the growth of the commission as an institution, independent of the government. Let us be clear. The commission can survive only if it chooses, in spirit, if not in letter, to be part of a people's movement. If it does not identify itself with people's causes