

Hindu tradition and Mother Durga

PREM RANJAN DEV

THE Hindu tradition, followed by over 900 million people today, is one of the oldest, richest, and most influential traditions on earth. Whatever sphere of the human mind one selects for study whether it be language, customs, art, ancient sciences, polity, literature, architecture, painting or music -- one has to look to this heritage, because some of the most valuable and insightful materials in the history of mankind are encompassed within this tradition. For example, Ayurveda, Yoga, Dhyana, astronomy, astrology, vegetarian experiments and spiritual disciplines have all been of continuous interest and much sought after by people cutting across all national and religious barriers. And it is Hinduism, 'in its broader perspective that holds the key to understanding the full richness of these ancient traditions.

In recent years, there has also been a burgeoning interest in Hindu thought among philosophers, theologians, psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists, worldwide. More and more scientists are discovering the convergence of Hinduisms and modern scientific thinking. Unfortunately, this rich culture and civilization can provide no source of ready reference for students and teachers. Therefore, an authentic, objective, insightful, scholarly, critical and contemporary presentation of Hinduism is needed

as a standard source of reference.

The Hindu tradition does not derive from any one prophet or founder. It has neither a uniform creed nor any organized church. Its history and prehistory are ageless. The Vedas, which are the scriptures of the Hindus, are unique in character. We find in the Vedas a great variety of subjects and a great flexibility of doctrines. For example, there are several interpretations of the Upanishads, Brahmasutras and the Bhagavadgita, and they are all considered authoritative. This is the result of freedom from dogma.

Meanwhile man has created such an environment that it reacts unwholesomely upon him. Mankind is terribly heading as if towards a total annihilation by committing licentious suicide. Heart rending cry for peace, happiness and equality is heard from all corners of this bewildered world. The state of affairs resembles that of the Devas in the reign of Mahisasura. In the course of the eternal strife between the Devas (gods) and Asuras (demons), the former being defeated, the latter reigned supreme in the heaven inflicting too much sufferings on the Devas.

The helpless Devas came to Brahma, the creator of their distress. Brahma, afflicted with the sorrows and sufferings of the Devas, led the commission of the gods to Vishnu and Shiva for appraisal of the grave situation and redress. The tale of intolerable atrocities of Mahisasura raged

vehement anger in Vishnu and Shiva and in a feat of their vital energies came out in the form of flashes of fire. This created similar reaction among the gods whose vital energies too came out in like manner. These fiery energies took the form of an unmatched, sublime and superb woman. She is Divine Durga. This divine-embodiment of all spiritual energies had decoration of numerous weapons offered by the gods. Thus descends the Divine Mother, the Supreme Being, energy-incarnate who embodies in herself the multifarious modes of life. She happens to be too affectionate to her children to become fierce to those who tend to harm them. Durga is the supreme goddess of righteousness.

On the other hand, to the Bengali Hindu Durga is also the daughter who visits her maternal home for four days every year, and that is the occasion of festival.

Durga is tranquil and turbulent, serene and fierce, *shoumya* and *rudra* at the same time. This is because her all embracing motherliness makes her intolerant of those that are inimically disposed of towards her (human) children. The Mother Durga in a feat of destruction raised such a tumultuous uproar that the frightened Asuras came out in large numbers equipped with armours and weapons and the fierce war that followed between her and the innumerable Asuras brought the ruin of Mahisasura, other Asuras being already elimi-

nated. The heaven was recovered and the Devas cheered the victory with an elegant hymn addressed to the mother: ... *jayang dehi disho jahi* (... give us victory eliminating the enemy).

To Hindus, symbolically, Durga is the progenitor of the universal process in its entirety. She is the presiding principle of the cosmic manifestation and the source of ultimate goal of all perfection and attainment of all existence. She is essentially unique and one. She is the fountain-head of the highest good -- both spiritual attainment and material prosperity. The worship of the Mother Durga would ensure the devotees' communion with her. And constant communion with her would promote the development of friendly relations and universal fraternity. We pray to the Divine Mother for succour to save us from a confused world order.

Man is the maker of his destiny and he can exercise his free will, but at the same time he has taken upon himself the responsibility of full participation in the entire cosmos and consequently between himself and the Creator, man and nature, man and other living beings and of course between man and man. May the culture of Durga Puja fruitfully ensure all this. Let virtues win over vices.

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Shakti: Embodiment of the power supreme

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SHAKTI -- the source, support and end of all existence and life, is one and unique, but She does retain the potentiality of manifesting Herself in innumerable forms. Expressing, as She does, motherly affection, She is preeminently a Mother, so tender, so benignant, but controlling, as She does, the destructive agencies, She is terrific and fierce. She is Kali of extremely black complexion. She is Uma of golden hue. Uma imparts highest knowledge to the enlightened Devas. Kali devours Her own sucklings and keeps them in bondage in the all embracing totality of Shaktis that is Mahashakti.

Force is inherent in existence, so is Shakti in Sada-Siva, the eternal Brahman. The primordial Shakti is identical with Brahman, the Absolute. The objective universe is a projection of Her inner being, She is endowed with all-will, all-knowledge and all-action. She is Mahadevi. Multifarious are Her emanations and She is one-in-many.

Arjuna's prayer to Durga

At the beginning of Bhisma Parva, in the Mahabharata, Sri Krishna advises Arjuna to make an obeisance to Mahadevi Durga before the commencement of the battle and pray for victory. Arjuna, in his adoration of the Mother designated Her under many means, such as Kaumari Kali Kapali, Kantara-vasini, etc. The Argala hymn mentions Her ten-fold expressions: Jayanti, Mangala, Kali, Bhadrakali, Kapalini, Durga, Siva, Kshama, Dhatri, Swaha and Swadha. They are all bestowers of good in life.

The hymn named Devi Kabacha speaks of Naba Durga, nine manifestations as Sailaputri, Brahmacharini, Chandaghanta, Kushmanda, Skanda Mata, Katyayani, Kalaratri, Matagouri and Siddhidatri. They are the protective forces, offering safest shelter to all that seek.

In the Bhagavad Gita, Sri Krishna declares his eight-fold nature. They are earth, water, air, fire, ether, mind, intellect and ego. They are, in fact, the material cause of the Universe.

Russia-Japan relations

The Kurils: A 'colonial legacy' unresolved

SYED BADRUL HAQUE

IN the aftermath of cold war much of the world celebrated the renaissance of democracy. The democracy-leap is just the crucial hors d'oeuvres to make a better civilisation for people. In reverse, occupation of territories or alien rule subsumed under the rubric of 'colonialism', now largely marginalised, is tainted with its ugly and venal track record. It manifests the level of civilisational descent and is highly incompatible with the prized contemporary values, so positive with freedom of expression, human rights etc.

Hong Kong, the last colonial outpost of Great Britain in Asia that was wrested 156 years ago from a decrepit Qing dynasty was restored to China in July, 1997. This was billed an event of the century in the colonial league, a defining moment for China and no less epoch-making in world arena. It had too its footnotes for nations smarting under similar predicaments. As indeed, it leaves a message both for Russia and Japan that given a visionary perception, the dispute over the Kurils, the

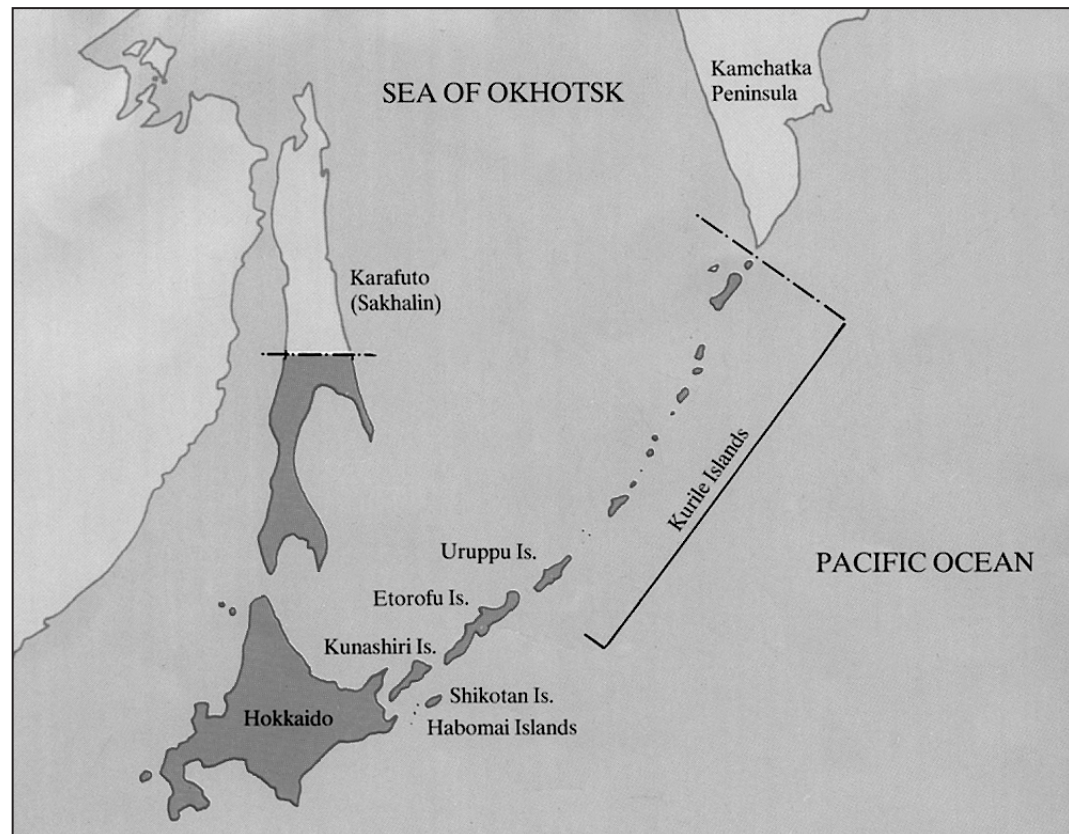
linchpin that kept in limbo a formal peace treaty for close to six decades can be settled through mutual trust and cooperation. It is indeed paradoxical that the world's major democracies -- only 6km apart at their closest -- are technically at war with each other.

The disputed territories are Kunaishiri, Etorfu, Shikaton and the Habomai islets off Hokkaido that stretches in a north-easterly direction. This barren, weather-bitten archipelago is home to about 16,000 people in a land area of 4,996 square kilometers and the waters at the conflux of warm and cold currents around the islands make up what is considered to be one of the three best fishing grounds in the world. These string of small islands were pocketed by Stalin in the waning days of World War II by courtesy of president Roosevelt under provisions of the secret Yalta Protocol. Stalin incorporated the territories under occupation into its own territory by the Decree of Presidium of the Supreme Soviet dated Feb. 2, 1946 in 'complete violation' of international law. Virtually the Kuril

As of the present, both countries cannot but to operate within the nationalist parameters. To agree to less would be treated as a climb down of national proportion. Both sides need to show enough political courage and ingenuity to overcome decades of divergent political, historical and cultural perspectives before this simmering territorial dispute yields a real dividend-- when it finally ends .

or northern territories (as called in Japan) issue originated from this 'illegal' incorporation which blocked the path to a peace treaty ever since. This occupation was conceded as an inducement to enter the war against Japan. But this was not an ambition Russia had any reason to indulge in unless Japan forcibly tried to retake the lost territories which it understandably would never do.

President Vladimir Putin of Russia and Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori of Japan held a meeting in Russia's Irkutsk in March last year -- the latest so far in the series -- in a bid to resolve the dispute between the two neighbouring nations. Although the Irkutsk summit was designed to wrap up the bilateral relations over the territorial issue through the end of 2000, the dead-



line set in 1997 during an informal summit between the Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto and the Russian President Boris Yeltsin in the Siberian city of Krasnoyarsk, it failed to produce any tangible result toward resolution of this dispute. Despite the 'unyielding' nature of the Kuril imbroglio, the meeting was not without any significance. It confirmed the validity of the 1956 Joint Declaration calling it a basic legal document to keep the bilateral process going. Both the leaders agreed to boost negotiations to achieve a 'solution mutually acceptable to both sides' without, however, specifying any deadline for concluding a peace treaty. This obviously made the Irkutsk declaration's binding power weaker than that of the Krasnoyarsk accord. The Japan Times, the flagship of the Japanese thinking, in its leader captioned 'A small step forward in Irkutsk' in a conciliatory note says that "Russia's adamant stance will require that the post-Mori Japanese government rework Japan's diplomatic strategy toward Russia with a new agenda for setting the territorial issue and concluding a peace treaty." It reminded that Japan-Russia relations should not revolve only around territorial problem.

Shigeki Hakamada, Professor of Russian studies at Aoyama Gakuin University, said the 2000 target was "too optimistic" to begin with and the condition also was not ripe for either Russia or Japan to make any headway to any mutually acceptable agreement between the two countries to resolve the dispute: Strong and stable governments in both countries, trust between the two leaders and public support among the Russians that it was in their interest to sign a peace treaty with Japan for the sake of

getting an economic gain -- none of these conditions exists today, he said.

Russia in terms of its territorial size and the number of nuclear weapons still on its territory, remains an important power on earth. But it does not measure up to economic indicators to gauge greatness. After the collapse of communism in 1991, Russia has entered a new era when economic development takes centre-stage. It is only Japan that fits so eminently in the role, and can promote Russia to become a dynamic member of the flourishing Pacific Commonwealth. The potentiality of the Pacific Zone was visualised as long as the beginning of the past century by the then American Secretary of State, John Hay who said: "The Mediterranean is the ocean of the past, the Atlantic the ocean of the present and the Pacific the ocean of the future." A straight line prediction it might seem though at the moment, its possibility cannot be dismissed either if the indicators are focussed more sharply.

In the wake of the decommunism spree, several Soviet Republics forged during the heyday of the Czars in the 19th century dismembered themselves from the Union and returned to their geopolitical entity which clearly reflected the recession of imperial Russia. Licking the wounds of such a vast empire, albeit the biggest on the planet, and no longer basking on the superpower status, the Russians were in no mood to cede any further their territory what they euphemistically called their national patrimony. Even today millions of Russians fondly remember when the Soviet Union was a war victory, when it launched the first man in space, had the world's largest army and won the most

medals at the Olympic games.

They are unable to accept the current status and are drawn to candidates who promise Russians a country worth fearing.

Politically, Russia is seeking to maintain its great-power status in a difficult time of transition. Her success will depend on how effectively she can manipulate growing nationalism and assert strong leadership. Conceding territories to Japan would strike most Russians as a betrayal of the national interest.

For nearly three quarters of a century the Russians were on a doctrinaire diet that offered no transparency on their own home ground and also no exposure to the outside world. Skewed in such a manner, the inward-looking Russians operate on flawed assumptions. The world may have to wait till a change arrives at their mental perception in order to communicate with them in a way as obliged in a changed world scenario. Although Japan and the Soviet Union continued peace treaty negotiations after the conclusion of the 1956 Joint Declaration the upshot of these meetings was that the issue had to be renegotiated.

The relationship between the two nations will only improve slowly because of the historical baggage. Early on, 200 years ago, the two countries remained locked contesting the possession of 1,200 KM chain of more than 30 islands, stretching from Hokkaido to Russia's Kamchatka peninsula.

The nationalistic political heavy weather built around a wide spectrum of the Russian citizenry stands as the immediate barrier to any fruitful resolution of the dispute. Legitimacy and justice had to yield to realpolitik; emotions were stirred up blowing beyond propor-

tion the economic and strategic significance of the islands to their legitimate modest value.

The ignominy of suffering foreign domination of her own territory and also as a victim of the atomic bomb, Japan has paid dearly for her war crimes by now. Again, nationalist sentiment has come to such a pass that any concession on the territorial issue is subjected to charges of treachery.

As of the present, both countries cannot but to operate within the nationalist parameters. To agree to less would be treated as a

climb down of national proportion. Both sides need to show enough political courage and ingenuity to overcome decades of divergent political, historical and cultural perspectives before this simmering territorial dispute yields a real dividend-- when it finally ends .

Evidently, the settlement of the Kurile dispute is a waiting game par excellence.

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