

The vision of Supreme Mother

PREM RANJAN DEV

CIVILIZATION is now in a state of transition. But the transition that we have to effect today for our survival is of course a moral and spiritual revolution which should embrace the whole of the world. For this we shall have to inculcate virtues within ourselves in whatever manner one believes. In this context, a penetrating thought and look into the totality of blessing of the supreme force that creates, annihilates and creates i.e. Mother Durga according to Hindu mythology and philosophy, is helpful. The supreme power alone can save the cosmic existence and sanctify coming centuries. The Vedas, the ancient most Holy Scriptures uphold the eternal truth of eternal existence of the supreme power envisioned as Mother, without whom no creation is possible. The Hindu tradition, still followed by about 1000 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 may look into this heritage, because some of the most valuable and insightful materials in the history of humankind 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, religious and cultural barriers. Yet, despite their universal appeal, it is Hinduism that holds the key to understanding the full richness of these ancient traditions.

In recent years, there has also been a burgeoning interest in this ancient thought among philosophers, theologians, psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists. More and more scientists are discovering the convergence of Hindu philosophy 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 Hindu thoughts 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 organised 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

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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.

Of late 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 is heard from all corners of this restless, bewildered world. The state of affairs resembles that of the Devas in the reign of Mahisasura. In the course of the eternal strife of the Devas (gods) and Asuras (demons), the former being defeated, the latter reigned supreme in the heaven inflicting extreme suffering to the Devas. The helpless devas came to Brahma, the creator of their distress by earlier blessing Mahisasura. However, he led the commission of the gods to Vishnu and Shiva for appraisal of the grave situation and redress.

The tales of intolerable atrocities of Mashisasura raged vehement anger in Vishnu and Shiva and in a feat of this their vital energies in the form of burning flashes came out from them. This created similar reaction among the Gods whose vital energies too came out in like manner. These energies took the form of an unmatchable, sublime and superb goddess. She is Divine Durga. This all powerful Divine-embodiment had decoration of the numerous weapons offered by the gods. Thus descends the Divine mother, the Supreme goddess. 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. On the other hand Durga is also seen as daughter in Bengali Hindu mundane tradition, who visits her mother's house for four days every year. So the parting (Visharjan) become so emotionally painful.

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 to Her human and divine children. Mother Durga in a feat of destruction raised such a tumultuous uproar that the freighted Asuras came out in large numbers equipped with armours and weapons and the severe war that followed between Her and the innumerable Asuras brought the ruin of Mahisasura. The other Asuras met the same fate. The heaven was recovered and the Devas cheered the victory with an elegant hymn addressed to the Mother... *Jayang Dehi Disho Yahi.*

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 in spiritual attainment and material prosperity. The worship of Mother Durga would ensure our communion with the eternal power. We pray to the Divine Mother for succor and saving us in a confused world order.

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"Mother, always gliding near with soft feet,

Have now chanted for Thee a chant of fullest welcome?

Then I chant it for Thee, I glorify Thee above all,

I bring Thee a song that, When thou must indeed come Come unflatteringly!"

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The festival of fraternity

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DURGA Puja is the greatest socio-religious event of the Bengali Hindu. The concept of Durga as Supreme Goddess symbolising 'Sakti' took a long time to evolve out of many ancient religious texts and traditions. The Skanda Purana says that the Goddess got her name after killing a demon called Durgam. Who had been harassing the gods and had stolen the Vedas from them with a view to destroying religion. When the gods unitedly sought her intervention, the Supreme Goddess destroyed the demon and restored the Vedas. She also incorporated the Vedas into her person to ensure that these were not stolen again. That is why Durga is also called Vedamoyee. She destroys all the evil forces represented by the six Ripus: lust, anger, greed, delusion, arrogance and jealousy.

Durga is tranquil and turbulent, severe and fierce, *soumya* and *rudra* at the same time. However, what is generally worshipped in Bengal is Durga as Mahishasuramardini, the vanquisher of Mahishasura, the buffalo-demon. The concept of Durga as Mahishasuramardini took a definitive shape in the Markandeya and other

Hindu thought is essentially democratic, liberal and social. But there are a number of concepts in Sanatan Dharma which are rarely understood in true depth. According to historians, the concept of Durga as 'mother' might have evolved in Bengal under the influence of some cults from Assam, Meghalaya and Burma, where matriarchal traditions had strong roots. Alternatively, this tradition might have travelled to Bengal along with the Dravidians, who came from Mohenjodaro and Harappa, where a similar custom was believed to have prevailed.

Puranas, particularly the Devi-Mahatmyam or the Chandi that forms part of the Markandeya Purana where the importance of the Devi or the Supreme Goddess is highlighted. Iconographically also, the image of Durga worshipped in Bengal is that of Mahishasuramardini as described in the Devi-Mahatmyam with ten arms, each with a weapon symbolising shakti. One of these weapons is a spear with which the Goddess pierces the chest of Mahishasura. With her daughters and sons Lakshmi, Saraswati,

Kartika and Ganesha, standing by her on both sides, she presents a picture of massive power that prevails over all that is evil.

Durga is the progenitor of the universal process in its entirety. Durga, the divine mother and the emblem of shakti or cosmic energy, is also the symbol of the Hindu female hierophany. The worship of Durga as mother is an important feature of Hindu religion. Durga also reflects the importance of what is called woman-power in modern-terminology. Durga is also the symbol of Prakriti, the primordial matter or substance, which provides the basis for all that exists in the universe. Since she fights all the forces of evil, the Supreme 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 a series of shlokas of which an oft-quoted one reads "Ya Devi Sarvabhuteshu Shaktirupena Sangstitha, Namastasyai Namastasyai Namastasyai Namamam (repeated salutations to the goddess who is present in all living beings as 'Shakti')."

Two different concepts of Durga are in vogue in Bengal, one of which is that of 'Mahishasuramardini'. The second is that of Durga as Uma, Gauri, Parvati, the daughter of the Himalayas, who, as the wife of Lord Shiva and the mother of Lakshmi, Saraswati, Ganesha and Kartika, radiates the peaceful ambience of the divine mother rather than the bellicosity and destructiveness associated with Mahishasuramardini. In this second sense, Durga Puja represents her homecoming from the Himalayan abode of her divine spouse, Lord Shiva. It is the concept of Durga as Uma, Gauri

or Parvati that great poet Kalidasa projected in his 'Kumarasambhava'. In the evolution of this concept, the scriptures, literary works as well as folklores have all made their respective contributions.

Sanatan Dharma is the most ancient and insightful among the Dharmas of the world. It is called Hinduism. The Vedas, Upanishada, Puranas and Gita have dealt with it extensively. This Vedic Hinduism is an eternal and unfathomable ocean. Hidden beneath its surface are the pearls of wisdom and essence of life. Many sages and great men have traveled on the path of legacy to inspire and help mankind. At a time when the inquisitiveness for and impact of Hindu thought and spirituality is increasing globally and when scholars from many disciplines are discovering parallels between Hindu thinking and scientific thought, the true spirit of Hinduism is very relevant in overcoming problems. It has answers to problems of relationship between man and man, man and God, and it brings man closer to man and creates love for all creations. Sanatan Dharma explains the way for attaining liberation according to each individual stage in life.

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Whatever be the mythology and history, Durga Puja as a festival in the seasons of season in Bengal, the Autumn, has come a long way as a deep tradition of fraternity transcending the religio-cultural barrier.

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A symbol

MOHAFAZ ALI

A symbol of love
And bridge of harmony,
Irrespective of colour, caste,
Country, race and religion.

A symbol of peace,
Progress and prosperity;
Heartiest welcome and wishes
To all classes of people and masses.

A symbol of all-people's festival
Goddess Durga was worshiped first
At Taherpur of Rajshahi,
In the 19th century by a local Zamindar.

Since then the tradition
Continues with a message
Bringing all closer
from near and far.

A symbol of pleasant and divine peace.
In the land of ours.

A land of beauty
And of natural catastrophe.
Yet, a beam of light
Flows over the million saving from atrophy.

The longest beach of the Bay of Bengal
And the greatest forest of the Sundarbans;
The roar of the Royal Bengal Tiger
and the songs of Bauls
All mingle together

In the land of poets --
Tagore, Nazrul, Sukanto
Jeebanananda, Jashim Uddin.
This land of festivals is
Always an attraction and thrill
to all travellers of the world
Within and without bustle and din.

The mythology

ACCORDING to Hindu mythology a demon named Mahishasura, earned the favour of Lord Shiva after a long and hard penance. Lord Shiva, impressed with his devotion, blessed him that no man would be able to kill him and that only a woman can kill him. Mahishasur was very pleased with this boon as he thought that a woman can never defeat him. Arrogant Mahishasura started his reign of terror over the Universe and killed many mercilessly. He even attacked the abode of the gods and conquered the heavens and became their leader.

The defeat of gods

After their defeat and humiliation at the hands of Mahishasur, the gods took refuge under Lord Brahma, who took them to Lord Shiva and Lord Vishnu. The only solution left was the creation of a woman who would possess the ultimate power to fight and defeat Mahishasur. Pure energy blazed forth from Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva -- the trinity forming the pure energy of Godhood, all concentrating at one point that took the form of Goddess Durga.

Culmination of energies

Her face reflected the light of Shiva, her ten arms were from Lord Vishnu, her feet were from Lord Brahma, the tresses were formed from the light of Yama, the god of death and the two breasts were formed from the light of Somanath, the Moon god, the waist from the light of Indra, the king of gods, the legs and thighs from the light of Varun, the god of oceans and hips from the light of Bhoodev (Earth), the toes from the light of Surya (Sun god), fingers of the hand from the light of the Vasus, the children of goddess river Ganga and nose from the light of Kubera, the keeper of wealth for the gods. The teeth were formed from the light of Prajapati, the lord of creatures, the Triad of her eyes was born from the light of Agni, the Fire god, the eyebrows from the two Sandhyas, ie, sunrise and sunset, the ears from the light of Vayu, the god of wind. Thus from the energy of these gods, as well as from many other gods, was formed

the goddess Durga.

Power of weapons

The gods then gifted the goddess with their weapons and other divine objects to help her in her battle with the demon, Mahishasura. Lord Shiva gave her a trident while Lord Vishnu gave her a disc. Varuna, gave her a conch and noose, and Agni gave her a spear. From Vayu, she received arrows. Indra, gave her a thunderbolt, and the gift of his white-skinned elephant Airavata was a bell. From

Yama, she received a sword and shield and from Vishwakarma (god of architecture), an axe and armor. The god of mountains, Himavat gifted her with jewels and a lion to ride on. Durga was also given many other precious and magical gifts, new clothing, and a garland of immortal lotuses for her head and breasts.

The beautiful Durga, bedecked in jewels and golden armor and equipped with the fearsome weaponry, was ready to engage in battle with the fierce and cruel

Mahishasura. Mahishasura and his demon allies found their attention drawn from heaven to Earth, as Durga's power moved its way towards heaven. Though confident of their power and control in heaven, the demons could not help being awestruck.

The battlefield

As Mahishasura's armies were struck down effortlessly by Durga, it became obvious to him that he was not as secure in heaven as he had thought. No demon could fight her and win. Her breath would replenish her armies -- bringing back to life all of her soldiers who fell. The demons were in chaos and were easily defeated and captured. Mahishasura was shocked and enraged by the disastrous events. He took on the form of a demonic buffalo, and charged at the divine soldiers of Durga, goring and killing many and lashing out with his whip-like tail. Durga's lion pounced on the demon-buffalo and engaged him in a battle. While he was thus engaged, Durga threw her noose around his neck.

Mahishasura then assumed the form of a lion and when Durga beheaded the lion, Mahishasura escaped in the form of a man who was immediately face to face with a volley of arrows from Durga. The demon escaped yet again and then having assumed the form of a huge elephant, battered Durga's lion with a tusk. With her sword Durga hacked the tusk into pieces.

The victory

The demon reverted once more to the form of the wild buffalo. He hid himself in the mountains from where he hurled boulders at Durga with his horns. Durga drank the divine nectar, the gift of Kubera. She then pounced on Mahishasura, pushing him to the ground with her left leg. She grasped his head in one hand, pierced him with her sharp trident held in another, and with yet another of her ten hands she wielded her bright sword, beheading him. At last he fell dead, and the scattered surviving remnants of his once invincible army fled in terror.

Celebration of Vijoya or Dussera

Lord Rama

This festival has immense mythological significance. As per the great epic Ramayana, Ram did "chandi-puja" and invoked the blessings of Durga to kill Ravana, the ten-headed king of Lanka who had abducted Seeta. Durga divulged the secret to Rama how he could kill Ravana. Then after vanquishing him on the Vijayadashami or Dasser day, Rama with Seeta and brother Laxmana returned victorious to his kingdom of Ayodhya on Diwali day.

The Pandavas

As per the great epic Mahabharata, the Pandavas after wandering in the forest for 12 years, hung their weapons on a Shami tree before entering the court of king Virata to spend the last one year in disguise. After the completion of that year on Vijayadashmi the day of Dasser day they brought down the weapons from the Shami tree and declared their true identity. Since that day the exchange of Shami leaves on Dasser day became symbol of goodwill and victory.

Kautsa

Kautsa, the young son of Devdatt, insisted on his guru Varatantu to accept "gurudakshina", after finishing his education. After lots of persistence his Guru, finally asked for 14 crore gold coins, one crore for each of the 14 sciences he taught Kautsa. Kautsa went to king Raghuraj, who was known for his generosity and was an ancestor of Rama. But just at that time he had emptied all his coffers on the Brahmins, after performing the Vishvajit sacrifice. So, the king went to Lord Indra and asked for the gold coins. Indra summoned Kubera, the god of wealth. Indra told Kubera, "Make a rain of gold coins fall on the "shanu" and "apati" trees round Raghuraja's city of Ayodhya." The rain of coins began to fall. The king Raghu gave all the coins to Kautsa, who gave 14 crores gold coins to his guru. The remaining coins were lavishly distributed to the people of Ayodhya city. This happened on the day of Dussehra. In remembrance of this event the custom is kept as collecting the leaves of the "apati" trees and people present each other these leaves as "sone" (gold).

The Bengali tradition

SATI, the consort of Shiva was the daughter of Daksha Prajaapati a descendant of Bhrama. Sati had married Shiva against the wishes of her father. Daksha was sponsoring a sacrifice and attendees came from various parts of the universe. He invited all of the gods and goddesses except his son-in-law Shiva. Against Shiva's wishes, Sati attended this sacrifice and was insulted by her father. Unable to bear this insult, Sati immolated herself.

Enraged at the insult and the injury, Shiva destroyed Daksha's sacrifice celebrations, cut off Daksha's head and when pleaded by other gods, replaced it with that of a goat and restored him to life. Still berserk with grief, he picked up the remains of Sati's body, and danced the dance of destruction. The other gods intervened to stop this dance, and the disk of Vishnu cut through the corpse of Sati, various parts of which fell at several spots all through the Indian subcontinent and formed the sites of what are known as Shakti Peethas today.

Shiva was finally pacified when the last piece fell off from his shoulder. Narayana revived Sati as Uma for a new life. Ever since peace was restored, Uma, with her children, sons Ganesha and Kartick, and daughters Laxmi and Saraswati comes to visit her parents' home each year during the season of 'Sharat' or autumn and Durga Puja is celebrated.

