

Durga Puja: The social and religious aspects

JUSTICE GOUR GOPAL SAHA

DURGA Puja 'worship of Divine Mother' the festival of pomp and power -- is the greatest socio-religious extravaganza of the Bengali Hindus and by now it has become a global celebration witnessed in almost all the major cities of the world, from New York to Los Angles, from London to Belfast, from Durban to Tokyo. It is a mixture of spiritual subtlety and enlivened sociability that gives it a multi-dimensional excellence. The exquisite beauty of the Pratima (idol), splendidly decorated by artistic skill and colourful devotional outfit adds additional grandeur to the whole spectrum of jubilation and enlightenment. Bengali culture and Bengali literature indeed owe a lot to this prodigious socio-cultural fanfare and nostalgic articulations.

Driven away by demon king Mahishasura, who became invincible by any male by dint of a heavenly boon, the celestial gods and goddesses with their king Indra were roaming about in the wilderness deliberating ways and means to regain their lost fortunes. At one stage of the ordeal, they approached Prajapati Brahma to tide over their vicissitudes by defeating Mahishasura. Brahma led the celestial gods and goddesses to Lord Vishnu, who was in deep self-absorption at that time, for mitigating their sufferings. At the wails and entreaties of the gods and goddesses Lord Vishnu woke up from His self-animated slumber and told them that Mahishasura could not be destroyed by any male and as such an extra-ordinary and devastating female manifestation was alone capable of doing the job.

Lord Vishnu advised the celestial gods and goddesses to endow the emerging image with the best of their weaponry and to invoke her blessings for vanquishing demon king Mahishasura. Out of the flames that came out of the mouths of the different gods and goddesses and the cumulative power delivered by them there emerged a female image with scintillating radiance and overflowing passion for destroying the adversary. She is Divine Mother Durga as the manifestation of infinite power of the universe and the symbol of feminine majesty. It is this Devi Durga who destroyed Mahishasura as an embodiment of triumph of the right over the wrong and thereby redeeming the unsettled equilibrium of the disturbed world order.

The Hindus believe Goddess Durga as the Divine Mother since her grace is boundless, her compassion infinite, her knowledge unfathomable and infallible, her power immeasurable and her glory ineffable and splendour indescribable. She offers material prosperity and spiritual subtlety to the worshippers. This is possibly the precise reason for the inexplicable euphoria for the universal adoration of Goddess Durga by the Bengali Hindus the world over. Devi Durga is an incarnation of the

all-pervading and all-powerful entity designed by Lord Vishnu, the absolute and supreme entity regulating the entire universe. She is an embodiment of highest purity, serenity and subtlety and an endearing symbol of beauty, power, excellence, compassion, benefaction, affluence and all that is great and good.

The history of the origin of worshipping of Goddess Durga is somewhat submerged in obscurity. While some religious pundits say that Goddess Durga is being worshipped till before the dawn of recorded history, others have it to say that Raja Surath and Baisya Samadhi introduced Durga Puja in its present form in this part of the globe about 2000 years ago. Bereft of power and wealth at the hands of their kith and kins, Raja Surath and Baisya Samadhi moved around in the wilderness in search of ways to regain their lost fortunes and ultimately met Maharishi Medhosh and sought his blessings to get over the vicissitudes. Following Maharishi Medhosh's advice, they worshipped Goddess Durga with due solemnity and devotion and

Rama, under trying circumstances, had to invoke the blessings of Goddess Durga in autumn necessitating the destruction of demon king Ravana.

The social and economic significance of Durga Puja can hardly be over-exaggerated. It involves the service of cross-sections of the people, beginning from the potters, craftsmen, drummers, painters, blacksmiths, gardeners, cleaners, decorators, artists and artisans and a host of others down to the high priests. Durga Puja invariably generates brisk economic activities for a large number of people, especially in the rural areas, for a large part of the year. In fact, during the older days, rural economy of Bengal substantially revolved round Durga Puja, which was usually celebrated by the Zamindars, Talukdars, rich businessmen, and other affluent people, spending huge sums of money displaying high pomp and grandeur as mark of social respectability and financial sustainability. But with the lapse of time, the landed aristocracy disappeared from the scene and the emerging rich

nanimous in contents. The Vedas, the Upanishads and the Bhagwat Gita, are no doubt, sacred texts of the Hindus but they go beyond them in search of the Ultimate Reality.

The Hindus believe that the entire cosmos is subject to the vicissitudes of time and consequently whatever has an origin at a point of time has an inevitable end. The process of creation (Shrishti) and dissolution (Pralaya) of the universe is a periodic cycle in which the entire cosmos manifests at the time of creation and withdraws at the time of dissolution. Everything but the Infinite is conditioned by time. The process continues till the liberation of the soul from the cycle of birth and death is attained. The Ultimate Reality or the Absolute Truth is spoken of as the Indestructible, the Supreme Being the Almighty etc. From this we get a clear idea to the questions of cycle of life and death, the nature of the soul, the Universe and the Creator, the unity of the creation and reasons for joys and sufferings and the ultimate understanding of man's relationship

with diverse cultures and inhibitions is a part of Hindu way of looking at and doing things. As a pluralistic religious view it visualizes that there are many religions and religious paths and they appeal to different individuals according to their varying levels of mental development, which is bound to be diverse and ever changing.

The perplexing question that is very often posed before us is whether religions are complementary to each other and are equally true. Truth, which is the kernel of every religion, is one and the same; doctrines, however, differ considerably since they are applications of the truth by human beings under different situations. It is thus clear that religions form a unity, and it is this unity which alone provides the right perspective of the Ultimate Truth. The various religions are merely alternative paths to the same transcendental finality. Sri Ramakrishna espoused it in a very clear and lucid manner by saying: "Jata matata path," which readily appeals to a very large segment of the human race.

The essence of religions being



recovered their lost fortunes. Celestial gods and goddesses, on numerous occasions, invoked Devi Durga's help under trying circumstances to withstand the onslaughts of the demons and devil incarnates.

She came to be known as "Mahishamardini" as she annihilated mighty demon king Mahishasura. Durga Puja celebrated during the autumn is known as 'Autak Bodhan' as this part of the year is considered inauspicious for any religious celebration. But Lord

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Hinduism as is popularly known cannot be traced to any specific starting point in history and it does not have a founder, nor is it based on a particular "holy book" as the basic spiritual guide. It is, in fact, the cumulative realization of the Supreme Truth by the 'Debarshis', 'Rajarshis' and the highly developed spiritual personalities of the world that act as the driving spirit of Hinduism. Of necessity, it is universal in character and mag-

shifted to towns and cities leaving the countryside to its fate.

Hinduism believes in the unison of the creation. It is built upon diversity and holds within itself an amazing, even bewildering variety of teachers and teachings, from the most primitive forms to the most abstract spiritual philosophies and practices. It has always remained open to new teachings and revelations on the one hand and yet has not cut itself off from the older tradition on the other. Adaptability to properly handle the emerging global diversity of human beings

with God.

The writer is a former Justice of Supreme Court of Bangladesh.

The Hindu vision of Divine Mother

PREM RANJAN DEV

CIVILIZATION is in a state of transition. The transition that we have to effect today, if we are to survive, is a moral and spiritual revolution which should embrace our whole existence. In this context, a penetrating thought and look into the totality of the blessing of Mother Durga acts as a salvation. The Vedas, the ancient holy scriptures of the world, uphold the truth of eternal existence of the Divine Mother as the supreme power.

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 is in the faculty of language and literature, customs and tradition, art and culture, ancient sciences, polity, architecture, painting or music, one has to look to 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, vegetarianism and spiritual disciplines have all been of interest, and are sought after by people cutting across national and religious divides. Yet, despite their universal appeal, it is Hinduism that holds the key to understanding the full richness of these ancient traditions. And here lies the concept of Durga worship, too.

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 Hinduism 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 Bhagavad Gita, and they are all considered authoritative. This is the result of freedom from dogma.

A popular concept of Divine Mother worship or Durga Puja is the following: In the course of the eternal strife of the Devas (gods) and Asuras (demons), the former being defeated, the latter reigned



supreme in the heavens, inflicting intolerable suffering to the Devas. The helpless Devas came to Brahma, the creator of their distress by default, who led the commission of the gods to Vishnu and Shiva for appraisal of the grave situation and redress.

The tales of the intolerable atrocities of Mahishasura raised vehement anger in Vishnu and Shiva and, in a fit of this, their vital energies in the form of burning flashes came out and 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 Divine woman. She is Durga. This Divine embodiment of all spiritual energies was equipped with the numerous weapons offered by the gods. Thus, descended the energy incarnate to destroy evil and sustain virtue. She happens to be too affectionate to Her children and very fierce to those who tend to harm them.

So, Durga is tranquil and turbulent, serene and fierce, Shoumya and Rudra at the same time. The Mother Durga, in a fit of destruction, raised such a tumultuous uproar that the frightened Asuras came out in large numbers, equipped with armour and weapons, and the severe war that followed brought the ruin of Mahishasura. The heaven was recovered and the Devas cheered the victory with an elegant hymn addressed to the Mother.

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. She is the fountain-head of the highest good, both spiritual attainment and material prosperity. The worship of Mother Durga would ensure our communion with her. We pray to the Divine Mother for succor to save us from any confused order. On the other hand Durga is also adored as daughter by the Bengali Hindu. She comes to her mother's home from that of her spouse Shiva on the Himalayas only for four days, i.e. the duration of Durga Puja festival.

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 to ensure full participation in the entire cosmos and, consequently, between man and God, man and nature, man and other living beings and finally between man and man, child and mother. The great American Poet Walt Whitman said,

"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 unfalteringly!"

The concept of supreme mother is universal. Hindus go just one step further deriving it from Divinity and worship: "Ya Devi sarvabhouthesu matirupena samsthita..."

Prem Ranjan Dev is president of Jatiya Hindu Parishad.

When shall we get rid of Dhaka city traffic jam?



WITH a huge fleet of cars, buses and all other types of vehicles gridlocked near a rail gate or road intersection sometimes even for 30 minutes at a stretch, Dhaka city's traffic congestion problem has assumed an alarming proportion. People are afraid to get out of their houses because the journey from home to office or business centre takes away the vital hours that he could devote to his work. Other than being late in the offices, work places or on any scheduled appointments, mental disgust, exhaustion and loss of effective man hours is a colossal drain on the resources of the whole country. The road scene in Dhaka is something awesome especially at important crossings like Bishwa Road, Mohakhali-Tejgaon, Panthapath-Bijoy Sarani, Sonargaon Hotel crossing linking Tejgaon Industrial area and Farmgate, Gulistan, Hatirpool, New Market, Gulistan, Bangladesh Bank and Hatkhola crossing near the Ittefaq office.

Other than the influx of huge number of new cars that are hitting the road everyday, there is huge increase in the number of rickshaws, many of which allegedly unlicensed, have added to traffic jam and congestion. According to some of the DCC there are about one lakh licenced rickshaws in the city but unofficially perhaps

four lakh rickshaws are plying on the city roads. In absence of any separate lanes for rickshaws on most of the roads, they occupy the whole road space and interfere with the movement of the mechanized vehicles. Due to traffic congestion created by these rickshaws on the same road lane, the fast moving transports can hardly make 15 to 20 km per hour.

The major causes of congestion, road jam and accident in the city is attributed to lack of land use in the city. Transportation plan in big cities are done through appraisal of travel demand management that aims at reducing trips in congested parts of the city. Undeniably true, Dhaka has grown manifold over the years but its business activities like growth of shopping malls, location of residential apartments, mushroom growth of schools, colleges, private universities and clinics on both sides of the road has aggravated the problem to a large extent.

This only indicates that the haphazard growth of the city with no Master Plan has given rise to such chronic congestion. The only pragmatic and permanent solution to this chronic and chaotic traffic jam lies in building subways under the existing road.

Along the 220 km road space covering 340 sq km city area from Narayanganj to Savar, the volume of buses, trucks, cars and three wheelers is growing at a breathtaking pace. With the axiom that the tonnage on city road, especially an industrial city grows twice as fast as the economy, the traffic growth has ranged at least 10 percent in each of the past 10 years. The total number of vehicles on the city road is about 7.5 lakh, at least five times the number it was in 1990. The weight of freight moved by the city roads in recent times has jumped to at least 50 times in this period and the number of passengers has leaped to 70 times.

Under the growing load of traffic, roads are getting cratered and

potholed. Roads with innumerable potholes, a cloud of dust, accumulated water in the ditches and smoke blowing over the commuter's face as vehicles pass by are features symbolic of the squalid state of the city in summer. With the onset of rainy season most of these roads are either canals or mini reservoirs of water.

The pavement formation. Other than the drain on the economy due to slow pace of industrialisation and trade and a poor FDI (foreign direct investment) climate in consequence of poor road structure, precisely speaking, the cost of vehicular damage because of poorly maintained city roads is pushing up transportation costs for goods and passengers to unsustainable limits hardly affordable by the common man.

The delay factor in travel, say from Gulistan to Mirpur, or from Motijheel to Tongi due to traffic jam and bad city roads has reduced the number of trips a bus or any mechanized passenger carrier can make. So a bus owner or trucker must push up the passenger fare or freight charges to meet his capital cost and maintain the rate of return. Other than the commuter's woes that beggar any description, the wear and tear of vehicles on the other hand due to bad city roads is expediting ageing of vehicles. The total road scene in the entire Dhaka city is something awesome and precisely speaking, a journey to either office or business centre or market places or hospital is literally a journey to nowhere.

Dhaka's population is now about 15 million and thousands of people, namely traders, students and job seekers come to Dhaka every day from all the districts. Dhaka is now the number one destination of migrants. Of course, immigrants have landed in Dhaka before, though never so relentlessly

and not for the reasons they are coming in now. Because it is not only the nerve centre of political power but in recent times it is unquestionably a commercial hub. The export potentiality of RMG sector has spawned the growth of garment factories surrounding the city belt that employ more than 20 lakh workers. Such large scale flow of businesses is changing Dhaka into something it never was in the early 70s. All such factors have changed the beat, tenor and character of the city but appallingly with no improvement in road condition. In consequence, business suffers and the economy bleeds.

Precisely speaking, Dhaka is the epicentre of Bangladesh's economic modernisation. That reflects as much in the swarming of new foreign and Bangladeshi companies as in the profusion of opportunities in new vocations like computer technology, mobile phone business, consultancy, company jobs, university teaching and technical training. Despite all the attractive features, Dhaka feels like a mess. That's the reason why even as Dhaka thrives, it remains leavened by the spirit of nonchalance, best explained by the DCC's age-old motto: "life has not stopped, things are going."

The problem is compounded by the fact that there seems to be no let up in development and maintenance works like pipe and cable laying work on the city roads. If WASA has finished laying down

jobs, increase business activities and enable phenomenal savings in fuel.

From a stodgy city of the past, the capital city has turned into a thriving business centre. When the rest of the world, including our neighbouring country India has taken care to speed up road construction by upgrading technology, we continue to pay scant attention. Surely, if we could build roads for fast moving traffic we could witness a whole new kind of progress. If we have doubts all we need to do is to make a quick trip to Malaysia or Singapore to find out what a difference modern roads make.

However there is no doubt that roads sector is most eligible to kick-start the economy. With widening of the city roads as well as maintaining it in the proper condition the gains will far outweigh the cost. Yearly savings on fuel, spare parts

and vehicle maintenance will be substantial. Trade would get a fillip as travel time is expected to be reduced by 50 percent. Yearly savings due to fewer accident and damage to property will be several million taka. While recounting America's prosperity former US President John F. Kennedy said, "It is not wealth that built our roads but the roads that built the wealth". Sadly true, Bangladeshi leaders thought the other way. In India, new measures are being taken to encourage private capital in the road sector. Unhappily, even though the number of vehicles in the Dhaka city roads has perhaps increased 100 times during the last one decade the investment flowing into the road sector has not matched this growth.

Md. Asadullah Khan is a former teacher of physics and Controller of Examinations, BUET.

