

Victory against evil

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P.R. BISWAS

THE myth of Goddess Durga, recorded in the Vamana Purana and elaborated in Devi Bhagavata Purana, provides the basic story of Goddess Durga and the demon king Mahisa. Carmel Berkson, a well-known woman photographer and writer on Indian culture, combines copious referencing with a bold psychoanalytical framework, into which she brings personal insights, experiences and feeling about the struggle between demon king Mahisa and Goddess Durga.

The brothers Rambha and Karambha, derived from demon king dynasty, practiced severe austerity with the goal of attaining sons. The demon kings were so powerful that they vanquished all the kings of the world, and finally wrested heaven from the gods and forced them to roam the earth in misery. Among the demon kings, Mahisa was the most energetic and powerful.

Because of their growing power over gods, Indra intervened and killed Karambha. Rambha got annoyed at Indra and threatened to commit suicide, but the god of fire, Agni, prevented him from killing himself by offering him a wish. Rambha wished for an invincible son by a female of his choice. When Rambha encountered a young she-buffalo, both were eager to mate.

From that union a son in buffalo shape, Mahisa, was born. He grew to adolescence and withdrew to Mt. Sumeru to perform penances. Brahma placated him with a gift -- he would not be killed by any man. Mahisa claimed to be an invincible warrior and conquered all the kings of the world.

Subsequently, for regaining their lost heaven, the conjoined energies of the gods were transformed into a Goddess, the parts of whose body and whose weapons were donations from each individual divinity. The Goddess manifested as Durga and, as she sat on a mountain, she attracted the attention of the ministers of Mahisa, Lord of heaven.

Awed and puzzled by her beauty and sexual attributes, they reported the news to their king, who then and there fell madly in love with her and commanded his ministers to bring her to him as his bride. In response to Mahisa's offer, she entered into a protracted war with the ministers and killed many of them.

Mahisa turned himself into a magnificent, youthful human being to woo the lovely apparition. During a meeting between the two, the Goddess even declared her friendship for him but soon reversed her sentiments. There followed a ten-thousand year battle with her erstwhile suitor and his armies. In a grand finale, the Goddess first killed Mahisa by decapitating the

animal body.

When a human emerged from the severed neck, the Goddess killed Mahisa a second time, again by chopping of his head. Back in their abodes, the gods rejoiced; in heaven, the resurrected Mahisa was eventually united with his beloved enemy.

Ancient history and records show that Mahisa would not allow any Brahman to worship Goddess Durga in his empire. Sometimes the king would punish the Brahmans due to their devotion to Goddess Durga and other gods. It is historically true that in Indus civilisation there was no evidence of Goddess Durga, but the worship of Goddess Kalika with four arms was prevalent.

According to many analysts, Mahisa belonged to the successors of Indus civilisation, and he was animated by patriotic zeal to stand with his people in time of miseries and any other inconveniences.

Who were the enemies of the demon king Mahisa? According to Carmel Berkson, of many images of divine female power in Hindu iconography the strongest is arguably that of the Goddess Durga slaying the buffalo demon Mahisa.

Basing her discussion on the classical Hindu version of this legend, Carmel Berkson intersperses her analysis of the psychological meaning of the narrative with observations of how the present-day attitudes and behaviour of Hindu men bear out such an interpretation.

It seems to me from the story stated above that it may be a cause of dynastic superiority or racial hatred or discrimination. According to Vamana Purana and Devi Bhagavati Purana, Mahisa was



a Brahman demon king in the shape of buffalo. In the context of anthropology, any human being disfigured by such shape is impossible. Such religious interpretation is considered to be a matter of racial discriminated crime.

It needs an in-depth study with a

view to finding out the real interpretation regarding the struggle between Goddess Durga and the demon king Mahisa. In practice, we are very much familiar with racial hatred and discrimination among Hindu communities from the time immemorial. In addition,

we see the racial classification of Hindus like Bhraman, Kshatriya, Baishya and Sudra. Is the story mentioned above animated by it?

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Nobel Prize and the left out runners-up

The hopeful contenders are utterly disappointed if their names are not announced for the prize. An impression is created that the work and contributions, however grand, are of no practical value unless these are recognised through awarding Nobel prize to their authors. One prize makes or unmakes persons with scads of achievements.

SAADAT HUSAIN

THE month of October is usually abuzz with the announcement of Nobel prizes. High profile academics, intellectuals, writers, researchers, policy entrepreneurs, social mobilisers eagerly and anxiously wait for the announcement of the prizes. Many of them consider the prize as the final achievement of their life. A mission fully accomplished. Enlightened outsiders also share similar opinion.

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One prize makes or unmakes persons with scads of achievements.

The Nobel prize was established in 1901, five years after the death of Alfred Nobel, the Swedish chemist and engineer who made a huge fortune through discovery of and trading in explosives, and donated a substantial part of it for recognising the achievements and contributions of top-notchers in specified fields.

To begin with, the identified fields were physics, chemistry, medicine including psychology, literature and peace. For reasons best known to the administrators, the National Bank of Sweden was allowed to extend the field to economics in 1968. The trust fund is administered by a board of directors elected by the

prize awarding institutions.

The Swedish Academy of Science awards the prizes for physics, chemistry and economics. Prizes for medicine or psychology are awarded by the Caroline Medico Surgical institute in Stockholm. The Swedish Academy for literature awards the prizes for literature. A committee elected by the Norwegian Legislative Assembly awards the Nobel peace prize. Every year, the winners in each field receive a gold medal, a certificate and a cash award equivalent to approximately \$1.5 million.

Whatever be the intention of its founder, the Nobel prize has firmly established itself as the apex instrument to recognise the top achievers in the specified fields.

No other award comes near the Nobel prize. A number of multinationals or colossal business houses can afford to establish prizes which could be financially more lucrative than the Nobel prize. It is interesting and intriguing to see that they have conspicuously refrained from doing so.

Also, a number of competing fields are clearly visible these days -- mathematics or statistics, information technology, biotechnology, mass media etc. No organisation

has come forward to recognise the doyens in these fields through a financial award. Nobel prize holds its sway, as it did a century back.

What is the impact of the Nobel prize on the awardee's life? S/he physically remains the same person, maybe with a halo around his/her head. A Nobel prize does not lend immortality to the laureate. It does not guarantee long lasting happiness; nor does it readily do away with his/her physical debility though it allows him/her much better opportunity for medical treatment. His/her emotional sufferings remain his/her own though it may be attenuated by the ecstasy of winning the most coveted prize in the world.

If the prizewinner has any problem of impecuniousness, it is expected to be over, given the leviathan size of the financial award. S/he can pursue her/his preferred line of activities unencumbered by recurring financial constraints. Stories are afloat that winners of smaller prizes sold the gold medals in order to tide over financial difficulties. Nobel laureates have a built-in protection against such ignominy.

Except the Nobel peace prize all other prizes are oriented to academic pursuit. Nobel laureates in academic fields are

usually well-known in their professions, though their visibility may be limited to professional circles only. Winning the Nobel prize puts a stamp of permanence on their reputation and credibility. At times it also help transcend their fame to international stage from the confines of the native land.

Whatever be the case, all Nobel laureates are universally recognised as top-most achievers by international standards in their professional fields. Winners of Nobel peace prize are not academics or professional people; they are usually politicians, policy entrepreneurs, social mobilisers and rights activists. They have high visibility and are well known throughout the world because of the nature of their work. In most cases Nobel prize is just another feather in their cap.

The lifestyle, however, changes for almost all of them as they become celebrities worldwide. They have to travel a lot, deliver public addresses, join high level banquets, conventions and convocations. People listen to them; they have very high social carriage.

Their visits, public appearances and missions are sponsored by funding agencies, multinationals, native business houses, social organisations and private

trusts. The charm of winning the prize cannot be fully availed of by the reticent, the introvert, the travel-sick and the physically debilitated person.

The flip side of the Nobel Prize is the built-in bias in the selection procedure and, per force, exclusion of thousands of competent and dedicated persons in the process. Glory of human life should never be congealed into one single criterion. Nor greatness be measured by a single group of people representing a particular school of thought or a power bloc. Life consists of multidimensional pursuits and events all of which are dense in their own significance and meaning.

Many of the left out aspirants and many others who were never considered for this coveted prize are great people in their own right. Their failure to garner a Nobel prize should not belittle their contributions towards advancement of human society. We must prize the Nobel prize out from enrichment and welfare of life, not forgetting that a person who vehemently opposed our Liberation War also won a Nobel prize, unfortunately for peace.

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Separation of religion and state

Many countries, including the USA have a pledge of allegiance; however they are not based on religion. Americans are not required to pledge loyalty to the USA as a Christian state. In fact, nowhere in the United States Constitution is there a single mention of Christianity, God, Jesus, or any Supreme Being.

MUHAMMAD A. AZIM

THE Israeli government's decision to make new citizens announce their loyalty to Israel as a Jewish State is a populist agenda of the hardliners. The amendment to the Citizenship Act, which will require all non-Jews who wish to become Israeli citizens to pledge allegiance to a "Jewish and democratic" Israel, is a move in part of a series of actions which create an atmosphere of segregation. Since many new citizens will come from Arab countries in the context of family unification, they should be asked precisely to declare that Israel is legitimate.

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The Israeli government's continuance of barring Israeli citizens and their Palestinian spouses from the Occupied Palestinian Territories from living

together in Israel constitutes unlawful discrimination that cannot be justified by the country's security interests according to international human rights organisations. The government enacted the law that discriminates against Palestinian citizens and permanent residents of Israel on the basis of their ethnic or national origin. Palestinian citizens of Israel constitute the vast majority of Israelis who are married to Palestinians from the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

It unfairly targets Israeli citizens of Palestinian origin. It undermines the rights of thousands of Israelis to live together with their families, and the rights of certain Israeli children to live with both parents. The law denies spouses from the Occupied Palestinian Territories who are married to Israeli citizens or permanent residents the opportunity to acquire Israeli citizenship or residency rights. Normally, foreign nationals married to Israeli citizens undergo a graduated process of residency statuses, with security checks along the way, before ultimately being considered for citizenship after a minimum of four years. If the foreign spouse

is Jewish (or the child or grandchild of a Jew), Israeli citizenship is granted automatically.

The Israeli government is on a roll to undermine the international community, starting with the flotilla incident, the continuance of the settlement undermining the Obama administration, and now passing a law to require the oath of allegiance from its Arab citizens. The Israeli government is answerable to all citizens and it's immoral to create the awareness that they are not part of the state on one hand, and demand loyalty on the other -- that's a contradiction.

The new amendment will damage Israel's international standing and will be viewed as racist. Countries that have their principles based on religious fanaticism are unbalanced. Time and again this has been proven in history. That is why modern states are secular. Why Israel wants to revert back to the middle-ages and become a right wing encouraged religious fanatic country, based on an aggressive desire to expand is beyond logic. If the pledge of loyalty was based on something similar to "in God we Trust," as imprinted in the United States currency, personally I don't think there would be an issue since Islam teaches that God as referenced in the Qur'an is the only God and the same God worshipped by members of other Abrahamic religions such as Christianity and Judaism.

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IN MEMORIAM

Maj-Gen M. Hussain Chowdhury

HARUN UR RASHID

I am deeply saddened to learn that former adviser to the caretaker government Major-General Moinul Hussain Chowdhury (ret'd) passed away in the city's Square Hospital on October 10.

I did not expect his untimely death because I used to contact him quite often. Sometime in July, when I spoke to him as he returned from Singapore, he told me he was not keeping well. I did not ask him further about the nature of his illness. Since I was away from Dhaka for some time, I could not keep in touch with him.

I came to know him first when I replaced him in 1984 in the Philippines. Later, I met him in Canberra when he was posted there in the late '90s. Although coming from different life experiences, I gradually became close to him as the years passed by.

He was a tall and fit person and was typically an army officer in his manners. He was not only a distinguished army officer but also an excellent human being.

Any job he took on was carried out with great courage and determination. He was a hard master and did not tolerate inefficiency. What made him different was his unruffled conviction that there was a solution to every problem. He had his own style and wherever he served he made an impact on others.

He was a straight-talker of truth and did not mince words, although he knew that he might be unpopular in saying so he did not care much. He looked at things from a dispassionate perspective.

He was a great nationalist, and in his conversation he used to make clear that he detected a large gap between the rhetoric and reality of freedom and democracy in the country. He thought the best way to judge the health of a nation's heart was by how it treated the disadvantaged and the poor of the society.

He was critical of Western interference in the affairs of developing countries and believed adherence to ideals advocated by the West might not be necessarily suited to developing nations.

He was a great narrator of events of his life during the war and after the war in a manner that was interesting and captivating to all of us. His study was replete with certificates of honour, medals and other military decorations, which he earned during his extraordinary career. He displayed good sense of wit and humour when we used to admire him for his courage during the war.

He was a very hospitable person and used to look after each guest with warmth whenever he invited people to his residence on social occasions.

General Moinul joined the Pakistan army in 1962 and was commissioned in 1964. He also took part in the Indo-Pak war in 1965.

A valiant freedom fighter, he revolted as a captain against the Pakistan army from Joydepur cantonment in March 1971. During the Liberation War, he led the 1st and 2nd East Bengal Regiment. He led his regiment into Dhaka on December 16, 1971. The Bangladesh government conferred the Bir Bikram gallantry award on him for his bravery during the Liberation War.

He was ADC to Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and had been the youngest Major-General in the army at the time. He had a posting in London before he was promoted to the rank of Major-General.

He was appointed, on deputation, Bangladesh ambassador to the Philippines in 1982. He subsequently served as ambassador to Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand and Australia. Although he served overseas he missed his army career, which was his first call of duty.

In 2001, General Moinul Hussain was an adviser to the caretaker government



Major-General Moinul Hussain Chowdhury headed by Justice Latifur Rahman. He reportedly played a key role in the caretaker administration, besides his portfolios.

After his retirement he became a consultant to UNDP for some time in Dhaka. He used to appear in various talk-shows in TV and provided frank answers to the issues on which he was being interviewed. Many people might not agree with his views, but he demonstrated his courage and conviction in laying bare the facts and hidden causes of the problems, exhibiting his penetrating mind.

He wrote his autobiography in which many interesting facts are provided, which are unknown to people, about the Liberation War. He used to write articles in newspapers, both in Bangla and English, which were different in kind and laced with humour.

He is survived by his wife, a son, a daughter and a host of relatives and friends to mourn his death.

May his family get the fortitude and strength to bear this irreparable loss. We pray to Allah for eternal peace of his soul.

Barrister Harun ur Rashid, Former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.