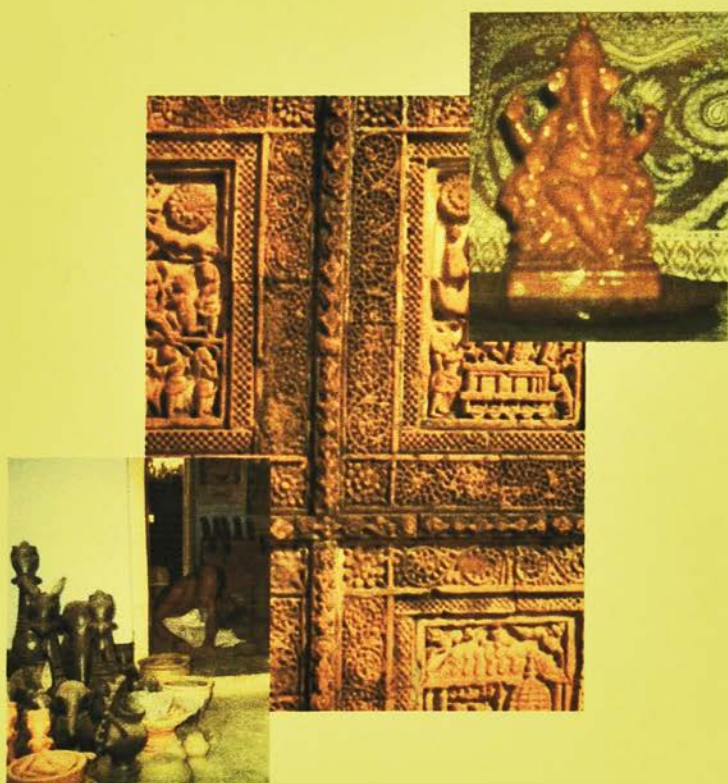# THE SECULARISATION OF RELIGIOUS ICONS

IN

URBAN BENGAL

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgement

INTRODUCTION

The thought process that activated my current research can be seen reflected in a local newspaper (The Telegraph, dated 14.11.2001) where a very interesting debate was thrown open to the readers. The topic was whether one should be asked to pay for entry tickets for admission into the Durga Puja pandals of our city. The answers showed variation in attitudes, but one remarkable point came across – the Puja, said many readers, "is not a circus", so why should one pay for admission? At the same time, many readers also felt that "if people want to see huge and extravagant pandals, they must contribute to the Puja". The basic point was stated by the author and academician, Prof. Nabanita Dev Sen whose very apt observation was – "We're fast forgetting that Durga Puja is not a form of Showbiz, like theatre or jatra".

This social reaction in West Bengal to a super-religious festival like Durga Puja makes me reflect – has religion become secularized? Have Pujas become at par with fairs and have divinities become figure-heads only in urban West Bengal? Through personal interviews and probing, the ultimate answer emerges as very dualistic in nature, and somewhat novel in its ultimate analysis.

CHAPTER - I

The Origins : in the Literary Context

This phenomenon of secular interpretations of religious myths and legends is not an entirely modern one. As early as in nineteenth century Bengal, we have the famous Meghnadbadh Kabya (1861) by Michael Madhusudan Dutta whose interpretations of the Ramayan, which is a definite religious epic, is secular and rational in the extreme.

Epics depict the eternal and universal fight between Good and Evil, between the Holy and the Demonaic forces, the power of immortal life versus the fallen Dark One. These concepts are all actually, at the root, supported by religion. It is religious Euhemerism that has made the Lord Ram, for example, not only a great king but a demi-god and an "avatar" or re-incarnation of the God Vishnu. The force pitted against him, therefore, has to be utterly dark and very strong- Ravan, the 'Rakshasha' or Demon, whose effigy is still burnt ritually, and religiously fits the bill.

Valmiki's[1] Ravan is therefore the sensuous and sensual demon-king who proceeds to trickery and dark "Maya" to avenge (he says) the insult of his sister Surpanakha. However, he is avenging more than that, since his own lustful desire for Sita dates back to her famous 'Swayambar' where he failed to perform and was, like so many other, contemporary heroes, beaten by Ram. Valmiki's description of Ravan is that of a terrible monster : "He has twenty hands, ten heads, vast chest, dark visage, huge mouth....... he is the plague of the Gods, the destroyer of 'dharma', and obstructer of 'yagnas'.... he is 'Krurkarma' (lowly in action), coarse, ruthless, feared by all".[2]

In the translation by Krittibas,[3] Ravan is very affluent and powerful, yet it is the lust for a married woman that really stirs him as he listens to Surpanakha's diatribe:

শূপনখা যত বলে রাজা সব শুনে।
সুন্দরী সীতার কথা ভাবে মনে মনে।।[4]

['As Surpanakha speaks on, the King (Ravan) listens to everything and he goes on thinking of the beauteous Sita'][5].

In spite of the grim warning by the terrified victim of Ravan's very non-heroic plot, 'Marich', the King decides to abduct Sita — an act of unmanly and unholy cowardice against a defenseless married woman, motivated by lust and revenge. Here he is very much like Satan in Milton's **Paradise Lost** — a character full of bombast, but falling to the lowest level of the heroic scale.

As soon as the social atmosphere changes, however, the rebellious individual overturns traditional religious taboos and attempts to rationalize the scene. Sympathy for the underdog is a universal human emotion and we find this combined with a keen search for the feet of clay of great demigods. Madhusudan Dutta, the rebellious convert to Christianity and erudite Western Scholar dared to do just this.

Michael Madhusudan does not accept that Ravan is all-bad and Ram the ultimate in goodness. The traditional religious myth is viewed through humanist and rationalist eyes and Ravan, too, has his justifications, his grievances. Apart from personal insult, Surpanakha, his sister, is not only a wronged and abused woman but also the princess of Lanka. Ram and Lakshman have behaved ungallantly and inhumanly with her with the typical 'Aryan' arrogance towards lesser beings. Besides, like the tragic heroes of Shakespeare, Ravan is not a devilish person but rather a very capable and sensitive ruler and family-man with the fatal flaw – the 'hamartia' which brings about his inevitable downfall.

The Indian rhetorician Biswanath says in the sixth chapter of his **Sahityadarpan** that the hero of a true epic must be "a god or descended of a noble family..... many Kings thus descended may be heroes...."[6] From this point of view, Dutta's Ravan is decidedly a hero Though he is neither a God nor a Kshatriya, but a Rakshash' – the enemy of Gods and men, yet he is definitely descended from a 'noble' family, the renowned and great king of Lanka, with wives, sons, a family he loves and cherishes. In fact, to magnify the greatness of the Rakshashas, Dutta diminishes the stature of the Gods and the humans. Ram is certainly de-mythologised, not the omnipotent 'Avatar' of Valmiki's epic, but often rather unheroic, prone to tears, not above deceitful behaviour. Lakshman, in fact, kills the "good" and heroic Meghnad in a very unfair way.

The interesting point to note is that these "unfair" episodes exist in the original myths of the religious epic. Ram's killing of Bali in order to make Sugrib King, Lakshman's killing of Meghnad are all conducted in "unfair" ways there, too. But there is always a "religious" justification. For example, when the dying Bali accuses Ram of having killed him through "Adharma" and deceit, Ram justifies his action by the explanation: This is the divinely appointed punishment meted by him (as the Godhead) to the sinner Bali. Also, being killed by Ram will cleanse Bali of all his sins and ensure him eternal paradise. Meghnad in the original epic is not a pure heroic soul entirely, but resorts to sneaky "Maya" (illusion) and attacks/ kills his targets while making himself invisible.

Once the religious context is taken away, however, the entire argument falls through, and so does the characterization. Together with this secular view point, we have a reversal of the demonology in Madhusudan – the already noted 'humanization' of the Rakshashas of Lankapuri. They are domesticated, intelligent, beautiful and talented (e.g., Promila the wife of Meghnad in Book Seven) loving and aesthetic.

3

Therefore, their tragedy hurts us, stirs our sympathy and often angers us. Values are totally reversed; without the religious sop of Gods always being right, we are repulsed (in the case of Lakshman vs. Meghnad) at what appears to be a cowardly slaughter of a great hero, thus making Lakshman quite a villain and Meghnad the wronged victim, a feeling emphasized by Madhusudan in the laments (Book Seven) of the mother Mandodari and the father Ravan :

আকুল বিষাদে
রক্ষকুল-নারীকুল কাঁদে হাহারবে

[In utter grief / the women of the Rakshash dynasty wail tearfully][7]

Even Ram is moved by the aftermath of this tragedy and sends Angad with his followers to offer condolence – thus lending a great magnitude to Meghnad and the Rakshashas. In heaven, Shiva's rage at this tragedy is so great that his consort Parvati has to literally protect Ram and Lakshman from his divine anger, making him relent :

তব অনুরোধে
ক্ষমিব, হে ক্ষেমকরী, শ্রীরাম লক্ষ্ণে।

[At your request, O Goddess, I shall forgive Sri Ram and Lakshman][8]

This is hardly a heroic situation for the two semi-divine brothers. The epic ends with this diminishing status of the traditional religious icons and the glorification of the anti-religious demons. Ravan emerges as the eternal tragic, grand sufferer and the reader's sympathy is not oriented towards the victory of Ram but the tragedy of Lanka :

বিসর্জিত প্রতিমা যেন দশমী দিবসে!
সপ্ত দিবানিশি লঙ্কা কাঁদিলা বিষাদে

[For seven days and nights Lanka wept in sorrow, as one weeps for the immersed image (of Durga) on the tenth day of the festival].[9]

Similarly in the case of the other great Indian epic – the **Mahabharat**. "Mahabharater Katha Amrita Saman" is the very serious and religious refrain of the great Bengali translator Kashiram Das. This same phrase is used in **Katha Amrita Saman** – by Shaoli Mitra and Shambu Mitra in order to point out the lacuna in this mythological epic. A masterful case against the decrees of religion has been made in her fight on behalf of Draupadi by Shaoli Mitra in her immortal,

4

mono-drama **Nathabati Anathbat** – produced by Sambhu Mitra and made into a moving audio tape in 1992. Here Draupadi, in spite of being the wife of five heroic demi-god husbands, is, to all intents and purposes, an "Anath" unprotected. She is also coerced and betrayed into becoming the common wife to all five of Kunti's sons. Whereas, in the original socio-religious context of the **Mahabharat**, sons obeying their mother's every command deserve admiration, in this modern re-thinking of the epic's story, by secular standards, all this is sheer victimization and psychological abuse of women. The Kathak speaks in **Nathabati Anathbat**. She has been described as :

কথকঠাকরুণ আমার আপনার মতই
কেউ – এই মেয়েটির কিছু বলতে ইচ্ছে করছে ...

(Trans : The Kathak lady is just a person like you or me and this girl wants to say something")[10].

This "something" is not mere narration – it is an interpretation, through logic and analysis, of the original myth – sometimes with a cutting edge. Shaoli Mitra muses in her introduction –

ব্যাস মুনি দ্রৌপদীর বিশেষণ দিয়েছিলেন –
'নাথবতী অনাথবৎ'। এমনও তো হতে পারে যুগে যুগে
এমন নাথবতী অনাথবৎ আরও অনেকেই ছিল –
হয়ত আজও আমাদের মধ্যে আছে কেউ কেউ।

[**Trans** : Vyas Muni had used the adjective "Nathbati Anathbat" for Draupadi. Perhaps it can be that such women have existed all through the ages...... may be they are amongst us, in some way, even today]

Draupadi has been described as

রাণী কিন্তু রাণী নয়
সম্রাজ্ঞী কিন্তু সম্রাজ্ঞী নয়
রাজ্যেশ্বরী হয়েও রাজ্যহারা
সব পেয়েও সর্বহারা এক অভাগিনী মেয়ে...

Translated :

A queen yet not a queen
An empress yet not an empress
A sovereign yet without a Kingdom
A girl who was bereft though she got all.....

Her 'Swayambar', instead of being (as we have been told traditionally), an example of the woman's freedom of choice, becomes, through this very secular analysis, rather an auxious public bidding for a husband for the girl of the household –

5

by eager brother and father. Her beauty is the prize, the bait, and then, when she is won by Arjun, her genuine love is squashed by consequent developments. In the original myth, the Pandavas were dutifully obeying their mother Kunti. In the modern secular version, when Kunti unknowingly says "Whatever you have brought, divide it up amongst the five of you" – the faces of the brothers (apart from Arjun) are described as – 'মুখগুলো কামনায় উজ্জ্বল'' – "Their faces were alight with desire". The eldest, Yudhisthir (who ironically symbolizes 'dharma' or 'fairness/justice') agrees to the dictum because he wants peace amongst the brothers (and he himself, it is hinted, also desires Draupadi), and Kunti, though her heart bleeds for Draupadi, knows that "In this world fights are mainly caused by the lure of property and that of a woman". So she allows her five sons to equally share (through marriage), the hapless Draupadi. As for Draupadi – she is the eternal feminine victim – unbelieving that this could happen to her, bewildered, numb with shock.

Shaoli Mitra's re-interpretation of **Mahabharat** is powerful, emotionally vibrant, acutely logical, rationally secular. It definitely appeals to us, because this is a universalisation of the myth, not a mere religious adherence to it.

The same secularization of the same myth (of **Mahabharat**) is apparent in **Katha Amritasaman**. Starting from Satyabati, to Amba, Ambalika, Draupadi, Subhadra and Uttara – all the women are depicted as victims and sufferers – which they truly are, if only the religious mould is cracked open and their life-stories are interpreted by secular, familiar standards.

This secularization strips the myths of their mystic uncritical aspect and shows the flaws in them, the injustices, the constant victimization of women, the forcible display of ruthless power in the name of "godliness".

Thus, the "Katha" or "muthos" of the **Mahabharat**, called "Amritasaman" traditionally by Kasiram Das the great poet, has been exposed as not "Amrita" or nectar, but rather, a concoction resembling poison, by secular sarcasm.

In fact, due to a secular viewing of epic incidents, episodes and social behavioural patterns that are justified in the name of religion in the original epics are criticized mercilessly in the light of contemporary logic. The abandoning and "testing" of Sita by Ram in the **Ramayan**, the total social inhumanity towards Draupadi in the 'Bastraharan' episode of the **Mahabharat**, the self-justification offered to characters like Karna or Asathwama in modern literature – all are pointers to the change that the self same myth can undergo when religious iconology is replaced by secular thinking, thus un-deifying traditional models of worship and elevation. To turn back to **Nathabati Anathbat**, it is interesting to note that Bhim, who is least perfect (and perhaps the most human) of the Pandav brothers in the original epic, emerges as the best husband of Draupadi. He is, in the **Mahabharat**, prone to anger and great appetite, he dares to question his elder brother, the great Yudhisthir bluntly and is more physical and earthly than spiritual and obedient.

6

He is the brother who, in the 'Mahaprasthan' or journey to Heaven, falls by the wayside first among the brothers (Draupadi falls before him in a case of glaring injustice, secularly viewed). These same "flaws", however, make him a laudable character in Shaoli Mitra's rendition. She says: In the last moments of Draupadi's life she suddenly realizes that just as she has loved Arjun all her life without a return of the same love from him, so has Bhim loved her always and not been loved back by her : Bhim was always there for her – in the Swayambar he stood by Arjun, objected vociferously at the chess game, avenged her insult in the Kuruk-shetra War, killed Jatasur, Jayadrath, Kichak – all who insulted her, took untold risks to bring her a golden lotus she had craved.... So, she concludes, "Just as Draupadi was the daughter of this earthly world, so was Bhim". This is a secular interpretation indeed.

Buddhadeb Basu's **Pratham Partho**[11] gives the same treatment to the character of Karna. In fact, it is remarkable to see the metamorphosis that the visualization of Karna's character goes through in the value- system over the ages. In the **Mahabharat** the discarded son of an unmarried mother (no other than the royal queen mother Kunti, mother of the five Pandavas – before her marriage to Pandu) – Karna was (in the way of many mythological characters, e.g., Moses or Oedipus) – found and brought up by parents of a lower caste – Radha of the Daipayan caste : son (apparently) of a charioteer. This, in the socio-religious caste system, is a huge blot, and therefore, in spite of great potential he is unfit to even challenge the Pandavas (who are Kshatriyas), leave alone participate in Draupadi's 'Swayambara'. At the same time, his subsequent allegiance to the Kauravas makes him a target of divine wrath, and he behaves pretty barbarously in the 'Bastraharan' episode. He is consequently killed by the will of no less a person than Lord Krishna while labouring under a past curse – again brought upon himself by his own misdemeanour.

The other side of this story is perceived as soon as the religious veneer is stripped off, and Karna is seen not as an instrument obligated under the evil Duryadhan, but as an individual, much wronged. Even when he is barbaric, or revengeful, it is the manifestation of the inner frustration and unfair victimization that he has been subjected to all through his life.

In **Pratham Partho**, his reason for warring with the Pandavas is not mere obedience or loyalty to his patron Duryadhan. He emerges as the sublime character, the true hero who acts without expectation of rewards, who performs what is his duty, regardless of the consequences. Ironically enough, this makes him the personi-fication of what Lord Krishna preaches to Arjun in the **Sri Bhagavat Gita**, a sublime soul who does his "Karma" (action/duty) without desiring the "phal" (result/reward), the performer, therefore, of "Niskam Karma". In Buddhadeb Basu's interpretation, this is what he states in answer to Draupadi's very self-oriented plea –

মহত্তম সেই যুদ্ধ, যা নিঃস্বার্থ,
বিশুদ্ধ সেই চেষ্টা, যা নিষ্ফল।
আজ পাণ্ডবরা জয়োৎসুক, কৌরবরা জয়োৎসুক,
আকাঙ্ক্ষায়, আশঙ্কায় তারা চঞ্চল --
পাঞ্চালী, তুমিও তাই।
শুধু আমি ইচ্ছাহীন, শঙ্কারহিত,
শুধু আমি অনাবিলভাবে প্রস্তুত।
তুমি জেনো, আমি দুর্যোধনের যন্ত্র নই,
কেউ মিত্র নয় আমার, কাউকে আমি শত্রু বলে ভাবি না --
আমি স্বাধীন, আমি নিঃসঙ্গ।¹²

That battle, Karna states impassively, is the noblest, which is self-less, that attempt is pure, which is made without striving after positive results. He is that person – he is the only one without any desire for gain, without fear, ever-prepared, while on both sides the Pandavas and the Kauravas are each fighting for victory. Even Draupadi desires the same for her side. Therefore, he stands alone, solitary, with none to call a friend or enemy, and therefore he transcends them all – he is independent and not at all an instrument of Duryadhan.

The chorus emphasizes this aspect of Karna so that we realise this is the truth about his character and not mere self-aggrandizement. The chorus asserts. "তিনি জয় চান না। তবু যোগ দেবেন যুদ্ধে।"[13] (he will join the battle even though he is not desirous of victory).

This, then, is what Lord Krishna in **The Bhagavat Gita** marks as the human ideal:

> One's own dharma, however imperfect,
> is better than another's, however perfect.
> Even death in one's dharma is to be referred,
> because another's dharma can deceive and degrade.[14]

Lord Krishna also tells Arjun

> Selfish work is inferior
> to the work of a balanced, uncoveting mind; shelter
> yourself in this mental stability, Arjun;
> harassed are the runners after action's fruits.[15]

Thus, it is as if Karna in **Pratham Partho** is, of his own superior nature, acting out the tenets of "Ideal Work" while Arjun is learning them from his divine mentor.

Before Buddhadev Basu, Rebindranath Tagore, in his deathless dramatic lyric **Karna-Kunti-Sambad** also emphasizes this greatness of Karna, his dedication to what he considers to be his 'dharma' and 'karma' even while he knows that he

is on the side of the losers. He can, after being told of his birth-history by his mother Kunti, very well join the ranks of his Pandav brothers, but he will not, because his focus is not on victory but duty. Instead of the revengeful misled Karna of the **Mahabharat** we have here a much-wronged but all-forgiving sublime hero who turns all temptation away:

... এই শান্ত স্তব্ধক্ষণে
অনন্ত আকাশ হতে পশিতেছে মনে
জয়হীন চেষ্টার সঙ্গীত, আশাহীন
কর্মের উদ্যম – হেরিতেছি শান্তিময়
শূন্য পরিণাম ৷ যে পক্ষের পরাজয়
সে পক্ষ তাজিতে মোরে কোরো না আহ্বান ৷[16]

The words are noble indeed in their heartfelt bleakness – ".....at this quiet hour of silence, from the eternal heavens there enters into my mind the music of attempt without victory – I can see the peaceful fruitless result of it all. So, do not ask me to desert that side which is fated to lose the war.....".

This, definitely, is mythopoeia at its subtlest – the reversal of the original myth achieved by making the religious, secular. The same spirit has led the contemporary danseuse to portray Surpanakha as the victimized, abused woman in her dance – drama and has led hundreds of feminists to criticize the very concepts of "virtue" and "feminine chastity" embodied in the myths of Sita, Ahalya, or Savitri, myths of "Satidevi" or "Sati Maa" where, if one rubs off the veneer of traditional religious dogma, what remains is the revolting secular tragedy of the many victims like Roop Kanwar. What religion calls a "Devi", secular rationality exposes to be the archetypal "abused woman".

Satyajit Ray, in his famous film "**Devi**", has shown this religious fanaticism at its most rigid, and how it can victimize the helpless and the innocent. From an ordinary, very human young girl, the deification imposed upon her makes the main character crumble from within and without. So caught up is she in this socio-religious mesmerism, that she cannot escape the process even when her very rational and secular-minded husband urges her to. Her psychological stumbling block is insurmountable : "What if I am, indeed, the Devi?" She asks. A related theme of blind superstition versus scientific sanity is explored by Ray in his later film **Gana Shatru**.

In an interesting study of myths of women based on according to us, "injustice" and according to religion, "authentic goodness", Dr. Madhubala Rohatgi devotes a sizeable section of her book **Maithilisharan Gupta Ke Kavya Mein Nari Bhavna**[17] to this author's treatment of women like Sita, Draupadi, Urmila, Amba and others of the epic tradition, through an analysis of their characters and personality. Referring to Lakshman's wife Urmila (referred to, incidentally, as

"Kabyer Upekshita" - "The One Neglected by Poetry" by Rabindranath Tagore also), Dr. Rohatgi states – "Urmila was neglected in the world of poetry and in the life of Lakshman, too"[18]. A very true statement, because again, if the traditional religious sobriquet of "the ideal brother / brother-in-law" is rubbed off through secular rationalization, then Lakshman may shine brightly as a brother but fails dismally as a husband. The **Ramayan** is full of Sita's deprivation of her husband's company – who has spared a thought for Urmila's total deprivation of **her** husband's company in the very flush of her youth? She is the archetypal wife abandoned, on whatever formula of "duty" by her husband, passively accepting her socio-religious role of the 'good woman'. In fact, expressed in the Sanskrit **Padmapuran** of Ravishenacharya, there is a mention, in Part-III, of the "seventeen thousand wives" of Lakshman, and of some thousand sons. Of course, this is a variation from Valmiki's story, but the situation of Urmila remains the same in both cases, and Lakshman remains an "ideal" because the socio-religious norm demands it. Questioning this norm needs secularization of the entire social iconology, and that is what is done much later by writer-philosophers like Mahabirprasad Dwibedi (in his **Dwibedi Kabyamala**), Maithili-Sharan Gupta and, of course, Tagore.

FOOT-NOTES

1. Valmiki : Early epic poet of Sanskrit, main epic possibly created in 4th cen.B.C., many episodes added later.

2. **Ramayan** : by Valmiki, trans in Bengali by Rajsekhar Basu (M.C.Sarkar & Sons. Pvt. Ltd., 1946), English translation by self.

3. Krithibas : **Krithibashi Ramayan**.

4. **Ibid** : pub. Raibahadur Dinesh Chandra Sen, 10th edn., 1943, 'Aranyakanda'.

5. Trans. by self.

6. Trans. by self.

7. **Meghnadbadh Kabya**, Michael Madhusudan Dutta, composed 1861, Bk IX, ll 285-286. Trans. by self.

8. **Ibid**. Trans. by self.

9. **Ibid**. Trans. by self.

10. All trans. From **Nathbati Anathbath** and **Katha Amritasaman** by self.

11. **Pratham Partho**; Buddhadeb Basu (Nov. 1970), Dey's Publishing, Calcutta 1991.

12. **Ibid**. p.129.

13.   *Ibid.* p.133.

14.   *The Bhagavatgita*, trans. P. Lal (1965), Ch-III, St. 34, "Karma Yoga".

15.   *Ibid.* Ch-II, St. 45, "Sankhya Yoga".

16.   *'Karna-Kunti-Sambad', Kahini,* Rabindranath Tagore (1899), 96-101 Trans. by self.

17.   *Maithilisharan Gupta Ke Kavya Mein Nari Bhavna,* Dr. Madhubala Rohatgi, (Surana Printing works, 1993)

18.   *Ibid.* Ch. IV, Sec.III.

RELIGIOUS ICONS : SECURALISED

Gods and Goddesses in decorative cabinets in urban homes.

The orders are placed in bulk.

CHAPTER - II

The Stages in the Socio-Religious Evolution

So far, we have glanced through literature to see how religious icons turn into secular realities as the rigidity of religion is relaxed.

Let us now consider the situation of the deities themselves. In the case of the various gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheology, we find an interesting phenomenon occurring in almost each and every case. There seem to be three stages in the social perception of the religious icon, namely :

Stage I   The totally religious concept of the deity in its original (usually Vedic) form, with a fixed iconography.

State II   The humanization of this deity through folklore and domestic rituals - without disturbing the essential concept of the icon.

Stage III   The total secularization of the religious icon - and a consequent "unfixing" of its iconological connotations, while still maintaining the popularity of the deity.

Stage one, as stated above, is the concept of the deity in its original splendour. Just as Hesiod in Greece gave a record of the genesis of the classical gods, so do our Vedas mention the nature of the deities of the Hindu pantheon. As in the case of most mythology, these gods originate from the elemental forces of Nature. The sun, rain, thunder and earth - all are deified in expectation of protection and prosperity. For example, Dharma, Ganesh, Durga, Shiva are all very powerful gods and goddesses in the Vedas. Let us consider the cosmic omnipotence and the sublime nature of one or two of these deities.

Mankind has always needed symbols to realise the Infinite. As Swami Vivekananda proclaimed in his lectures at the Parliament of Religions at Chicago in 1893 - "...... all the religions, from the lowest fetishism to the highest absolutism, mean so many attempts of the human soul to grasp and realise the infinite". He further emphasized that "the absolute can only be realized or thought of, or stated, through the relative, and the images, crosses, and crescents are simply so many symbols – so many pegs to hang the spiritual ideas on".

Therefore, before assessing our modern-day 'secularization' of deities, we should first take a look at the causes of the original worship.

Brahma, Vishnu and Maheswar are the great deities of the Hindu pantheon - the Divine Trinity of the birth, nurture, destruction and rejuvenation of this world of

ours. The gradual blending of the three stages of secularization into each other can be observed very interestingly in a study of Shiva or Maheswar.

Shiva has many manifestations - as 'Mahakal' or 'Bhairav' or 'Pashupati', (the Lord of all creatures), and also as the much worshipped 'Lingam' (phallic worship). The very popularly recognized form is that of the 'Nataraj' (the Lord of Dance) which shows us the cosmic vastness of this iconological concept. The 'Dancing Shiva' concept was developed in the bronze images of South India from the tenth century - the concept of the 'Shiva Nataraj' or the 'Lord of Dance' immortalized by the sculptural iconography of the Chola Dynasty. Heinrich Zimmer, in his book **Myth and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization** observes that "Dancing is an ancient form of magic ..... Like yoga, the dance induces trance, ecstasy,.... emergence into the divine essence ..... To work magic, to put enchantments on oneself ... Shiva, therefore, the arch-yogi of the Gods, is necessarily also the master of the dance[1] 'In the 'Nataraja', the ancient rules of the **Bharata Natyasastra** combine with religious iconography to allegorize an Infinity that is awesome. In his 'Nrityamurti' or Dancing Form, Shiva is both the Creator and Destroyer. He is the embodiment of Eternal Energy. In his upper right hand he carries the "damaru" or drum, the rhythm of the Universe - the force of creation. The upper left hand shows the "ardhachandra mudra" (half - moon posture) with the fingers, and bears a vibrant flame on its palm - symbolising the destruction of the world. The second right hand shows the "abhaya - mudra" ('fear not!') while the second left hand points to the uplifted left foot which symbolizes "Mukti" or "Release" for the worshipper. Shiva is dancing on the prostrate body of a dwarf - like demon, called "Muyalaka" in Tamil, meaning "heedlessness" or "forgetfulness" - that is, human ignorance. Shiva is surrounded by the "prabha - mandala", a ring of flames and light signifying vital cosmic energy and the energy field of Wisdom and Life. This same aura is sometimes seen to be the same as the sacred symbol of Oneness - "Om".

Thus, in this one deity, we find representations of so many inter-linked and counter forces - "Sristhi" or creation, "Sthithi" or Duration, "Samhara" or Destruction and "Abhaya" or granting the devotee freedom from all fears. This is in combination with the power to surpass all ignorance, to portray the grace and dignity of the cosmic dance : that cyclic dance which brings forth the progression of night and day, past, present and future, the changing seasons, the changing generations of all born creatures (the "Pashu " for whom Shiva is the "Pashupati"). This same Shiva, therefore, is quite naturally worshipped in the "lingam" (phallic) form, the basic phallic-worship of all cultures. He is also the "Mahakal" or "Great Time", as "Rudra", or the "Angry One" dancing the chaotic "Tandava" with his "Trishul" or trident held high. He is also the "Bhairav" adorned with skulls and again, the calm "yogi" whose name "Shiva" means "That which is good" as in the chant: "Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram".

The Humanization of Religious Icons : Shiva

The metamorphosis of this magnificent figure of Shiva, the icon mentioned in the previous chapter, is the point to note in the second stage of the social perception of the religious icon - namely, the humanization of this omnipotent, celestial deity.

In the mythology of most cultures, with the passage of time gods and goddesses become allegorical symbols. Thus, in Greek mythology, Aphrodite and Artemis, who had been real divinities descending on earth from time to time from Mount Olympus, gradually become allegorical symbols of love and chastity in the later Roman myth – making of Seneca. A survey of a common myth, like that of Hippolytus from Euripedes to Seneca to the French Racine makes us realise how divinities change from real beings to abstract moral values.

What happens in the social treatment of Indian mythology is indeed very startling and interesting. We observe a process of humanization of the deity, without any loss of the "realness" of its existence. No abstract or allegorical symbol replaces the original deity - only, the celestial is thoroughly humanized. Shiva, for example, is still on Mount Kailash, the consort of the Devi Shakti, but Kailash, in the folk-lorique version, is absolutely like a little village of Bengal, and the Devi is the typical rural Bengali girl born to rich parents, married to a penniless husband, yet subservient and ever-loving. This then is not secularization, because the process helps the deities to live on, close to the devotees' hearts rather than remain unreal sublime godheads in a rarefied "heavenly" stratosphere. More so, because all this ruralisation and humanization encourages rather than diminishes their status as gods, worshipped with great attention to ritualistic details and holy zeal.

So, this second stage is all about the humanization of the deities through folklorique, tribal and rural festivals and "Bratts" (domesticated rituals). For example, there are numerous folk rhymes and domestic rituals concerning Shiva, who, from the original "destroyer and preserver". figure, becomes the somewhat problematical son-in-law of Himalaya (Giriraj = king of the mountains), and the ash-smeared marijuana-smoking feckless (but powerful) husband of Uma with his band of rowdy followers. This is, in fact, what the folk lorique "Gajan" and "Charak" melas are about. For example, in his collection of rhymes or "Chharas" about Shiva in his book : **Lok Sahityer Tridhara**, Jogilal Haldar provides us with folk poetry which shows this deconstructed and then reconstructed icon - the Lord Shiva who is slightly cantankerous, definitely the poor husband of a typical Bengali middle class home.[2] He is "Bholanath", smoking "Bhang", with an unworldly but very warm heart, a self-sacrificing, adoring wife (who, at the same time is the Devi Durga who effortlessly kills the monster 'Mahisasur' and is the Goddess Shakti), two daughters (one, Lakshmi, in the larger context the Goddess of prosperity and the other, Saraswati the deity of learning, music and wisdom), and two sons (again, in the mythological context, Ganesh, the giver of success and Kartikeya the divine warrior). In the folklorique vision of this household, however, they are the overworked

penniless wife, daughters and sons, and the uniqueness of the situation is how rural and subsequently urban Bengal manages to love, familiarize and worship with awe these deities on parallel levels simultaneously.

In the poetry of Rameswar Bhattacharya, called by him **Shiv Samkirtan** but more popularly known as **Shibayan** (c.1750 as calculated by scholars like Sri Jogilal Haldar), we have such an example Shiva fails to provide his wife with even a pair of "Sankha" or conch bangles due to his extreme penury and feckless unemployed life style. Since the "Sankha" is the marital symbol that every Hindu wife can claim (mind you, she is not asking even for gold or silver), household peace is somewhat disrupted, only temporarily of course, since Uma is a docile wife. The strongest massage that comes across to secular minded people like me is that this same very (one would say) non-husband-like figure is held up socially (traditionally) as the ideal husband and generations after generations of little Bengali girls are inducted into "Shiva-puja", "Shivaratri" and other "Bratts", praying for "Shiber moto Swami" - "a husband like Shiva". Apart from the given qualities of large heartedness and marital faithfulness, surely this shows the process of the original myth colouring the secondary humanisation, and somehow even this ruralised flawed Shiva retains the omnipotent qualities of the original Nataraj, Rudra, Mahadev.

Thus the "Charak", held on the last day of the Bengali month of "Chaitra," is on one level dedicated to a god whom the devotees want to please (in the religious mode) by self-denial, starvation and terrible acts of self-torture, participated in by 'Shivait' 'Sannyasis' (sages). At the same time, however, the 'mela' or 'fair' that is an integral facet of the "Charak" has an entirely secular tone - full of fun, food and goods stalls, songs and dances. The very basic "Shiva-Durga" dance was a common spectacle even in the streets of Calcutta till a few years back and can still be seen in certain areas and in many (mainly rural) areas there are huge "gajan" festivals - for example the "Gajan utsav" of Ekteswar at Bankura or those of Birbhum, or Jamalpur in Burdwan. The words of Gajan songs show a spirit of tolerant affection for a god who is quite a friend - no sign of sublime respect is present and the dancing devotees are high on jollity and "bhang" themselves. Gajan is traditionally sung and danced by the menfolk (who become for that period members of the retinue of Shiva), dancing with the typical folk rhythm accompanied by rancous laughter and noisy teasing :

শিব হে – শিং ডমরু লয়ে হাতে.
ভূতগণ সব চলে সাথে,
কৈলাসেতে বিয়া করতে যাও...

[Rough translation : 'O Shiva, with your trumpet and drum, accompanied by your roguish/ supernatural followers, behold you going to your marriage at Kailash ....']³

Yet, and this is a point I am re-emphasizing, at the same time this homely God

is perhaps one of the most revered deities in Bengal. There is a "Shiva-linga" under almost every tree and a Shiva temple at every corner in rural and urban areas with very serious worshippers and priests in attendance.

This respect together with the humanization is also at the source of the "Bratts" the religio - ritualistic domestic rites carried out without (necessarily) any Brahmin priests or Vedic mantras. In the "Bratt" of Shiva, he is a benign deity who is pleased with the simplest paraphernalia :

<div align="center">
অখণ্ড বিল্বপত্র তেল গঙ্গাজল ।
এই পেয়ে তুষ্ট হলেন ভোলা মহেশ্বর ।।
</div>

(Rough translation : "The whole / three-headed leaf of the 'Bel' tree, and pure Ganges water - these are the only things needed to please the Bhola or 'Simple' Maheswar).

In fact, the "Shivaratri" is an important "Bratt" which springs from the folk story of the powerful but easily -pleased Shiva : A hunter, with many sins on his account, had to spend the night once on a "Bel" tree in the midst of a dense forest. That was incidentally, the night of the "Shivaratri" and the hunter had per force, and with no religious motivation to stay without any food up on his high perch (an important "Shivaratri" necessity - fasting). He also had to, naturally, stay awake (another necessity of this "Bratt") and by chance, there happened to be a "Shivalinga" under his tree. Again, accidentally, the hunter's movements on the tree dislodged a "Bel" leaf that night, which, together with dew, fell on the "linga". This was tantamount to his performing a "Shivaratri" puja and even though conducted in ignorance, that was enough to save him from "Yama" (the Lord of Death) when he appeared shortly. So simple, we are advised, is it to please the "Bholanath" Shiva and so powerful is his divine protection - even defeating Mortality for his devotees.[4]

Such Bratts are practised religiously for the fruit thereof - as also are the annual Shiva festivals on Chaitra - Sankranti (mid-April) and Srabani - Purnima (August), when devotees smoothly and effortlessly manage to combine the homely and omnipotent concepts of the God and at the same time preserve and re-make the original icon.

This same process of humanizing the original Celestial Being is seen in the familiar treatment given by generations of devotees to the Lord Vishnu - the great creator and Preserver of the Vedas, the Omnipotent One of the "Vishnu-Puran", who, in his earthly "avatar" or incarnation as Lord Krishna is so close to the human heart. He is associated, through folk-tales and legends, with very real, rich and earthly love. He is loved as the "Bal-Gopal", the naughty little boy loved by all stealing butter as the "Nani-Chor", The Lord of the Dance as "Rash-Behari" who has all

The traditional image of Ganesh

M. F. Hussain's interpretation of Ganesh
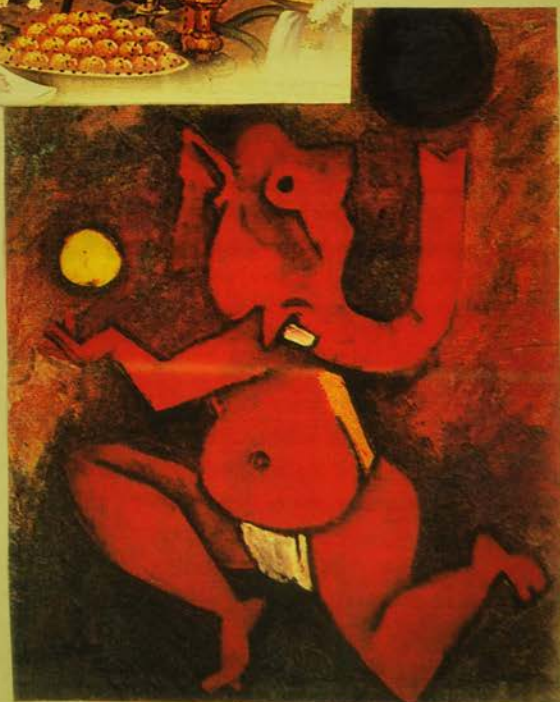
the young belles of Vrindaban (the Gopinis) loving his virile lover - like behaviour. He is the eternal lover to Radha and Meera, he is the friend of Arjun and Draupadi, and at the same time the shrewd politician of the **Mahabharat** and the enlightened fountain-head from which as sublime a message as that of the **Srimatbhagabatgita** flows out. The famous writer Bankim Chandra Chatterji eruditely analyses this very human demi-God in his famous essay **Krishna Charitra**.

The Evolution : Ganapati

Now we can turn to the treatment of another such deity of the Hindu Pantheon Ganesh or Ganapati. The mention of this deity is found in **Skandapurana**, **Brahmabaibartapurana** and in fact, he is mythologically presented as the one who penned the great epic **Mahabharat** created by Vedavyas. Ganesh is presented as a god with the head of an elephant, various myths being existent in support of this blending of a human body with an elephant's head. He certainly belongs to the early anthromorphic concept of the blend of the human and animal form in creation of deities - as, for example, in the concept of 'Anubis' or 'Osiris' in the religious iconology of ancient Egypt. In theanthropic religions, where religious deities are presented in human form, this kind of blending is often seen and worshipped.

There are various legends of how Ganesh was given his elephant head (in most versions, by Shiva) as a replacement for his decapitated head. He is shown as having a large pot-belly, may be shown with a consort and with a mouse as his "Vahan" or vehicle. These aspects, however, do not prevent his devotees from worshipping him with great reverence. He is a very popular deity, the god of wisdom and prudence, and, most importantly - the "remover of obstacles".

Ganesh, the "Leader", is also called "Vigneswara" or "Vignanasha" with his mouse as his vehicle. Perhaps as iconographers have speculated : "Ganesh forges ahead through obstacles as an elephant through the jungle, but the rat, too, is an over comer of obstacles, and as such, appropriate.... the two represent the power of this god - to vanquish every obstacle of the way".[5]

In ancient religious iconography, there was a reverse side to this God, too the terrific, destructive aspect - the "ghora-murti" in the form of a monster known as "Kirttimukha" : a devouring being with carnivorous teeth. This is the reverse face of Ganesh. On Javanese temples this motif is seen popularly. The meaning of "Vignanasha" is the one who overcomes all obstacles, but as a sort of undertone of the other name of Ganesh, "Vinayak", we may remember that in the **Mahabharat** there is the mention of the "Vinayakas" who create obstructions for work in all sorts of ways, though they together create the "Ganapati", the "Vinayak" whose mission is exactly the opposite, if satisfied by worship.

Ganesh is a deity who is worshipped in every ritual, before the 'puja' of any other deity, since no god apparently accepts the offerings of the devotees before Ganesh is ritualistically worshipped.

The traditional image with which this religious icon is associated is in a sitting posture, with three eyes and mostly four hands (though earlier Ganesh images show two hands, and are in standing poses. In Orissa, there is even an image of the dancing Ganesh with eight hands). In the aforementioned traditional image, however, in one hand Ganesh holds the conch shell, in the other the "Chakra", in another the "Gada" and in the fourth the "Padma" or Lotus as in the Vishnu icon (an association of icons that elevates Ganesh's importance even more). However, as noted above, there are variations - sedentary, standing, dancing, even (as in Java), sitting on a seat of human skulls in the "Tantric" tradition. Similarly there are variations in what the icon holds in his hands. Often we find him holding one of his own broken tusks, in the Tantric tradition he holds a skull full of "Modak" or wine, in other cases a small snake, an "Ankush" (a goad) etc. The very important point to remember in all this is that, in all these traditional variations each pose, each object, has a religious meaning - an iconological inner meaning.

The puja of Ganesh is usually associated in Bengal with the great Durga Puja (apart from the already-mentioned compulsory Ganesh-worship preceding any puja or ritual).

In various parts of India, however - specially in Maharastra - Ganesh Chaturthi is celebrated with great solemnity in the month of "Bhadra" (roughly, September). This religious ceremony is also conducted as a "Bratt" - the "Ganesh Chaturthi Bratt", by women on the domestic level in Madhyapradesh, for the good of their husbands and children.

A very interesting later humanization of Ganesh is in the establishment of the very popular goddess "Santoshimata", the daughter of Ganesh. Her "Bratt", observed by women on Fridays, is rigidly and sincerely carried out. This is an example of later day mythopoeia, since the source of the myth lies in the very popular Hindi film on her greatness. Again, an example of how a very humanized source (film) can inspire a very religious and ritualistic fervour.

There are quite a few gods and goddesses who are similarly both humanized and feared, treated as household elements and at the same time propitiated through rigid ritualistic worship. Such deities are, for example, "Ma Manasa", the patroness of snakes (cf. **Padmapuran**); "Basulidevi", who, though not found in any Vedic or Puranic literature, enjoys great veneration in folk rituals; "Olaichandi" or "Olabibi" who is, basically, a protectress of her devotees from the deadly disease (at one time fatal and an epidemic) - cholera; "Barer Thakur" or "Shani Thakur" who can destroy all with a single "dristi" or glance if not propitiated. The list is endless - but goes to show how the Hindu psyche (in Bengal, at least) can bring deities

close to their daily lives and still worship them. By "Bengal" I mean undivided, pre-partition Bengal, though the later West and East Bengals retain this trait.

The images thus worshipped may be iconic : "with a likeness" or aniconic : "without a likeness" - symbols like the "linga" representing "Shiva", the "Shalgram Sila" (black stone) representing Vishnu, the cactus-like 'Manasa' shrub representing 'Ma Manasa' - but each icon has a fixed context. Erwin Panofsky in his **Studies in Iconology** gives us a schema for interpreting iconography, and other suggestions are given by E.H. Gombrich in "The Use of Art for the Study of Symbols". What does matter is that these images, whether Vedic or folklorique in origin, represent a "fixed" iconography which standardizes them. A god or goddess was to be identified by the proper related symbols and by the typical ritual of the associated "puja" or worship.

FOOT NOTES

1.   *Myth and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilisation*, (ed. Joseph Camphell, 1946), Heinrich Zimmer, Ch. V, p.151.

2.   *Lok Sahityer Tridhara*, Sri Jogilal Haldar, pub. Ghosh and Co., (1364 Bangabda : 1957).

3.   From a popular old folk song : "Shiber Gajan".

4.   As narrated in *Meyeder Brstokatha*, Asutosh Majumdar, pub. Deb Sahitya Kutir(1995, 21st edn.), pp. 183 ff.

CHAPTER - III

The Icon "Unfixed"

Now we come to the third stage of this secularization process which is the most interesting stage of all To Start with, we must remember that there are always two parallel trends in relation to religion in every society and culture at all times – those who accept the religious icons and their importance, and those who do not. The latter are sometimes extremists, iconoclasts, atheists or merely rationalists, just as the extremists of the former trend can be bigots and fanatics. In the case of anthropological religions there has always been a conflict between monotheism and polytheism – so that is no new phenomenon in any way.

What is new, in our contemporary urban Bengali society, however, is of a more complex nature. Gods and goddesses, with their own particular iconographical implications, seem to have become "unfixed", with new non-traditional connotations ascribed to them, and there is a definitely secular presentation of these deities, without a complete denial of their traditional names, lineage or the myth associated. totally. The icons are partially preserved and partially negated or re-constructed, thus creating a confusion as to the meaning of the iconology on the whole.

I would like to clarify this point with an example, to start with. In a local Calcutta daily, a news item headed "French Crystal Lakshmi for the Rich" (**The Telegraph**, Sunday, April 1, 2002), we are told in no uncertain terms that "From benign icons in the puja rooms to costly crystal collectibles in plush living rooms, Indian deities have made a big transition....". The report (from New Delhi by Ella Datta), goes on to report the expected launching of "a seated Lakshmi in crystal" by the French "Daum Crystals" at the New Delhi French Embassy. Similarly, in its supplement on "Books", the same paper (dated 15th March, 2002) heads a review of books with the title "Deities on the Bedroom Wall" and comments – "From glitzy television serials to kilsch calendars – the way the Hindu pantheon grips the popular imagination is both intriguing and puzzling. Still a vital source of mainstream entertainment, Indian deities are in sharp contrast to their European counterparts – the Greek Gods for instance – who have largely waned into an esoteric domain....".

These observations are very true and thought – provoking, specially the implication that the deities have "made it big" in the first report and that they are termed "a vital source of mainstream entertainment" in the second report.

Right up to the mid-twentieth century, rituals were an integral part of Bengal – both rural and urban. On a random survey, most Bengali households regularly observed the following Pujas and Bratts (apart from many other individualized ones, too) :

a) **Lakshmi Puja** : Out of 250 questionnaires, 246 admitted that Lakshmi Puja was conducted in their houses at least up to 1990. Thursday was observed as the day of the goddess, and in certain West Bengal households, certain months entailed special Pujas for the goddess. The Dipannita Puja (on the evening of the Kali Puja) and the Kojagari Puja (5 days after the end of the Durga Puja) are also household pujas. After approximately 1990, as the households were taken over by the 1950 born generation, only 50 percent still carry on the tradition – most of them because the mother/mother-in-law (belonging, roughly, to the generation born in the 1940s) is still there.

b) **'Bratts' like those of 'Shasthi', 'Shivaratri', 'Satyanarayan', 'Santoshimata'** Quite popular from the older to the 30 year old generation. The younger (80% of them) do not personally think much of rituals, but go along with family traditions. If on their own, they do not (mostly) get involved in such Bratts", except, in 20% of those interviewed, in that of 'Santoshimata' for fulfillment of expectations.

c) **Saraswati Puja** : Held almost in every house, specially in those with school or college – going children. The Puja may be of an image, a picture or even of books, which are the icons of learning.

d) **Durga and Kali Pujas** : Majority held in pandals in the 'Barwari' or Public form, participated in one spirit or the other by almost all – of all generations. Some houses, with great traditional heritage, conduct these Pujas at their homes.

In the case of each of these above Pujas, they are observed with rigid ritualistic correctness, accompanied by fasting, conducted by professional 'Purohits' or Brahmin priests, though the 'Bratts' and often the Lakshmi Puja are performed by the women of the house. The images, pictures, and other apparatus of the Pujas are kept with great "Purity" in the special room for Pujas. In these days of small flats and little space no separate room can be apportioned for worship, but a separate space is usually there, either in the store room or in the corner (alcove) shelf of the living / bed room, sometimes on a special wooden or brass throne which has an iconic importance of its own. There are many homes of the 40's generation which, with "Intellectual" (and what are often termed "Marxist") beliefs and values, have dispensed of such places in their homes altogether. A picture of a God / Goddess on the wall, sometimes in the form of a calendar picture is all that can be seen in most Bengali homes today, and in 40% not even that. However – and this is a very important factor – my survey showed that in most homes solid rationalism, intellectualism and Marxist ideology **does not** cancel out household religious icons and instead they co-exist pretty comfortably. For example, Mrs. Sinha, a lady in her fifties, openly declares her disbelief in religious icons and rituals, tries to pass this message on to her children, genuinely disregards casteism, and yet offers flowers in "Anjali" at Saraswati / Durga Pujas accompanied by brahmin priests chanting vedic mantras. A real paradox, this,

but so common in our urban Bengali culture.

I believe it is wrong to treat this attitude (as senior critics often do) as hypocrisy or meek following of tradition. In our urban culture, Pujas have become synonymous with "fun", and so, these examples show how the old serious rigidity has been metamorphosed into modern "fun" without discarding the old iconology, but only re-invented them by a process of secularization. For example, when questioned, out of hundred people (of various ages) participating in the "Pushpanjali" at the Durga Puja (A ritual where, ideally, the devotee **has** to fast and offer flowers with 'mantras' to the deity), interesting answers were evoked. The senior citizens (50 years up) grimly followed tradition. Of them, at least half did not much like the discomfort of having to fast till eleven thirty on a fairly hot morning – but "what to do?" They sighed. Quite a few (about 20%) very guiltily and shamefacedly confessed that they did not fast "totally" – and many very logically pointed out that masochism was highly inappropriate. Yet, This section (which, in reality, is probably more, only silent) pretended they had followed the early code. Even among the very young teenagers, there was a definite hesitation in admitting that they had neither fasted nor were at all following the "rules and rites". Most (below 45 years) frankly admitted that they did not really follow or want to follow the Sanskrit "mantras" chanted by the priest (which the older generation mostly know by heart) – but on one thing, strangely enough, they were all agreed – "of course I will offer the Pushpanjali". Why? – "It's fun, you join a crowd of friends, wear new clothes and well, it's fun!".... Secularization of religion, indeed.

The Durga Puja as a religious ritual has been almost overshadowed in the social consciousness by other considerations. In my review of middle-class Bengali urban people of various ages (Hindus), these are the responses received :

Question : What are the adjectives that come to your mind immediately when I mention 'Durga Puja'?

Answers :

a)   *Age Group 55 and above* : Aarti, Pushpanjali, Hom, Bhog, Prasad (all various aspects of the Puja itself), shopping for relatives and children, cleaning the house, expenses.

b)   *Age Group 35 to 50* : Pushpanjali, 'Adda' (an almost untranslable Bengali word for friends getting together & chatting and having fun), cultural programmes of the 'Parar Puja' (the Puja of one's own locality), new clothes (shopping) going all over the city viewing various images, travelling out of town since these are holidays.

c)   *Age Group 20 – 30* : Fun, food, new clothes, 'romance', discos/meeting, up at friends' places (not the Puja Pandal), no time-limit for returning home, dressing up, driving around.

From the above review we can see how the shift is passing from the religious aspect to the 'holiday and entertainment' aspect as we proceed down the generations. From religious to secular – but the importance of Durga Puja remains unchanged.

Thinking of the West, I got some feed-backs from foreign Christian friends (in France, U.S.A. U.K., Germany) via E-mail to ask them about their cultural evolution regarding Christmas. The responses were interesting. You either "believed" in Christmas and went to the Midnight Service on Christmas Eve, had a Christmas tree and in general followed the religious festival (may be in a more fun-seeking spirit) – or you cut it all out, and treated the season as the party-season, avoiding religious formulas altogether. The paradox of being totally secular-minded and yet participating in the "Puja" with no sense of duality seems to belong to our culture only. Perhaps it is a natural process, reaching stage three from stage two when we had started feeling as if the deities (of stage one) were already familiar friends, who could be very secularly treated.

Another very significant point that emerged was what people went around the town to see during the Durga Pujas. 60% was interested in viewing grand Pandals, decorations and visual effects; 40% was interested in such pandals and also the novelty of the image itself; while only 10% was interested in attending the religious rituals. A large 90% showed interest mainly in the cultural programmes and fairs held in various Puja pandals, and a whopping 70% was drawn to Pandals where the "ribbon was cut" by film stars/glamorous personalities. The more popular the star, the larger the crowd, with the Goddess definitely a second to the human luminary. The point to note is that the actual "inauguration" of Durga Puja is through a very solemn religious ritual called the "Bodhan" performed in the early hours of the first day ("Shasti") of the Puja. Now, the "Bodhan" is still ritualistically performed, but has become an "unfixed icon" – since so many pandals feel the real inauguration is performed by the VIP cutting the red ribbon. So, the religious icon has given way to a secular similarity with other non-religious functions.

Another point is the diversity of the images themselves. In their quest for novelty and excellence, the various Puja committees think of ever-changing forms of the Durga image – thereby again, "unfixing" the traditional iconography partially, or even totally. The motive behind this, for the past decade at least, can also be traced to the various "prizes" sponsored by various corporate bodies for the "best pandal", the "best image" and so on. This is turning the religious into the secular with a vengeance – the Puja or the Devi Durga being "judged" for artistic excellence by a panel of expert judges. Definitely urban secularization of religion at its best. And at the risk of being repetitive – all this does not stop the traditional rituals going on side by side.

When questioned, committee members of various Pujas were vociferously in support of this system, since this encourages aesthetic consciousness while it is not at

all detrimental to the Puja rites themselves. "From Shasti to Bijoya we follow every ritual, every 'niyam' (rule) of the Puja "- declared Haren Bose of Central Kolkata – " So, how does it matter if we experiment with the appearance of the 'Murti' (image)?".... Another lady from another Durga Puja quipped : "After all, we all know that the 'Murti' is a symbol for the formless God – So what does it matter if new idols are presented in new ways"?

These arguments show the modern paradoxical approach towards religion in urban culture, at least. On one hand, the religious iconology is giving way to de-mythologisation, experimentation and secular approaches which all aim at aesthetic novelty. On the other hand, this does not necessarily mean the rejection of orthodox rituals and rites : every "niyam of the Puja", we have seen, is still being followed. Thus we have a novel situation – a Goddess made of bamboo slats, or match sticks, or clay cups being offered 'Pushpanjali' or 'Mantras' while the pandal depicts a light-and-effects simulation of the WTC horror of the USA of September 11, 2001 – all accompanied by jingling film music blasting on microphones. In certain situations, as in a pandal at Kolkata in 2001, the ultimate crowd – puller was the pandal – an exact replica of the Victoria Memorial, as was a very Mughal architecture look-alike pandal and few years back, again in Kolkata. In all such cases, it must be re-emphasized, the Puja rituals remain unaltered.

However, if a traditional "Hindu" Puja is carried out in a pandal resembling the British and Christian Memorial to Queen Victoria, or in a pandal created as an imitation of Mughal/Muslim architecture, then the mythology and iconolgy of traditional Hinduism has travelled a long way indeed from the hallowed "Chandimandap" (the special area for the Puja, kept sacred) of the religious past. There is no **iconoclasm** at all but religious heritage is accepted without the associated prejudices, which definitely signifies great social liberation.

This process shows the secularization of the iconography of the Durga image. My interview of some of the artisans at Kumartuli revealed interesting data. There is a great demand for Durga images made, not out of clay, straw and bamboo in the traditional way but out of fiber-glass and "Shola" (a natural fiber : like thermocol), since these specially made images are created to order for NRI Pujas, e.g., at Canada or U.K. – and they have to be light in weight for transport by air.

Also, these days, says one craftsman, so many intricacies are ordered for so many images that though, traditionally speaking, the day of the "Rathyatra" (in July) is the day when the construction of the "pratima" (image) starts, these days the process starts as early as in May. Not only the images of Durga, but those of Lakshmi and Kali are also started around that time, again, mainly for orders from abroad. At Kumartuli alone, roughly 3000 images are made annually – perhaps a few more in 2001.

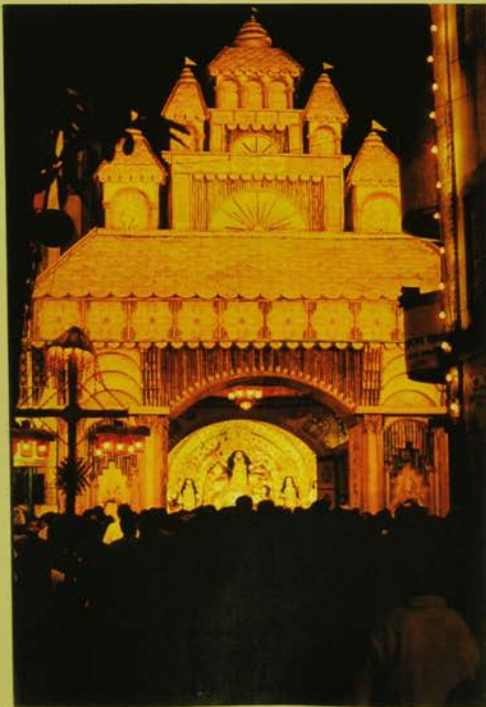*The Traditional Icon : Devi Durga*

A Modernisation of the Icon : Devi Durga

BLEND OF ICONS IN PUJA PANDALS

The Kolkata Pandal patterned on the Victoria Memorial

A Kolkata Pandal :
A Castle of bamboo slats.

CHAPTER - IV

"Unfixing" : The Inspiration and the Result

After analysing in detail how the religious icons of West Bengal have had their very iconical context "unfixed" in recent times, it is natural to ponder – what is the inspiration behind the new mythopoeia, and, more importantly, what is the result of this on our (at least urban) society.

I came across much food for thought while looking through the book **Handicrafts of India** by Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay. In her Chapter on "Textiles", she makes, as late as in 1975, the following observations regarding the famous "Baluchari" sari of Bishnupur "The 'Baluchar" style woven in silk is only confined to sarees. It hails originally from a place of the same name in Murshidabad district, West Bengal..... very colourful, a real traditional 'baluchari' is said to have seventeen colours in it, with 'butis' sprinkled all over.... The big 'pallu' which is the main piece is a large panel with mangoes in the centre, bordered by diverse designs, depicting a royal court, domestic or travel scenes with horse riders and palanquins, the lotus, the bee, and rosette, the stylized peacock, the bridal 'alpana' (floor design) of Bengal, the Taj, etc. The 19th century weaves strangely enough have even European faces mingling with Indian..... The simpler 'baluchar' has small dots or flowers all over with a flowery border and mangoes in the 'pallu'"[1]

Today, however, the 'Baluchari' sari has incorporated religious motifs and icons. When I visited a weaver at Bishnupur, he told me that the most costly and extravagant samples had a "double pallu" which always depicted a "story". This story could be a very secular myth -- like that of the famous Kalidas creation – 'Dushyanta and Shakuntala', but very often they depicted religious myths, such as the marriage of Ram and Sita from the **Ramayan** or the marriage of Shiva and Parbati. In fact, most weavers felt, these "religious" myths are more in demand by the modern customers since (suggested one) they are "Brihat Kathas" (Great Legends). The evolution in this art therefore seems to be from arbitrary aesthetic designs with inherent "Subha" (good) portents (like the mango) to human activities (horses, palanquins, bridal 'alponas') to "Stories" (mostly secular) to the final full-fledged resourcing of traditional myths and iconography. This final step involves women **wearing** such religions icons and myths on their bodies, in an entirely secular way – since there is no 'rule' which says that a 'Baluchari' sari be treated as dress for Pujas at all. This reminds me of a bewildered utterance by the grandmother of a young girl who preened herself in her new 'baluchari' before proceeding to a wedding. "I just can't imagine" said the elderly lady "how you can sit down and eat meat and fish and everything with Gods and Goddesses on your Sari!" – That is the traditional religious voice – but today's attitude to religious icons is secular.

Similarly, weavers at Phulia, weaving beautiful 'Tangail' and 'Tant' Saris said that they very often made Sari borders and designs as per the urban customer's order. These orders very often demand Ganesh images, Conches, Radha Krishna and the Swastika as motifs. The reason – they are very "typical" and "ethnic" as well as aesthetic. A lady in Calcutta who runs a boutique observed that she had "tant" saris printed with "Swastiks", "Lakshmi footprints", "mangal kalash" (the typical vessel adorned with a 'dab' or green coconut and mango leaves) for "uniqueness of appeal" and got very good responses from her customers. Similarly, we often find saris or jewelry decorated with "Karis" (particular type of shells traditionally associated with the Goddess Laksmi, formerly regarded as money) – and terracotta jewellery often sporting figures of Ganesh as the locket

At Panchmura, a village away from Bishnupur (Dist. Bankura), Dhirendra Nath Kumbhokar, proprietor of a terracotta shop, commented on this "modern" application of traditional religious icons. He pointed out "diyas", "images" and the special and unique "Bankura Horse", together with the "Mansa Jhar" – all originally religious items, but now mainly collectors' delights. The Bankura Horse, made of terracotta is made of local clay and has a distinctive appearance – its feet, body, head and ears are detachable (thus making it a very convenient carry-home tourist attraction). However, the origin of this horse is religious – it is supposed to symbolise "Dharmathakur" – another name for "Yama" or the God of Death (though the ritualistic associations in the folk traditions here between Shiva and Dharma often do overlap). Even today, travelling on roads of Bishnupur and Bankura it is a common sight to see these horses placed under trees, often with a few flowers strewn around – the deity-protector still.

But, over all, the importance of this horse today, the Kumbhakar family asserted, is as souvenirs for urban collectors and foreigners. In fact the late Rashbehari Kumbhakar was awarded the "Rashtrapati Puraskar" for his creation of such a horse. Today, in many urban houses, this horse, usually in pairs, is seen at various corners of the room, on either side of doors, on shelves and on TV tops – as the "ethnic" aesthetic touch to interior decoration. Some also collect them in various sizes. As a result, the artisans are adding more and more decorative touches to the horses, and this is definitely a case where secularization has almost wiped away former religious overtones.

The same is applicable to the "Manasa Jhar". Originally, in a snake-infested region, Ma Manasa, the patroness of snakes, was revered, feared and worshipped in every rural household which had its "Manasa-Tala", where there was the Manasa Shrub which was worshipped zealously. This led to the creation of the terracotta "Manasa Jhar", a bush-like structure with snakes surrounding it, also for worship. Today, this Manasa-Jhar is quite a costly collector's item, with unbelievable intricacy of adornment, sometimes with fifty or more snakes coiled artistically to structures small to big – sometimes more than four feet high. Though basically collected by urban dilettantes, the words of a lady buying items struck me as interesting.

Hesitating, she avoided buying a 'Manasa-Jhar", saying apologetically, "My mother would not like it in the house, you see – snakes and all.... one shouldn't keep one, she believes, unless we do proper Puja every day".

The artisans, claim the Kumbhokars, have been encouraged by this secularization to become innovative and creative, using these basic religious symbols. Apart from the horse they make intricately moulded elephants, the "Manasa" motif adorns jugs, pots and lamps, pen-stands and decorative tiles. The now famous "Bonga – Hati", a rounded beautiful figure of an elephant was also a prize-winning innovative creation. Thus all motifs which were religious, magical and ancient (like the typical inter-linked loop on Bishnupur temple roofs) – or the 'Swastika' (believed to be pre-Mahenjodaro) are incorporated into artistic objects and given totally secular existence.

In certain cases, the old socio-religious associations still linger. Places like Hatogram, Raibaghini are areas of intense creativity with conch – shells. Originally, the conch or "Sankha" was an integral part of all Pujas, and is regarded in Bengal as an "auspicious" object. Also, the round protion of the conch is sawed into round pieces to make the "Sankhaa" a white bangle which is worn by the bride and which in a way signifies her husband's long life. These days, due to the high price and less availability of conches, the 'Sankhaa' is so costly that many low-income married women wear imitation 'Sankhaas' made of white plastic – yet, the belief (or superstition) in this case lingers on.

However, in the realm of conch craft, too, secularization has over-shadowed religious associations. Conches are often used to decorate the room, and jewellery, and engraved plaques are some of the new products feeding the market. Also, people like Haripada Kundu of Hatogram, amongst others, started intricate engravings and etchings on the 'Sankh'. it started off with beautiful patterns, but then there were tiers after tiers of engravings of huge white conches depicting mythological, epic situations and sequences. A big secular push has been given by the Government's "Conch Shell Design Development Programmes" held in various conch-shell workers' villages / centres.

Such secularization of orginally religious motifs can be seen in Bikna, a small village very near the town of Bankura. Dhokra, a metal-based craft is practised there by skilful tribal people (usually the Kainkuya Mals). They make the 'Bankura Horse' in dhokra style in brass, and jewellery with religious motifs – to be worn by their customers. Things like the "Lakshmi Jhanpi" and "Lakshmi Saj", which were originally definite apparatus of the Lakshmi Pujas, are now very costly items of art for urban customers.

Nearby Susunia also lets us see how the Karmakar community (specially Sahadeb Karmakar, secularised art through innovation. Originally makers of brass utensils, they turned to stone figurines, with stone taken from the Susunia hills. These stone

Innovative "Manasa" face on water-pot.

*The Intricate
modernisation of the
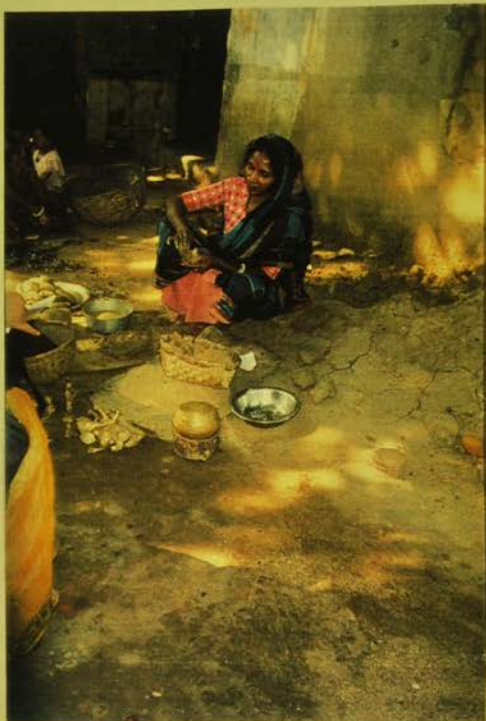traditional "Manasa Jhar"*

The Famous "Bankura Horse" : not for worship- at Panchmura.

The "Bonga Hati" of Bikna - in Dhokra

MODERNISED ICONS

The Traditional "Lakshmi Jhanpi" being made in Dhokra at Bikna at the order of foreign tourists.

Gods and goddesses made of stone being sold as tourist collectibles at Susunia.

objects, again, have religious bases – like the owl of Lakshmi, diyas (as used in Pujas), images of deities like Shiva, Saraswati, Durga – all bought by crowds of tourists who collect them as souvenirs, in a very secular spirit.

The artisans, whether working in terracotta, dhokra, stone or the weaving loom, all diversify for commercial purposes. I questioned, on one hand, a potter at Bishnupur turning out scores of Buddha images, and on the other hand, a street hawker in Gariahat at Kolkata vending numerous varieties of Ganesh images depicting numerous poses and activities, asking them **Why** these artifacts were being made and sold. The reply was a standard one – the city customers want novel images, so they are sometimes "imagined" by the artisan and at other times specifically ordered by the buyers. So there was a Ganesh with a mobile to his ear, a set of the same God playing different musical instruments, even one working at a computer. This was secularization, indeed.

Similarly, there were, said a young craftsman of Potopara in Kolkata, demands for Durga or Lakshmi images (for Puja) with the face of Madhuri Dixit or Aisharya Rai. "This is nothing new" – he chuckled- "In my father's time they would order images with Suchitra Sen's or Hema Malini's face – now the film stars have merely changed".

In Jalaberia (near Jaynagar, 24-Parganas), the artist Debendranath Naskar and his crew of Badal, Gopal and Prahlad have been creating a series of 62 Durga images in one pandal for the Durga Puja. The process seems to have started, as an elderly member of the 'Jalaberia Ratikanta Mor Nabadurga Sangha' stated, as the Puja of the usual single Durga. Then, by their urge to do something new each year, the progress was to 'Pancham Durga' (five images), 'Sashtha Durga' (six images), 'Astam' (eight) and the 'Naba Durga' (nine). At this stage the name of the committee became 'Nabadurga Sangha', but the evolution continued, till in the year 1998 the adventurous Puja committee started the practice of worshipping a conglomeration of 52 Durgas, to be further enhanced into 62 Durgas in the year 2000, continued till date. This "unfixing" of the Durga icon has secularly been rationalized by the huge public response from far and near, and at the same time religiously justified by demonstrating, through, the 62 images, 62 manifestations of the Goddess 'Chandi', such as, the usual 'Mahisasur Mardini', 'Narsinhi', Chamunda', 'Jogmaya' and so on.

Such enterprises really explode the religious iconology, as in the case of the "Dashabatar Cards" of the famous Foujdar family of Bishnupur.

The "Dashabatar Cards" are examples of aesthetic playing-cards originally introduced as "Naksha-tash" (patterned cards) by the Malla Kings of Bishnupur. Apparently card games were played with these intricately artistic round-shaped cards. Bansari Foujdar's family are famous for their artistry and authenticity in the making of these cards. Each set contains the usual denominations, though
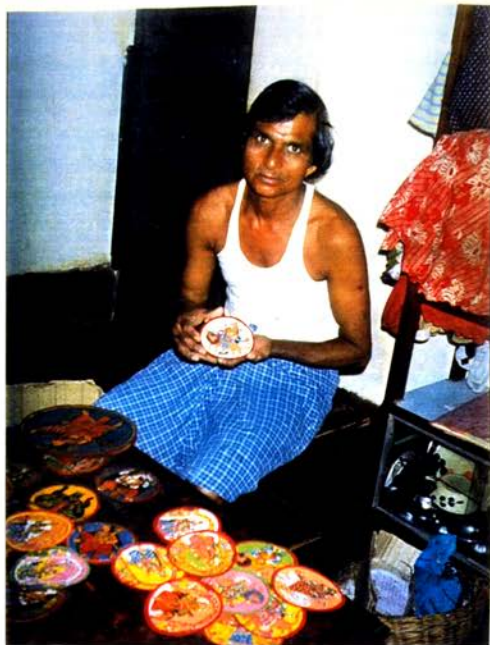
Foujdar with his cards

The original "Dashavatar" Motif.

often there is a 'Raja' and 'Mantri' instead of the usual "Sahib" and "Bibi". To start with, these cards were decorated with all kinds of pictures. They were and still are round in shape, made of torn up pieces of cloth stiffened with the gum extracted from tamarind seeds and chalk. However, the Foujdars (and some other artists) experimented with varying the traditional pattern – which was that of the "Dashabatar" or the ten reincarnations of Lord Vishnu, painted on the cards in very colourful typical styles, each set containing 120 pieces. These cards, played by the royalty, depicting divine figures, represented even to start with, secular usage of religious mythology. The process was furthered by artists who, in search for variety, introduced other mythological topics on the cards. Foujdar demonstrated cards, with picturisations of the 'Ramlila', 'Krishnalila', 'Nabagraha', 'Chamundeshwari'. He also showed how today he makes cards of various sizes from coin-sized one of 48 cards per set to those as big as quarter-plates.

Today, the game that was played with these cards has gone into oblivion, (though apparently in some places in Maharastra it is still played) – but the cards have become famous as artistic items, bought and mounted by collectors in our country and also by foreign tourists. The ultimate example of secularization of the Dashabatar' myth was, perhaps, in 2001, when Foujdar was commissioned to make huge cards (according to him many thousand rupees worth) for decorating the Durga Puja pandal of the Peyarabagan Puja of Dumdum. The decoration (to make the whole business more secular and technological from our point of view), was done with computerized copies of the cards made by him, since the real ones were too expensive to be publicly displayed. This pandal, incidentally, was awarded a prize for artistic excellence that year.

A similar shift in attitude can be seen in the clay toy industry of Krishnanagar, where the original images have moved away from the religious to social, the traditional social "dolls" of brides and grooms etc. have given place to 'modern' dolls – as the customer desires.

In "Amar Kutir" in Santiniketan, there is much less anomaly, since the beautiful "Batik" work was secular in nature to start with. However, here, too, there was a clear indication that the urban consumer was demanding motifs like the 'Swastika', 'Ganesh', 'foot-prints' (considered holy in the religious context), not for any religious purpose but for an "ethnic" ambience. The terracotta ornament-makers of Bhubandanga (in Santiniketan) showed how urban buyers demanded "Ganesh" lockets, figurines, while the leather-shops there showed lovely 'Batik' figures of divinities (mostly Ganesh) on bags and purses, though the traditional motifs (like flowers, fish etc.) still held good.

A strange sight in Santiniketan, Digha and Puri were images of the "Laughing Buddha" ranged side by side with Hindu Gods and Goddesses in shops. Which incidentally, brings us to a paradox in the modern social attitude to religion/ superstition/faith. The "Laughing Buddha", crystals, wind-chimes, tortoise figures-

are all the apparatus of Chinese "Feng-Shui" which, together with Hindu "Vastu Sastra" has become almost an obsession of the urban Bengali. The very same generation that blithely cuts up a "Namabali" (the saffron cloth associated with Sadhus and printed in red with holy symbols and names of Gods) to make a short top or a Kurta, who puts the brass "Om" symbol on the book-shelf for decor, is paranoid about which way a bedroom or a living room must face, where to hang charms (chimes, crystals, etc.) to ward off the "evil eye", how to prevent good "chi" (energy) from flowing out of the house, which way to point one's head for sleeping / eating / studying. In my interviews with various age-groups, I discovered that while 'Vastu' and 'Feng-Shui' is religiously believed in by non-Bengalis, too, the generation most affected by these amongst the Bengalis is that of those born around 1965-70, and definitely urban. A young man carries around a compass in his pocket so as to face the right direction in various activities; a young lady always has the image of a red Ganesh in her handbag for success in all her daily activities.

Yet, this is not religious zeal - but an eagerness for "good" fortune – the same urge that drives generation after generation to use gems to propitiate the planets, to visit astrologers to get a glimpse into the future and if possible, better it. I definitely found the Vastu-believers quite secular in their utilitarian attitude to Gods and Goddesses, mostly. For example, Ashish Das, a young man of 35, had been advised by a Vastu expert to keep a beige-coloured image of Ganesh in his office, the trunk of the Ganesh pointing down right, to an image of Lakshmi placed next to it – for prosperity in his business. Searching around for this particular combination, said Ashish, was a tough job, and, said he, "I bought many which did not 'work', so naturally I discarded them". This is treating the figure of a religious icon as an instrument of utility – there is no religious slant when you 'discard' a deity because it does not 'work'. So, the religious icon is here being secularized for practical purposes.

Why, one wonders, this obsession with ' Ganesh', these charms for the perfect house, the perfect office through Vastu and Feng-Shui? So much so, that almost all news-papers and magazines have columns on these doe's and dont's, there are a lot of experts with their computers out there giving advise on the perfect site/house/door, there are daily/weekly programmes on TV Channels on the same subject. Walk into any shop – like Archies or Giggles in Kolkata, and there are long shelves marked "Feng Shui items" where the sale, we are informed, is brisk. Why this bondage to blind faith in an age which seems to have secularized religious rules?

The answer, I believe, is very simple. In the fast track of urban life, with the various problems of health, wealth and happiness, the human being has to depend on something that will create "magic" and bring prosperity. The icons of yesteryear like the "Lakshmi Jhapi" or the Bratts have merely been replaced by Laughing Buddhas, red or brown Ganeshas, wind chimes (with 5 rods') and tortoises.

Astrology, Numerology, Vastu, Feng Shui all, whether genuinely effective or not, provide the much needed crutch for helpless humanity. Without being at all judgmental, my point is to show how religious icons slide smoothly into very non-religious utilitarian usage. The sample of computerised astrological chart on the following page demonstrates this point aptly.

To round off this point, I will mention a news item dated 14.07.2002 in **The Telegraph** tilled "Julia's Jumbo". The reporter remembers how "Selfridges, the Oxford Street Store, got into trouble for selling cakes bearing a likeness of Ganesh". However, "A cake unveiled by the Hollywood actress Julia Roberts after her wedding to cameraman Danny Moder" had Ganesh atop it. So, here again, Ganesh is the icon for success — but very, very secularly as a cake (made of eggs) to be eaten — "The Ganesh Cake".

FOOT NOTES

1. *Handicrafts of India*, *Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay (ICCR, 1975)*, *"Textiles", pp.35 ff.*

Gems And Remedies

Performing Remedial measures & wearing stone for a planet helps increase the positive aspects of the planets in the horoscope. Scientifically, recital of Mantra for a particular planet forms a protection layer around the man. Stone increases the benefic aspects by absorbing rays of the planet and flowing them into human body.

Normally a remedy is provided for the Major period lord Stone is worn for a weak ascendent, 9th or benefic houselord. When you should wear which stone or adopt which remedy is given in the following table along with its area of effectiveness. In each Major period three option of Stone are given. You can select any option by looking at the help you expect from the stone or remedy.

Gems and Remedies in Major Period

Life Stone	: Coral	Wealth, Good health, Avoids accident
Lucky Stone	: Y-Sapphire	Conquer enemies, Fame, Savings
Benefic Stone	: Ruby	Comforts, Kids happiness, Savings

Dasa	Stone	Power	Mantra/Fast-Donation/Benefits
Sun	Ruby	94%	Om Hram Hrim Hrom Sah Suryaye Namah (7000)
11/06/1945	Y-Sapphire	60%	Sunday-Wheat, Saffron, Coral, Red Sandal, Ghee
07/05/1946	Coral	56%	Comforts, Kids happiness, Savings
Moon	Ruby	77%	Om Shram Shrim Shrom Sah Chandramase Namah (11000)
07/05/1946	Y-Sapphire	64%	Monday-Rice, Conch Shell, Musk, White Sandal, Curd
06/05/1956	Coral	51%	Conquer enemies, Comforts, Savings
Mars	Ruby	77%	Om Kram Krim Krom Sah Bhomaye Namah (10000)
06/05/1956	Coral	73%	Tuesday-Malka, Molasses, Musk, Red Sandal, Ghee
07/05/1963	Y-Sapphire	59%	Wealth, Good health, Avoids accident
Rahu	Ruby	74%	Om Bhram Bhrim Bhrom Sah Rahve Namah (18000)
07/05/1963	Coral	56%	Saturday-Mole, Rape-seed, Sword, Blanket, Mustard oil
06/05/1981	Y-Sapphire	55%	Power, Good health, Avoids accident
Jupiter	Y-Sapphire	77%	Om Gram Grim Grom Sah Brihaspataye Namah (19000)
06/05/1981	Ruby	77%	Thursday-Gram, Turmeric, Book, Yellow Fruit, Ghee
06/05/1997	Coral	55%	Conquer enemies, Fame, Savings
Saturn	Ruby	74%	Om Pram Prim Prom Sah Shanescharaye Namah (23000)
06/05/1997	Coral	56%	Saturday-Urad, Musk, Black Cow, Shoe, Oil
05/05/2016	Y-Sapphire	55%	Power, Career success, Earnings
Mercury	Ruby	84%	Om Bram Brim Brom Sah Budhaye Namah (9000)
05/05/2016	Y-Sapphire	60%	Wednesday-Moong, Ivory, Camphor, Fruit, Ghee
06/05/2033	Coral	51%	Kids happiness, Power, Earnings

CONCLUSION

'Iconography' literally means - "writing in images" (Grk. eikon - 'image and Grk. 'graphein' - 'to write'). So, to study iconography is to "read" those images. As William Willetts says in his volume on Chinese Art - "Pleasure in a piece of sculpture depends indirectly perhaps, on knowing what it represents. Knowledge, in this sense, offers no bar to appreciation, whereas unsatisfied intellectual curiosity may greatly reduce one's capacity for aesthetic response."[1]

The main problem resulting from the "unfixing" of the icon, then, is not quite "knowing what it represents", while this confusion is augmented by our traditional inbred knowledge of what the icons are supposed to represent. So, when in popular magazines and newspapers near the time of Durga Puja we are confronted with a colourful picture of the Goddess Durga with her traditional ten hands holding, instead of the traditional symbolic weapons, consumer products like a TV, a washing machine etc (as the advertisement for consumer buying power by a commercial house), we are confused, not only by the unfixing of the icons, but at this combined impact on us of mixed signals - 'believe in the Goddess as powerful' and at the same time, 'She will sponsor not spiritual but material prosperity "(a very secular massage, indeed).

The 'dynamics' of iconography are the various factors leading us to make, use and to circumscribe images for religious purposes, as in Hermeneutics, the principles of interpretations which we bring to focus on iconographies in order to discern their various levels of meaning and changes of meaning. It is man's very ability to interpret his world with the aid of symbols that has led to the rich complexity of meanings in art and religion; this is what Albert C. Moore says in his book **Iconography of Religion**.[2]

On more or less the same note, Hertbert Read, in **The Art of Sculpture**, talks of myths and observes that icons, as such, "illustrate the deep-seated longing that man has to project an icon, a material counterpart of his mental image of himself... Only by conceiving an image of the body can we situate the idea of ourselves in the external world."[3]

Thus, in our present study, the unfixed icon represents a de-construction, followed by a reconstruction of the iconic interpretation. The originally religious icon is secularized in urban West Bengal by its modern (sometimes quite irreverent re-interpretations), but not discarded. This continuance of these religious myths, even in very non-religious contexts, goes totally against the often-held conviction that secular art or secular expression finds its purpose and inspiration in social and individual terms rather than in spiritual or cultural contexts.

Now we come to the problem of the whole theme. Icons as such are used to hand down religious concepts from one generation to another. They are, therefore, instruments of preservation. Iconoclasts want to, and often do, wipe away religious

icons totally, in which case the entire "handing down" process stops. A person who does not visit Durga Puja pandals, who looks on figurines of divinities as so much junk, who is only motivated by scientific rationality is a clearly-defined single-dimensional person. But our study here is of the person who goes regularly to Pujas but more for fun than worship, who recognizes holy icons but uses them as shelf-decorations or ethnic prints, who uses the image of the Nataraja as a flower-vase (with opening for flowers at the top) who is interested in innovatively created "Bonga" Ganesh figures as pen- holders, and Lakshmi's owls as salt-and-pepper pots on the dining table. The person, perhaps, who "collects" Ganesh figures in a glass case with lighting, does no Puja, yet (in a more mixed-up psychological situation not so uncommon), does a sketchy "Pranam" to the case before solving some knotty problem. Cases, indeed, of almost a schizophrenic attitude to once-religious icons.

The answer to the problem is the duality, the blending, already discussed in this analysis. Our religious icons are all firmly embedded in our Bengali (and Indian) social consciousness. However, modern rationality prevents us from approving of rigid ritualistic treatment of these icons. On the other hand, our social conscious-ness also wants to clutch on to "Symbols of Good Luck" - Good Luck charms like stones for pacifying planets, 'Vastu' and 'Feng-Shui' for happy homes, Ganesh, Lakshmi, Saraswati for success, wealth, knowledge. The scientific part of the modern psyche, which has done away with rituals, tries desperately to call these good-luck totems scientific. Ask any believer, and he will vouch on scientific causes behind 'Vastu', mathematical calculations behind astrology, physics and refraction behind wearing a topaz or a moonstone. So, perhaps while we "feel" it is good to have "Shubh" things about us and the age-old aesthetic balance of these icons appeal to us, we haste to add a "Scientiic" explanation for our involvement with them by specifying certain shapes, angles, postures and colours for the icons.

Finally comes the approximately forty percent (according to my interviews) who regard the icons as "ethnic" - fashion statements, without any bias towards religious associations in their minds. In them, perhaps, we find the genuine 'Secularization' of these religious icons in our urban Bengal - nothing but social or status or fashion statements with not only "unfixed" but "unrecognized" iconic values comprehended.

FOOTNOTES

1.   *Chinese Art*, William Willetts (Penguin Books, 1958), p.348.

2.   *Iconography of Religion*, Albert C. Moore, SCM Press Ltd., (London, 1977).

3.   *The Art of Sculpture*, Herbert Read, (Faber 1956), Ch II, "The Image of Man", p.29.

QUESTIONNAIRE

1. **Name** :

    Male   *Female*

2. **Age** :

3. **City/Small Town/Village** :

4. **Educational Level** :

5. **Professional/Business** :

6. **Are you a (Please tick)** : a) Craftsman
                                     b) Small Industrialist
                                     c) Painter/Sculptor
                                     d) Any other.

7. **Religion** :

8. **If your answer is 'none' to 7 Why** :

9. **Do you actively practise your religion** : a) Yes
                                                    b) No
                                                    c) On Social occasions only

10. **Do you actively practise rituals** : a) Yes
                                              b) No
                                              c) Sometimes
                                              d) When stressed

11. **In 10, if you have ticked(c) or (d), explain** :

12. **Do you have religious symbols/ idols/pictures in your house** : a) Yes
                                                                         b) No

13. **If 'Yes', specify why/where** :

    If 'No', specify why/where :

14. **Does your house have a room for Puja/Worship/ Meditation** : a) Yes
    b) No
    c) A section of Living/Bed room

15. **If 'Yes' in 14, is the room** : a) Inherited and still used
    b) Inherited but not used
    c) Made by you and used regularly
    d) Used by you occasionally.

16. **Do you collect idols/ symbols originally religious If 'Yes', Why** : a) Aesthetic value
    b) As a collector
    c) For Worship
    d) 'Vastu' etc.
    e) Decoration of house
    f) Psychological strength

    [If more than one reason, tick all relevant boxes]

17. **If you collect, is it any specific idol/symbol** : a) Yes
    b) No - Any and All

18. **If (a) in (17), specify** : a) Which
    b) Why

19. **Do you like wearing clothes with religious motifs on them** : a) Yes
    b) No
    c) Do not notice particularly.

20. **If "Yes" in (19). Why** :

21. **If "No" in (19). Why** :

22. **Any other opinion about your attitude to religious icons/ idols/symbols/motifs** :

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46