

Swareshati – the Goddess of Knowledge (A Personal Perspective)

In early fifties I was a boy of 6 years of age, growing up in a provincial town Called Netrokuna on the bank of river Magra in the then East Pakistan. The town had a small Hindu majority. My father, a medical practitioner, was a prominent office bearer of the all ‘All Bengal communist party’ and our extended family, including a few relatives, practiced Islam and participated in all manner of rituals associated with it. This did not create any conflict between us and our father. Instead this difference in our beliefs generated occasional healthy discussion and arguments within the grownup family members. We celebrated Eid festivities through prayers and endless feasts. The joy for us was to attire ourselves with new clothes as presents from parents and relatives and to show off our elegance and style in such clothes to our friends and relatives. We also looked forward to Hindu pujas (worships of deities).



Pujas were part of the thirteen Hindu festive events within the twelve months of the Bangla calendar. Nobody told us that these were meant to be religious occasions only for the Hinds. We took it for granted that these festivities were part of our culture and for the whole community. Durga puja was the main and most elaborate festival amongst all. During 9 days of festivities the Hindus celebrate the victory of goddess Durga over the evil demon -Mohisha. On such occasions for pujas, pulsating sounds of drums, the haunting sound of conch, occasional ‘Ulu’ sounds (by the sideway movement of tongue) by ladies and the incessant recitals of mantra from their scriptures were inexorably alluring for me and the smell of incense (Dhup) added to the hypnotic intoxication that allured me to believe in supernatural powers that dictated our various aspects of lives. The temptation of sweetened rice and fruits as ‘proshads’ (the offering to the goddess) was, as I remember, was tastier than I had ever tested. Although less elaborate and less colourful than the festivities of Durga puja, the day of the ‘Sarwashati puja’, celebrating the birth of the ‘Devi’, was indeed a red- letter day for me. It was the fifth (ponchom) day of the Bangle month, Magh (Jan,- Feb.), the beginning of the spring season (Vasant) and therefore, the occasion is also widely known as the ‘Vasant Ponchomi’.

Sarwashati, according to Hindu mythology, having attributes of fathomless divine knowledge of art, culture, music and science, had helped one of the three godheads, Brama, the creator (other two being Shiva, the destroyer and Vishnu, the preserver) to create the Universe and all life forms. Among the later human species is the only one which had been bestowed with consciousness of its existence through the cultivation finer instincts. According to the legend, Brama developed a carnal desire for this elegant and most beautiful deity assistant. To ward off this desire from his mind Sarwashati Devi declared, “The goodness I offer must be for elevating the spirit and not for indulging the sense”. The form, in the name of Sarwashati, represents consciousness through the manifestation of finer and non-materialistic aspects of life. This is for lifting ‘man’ to a higher stratum, ‘Naro-Naryana’, which is close to the status of the gods and goddesses. According to myths, Brama was able to get rid of his carnal desire and accepted the spiritual aspects of the Devi and she then became his consort. Hindu scriptures mention the importance of knowledge gained

through meditation and by reading books of learned saints and luminaries. No wonder my father, despite his unpopular and controversial political belief, resorted to religious dicta, quoting Prophet Mohammed (pbh), “The ink of a learned person is holier than the blood of a martyr” and, “Go forth and take a journey to far away China to acquire knowledge”. I thought, China was too far away for me to walk from where I was. The next best thing for me to do was to make a few steps down the road to the nearby Mandir (Hindu temple for worship) with my precious few books for learning the alphabets and the numbers in my cloth bag. That was where all the children of the locality, irrespective of cast, creed and religion, took their school books and note books and lay them on the feet of the divinely beautiful, four-armed statue of Mother Sarwashati on the auspicious day of the puja. We all passionately believed that we would be blessed by the deity with knowledge, known in our language as, ‘Vidya’, which, we believed was hidden within the pages of the books. Acquiring knowledge through the pages of our precious few books was very important to us, so much so, that we had a swearing sentence for the breaking a promise or lying, “You will eat the ashes of your Vidya (books)”. Once agreeing to honour a commitment, or not to lie while under this oath, we never broke our promises or lied. To us acquiring knowledge was our ultimate goal and the way to ‘Nirvana’.

Hindu scriptures provide vehicles to fulfil all human desires in the form of deities, such as Ganesh for material good, Laski for inner tranquillity, Parvati for overall serenity, Shiva for strength and fertility, Durga for protection against evil etc and, of course Swareshti, for consciousness through the cultivation of knowledge and inculcation of fine arts. I wonder how many children these days know about this deity. I wonder if the ‘sanatan’ (old) practice of starting to teach the children to write first few words of their mother tongue on this auspicious day of ‘Vasanta Ponchomi’ still exists in our society! In the good old days ‘knowledge was for knowledge’s sake’, art was for art’s sake’ and the science was for science’s sake. The pursuit of excellence in the finer aspects of life, which make us ‘human’, is waning. The ever-engulfing materialism has eroded the desire for the pursuit of excellence in fine arts from our psyche and replaced this with the pursuit of material gain which, in turn, has given rise to a unquenchable thirst of greed for success. Knowledge is now universally considered to be a vehicle for qualifications to promote success in professional career. Art, music, philosophy etc are not for their own sakes anymore but for using such skills for earning a living or fame. While a profession is essential for earning a living, the art is also essential for our spiritual and emotional well being. The great saying, “Man cannot live by bread alone”, is more relevant today than ever before to stop a future human catastrophe. The famous psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung quoted in one of his essays, “It is not the earthquake, not the tidal bore, not the plague or carcinoma which threatens the existence of human race. Man is the greatest peril to himself, only because human psyche is unpredictable and unfathomable and there is no known remedy for some catastrophic psychic disorder”. Such illness has given rise to mass murders of innocent men and women and children in the materialistic societies of the western world. It is not an illness confined to an individual. In despot and crackpot leaders it may become infectious. The history bears witness of mental disorders of people (e.g. Hitler, Stalin Genghis Khan etc) being so contagious as to spread like forest fire, infecting the people of an entire nation, as was the case in Nazi Germany. Such infectious illness had caused catastrophic calamities and untold suffering to humanity. It is still happening now and has become globalized and politicized and in a macabre way has become sanitized and justified. There is, of course, no remedy for such psychic illness as postulated by Jung. But there is a precaution, i.e. a vaccine for this illness and this may be injected in our perverted psyche by inculcating and nurturing ‘Devi Swareshti’ in our lives, she belongs to all of us –

mankind of the entire world and not just to Hindus alone. Unless and until we understand what makes us 'human' through the pursuit of excellence in art, music, science and culture the psychic illness will infect modern man with vengeance and will spread like forest fire. The very auspicious occasion of 'Vasanta ponchomi' – Swarwasati puja offers us the opportunity to enjoy and lift our spirituality, as both are needed more than ever before, for our overall wellbeing. The latter has to be acquired through reflecting on ourselves, pondering as to what makes us human and what gives us inner peace.

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