

The History and Origin of the Durga Puja Festival

Durga Puja—the ceremonial worship of the mother goddess, is one of the most important festivals of India. Apart from being a religious festival for the Hindus, it is also an occasion for reunion and rejuvenation, and a celebration of traditional culture and customs. While the rituals entail ten days of fast, feast and worship, the last four days—Saptami, Ashtami, Navami, and Dashami—are celebrated with much gaiety and grandeur in India and abroad, especially in Bengal, where the ten-armed goddess riding the lion is worshipped with great passion and devotion.

Mythology: Rama's 'Akal Bodhan'

Durga Puja is celebrated every year in the Hindu month of Ashwin (September-October) and commemorates Prince Rama's invocation of the goddess before going to war with the demon king Ravana. This autumnal ritual was different from the conventional Durga Puja, which is usually celebrated in the springtime. So, this Puja is also known as 'akal-bodhan' or out-of-season ('akal') worship ('bodhan'). Thus goes the story of Lord Rama, who first worshipped the 'Mahishasura Mardini' or the slayer of the buffalo-demon, by offering 108 blue lotuses and lighting 108 lamps, at this time of the year.

Origin and History

The first grand worship of Goddess Durga in recorded history is said to have been celebrated in the late 1500s. Folklores say the landlords, or zamindar, of Dinajpur and Malda initiated the first Durga Puja in Bengal. According to another source, Raja Kangsharayan of Taherpur or Bhabananda Mazumdar of Nadiya organized the first Sharadiya or Autumn Durga Puja in c. 1606. The origin of the community puja can be credited to the twelve friends of Guptipara in Hoogly, West Bengal, who collaborated and collected contributions from local residents to conduct the first community puja called the 'baro-yaari' puja, or the 'twelve-pal' puja, in 1790. The baro-yaari puja



was brought to Kolkata in 1832 by Raja Hari-nath of Cossimbazar, who performed the Durga Puja at his ancestral home in Murshidabad from 1824 to 1831, notes Somendra Chandra Nandy in 'Durga Puja: A Rational Approach' published in The Statesman Festival, 1991.

"The baro-yaari puja gave way to the sarba-janin or community puja in 1910, when the Sanatan Dharmotsahini Sabha organized the first truly community puja in Baghbazar in Kolkata with full public contribution, public control, and public participation. Now the dominant mode of Bengali Durga Puja is the 'public' version," write M. D. Muthukumaraswamy and Molly Kaushal in Folklore, Public Sphere, and Civil Society. The institution of the community Durga Puja in the 18th and the 19th century Bengal contributed vigorously to the development of Hindu Bengali culture.

British Involvement in Durga Puja

The research paper further indicates that: "high level British officials regularly attend Durga Pujas organized by influential Bengalis and British soldiers actually participate in the pujas, have praised, and even salute the deity, but 'the most amazing act of worship was performed by the East India Company itself: in 1765 it offered a thanksgiving Puja, no doubt as a politic act to appease its Hindu subjects, on obtaining the Diwani of Bengal.'" (Sukanta Chaudhuri, ed. Calcutta: the Living City, Vol. 1: The Past) And it is reported that even the Company auditor-general John Chips organized Durga Puja at his Birbhum office. In fact, the full official participation of the British in the Durga Puja continued till 1840, when a law was promulgated by the government banning such participation."

In 1911, with the shifting of the capital of British India to Delhi, many Bengalis migrated to the city to work in government offices. The first Durga Puja in Delhi was held in c. 1910, when it was performed by ritually consecrating the 'mangal kalash' symbolizing the deity. This Durga Puja, which celebrates its centennial in 2009, is also known as the Kashmere Gate Durga Puja, currently organized by the Delhi Durga Puja Samiti in the lawns of Bengali Senior Secondary School, Alipur Road, Delhi.

Evolution of the 'Pratima' and the 'Pandal'

The traditional icon of the goddess worshipped during the Durga Puja is in line with the iconography delineated in the scriptures. In Durga, the Gods bestowed their powers to co-create a beautiful goddess with ten arms, each carrying their most lethal weapon. The tableau of Durga also features her four children—Kartikkeya, Ganesha, Saraswati, and Lakshmi. Traditional clay image of Durga, or pratima, made of clay with all five gods and goddesses under one structure is known as 'ek-chala' ('ek' = one, 'chala' = cover).

There are two kinds of embellishments that are used on clay—sholar saaj and daker saaj. In the former, the pratima is traditionally decorated with the white core of the shola reed which grows within marshlands. As the devotees grew wealthier, beaten silver (rangta) was used. The silver used to be imported from Germany and was delivered by post (dak). Hence the name daker saaj.

The huge temporary canopies—held by a framework of bamboo poles and draped with colorful fabric—that house the icons are called 'pandals.' Modern pandals are innovative, artistic and decorative at the same time, offering a visual spectacle for the numerous visitors who go 'pandal-hopping' during the four days of Durga Puja.

By Prakash Shrivastava

Raju was walking home from school, his heart brimming with pride and excitement. In his hands, he held a shining citation and a neatly wrapped prize—tokens of his victory in the district-level painting competition. The entire school had erupted in applause when his name was announced, and for the first time, he felt the sweet taste of accomplishment. His friends patted his back, his teachers smiled warmly, and Raju could not wait to share the news with his parents. He imagined their joy, the pride on their faces, and the warm words of praise they would shower on him. However, the reality that awaited Raju was quite different.

A Mother's Dismissal

As Raju entered the modest home, his mother, Arti, was busy sweeping the floor. He called out, "Ma, look! I won!" Holding the citation aloft, his face glowed with anticipation. Arti glanced up briefly, offering a distracted smile before returning to her chores.

"That's nice, Raju," she said in an absent-minded tone, barely glancing at the paper.

Raju's enthusiasm faltered. He tried again, holding up the prize. "Look, Ma, I even got a prize!" His voice held a hopeful edge, but Arti's attention remained fixed on her work. "That's good," she murmured, not pausing.

The joy that had filled Raju's heart just moments ago faded, leaving a dull ache. He knew why. He had always struggled below average in tests. His parents valued academic success above all, and his achievements in painting, sports, or anything outside the classroom never seemed to matter. Though he tried not to show it, Raju was deeply hurt.

A Troubled Game

Determined not to dwell on his mother's reaction, Raju grabbed his cricket bat and

RAJU'S UNEXPECTED CELEBRATION



headed to the playground. Cricket was his sanctuary, a place where he excelled. His friends greeted him with excitement, expecting him to deliver a brilliant performance.

"Raju, we're counting on you to hit a century today!" one of them said eagerly.

Raju nodded, gripping his bat tightly as he stepped up to the crease. But the disappointment from earlier clouded his mind, and as the first ball came toward him, he misjudged it completely. The ball knocked over his stumps with a clean strike. Raju was out.

The field fell silent in shock and disbelief. Raju couldn't live up to expectations for the remainder of the game. His bowling and fielding were also poor that day. Raju's friends tried to comfort him: "It wasn't our day, Raju," they said. After the game was over, Raju trudged off with his head bowed. He couldn't shake the feeling of failure that had settled deep within him.

A Mother's Realization

Back at home, Arti contin-

ued sweeping when something caught her eye on the floor. It was the citation Raju had been (trying so hard so proud to show her. She picked it up, curious, and read the

words carefully: "First Place – District Level Painting Competition." The realization hit her hard. Her mind drifted back to the traffic training program where Raju had received another certificate—one that she had also dismissed without a second thought. The District Police had conducted a traffic awareness campaign involving school and college students from the city. Raju participated enthusiastically; he took part in awareness rallies, talked to commuters who drove recklessly, and convinced them to follow traffic rules. At the end of the campaign, the Police Commissioner issued him a letter of appreciation. Senior officers praised him for his diligence and hard work in the felicitation ceremony and his name and photo also appeared in the local newspaper.

Everyone praised Raju, but his parents remained unaffected. A few days later, when Arti was selling old newspapers to a junk dealer, she no-



ticed Raju's traffic certificate among the discarded papers. She picked it up and carefully placed it in the cupboard. Yet, even at that moment, she didn't feel it necessary to acknowledge Raju's achievement.

A Surprise Unfolds

Determined to make amends, Arti sprang into action. She decorated the small living room with bright streamers and balloons, called a few close friends and neighbors, and arranged a small celebration in honor of Raju's achievement.

When Raju returned home, tired and dejected, he was stunned to see the house transformed. Laughter and chatter filled the room, and the air smelled of his favorite sweets. His friends and family were gathered, waiting to celebrate.

"Ma, what's all this?" he asked, bewildered.

Arti walked up to him, tears glistening in her eyes. "We are celebrating you, Raju," she said, pulling him into a tight

hug. "I'm so proud of you. Your teacher called and told me how hard you worked and how talented you are. I should have seen it earlier. You are brilliant, and we all are so proud of you."

A Moment of Joy

Raju's face lit up with a mixture of surprise and happiness. The ache in his heart melted away, replaced by pure joy. For the first time, he felt seen and appreciated by the one person whose acknowledgment meant the most to him.

As the celebration unfolded, Raju laughed with his friends and basked in the warmth of his family's pride. The disappointment of the day was forgotten, replaced by a memory he would cherish forever—a memory of love, recognition, and the simple, profound joy of being celebrated.

At that moment, Raju knew he was more than his academic struggles. He was talented, valued, and most importantly, loved.

