“The greatness of a culture can be found in its festival.” In every person’s heart, be it a child, a teenager or an adult, there is a festival that they enjoy the most. This festival holds a special place in their heart and they eagerly wait for its arrival throughout the year. In India, a country full of different cultures, religions, and people, we have a festival every month, and the entire country celebrates it together with love, warmth and happiness. The festive season of India is earmarked by the spirit of worship. We have a multitude of festivals which are unique, fun, and significant but for most of us, the people who live in Bengal, Durga Puja simply stands out.

The beginning of Durga puja is marked by “Mahalaya”. “Mahalaya” marks the beginning of “Devi Paksha” –the time of the Goddess. According to legend the Durga puja we celebrate today is actually known as “Akal Bodhon” – Untimely Summon. According to the “Ramayana” Lord Rama had summoned Goddess Durga to seek her blessings before going to war with the mighty “Rakhyasa Raja” – Demon king Ravana. It is very rare to find a Bengali person who has never heard “Mahalaya path” – recitation of the scriptures of “Mahalaya”, on the radio in the iconic voice of Birendra Krishna Bhadra. During this time Kolkata is decorated like a new bride. The roads are full of lights. There are pandals everywhere. Street food. Fairs and theme pujas. Durga puja is celebrated over the course of 10 days, starting from “Prathama” to “Dashami”, with the main festivities ranging from “Sashti” to “Dashami”. Durga puja is one of the most elaborate festivals in India and maybe in the world too! Durga puja also marks the starting of shopping season. Everyone buys new clothes during this time. The festivities begin from “Mahalaya”, where the devotees request Goddess Durga to come to the earth. On this day, they make the eyes on the statue of the Goddess during an auspicious ceremony named “Chokkhu Daan”. After establishing the idol of Goddess Durga in place, they perform rituals to raise her blessed presence into the idols on “Saptami”. These rituals are called “Pran Pratisthan”.

The Durga puja is a festival that symbolizes the victory of good over evil. Goddess Durga is the manifestation of solidarity or ‘shakti’ that prevails upon the evil presence. During Durga puja, Kolkata is beautifully decorated with lighting and decorations. India and the culture of its people are wonderfully displayed at their best for the world with all the pandals, food and rituals. The colorful pandals and sparkling lights make every corner of the city light up. People go ‘pandal hopping’ for the duration of the night. Everyone celebrates with extraordinary festivity.

Everyone celebrates and enjoys this festival together irrespective of their caste and financial status. Durga Puja is a communal and theatrical celebration. Traditional dance and cultural performances are an important part of celebration. The streets of Kolkata are filled with food stalls and shops are crammed with delicious traditional food, where several locals and foreigners enjoy mouth-watering food items. To celebrate Durga Puja, everyone comes together to celebrate it with their family and community. People forget their past differences and start anew. After the immersion people embrace one another as a token of love and affection and distribute sweets among all. The festival teaches us that good always wins over evil and that we should always follow the right path.