

Mahalaya, the onset of Durga Puja celebration is of great excitement for Bengalis around the world. It also brings the memory of my childhood every year at this time I revisit my childhood, when early morning at 4.30 am, a mesmerizing audio program makes you open your eyes wide but with a broad smile on your face with the excitement that puja is round the corner. Your heart fills you with such an excitement that you don't care about the darkness and chillness outside with the environment which is full with fog and the sunrise is yet to happen giving you the alarm that winter is around. But you don't care about anything , just jump out of the bed and hear the broadcast of "Mahishasura Mardini" the sound of which is coming from every house in your society.

Mahalaya is an auspicious occasion for Bengalis, marking the beginning of the much-awaited festival, Durga Puja. This day holds immense significance and is celebrated with great enthusiasm. Mahalaya occurs on the Amavasya, the last day of the dark fortnight (Pitri Paksha) in the month of Ashwin, just a week before Durga Puja. It's a time when Bengalis come together to pay homage to their ancestors and invoke the goddess Durga.

**1. Remembering Ancestors:** Mahalaya is a day when Bengalis offer their heartfelt tributes to their forefathers through the ritual of 'Tarpan.'which involves offering water and "tarpan mantras" to honor the departed souls. It is an essential part of Mahalaya.

- Family members collectively perform Tarpan. They fill a "tarpan vessel" with water and use "kusha" grass to make offerings.
- While making the offerings, they chant specific mantras, seeking peace for their ancestors' souls.

Families visit the holy riverbanks and offer water to the departed souls, seeking their blessings and forgiveness for any shortcomings.

- Apart from water, it is customary to offer food to the ancestors during Mahalaya. This "pinda pradana" consists of rice and sesame seeds mixed with milk and sugar. The offerings are made on "koor" (a plate made from leaves).
- The belief is that these offerings nourish the souls of the departed and help them in their journey in the afterlife.
- Lighting oil lamps is another common practice during Mahalaya. It symbolizes the light that guides the ancestors on their journey to the heavenly abode.
- Families often place these lamps near the water bodies where the Tarpan is performed.

This act symbolizes the deep respect for their ancestors and the belief in their eternal presence.

**2. The Arrival of the Goddess:** Mahalaya marks the moment when the goddess Durga, along with her children, begins her journey to Earth. It's believed that on this day, the goddess starts her descent from Kailash, the abode of Lord Shiva, to answer the prayers of her devotees. The 'Chokkhudaan' or painting of the goddess's eyes on this day is a significant event. It breathes life into the idols and is an exciting countdown to the festival.

**3. Mahishasura Mardini:** The most iconic and cherished part of Mahalaya is the 'Mahishasura Mardini.' This is a mesmerizing audio program that is broadcasted on the radio. This program has been broadcast since the 1930s. It narrates the tale of Goddess Durga's triumph over the demon Mahishasura, signifying the victory of good over evil. Listening to the sonorous recitation by the legendary Birendra Krishna Bhadra early in the morning is a tradition that has been cherished for decades. It stirs the emotions and fills every Bengali heart with devotion and excitement.

**4. The Beginning of Festive Preparations:** With Mahalaya, the festive spirit awakens in every Bengali household. It's a signal to start the preparations for Durga Puja. People clean their homes, shop, buy new clothes, prepare lots of sweets and indulge in the anticipation of the grand celebrations ahead. The air is filled with the scent of new clothes, and the markets bustle with activity.

**5. Uniting the Community:** Durga Puja is not just a festival; it's an emotion that brings the entire Bengali community together. Mahalaya serves as a precursor to this togetherness. It instills a sense of belonging and unity among Bengalis, and it's a time when communities organize 'agomoni' programs to welcome the goddess with music, dance, and cultural performances.

In essence, Mahalaya is the awakening of a Bengali's soul, a call to reconnect with their roots, when people remember their ancestors, perform rituals to honor them, and anticipate the arrival of Goddess Durga. It's a time of reflection, spiritual connection, and cultural celebration with a promise of joy, celebration, and togetherness. It is a day filled with devotion, love, and eagerness for the grand festivities of Durga Puja, which is not just a festival but a way of life for Bengalis.

In today's busy life our younger generation are not that enthusiastic to enjoy the same vibes or rather I would say they don't get the opportunity to feel the culture of ours, which we used to enjoy in our childhood days, especially when you are away from your native. We also start to miss our hometown, the festive environment, the homemade varieties of Bengali sweets (different types of muwa, shondesh, malpua, payesh, langcha and many more), the excitement, the decoration, the eagerness with which we used to start the countdown of the arrival of Maa Durga. Remembering Rabindranath Tagore's poem - "Eseche Sarat Himer Paras". Every Bengali's heart starts to fill with enthusiasm and joy on this day of Mahalaya as they know Goddess Durga is coming to fill their life with positive energy and happiness.