



# INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL AND CULTURAL STUDIES INDIA

## NEWSREEL

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### MESSAGE FROM

### DIRECTOR'S DESK



This autumn segment conjures a discrete flavour as it brings a teaser of footslog of pandemic and calamities impeding festive ardours ...

The slim but dense ISCS's Bi-Monthly Bulletins over last few months have truly been an interesting browse to the readers. The Institute engaged multi-sectoral writers allowing them to braid profoundly multiple strands of dynamic narratives over wide precincts of culture, politics and power.

All the issues so far published have accorded Institute's readers an agility to recognize and learn about stimulating arguments, future indictments, marshalling economy, defence, environmental sustainability and considerable searing insights to other such interdisciplinary resources altogether.

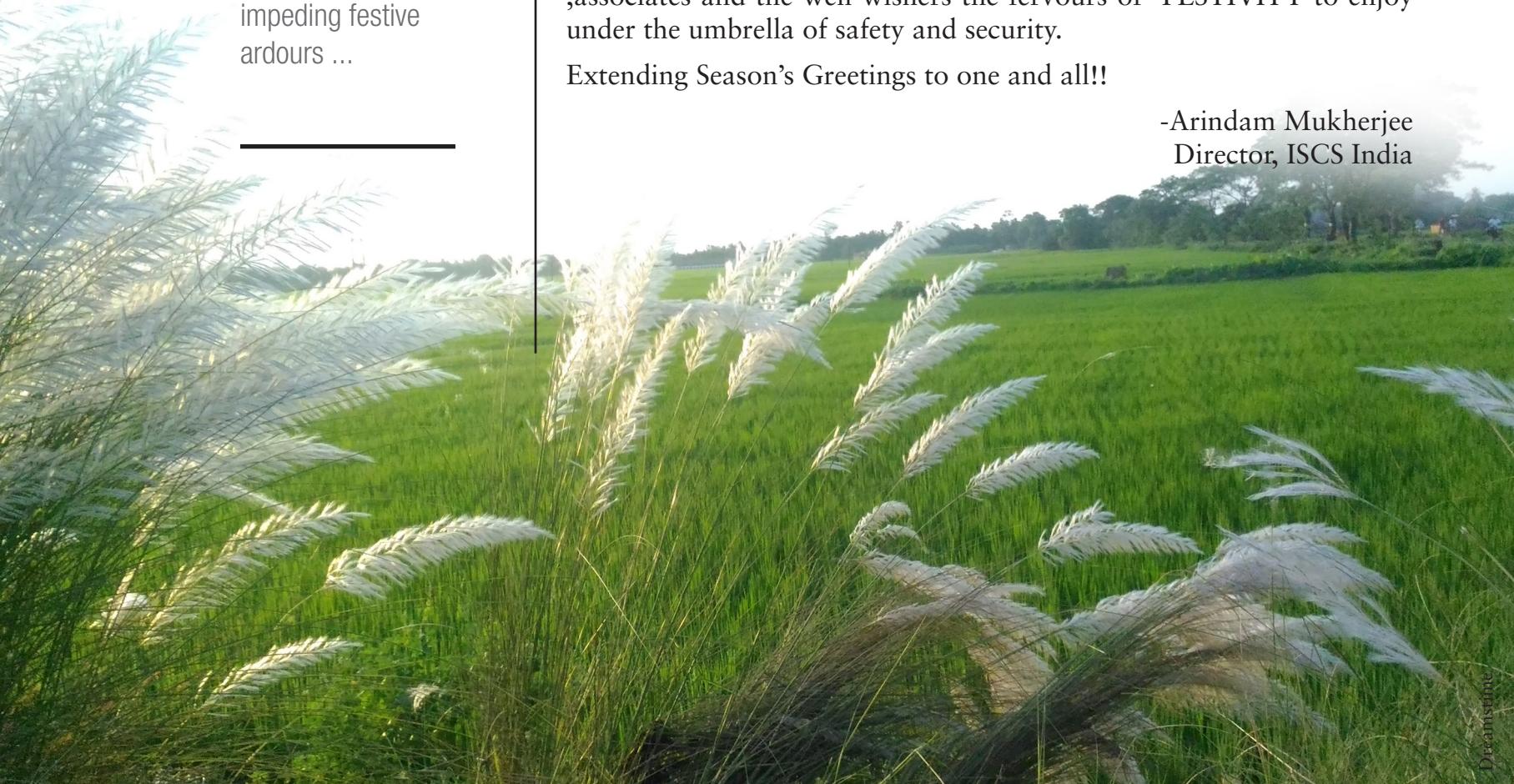
This autumn segment conjures a discrete flavour as it brings a teaser of footslog of pandemic and calamities impeding festive ardours and its co-related factors at transcontinental level- over exquisite stories from the past along with contemporary snippets and interviews.

This special festive edition highlights that in order to slog over the caveats of COVID-19, what and how the arbitrary initiatives are taken by communities being elated with the conventional rituals and practices in the unconventional situation.

ISCS wishes each of its members, readers, stakeholders, followers, associates and the well wishers the fervours of FESTIVITY to enjoy under the umbrella of safety and security.

Extending Season's Greetings to one and all!!

-Arindam Mukherjee  
Director, ISCS India





Durga Puja in West Bengal has been a center of attraction involving year long preparation, months of hard work for creating the beautiful *pandals* and the idols. The five days celebration coupled with the indomitable energy, pulsating to the rhythm of *Dhaaks*, sleepless nights, orgy of street food comes to a grand ceremonial end with the immersion of the cherished idol in the water bodies. We are back into the reality of routine life with the setting minds ready for the next year's festivity again!!

This year the scenario is different. The arrival of *Devi Durga* is approaching near ,only few days are left!!! But the run-up for her arrival is plunged in gloom. Even after the *Khuti Puja* which is a customary ritual before the bamboo scaffolding for Puja is under the veil of uncertainty due to pandemic named COVID continuing to loom over.

*Durga Puja*, the biggest festival in Bengal is not only a religious festival of worshipping 10 armed goddess representing divine power over all the evils but also a time for generosity, hospitality, dissolving differences, family gatherings, broaching the age old religious tradition and pride of vintage families. Yes, it works for strengthening religious harmony as there is no bar of entry for people having different religious belief.

*Durga Puja* is celebrated twice a year in West Bengal and many other states of India as also other parts of the world. According to Hindu religious scriptures, the conventional worship of *Devi Durga* falls in the Bengali month of *Chaitra* and is called *Basanti(Durga)* Puja. However, the autumnal ritual, known as *Akaal Bodhan*, is more popular and widely celebrated around different continents of the world in the Bengali month of *Ashwin* as per Hindu almanac (*Panjika*).It is believed that Goddess *Durga*, the slayer of Mahisasura, was first worshipped in autumn by Lord Rama before going for war against *Ravana*. Lord Rama invoked the blessings of Goddess *Durga* by performing *Chandi Homa*, offering 108 blue lotuses and lighting 108 lamps. It was on the *Ashwin Shukla Dashami* when Lord Rama was blessed by the Goddess and attained triumph by killing *Ravana*. There is also a belief that *Durga Puja* is observed as the welcoming celebration of Goddess *Durga* who visits her mother's home in this earth and goes back to her husband Lord *Shiva* after 10 days.

History records that grand celebration of *Durga Puja* began in late 1500. There are many folk tales about the first *Durga Puja* in Bengal. Raja Kangsha Narayan of Tahirpur organized the first autumn Durga Puja in Bengal. Tahirpur is now a municipal town of Bagmara

## BIRTH OF COVID-19 ON THE FESTIVE RHYTHMS OF DURGA PUJA\*





Dreamstime

*Khuti Puja, memories@ 2018, Howrah*

Upazila under the district of Rajshahi of Bangladesh. Another story says that the landlords or zamindars of Dinajpur and Malda initiated the first *Atchala Durga Puja* in Bengal.

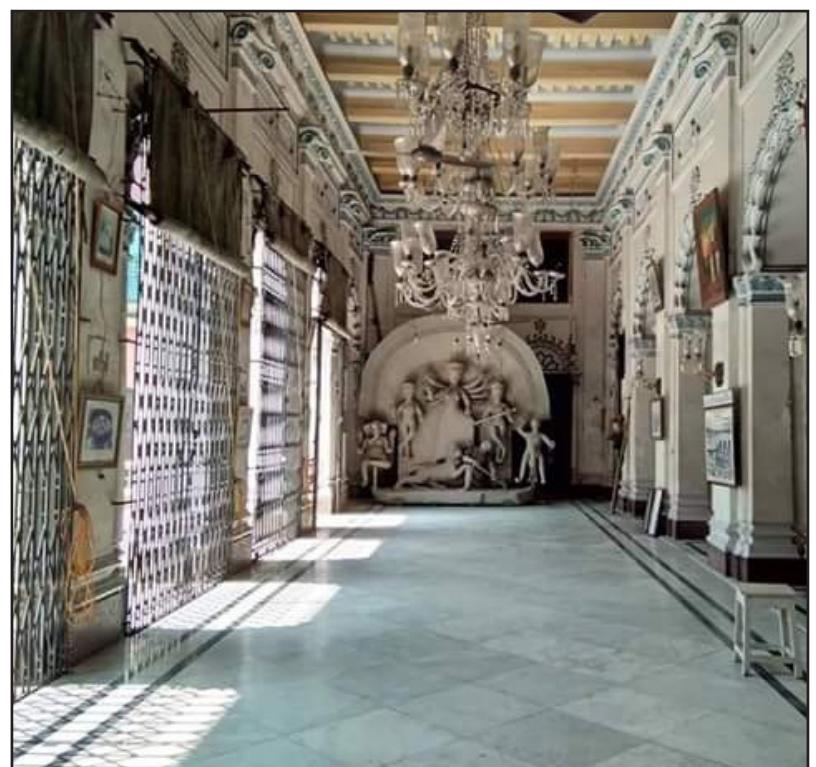
### Sovabazar Rajbari

There is another view that the first grand Puja was organized by Raja Nabakrishna Deb of Calcutta in honour of Lord Clive in 1757. Although this time the COVID's restriction seems to trim the grand celebration of 231 years of *Durga Puja* of Kolkata's *Shobhabazar*



Arindam Mukherjee

*Durga Mandap, Taherpur, Bangladesh*



*Takur dalan, Choto Taraf, Sovabazar Rajbari*



*Choto Taraf*, started by Raj Krishna Deb, son of Raja Naba Krishna Deb roughly around 1790.

Shri Debashish Deb, a descendant of the family revealed through correspondence that this time the '*Choto Taraf Durga puja*' will strictly abide by the mandates of Social Distancing due to uproar of pandemic. Thus the worship of Goddess Durga who is considered as a Daughter, visiting family once a year will be meeting only family members with security cards, wearing masks, sanitized hands and subjects to thermal screening. Deb, further added that the age old traditions of freeing *Neelkantha Birds*, as a messenger, sharing news of the arrival of *Devi Durga* to Lord Shiva and preparations of 52 various dry forms of food and offerings will not be observed due to various circumstantial and other situation. This time the dread of pandemic has dampened the enthusiasm for preparations. The phenomena of social distancing has been the focal point right from the *Katham Puja* during *Ulta Rath*, and will remain significantly all the same throughout the festive time. Since they are compelled to cut short the usual pomp and show during immersion, where Goddess is usually being carried by 26 people, this time the size and the width of the idol which is usually 13fts in heights and 9fts in breadth are reduced to enable the use of trolley with not more than 8 carriers. A strict measure will be taken to ensure that the materials brought from outside for the puja are well sanitized especially flowers which will be provided by the family during *Pushpanjali*(offering prayers and flowers) to be conducted in multiple batches with less people. Unlike many others, Goddess in this household is being offered dry rice, sugar, sweets and snacks which will also be limited as the team of people who are involved in preparing these items, following the age old traditions are brought from Midnapur District of Bengal and due to irregular transport services and travel restrictions, the family is doubtful about their participation this time.

Even though we are surrounded with restrictions and apprehensions our prayers resonate for the blessings of Goddess so that the –“*Pandemic and fear of Pandemic should wash off, social distancing should dissolve. People should congregate with a feel of oneness soon again*”- Sri Debasish Deb, Member of “*Shobhabazar RajBari, Choto Taraf*” opines.

#### The legacy of Saborno Roy Choudhury's

The history of Kolkata or the colonial Calcutta will remain incomplete without mentioning the legacy of

Saborno Roy Choudhurys. The family had link with almost all major historical events of Kolkata. Right from the construction of the first road, first pucca house, leasing of Kalikata's Sutanuti and Gobindopur to the British, construction of Kalighat Temple complex to the point as to legate one of the oldest *Durga Pujas* in the town, in the year 1610, the trend of worshipping Mother *Durga* and her four children together in one *Chalchitra*(one single frame) the role of this family was pivotal. A conversation with Sri. Probal Roychoudhury, the scion of this renowned family, now responsible for upholding the tradition and customs of 411 years in purest form said, '*Durga Puja* is not only unique but it is a fusion of history, heritage and tradition that has been touched upon by the family for centuries. The rituals are followed as per the notations of *Durga Bhakti Tarangini* by Bidyapati. However, with the time the grandeur of the Puja is faded, the rippling of chandeliers drawing light and energy are tarnished, changes like no animal sacrifice has been welcomed. Despite challenges due to pandemic this time, in 1918 & 1919 during the outbreak of Spanish Flu even, the tradition of *Durga Puja* was not withheld. Goddess was and will be worshipped with utmost belief, faith and adulations. Thus the pandemic called COVID-19 will nowhere be able to hinder the indomitable spirit of this age old tradition of the family.



*Durgotsav of Barisha Baro Bari  
(Saborno Roy Choudhury Paribar), 1925*



The preparations have already been started, from *Janmasthami* itself with *Kathamopuja*, with buffing dust and burnishing doors and corridors. Shri Roychoudhury discerns that the rituals will be solemnized with utmost precaution and sanitization. The importance will be given to distancing measures, and the offerings to the Goddess will be homemade including the flowers. The in house garden- plucked flowers will be used for *puja* this time. He added that the impact of the COVID-19 is visible especially with regards to the height and size of the idol as less artisans are involved due to the risk of susceptibility.

*“Though the Puja will be of small scale without any claim or proclaim the prayers for Goddess will be to take care of all her children and eradicate the pandemic at the earliest.”*- Shri Probal Roy Chowdhury, descendant of Saborno Roy Chowdhury comments. His voice echoed beyond the tales of casted iron balustrades of double stair cases, ornate ceilings, European Style *Verandahs*, semi-circular balconys and quadrangle courtyard with *Thakur Dalan*.

This *Dalan* is standing till date as a live witness of lavish *Durga Pujas*, memorable social gatherings epitomizing the opulence of past Calcutta through the palatial mansions of these conventional families. Though with time the ruined tor of these mansions has been a subject of various socio-economic transitions, this time it is shackled a bit more with the clauses of COVID.

### Guptipara “Baro-Yaari” puja

An away day nurturing makes me managing my eyes to the narratives of *Durga Puja* in West Bengal, the chronicles of first community Puja in the form of *Jagadhatri Puja* (another form of *Devi Durga*) was worshipped as “*Bindyabashini*” in 1758, 262 years back. The most popular myth compounding the community Puja credits the consortium of 12 friends of Guptipara in Hoogly district of West Bengal, who collected contributions from the local residents to conduct the first community or “*Baro-Yaari Puja*” indexing as “*Twelve-Pal Puja*”. It was this “*Baro-Yaari*” puja that later set the trend of *Sarbojanin Puja* or *Community Puja* since 1910. The first of its kind was performed by *Sanatan Dharmotsahini Sabha* at Balaram Bose Ghat Street, Bhowanipore, Kolkata, and down the line has become the dominant form. With the innovative ideas and extravaganza the community *Durga Pujas* have been able to draw global attention elaborating the spirit of oneness. Such community gatherings not only tie one

with another over faith and ritualistic practices but also transpire the message of love and humanity, aspiring to rise above the narrow division of caste, class, religion and ideology.



Baro-Yaari puja mandap, Guptipara

### Kumartuli

*Durga Puja* is celebrated in lot of cities, countries and continents, but what makes it unique in Kolkata is the artistic presentation that transforms the city to an Art Expo. The uniqueness in every theme and the spirit of creativity out of freedom of artistic expression along with the revival of traditions, forgotten myths and mythologies, array of inherited forms of craftwork, diversifications and contemporary outlooks applied to portray the Goddess make altogether spectacular. The thematic idea also focuses on concurrent issues like environment, climate change, women empowerment and world affairs transmuting *pandals* to a sentient agent ferrying messages, concerns and awareness amongst the onlookers. Thus community *Durga Puja* gets etched in public mind because of grand looks, crowd pulling caliber and accolades as also harps on attaining economic augmentation amongst rural artisans, who use their traditional skills and creativity in designing and building temporary pavilion as a house of Deity. For artisans *Durga Puja* is more than just a creative outlet, it is an opportunity to improve lives and social status, typically for a pair of hands working in shifts everyday for four to five months prior to festivals. Their unique and unrivaled charisma of art, imagination and professional strokes on idol and decorations on marquees enable the *Durga Puja* Committees to bid awards, attract sponsorships and most importantly fascinate the spectators worldwide.

The question that continues to dawdle- Will the aggressive cloud of pandemic envelope the livelihood of craftsman and artisans, depending widely on



such exuberance of festive season to fulfill their year round rudimentary exigencies? Will they succumb to COVID-19?

A fleeting visit to Kumartuli, a hub of idol makers which should have been alive and in full swing as *Durga Puja* is just a knock away, revealed a bleak emptiness this year as sweltering of Corona and thrashes of Amphan had suffocated survivability of this potters' colony in the northern part of the city. A conversation with a lady idol maker Mrs. Meenakshi Pal who challenged patriarchy and now schlepping the hundred year old family profession stated that the potters colony is reeling under the mounting loss due to cancellation



Kankana Roy

Meenakshi Pal and her associates at Kumartuli

calls of idol booking that triggered for lock down during peak booking months this year. Pal added that from *Basanti* and *Annapurna Puja* heralding the festive season marked a stygian situation for numerous hands engaged in shaping idols and thereby earning breads. The

situation remained grim without much improvement even after number of phases of unlock. Even *Durga Puja* Committees are delved with uncertainties. Therefore we have hardly received orders, and what we have, there are persistent demands to reduce the shape and size, not exceeding more than 8fts in height and 5fts in width so that the installation and immersion of such idols will involve less people to keep the social distancing norms tight in place. Moreover, there are hardly any orders coming from UK, US and Australia as they remain worst hit nations. The dearth of orders from foreign countries have created financial dent. Further, the demand of sanitization and special protection wraps increase the charges on shipment to other states and countries excessively. The Covid containment measures of lock and unlock have resulted challenges in procurement of materials, along with perpetual paucity of studio space, and measures of self-distancing have tethered creativity and efficiency of craftsman remarkably.

**“Cancellation of orders, slush in price of idols due to reduced shapes and sizes, shortfalls of human resources have put the existence and sustainability of hundreds of artisans at Kumartuli into question mark. Measures like serving food and visits followed with disenchanted promises cannot sink the dystrophies meted due to pandemic and natural calamity this year- The monetary measures should be piped in to preserve the artery of this living history hereafter”.** -Meenakshi Pal, Idol Maker Kumartuli comments.

### Kolkata Pujas

The hazards of COVID-19 hardly foists any silver lining on the Community *Durgotsav*. The discussion with renowned theme maker, whose creative endeavors have made *Pujas* of Lake Town, Ahiritola, Hatibagan and Lalabagan very appealing, revealed the fact .



Prashanta Pal said that this year creating a theme puja is a huge challenge due to 70 to 80% reduction in the budget, lack of sponsorship and stringent pandemic guidelines. He elucidated that instead of extravaganza, *Puja* committees are now inclined to solemnize the *puja* with basic rituals and practices. Certain measures have been adopted –firstly the *pandal* décor is made simple so that it drags less people and less artisans are involved- almost half as compared to the previous years. Mandatory COVID tests were conducted before involving artisans, facilities are provided so that they are less exposed to the outer world as long as they are occupied with the construction of *pandals*. We have made sanitizers and masks a must for them. “As theme makers we do understand the economic strain of the



artisans, hence the ones who are not involved this time will be engaged during *Jagadhatri Puja* which is in the pipeline, hitting in the next month. In order to void community transmission, we are stressing on Digital *Darshans* or *Darshans on Wheels* this year”

**Anirban Das-** His unique frame of art featuring contemporary realities has always been a crowd puller of some famous *pujas* in the city, The Chetla Agrani, Dum Dum Park and Behala Friends colony did feature his artful presentation. He recalled that previous year during this time the work was in full swing, whereas this time we are uncertain whether and how the *Puja* will be conducted. Apart from sticking to strict COVID guidelines and cost effective attributes in theme *pujas*, emphasis is given to ensure the health and safety of artisans involved. The *Puja* themes in every sense will represent the adversities of Corona. At the same time it will also transmute a ray of hope that the country after a long dark night is responding to the calls of normalcy by following the unlock norms in their everyday routine. Various forms and shades of environmental crafts will be used and their placements too will ensure social distancing norms!

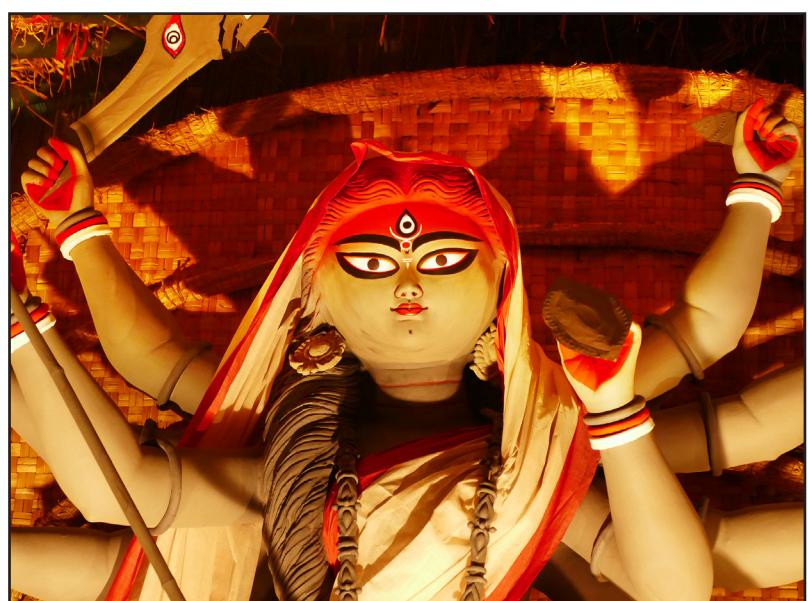
**Tala Baroari Puja** celebrating centenary year is also plunged with uncertainties. Committee members nodded, Yes, there will be *Puja* but not on grand scale. The guidelines will be observed definitely. The challenge is to ensure that the COVID-19 mandates issued by Government of West Bengal are fulfilled without any chaos!



Tala Baroari

Heerak Nandi

**Nepal Bhattacharya Street Durga Puja:** Abhijit Bose, a member of the Committee mentioned that there will be *Durga Puja* but with limited resources and precautions. Initiatives like giant screen, sufficient place for the movement of cars and bikes are designed so that commuters without stopping can see the Deity. *Durga puja* for us is an occasion to stand beside socially ostracized and economically challenged people. We ensure that they become a part of our celebration every year. This year also we will invite members and students from Blind schools to inaugurate the *puja*. We will extend support to members of Red Light area, slums and also residents of old age home by providing food and essentials.



Nepal Bhattacharya Street Sarbojonin 2019

Heerak Nandi

“We have considered this year Durga Puja as a Challenge and we are ready to accept it. We will try our best to observe all the rituals and practices and make the promises fulfilled, without endangering or affecting anyone”- Abhijit Bose of Nepal Bhattacharya Street Durga Puja asserts.

**Shiv Mandir Durga Puja :** Partha Ghosh believes that though *Durga Puja* is going to be very different this year, it should definitely be done as it will enable people to scrap the fear in their minds about the pandemic. The fear and panic surrounding COVID is hampering the mental peace. Though remaining affixed to sanitization measures will continue for long we should try at least mentally to come back to normalcy. Shub Mandir Puja committee like others is taking appropriate measures-artisans involved have undergone Covid test, and likely to undergo a second round before leaving for homes so that they can carry the negative certificate with them



and do not face any trouble and discrimination on return to their villages. However, if anybody is tested positive then *Puja* Committee will take the responsibility for his treatment. This year the theme and *puja* itself will not be something grand but through pandal décor, advertisements more stress will be given on spreading awareness of pandemic, precautions censuring myths and prejudices compounding pandemic.

"Durga Puja and its celebration has become an identity of West Bengal , despite multiple challenges we will not leave any stone unturned to preserve this global identity-once identity is cleaved it will be difficult to treasure it later on"- Partha Ghosh, Shiv Mandir Durga Puja Committee confirms.



### Puja in North Bengal

A telephonic conversation with Sri Subhashish Sengupta, Secretary -Nipendra Narayan Hall's 106 years old Durga Puja at Sree Mandir, Darjeeling divulged his concern about the *Puja*. The wave of health calamity has also exerted brakes on the enthusiasm of celebrations in this region. He said that the puja cannot be stopped but without sponsorship and support it will be difficult for them this time. *Durga Puja* in regions of Darjeeling is a manifestation of community solidarity as

Bengalees, Nepalees, Tibetans Marwaris and many other community members assemble for prayers. The Idol for the *puja* is usually purchased from Kumartuli, and brought by the committee members personally but this year we are preferring shipments with strict sanitization measures. This year the utmost importance is given on sanitization, and *Bhog* will be served accordingly.

Sengupta's voice reiterates the words of other organisers- 'We only wish that the period of crisis soon be dissolved, only prayers can save the world and help Darjeeling to return to its tunes filled with warmth, togetherness and enlightenment'.

Ramkrishna Mission Vedanta Math , Pralay Maharji, the Secretary has firm conviction that only prayers and faith in God may enable the world to sail through this crisis. The *puja* of the Math was started in 1939 by Swami Avedananda Maharaj out of faith in the feeling of oneness beyond parity over class, caste, religion and other factors. The condition is extremely deplorable this time in terms of economy and participation. Darjeeling ,to a large extent depends on tourism and now remains one of the worst victims of pandemic. The organization this time is equally focusing on relief activities, so that no child is abandoned without food and medicine . However, as in past we have faith that this time also we will be able to wade through adversities.



Durgapuja and Procession at Darjeeling





"He is the creator, He will be the resolver too"-  
Pralay Maharj, Secretary Ramkrishna Mission Vedanta  
Math, Darjeeling, expresses his faith on God.

### Puja in Bangladesh and Myanmar

The blow of COVID -19 has also tendered huge brainstorming among the overseas organizers. Nirmal Chatterjee, the General Secretary of Ujaban Parishad insinuates that the festival binds communities, religion of riparian Indo-Bangladesh through the string of harmony, faith and happiness but this will not be the same as previous years. *Durga Puja* in Bangladesh is celebrated unanimously from grassroots to moneyed without any discrimination in its practices, customs and religious rationales. Around 32,000 Pujas are being celebrated every year across the country. This time the country will witness with meagerness in terms of its celebrations, lightning, cultural events. Even the immersion will be inconspicuous as the country has to abide by the norms and principles of COVID guidelines issued by the ministry. A lot of ictus is given

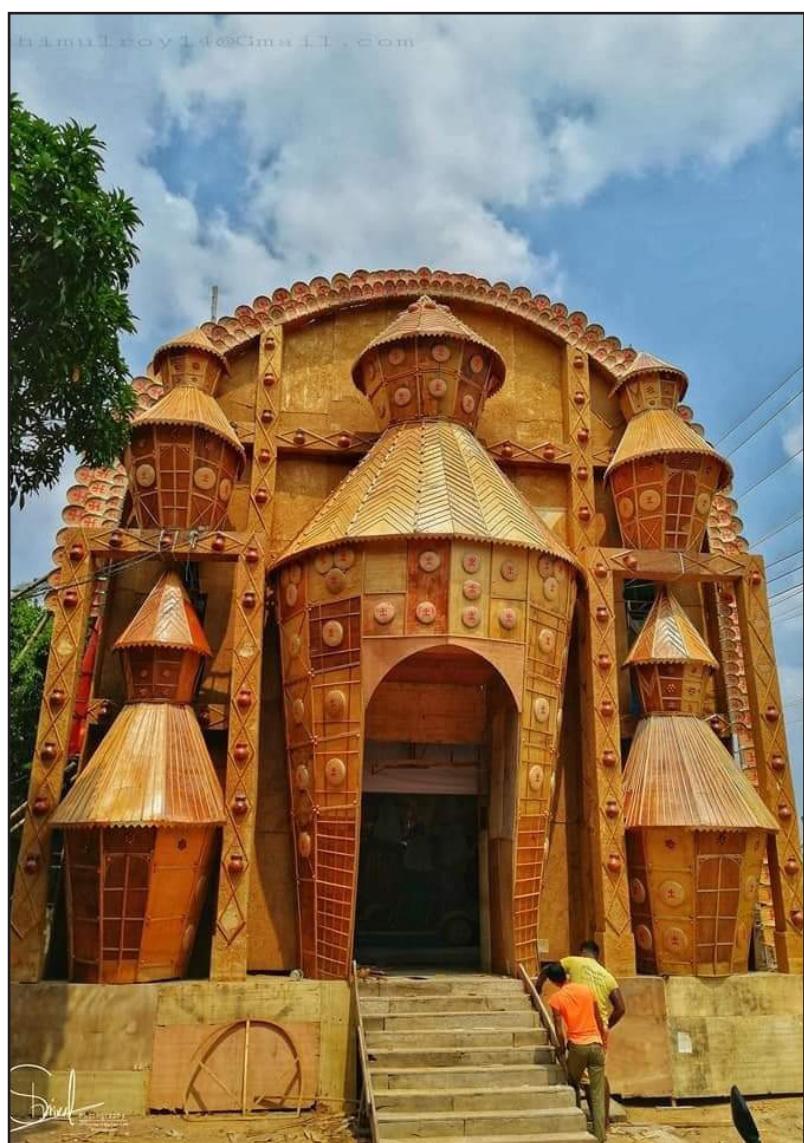


Gulshan-Banani Sarbajanin Puja Foundation Mondap,  
Dhaka, Bangladesh

on online *Darshan* facilities. *Prasad* will be distributed among small groups. Various Puja committees jointly and in their own respective ways are offering support to regions of Koirā and its annexed parts, affected by Amphan. We are trying also to facilitate support towards the sustainability of artisans and craftsmen who are associated with *Puja* to support their families. The country's insipidity over *Puja* is affecting overall multiple co-related factors specially economy & marketing, trade & travel and likes.

Therefore the country now remains concerned to focus only on stellar of hope to shine soon over disarray and belligerence caused due to the virus.

Scenario at Myanmar seems nowhere different – sources revealed that the upsurge in fresh COVID-cases and sporadic lockdowns in the country has made the celebration very doubtful. On whole including Navratri and others around 16 such *Durga Puja*'s are been held at Yangon. Though the 132 yr old *Durga Puja* that is celebrated at Durgabari, Yangon remains prominent



West hospital para puja mondap, Khulna, Bangladesh



Durgabari, Yangon, Myanmar



as it in itself becomes an occasion to assemble Indian community under one roof. The festivity starts off with a lavish dinner at Shashti followed by distribution of Bhog every day. Despite all the preparations the organizers and communities are waiting for improvements- for them if not in grandeur but Lord Durga's arrival can still be celebrated with affection and adulations this year at least.

### Puja at Kenya

Kenya Bengalee Cultural & Welfare Society (KBCWS) Celebrates Durga Puja - Pratik Ghosh, Chairman of KBCWS, Nairobi states that every year during festivities Devi unites through warmth and love all the Bengalees living across seas and missing their homeland. Pandemic and its attributes are pushing all of us back and scaling down the budget of four day celebration at badminton Court, Maharashtra Mandal, Nairobi. Every year a fibre glass idol is being shipped from Kumartuli. This is the time for manifestation of cultural heritage of Bengal to the indigenous people of the country and several other communities, who in the same plinth join to celebrate community solidarity over the occasion. This time the celebration will be strictly as per the COVID-19 rule book and will not license the organizers to offer *Prasad* and arrange cultural activities engaging the young generations. They used to go back to their origin and socio-cultural roots through cultural activities like dance drama, recitation and many others. Everyday life activities in this country do not give



Puspanjali, at Nairobi

young generations from Bengal room of opportunities to explore the legacies and get imbued to the diversities. Ghosh further added that this year from very beginning has been extremely testing. Bengal has not only been a victim of COVID but the storms of Amphan has tossed the livelihood of people at Sunderban about

whom the mind remains concerned in spite of living miles away. The organization as a part of other relief activities like distributions of PPEs in association with Bharat Seva Ashram has extended monetary support to the people living in the marshy land of mangroves in Sunderban, India.

### Puja at USA

Maryland, Kali Temple Puja, Washington DC : Souvik Bhattacharya, Software Engineer associated with Washington DC, Kali Temple *Puja* opens up: 'Weekend visit to Kali Temple and being attached with their activities especially *Durga Puja*, give me a priceless feel of home connect even staying in USA for more than two decades. It is true that the hazards of COVID-19 and its intractable footprints will tone down the celebration this year. Therefore the Temple committee is still not very sure what will eventually be the shape of the *Puja*. Sanitization and other precautionary measures will certainly be laid down. We are requesting NRIs to contribute for *Puja* online. Provisions like scheduled Darshan allowing 40 people at a time will be mandatorily followed. Digital Coverage's and Zoom telecasts will be made available to people who will not be able to come down physically due to COVID crisis but can have the opportunity to offer their prayers staying safe at home!!'

The hearts of Bengalees all over the world yearn for *Durga Puja*, whereas for other communities it is Navratri or Devi Puja. The thrills of festivities which embark with the fragrance of *shiuli* (*Nyctanthes arbortristis* or night-flowering jasmine) filling up the autumn breeze, the soothing views of *Kashphool* accompanied with the magical baritone of Birendra Krishna Bhadra in the early morning of *Mahalaya* still captivate the minds with nostalgia of holding hands, visiting *pandals*,



Maa Durga, Maryland, Washington DC, USA



draping new attires and mustering for *Pushpanjali* without any age bar. For youngsters *Mahalaya* which usually smudges ambience of Puja is the ultimate day to build pagoda of plans and *pandal* hopping itinerary.

The article on the wall is woven with captured history, tales of Doric columns and their exclusive exuberance to community celebration spreading joy without boundaries over several interactions. This time the sense of worries, anxiety and anticipation abutting the celebration are afloat. At the same time the zeal to fit all the rituals at place fuelling the spree of celebration without nailing spike to COVID dashboard persuades.

A meld of such thoughts brought some sleep, and wake me up to the dawn of *Mahalaya* sharp at 4am, without any alarm being fixed night before. I did put my earphones then and then, tuned to the channel transmitting the iconic tale of *Mahisasurmardini*, where *Devi Durga* seems to diminish the demon smearing victory of goodness over the evils. The epochal rendition of *Jago Tumi Jago*, managed to restore mind to the hope that *Mahalaya* this time too would mark a denouement of the world crisis. May Goddess *Durga* endowed with ten hands destroy the evils and reinforce peace and prosperity, illuminating our lives while bringing entire humanity into a fold of oneness.



*Durga Idol, Kali Bari, Maryland Washington DC, USA*



Dreamstime

**ISCS Admin\***



People in India are believers in religious rituals and practices. According to the 2011 census, India has 216 million residential houses. But there are around 3.01 million places of worship. The number is larger than the number of schools and colleges at 2.1 million. This means that for every 70 households, we have a temple, while one school for every 100 households. Temples and festivals have unique place in the country. Temples and festivals together boost up the whole economy, prosper the business and keep Indian economy vibrant through balanced expenditure. Festivals integrate the economy and society into oneness where happiness and sustainable expenditure give the stimulus to market forces, which keep Indian economy away from being sluggish for a long time.

Such love for temples would prompt a follower of Max Weber's thoughts on Hinduism as reflected in his "Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism" (1905) to imagine India as a country with low levels of economic development, with people spending most of the energy on religious activities. Max Weber viewed that religions that place more stress on otherworldly asceticism and de-emphasise the material world can

hardly foster attitudes that promote Capitalism. Inspired by this Weberian thoughts, Prof Raj Krishna coined the term "Hindu rate of Growth" in one of his lectures in the late 70s to say that "...no matter what happens to the economy the trend growth rate in India will be 3.5%". It was later used by a few economists to link the low growth rate of the 50s-80s period to Hindu beliefs of salvation or other-worldly asceticism. Between the 1950s to the 1980s, the average growth of GDP during this period was around 3.5% while per capital income grew by a mere 1.3%

While there are no reliable studies and estimates on the festival economics in India, any casual observer on the festivals in the country can feel that festivals foster a chain of economic activities involving common people. These is what economic development requires. In this paper, we would make a brief review of three Hindu festivals- Ganesh Chaturthi, Durga Puja and Vishwakarma Puja and see whether Indian devotion to religion has caused any movement away from capitalistic development as visualised by Max weber.



## Ganesh Chaturthi

Aside from its traditional strongholds in Maharashtra — Pune, Mumbai, the Konkan coast — Ganesh Chaturthi is now celebrated all over India. Celebrations in Gujarat, Karnataka, Telangana and, Kerala are no less than how it is celebrated in Maharashtra. Hyderabad mandaps today host bigger idols than in Mumbai. Ganesh festivals have now become very common in Kolkata streets. The public festival of Ganesh Chaturthi was initiated by the Peshwas, and later revived by Bal Gangadhar Tilak, to foster nationalistic spirit in the state. The festival no longer carries the original spirit of Peshwas or Lokamanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak, the organisers and sponsors try to out beat each other in their devotion to the Lord or rather to display their capabilities of organising mega shows to attract visitors. Visitors who make a visit to the Ganesh mandaps



Dreamstime

(organisations which host an idol and celebrations) also visit sponsored stalls meant for sales of consumer products of top fmcg companies to cottage industries. Ganesh Chaturthi is an organised business, as is Durga Puja. It creates direct and indirect employment for millions, business opportunities for others. According to estimates by industry chamber ASSOCHAM, the

only agency who took the initiative to study festivals economics in the country, the 11 days of festivity in 2015 generated all-India revenues of over Rs. 20,000 crore and it has been growing by 15 to 20 per cent year-on-year. The 20,000 crores of 2015 should end up at Rs 50,000 crores at CAGR of 20 % .

While the images of the elephant god are not the biggest chunk of the bill, for thousands of idol making craftsmen, this is a peak time for business. Maharashtra buys about 60 lakh idols a year. Of these, over 28 lakh are sold in Mumbai. In addition, Ganesh Idols are available in several art formats, like paintings and sketches over pen, clothes and art papers and, sculptures of different materials from clay to plaster-of-Paris (PoP) to thermocol, for which artists make significant seasonal earnings. Creation of mandaps and lighting of the area also cost huge money. The Mumbai region has over 15,000 small and large Ganesh mandaps. The decorative mandaps take long time to prepare and create job opportunities for lakhs of seasonal workers, electricians, and many other service providers. Trucks and other similar transports are on demand for bringing the idol to mandap and for immersion. Most organisers coordinate extravagant entertainment events which also create seasonal income to performing artists. It also creates supplementary job opportunities for many unemployed people, and small-time office goers who have priesthood training in addition to the normal priests. Organisers also host grand feasts for most of the days of Puja in the name of offerings to the God. This creates employment for cooks, kitchen porters and food caterers. The festival also provides jobs to thousands of people, most are hired as private security guards and volunteers, aside from the unskilled labourers who get extra work for assisting the devout in taking their idols for immersion.

Most of the Puja funding is crowdsourced, that is, donations and subscriptions from the members and patrons and corporate sponsorship. Where corporates are shy in investing extortions from local businessmen also form an important source of funding. The same is true for Durga Puja in Bengal.

## Durga Puja

Like Ganesh Chaturthi, Durga Puja generates about Rs. 25,000 crore at an estimated compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of about 35 per cent, as estimated by ASSOCHAM in a 2013 report. With that CAGR, the estimated size of the economy of Durga Puja in 2020 turns out to be over Rs 2 lakh crore. This then becomes 14% of the Gross State Domestic Product



(GSDP) of West Bengal for 2020-21 (at current prices) estimated at Rs 14,44,174 crore. It is larger than total receipts (excluding borrowings) for 2020-21 estimated at Rs 1,79,905 crore and almost at par with state government expenditure for 2020-21 estimated at Rs 2,55,677 crore. Durga Puja is not only the devotional and cultural life of Bengal, it is also the economy of West Bengal.

As in Ganesh Chaturthi, idol-makers, craftsmen, decorators, caterers, priests, dhakis, small shopkeepers, and many other service providers earn major parts of their yearly income out of this festivity. Maharashtra's state GDP is more than double that of West Bengal with 2 crores more population. The informal workers have access to income earning activities throughout the year, in West Bengal, there are not much scope. For many of these workers, Durga Puja is the survival. The state administration announced that there are 37,000 Puja committees celebrating Puja this year. The rounding of the number indicates that the list is an estimate for the purpose of state grants and not the actual position. The state government provide Rs 50,000 grant to each Durga Puja committee of the state, apart from a 50 percent waiver from CESC and the state electricity board charges. Presuming the grant to be only 5 % of the budgets of the puja committees, a whooping Rs 3700 crores is spent through community puja alone. The expenditure figure would rise proportionately as grant appears smaller in their budgets. The state budgets on police, transport and urban development in 2020-21 was Rs 8,167 crores, Rs 6,082 crores and Rs 10,571 crores respectively.

Durga Puja creates opportunities for all sectors, more in the unorganised sectors. Security personnel are in demand almost in every Puja, crowd control and event management. The Indian personal security market is estimated at Rs 1 lakh crore as per latest industry estimates. It is also the largest employers in India engaging 8.9 million people in 2018. The workforce size of this industry is more than the combined strength of the Army, Navy, and Air Force in India. Security companies are known for openly flouting the minimum wages prescribed by the Union Ministry of Labour, not to think about Puja or any similar festival bonus. As in 2017, there were 15 million unorganised sector workers in West Bengal, mainly in labour-intensive industries, with construction at the forefront. Indian consumers' market would definitely been widened had these hard-working under-paid people been little more cared with Puja Bonuses.

Puja means natun Jama (New dresses) and these new dresses are produced within Bengal by 1.5 million textile workers in the state, as per 2018 estimates the Department of MSME, largely sold through three large wholesale textile markets -Hari Sha Haat in North Kolkata, Mangla Haat in Howrah and Metiburuz . Hand weaved clothing, particularly Sarees are produced by the weavers in Shantipur and Fulia of Nadia district.

Newspapers reports that Kumartuli's 700-odd artisans received orders for Durga idols worth Rs 50 crore last year, and Durga idols were priced between Rs 60,000 and Rs 70,000. Kumartuli typically sells to over 2,000 organising committees, whose members would turn up in large numbers in the days preceding the puja. Idols of varying sizes are made by Kumartuli artisans, the majority of whom come from West Bengal's districts of Nadia, Howrah, East Midnapore, and North and South 24-Parganas. They normally earn between Rs 10,000 and Rs 30,000 per month at this time of year.

Apart from artisans and their assistants, the puja also offered employment to labourers, who would land up in Kumartuli to carry the idols to the pandals. Many of these labourers are from the Sundarbans, Canning, Baruipur, Joynagar and adjacent areas in South 24-Parganas. Organising committees would pay a group of labourers of 25-30 each, about Rs 5,000 per move to the pandals. Kumartuli 100 such groups every year. Then there are



Dreamstime

workers who provide raw materials for the idols, like straw, mud, bamboo, dress material, and ornaments. These items are sourced from East and West Midnapore, Burdwan, and North and South 24-Parganas. Bamboo usually comes from Murshidabad and Nadia. In 2019 ornaments worth Rs 3.75 crore were used to dress the idols.



Puja needs pandals or temporary pavilions to house the deity. Not less than 37,00 such pavilions are to be built this year in West Bengal during Puja . The pandal makers to the city come from various parts of Bengal, mainly from Paschim and Purba Medinipur, the hub of handicraft and cottage industry, and other districts including Nadia and North and South 24 Parganas, among others. In Medinipur alone, there are an estimated 100 pandal-making groups, also called decorators. Usually pandal artists and makers have no formal training. They are landless farmers, masons, carpenters, electricians, painters, etc who pick up the skills of pandal making with bamboo, cloth and other materials , artwork, painting and lighting in order to supplement income during lean agricultural seasons.



Durga Puja Pandel making at North Kolkata, 2020

Arindam Mukherjee

Typically, a worker working for three shifts earns up to Rs 1,500 a day with the pandal artist's fees ranging from Rs 200,000 to Rs 1 million per pandal. An artist of good repute can expect anywhere between Rs 1 million to Rs 2 million per pandal. This is certainly higher than what they would have earned in agriculture as labourers or even landowners of small plots of land. If 37,000 structures are to be built , a few hundred thousand workers are needed for several months prior to Puja

There was a time when all Bengalis would wait for Puja for new songs released by the popular singers.

Literary magazines still publish Puja special but gone are craze. Puja however, has become ideal time for new product launching and branding. Conservative estimates suggest corporate funding of pujas are no less than Rs 500-Rs800 crores through advertising and sponsorship. In recent years , there has been a paradigm shift from donations to corporate sponsorship through exhibitions and publicity programs. Corporates find new opportunities to launch their new products through local level advertising and sales program. It is a perfect opportunity for brands to try to tap the consumers. The entire Puja duration till Diwali is used to attract new and newer customers through print, hoarding, activation to digital. Any brand that wants to create a bond with West Bengal and Bengalis cannot ignore Durga Puja. Linking with this festival is a useful strategy to enter the market in East India , win over the new customers and to renew ties with older ones.

Advertisement promotes purchases . People at home also spend money on groceries, new apparels and life style and fashion accessories . According to another survey of ASSOCHAM in 2016, during the festive month people spend 20 per cent more on groceries; there also occurs a 52 per cent increase in budget apparels, about 32 percent increase on lifestyle and fashion accessories . The survey covered consumers in age groups 24-34 and 35-45 in Delhi-NCR, Mumbai, Kolkata, Bangalore, Chennai, Ahmedabad, Chandigarh, Lucknow and Indore. The survey reveals that women are likely to spend more on apparel than men, while men tend to spend more on lifestyle accessories than women. During Diwali, electronics, automobiles and apparel dominate the lion's share of business. 52 per cent of the apparel products sales take place during this festival.

#### Other festival related unorganised sectors

All the festivals in India encourages the unorganised economy in a large scale and provides massive employment opportunities for low-skilled traditional household manufacturing sector and small micro entrepreneurs. Raksha Bandhan festival generates about Rs 400 crore business and provides employment to more than 4,000 families in Gujarat.

According to Tamil Nadu Fireworks and Amorces Manufacturers Association (TNFAMA), crackers industry plays a dominant role with Rs 10,000 crore business and provides employment to thousands of families in Sivakasi of Tamil Nadu.

India celebrates kite festival during Makar Sankranti and this festival generates about Rs 500 crore business



Dreamstime

Flower Market at Mullick Ghat, Kolkata

in the country particularly in Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and Delhi. Kite industry is traditionally a household occupation which provides employment to more than 6,000 families of Gujarat.

#### China's onslaught on India's festival economy

India was the largest trade partner for Chinese products (US\$70.32 billion in 2018-19). While the products include household items like toys, furniture, building hardware, crackers, lighting and electric fittings, furnishing fabric, home office stationery, electronic appliances, consumer electronics, kitchen equipment & appliances, gift items, the list also include many festival related products and these are being dumped into the Indian markets through both legal and illicit channels at throw away prices. Majority of these items are produced in small and micro industries in India, where investment, technology and update skill are lacking.

Media reports reveal that 75 per cent of the colours from China have been used during last year Holi in India. China is also capturing the accessories, plastic products and colour sprinkler guns at worth of Rs 18,000 crore. ASSOCHAM survey reports that 8-10 lakh jobs are lost due to Chinese invasion on auspicious Holi colours.

Chinese have entered Indian markets for fire crackers and house illuminations. It has been reported that out of Rs 10,000 crore business of fireworks, 40 per cent of the market is captured by Chinese firework products, adversely affecting about 2.5 lakh Indian artisans who earn a chunk of their total income during Diwali days.

Chinese toys are also impacting the Indian toy industry. According to the ASSOCHAM, the Indian market is full of Chinese toys. Nearly 40 per cent of Indian toy companies have been closed in the last five years, and rest 20 per cent are struggling for the break-

even level. Cheap Chinese products have become the reason for the shutdown of nearly 60 per cent of the industrial units in Bhiwandi and Thane. Of late Indian markets have been flooded with China made statues of Ganesh, Lakshmi and many others Hindu Gods and Goddesses .



Dreamstime

As per media reports, ports in Maharashtra and Gujarat are the primary entry points for illegal Chinese crackers entering India; it has affected the livelihood of over 500,000 households in Sivakasi and 4,00,000 small factories in West Bengal.

#### Covid and Puja

West Bengal reported its first positive case of coronavirus on 17th March 2020, when a student returnee from United Kingdom tested positive. The state reported its first case of coronavirus death in Kolkata on March 23. The Covid 19 entered India early on January 30 and the fear psychosis associated with it dampened the spirit of Holi scheduled on March 9 and 10. People observed a muted Holi celebration, hoping that the Chinese virus would spare them for the bigger festivals waiting in line. Shitala Puja, celebrated widely in most parts of erstwhile small pox affected Bengal, Easter, May day, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, Rathojatra, Ram Navami, Moharram, Ganesh Chaturthi, Viswa Karma Puja - all got washed out in the pandemic and the resultant lockdown and government's regulations and restrictions over celebration and social gathering. Job losses for many, financial difficulties and hardships in travel and finally the fear relating to the pandemic have cumulatively taken the sheen out of Puja season we already entered through Mahalaya. Although Puja is scheduled a month later from Mahalaya because of an Adhik Maas or Purushottam Month, an extra month (leap month) in the Hindu calendar that is inserted to



keep the lunar and solar calendars aligned. This month is dedicated to Supreme God Vishnu, the Purushottam and no other Pujas are held.

The total COVID-19 Cases cumulated to 2,66,974 till 3rd October 2020. Most affected districts are Kolkata with 59,197 cases, followed by North 24 Parganas (54,182), Howrah (19,078), South 24 Parganas (18,253) and Hooghly with 13,432 cases. Total death due to Covid 19 at 5,194 is not insignificant. Death wise Kolkata is on top with 1,767 deaths, followed by North 24 Parganas (1,170), and Howrah (588). Interestingly, South 24 Parganas and Hooghly reported 330 and 233 deaths respectively. The corona, however, as yet created little impact in Jhargram and Kalimpong with less than double digit deaths as yet.

The India GDP figures indicate economic shrinkage by 23.9 percent in the last quarter. Given that a large part of the economy works in the informal sector — and the lack of robust data collection during the lockdown

— this number may still not reveal the extent to which people's livelihoods have been affected. While workers across sectors have been hit, people who make a living out of festivals like artists, craftsmen, shopkeepers, priests, decorators, electricians, flower growers and sellers, shopkeepers have received most of the jolt. Most of them spend the entire year waiting for the festive season to boost their incomes. With no possibility of a breakthrough in corona impasse the rejuvenation of the gig economy before Puja seems impossible. Any attempt to promote pandal visits may trigger a new wave of the epidemic. A festive season that would have seen pomp and pageantry is all set to be lost in mellow, sombre introspection for the first time in several decades.

However, not all is lost! the washout has a rosier side, with celebrations being a low-key affair, consumption of power and water will be less. There will be less garbage to be cleared. Fire accidents particularly during Diwali are likely to be low, Pollution that shoots up to abnormal levels every year is bound to be within limits.



Dreamstime



*Sanitization activity of Sreeleathers showroom, Kolkata in Covid-19 times*



Dreamstime

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# BENGAL'S OWN FESTIVAL REMAINS UNTARNISHED EVER IN THE FACE OF CALAMITIES

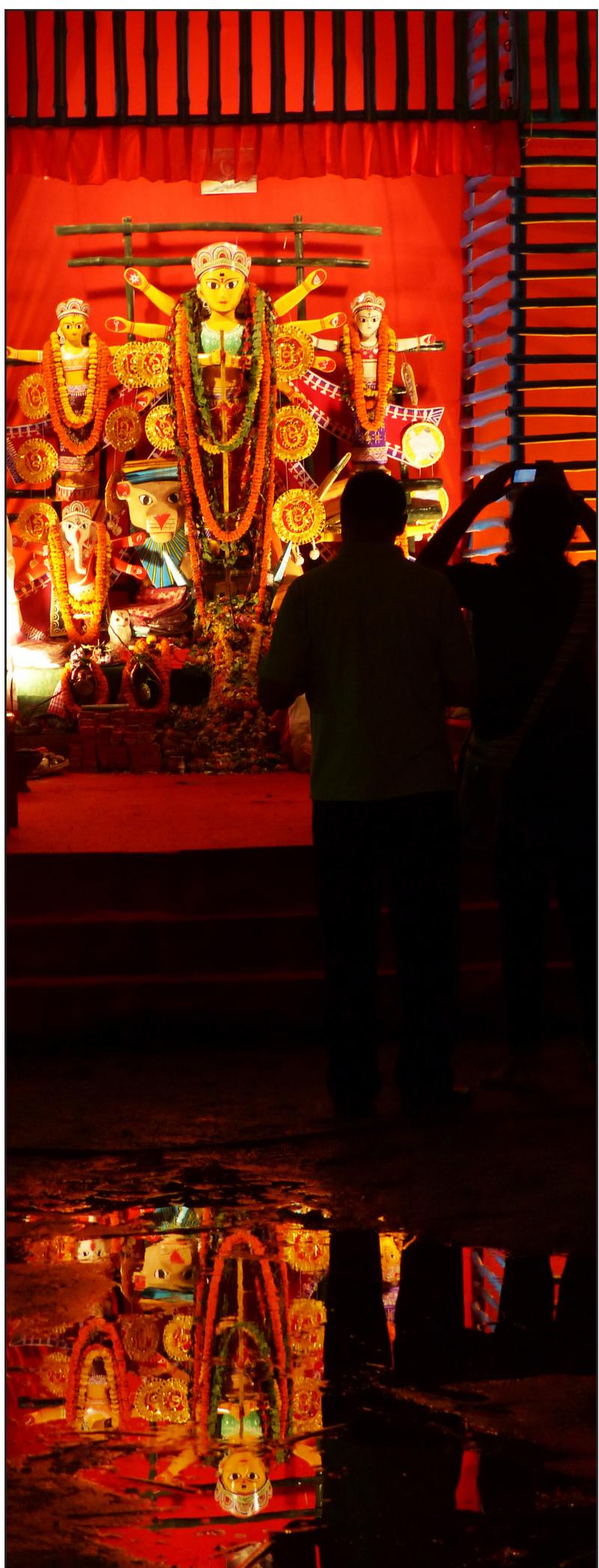
## History reveals

Arnab Nag\*

*Puja* takes place during the *Aswin* month of Bengali calendar , usually either in the October or end September in English calendar. But this time it is something different. As per Bengali almanac the month *Aswin* is denoted as an inauspicious month(*malmas*) when any sort of auspicious work is prohibited. In the dawns of Mahalayas the Bengalees are used to listen to Mahisasuramardini- the programme welcoming *Durgapuja* with the note *Aswiner Sarada prate beje uthechhe alokmanjari* (Puja mornings in Aswin month tinkle with luminosity )in the voice of Birendra Krishna Bhadra broadcast from All India Radio station. With *Mahalaya* the counting of puja days start though there is no scriptural link to it. However, some contraventions are found at times. In 1982 same thing happened, puja came late by more than a month after *Mahalaya*. In fact , one can get the scent of *Durgapuja* from the sky, from the air of Bengal and feel that the *Durga puja* is approaching. The natural surroundings get remarkably changed. The air carrying the fragrance of *Siuli flower*, the sky having the floating bunch of ethereal cloud and the catkins in villages inform that puja is coming. Something is wrong but this time, that atmosphere is foiled either may be of Corona Pandemic or because of late arrival of puja after *Mahalaya*. Catkins are certainly blooming , fragfrance of *siuli* is around, the natural atmosphere of autumn even in rain peeps in but we are having mental problem to come out from last six months' corona spell. From that point of view the situation is really something unprecedented.

History reveals that Bengal's own festival *Durgotsav* remained untarnished even in the face of various calamities in past also but there was no compromise with *puja* that was observed in a grand manner, if not incapable at all. This time also we do hope that the *Durgotsav* will be observed after following due strict health guidelines.

Let's turn the pages of history to review such cases in past .





In the monthly Magazine Basumati while writing a serial under the title Puratan Panjika (the old Almanac) Rasaraj Amritalal Basu, the famous theatre personality, had nicely explained the Bengalee psychology that dictated to celebrate the festival in a grand fashion on the occasion of *Durgapuja*. He labeled *Durgapuja* as Bengal's ethnic festival and elaborated some aspects in his excellent style of narration.

*Durgotsab* is Bengal's ethnic festival. This is like being immersed during the monsoon Bengalees wipe their entire bodies in *Aswin* and put on new clothes to get engaged in the work of new life. Bengalees welcome the Mahashakti (super power) in the name of Anandamoyee in *Aswin* month and place her in the hearts of their own families. Bengalees are not satisfied just to prostrate on the ground imagining their parents staying afar in the void and in formless form. Rather they like to instill life of Mother in the idol and place her in a *Mandap*. Imagining the dear daughter residing at the house of her husband coming to her Father's house they become emotional out of joy.

The gist is that Mother Durga is not only Devi to Bengalees but also daughter of the house. So she is

named Uma. Amritalal says, Bengalees never give any importance to the obstacles in the face of *puja*. Obstacles may come, still the home coming of the daughter is always welcome, whatever may be the means. The most important matter is she is coming back to her own home. In those days the storms during Sept-Oct were very famous in Kolkata and historical evidences are there that the public life used to be devastated because of the storms. Naturally that affected also *Durgapuja*. This time also we faced Amphan during May. Since there is a reasonable gap with the *puja* month this is under control now. But the natural calamity during Sept -Oct month just before puja did seldom give any chance to control the situation. There is a big and abnormal hike in the price of everything during the *puja* time when everything in general is costly. The abnormal high price did create trouble earlier, that tradition continues till today. But even amidst the loss and destruction because of the storm the festive spirit of Bengalees did never get hampered. In fact , Bengalees did not allow the note of sorrow to destroy the mood of festivity.

*This severe Aswin tempest sank down so many ships, razed to the ground so many houses but not a single bay of the festive hut of Bengal did move.*



Dreamstime



The situation is not much changed now in comparison to the situation of the society then. The high price during *puja* time makes life miserable even today. Shri Amritlal gave an account how the situation made people enjoying the *puja* celebration troublesome due to natural calamity and exactly at what ratio was the price hike.

*After three years in the month of Kartick since the storm came in the night it killed many people of Calcutta though it was not that much severe in the month of Aswin. On the one hand it was for puja marketing time and on the other hand the outbreak of storm, the prices of all the goods rose up high. You will be surprised hearing that the cost of good quality Balam rice was more than Rs. 3/- per maund. The full grown Ruhi fish cost 6 annas even 7 annas thus the hike in price was such that people suffered a lot. Families with 8 to 10 members having earning of Rs.40/- per month while managed earlier even to afford another 2 people staying at their places for 2/3 days were put in trouble. Only the hut-builders, masons, labourers, and the owners of ships carrying cargos were benefitted. The ships costing Rs 2/- or Rs 3/- per day rose to Rs. 80-90 and not dropped under Rs.40-60 till one year.*

Still people could take the abnormal expenses as something usual and used to arrange for celebration of *puja* at their level best. Though the time is changed today but the habit of Bengalees is, I doubt, not changed. However, there is a basic and qualitative difference between the association of people in *Durgapuja* in those days and today. The impact of *Baro Yari Puja* was not then that much as it is today.

In 1909 Sanatan Dharmarakshini Sava started first *Baro yari Puja* in Bhawanipore at Kolkata and post 25 years this *Baro Yari Puja* was not in popular practice. But today the scenario is different where the basic fear is more chances of more people getting infected by corona virus due to *puja* gathering resulting ultimately to uncontrollable wide spread of the disease. In earlier days there was no pomp and grandeur in *Baro Yari Puja* so there was no fear of spreading any contagious disease centering *puja*. There was restriction in entry for public at the *pujas* of aristocratic houses. So there was no link between *puja* and epidemic. At least this is certain that then the administration did least bother. The scenario of villages used to be something different. *Pujas* in the houses became the meeting place to enjoy the festivity. As a result, when in 1918 Spanish Flu after Mumbai did affect Kolkata people that lasted till 1920, the *puja* in October month at Kolkata continued without a break inspite of the sudden violent outbreak of the flu in the month of October 1919. The *Baro Yari pujas* of Kolkata were not concomitant to it. No doubt, there was some effect on in house *pujas* but no historical record of discontinuation of *puja* is found. We have idea about

plague at local levels. We have the history of death of countless people that almost depopulated Boral village in south 24 parganas in 1867 due to malaria. Rajnarayan Basu depicted the picture in his 'Gramya Upakhyan', but he wrote nothing on its effect on *Durgapuja*. During that time the well off people of Boral village shifted to some other places. We can assume that *Durgapujas* of those families were discontinued, but no historical evidence is available to that effect. There are instances of bleakness in the villages due to cholera, that affected *puja* also, still people somehow could ultimately manage to overcome those fleeting disasters. Shri Tulsidas Basu of the Basu family, first inhabitant of Boral village came again to live with his family and the *puja* that started, has been continuing thenceforth till today. We are not getting any data, any record, any evidence, any instance even orally that *Durgapuja* was totally stopped at any place only because of plague or epidemic. It might have so happened that *pujas* were stopped in a particular area for a certain time in some villages or Muffasils.

Though, in Calcutta the fact was something different in times of Spanish Flu. Calcutta *Durga Pujas*, controlled by the aristocratic houses of wealthy people used to showcase the standard of their prosperity at that time.

Recently Rwiju Basu has written an article in Ananda Bazar Patrika describing the new norms will be followed like use of mask and sanitization by the organizers of 200 years age old *Durga pujas*. People were not so much health conscious 100 years before. The rules by doctors were also not so strict. During the spread of Spanish Flu and even before that there was no *Baro Yari Puja* as such, hence the question of infecting others during *puja* did not arise. But now, the aristocratic houses, organising *Durga Pujas* are planning to control the entries of the outsiders. They did take same step in similar situation 100 years before, revealed the family members of some houses though no written document is available exactly what steps were taken.

According to Amritlal Basu, Bengalees are keen to make preparation for *Durgapuja*, come what may and the history of our *Baro Yari Puja* confirms this fact. The *pujas* in Bengalee houses might have been stopped due to financial crisis or some other reason but there is no evidence of discontinuation of *puja* as a whole due to plague or natural calamity. The example of *Baro yari puja* is drawn here as because the participation of public is much more in such *pujas* due to comprehensible reason. In the Corona atmosphere the relevance of this context is beyond question. There are evidences that during second world war public participated in *pujas* ignoring extreme obstructions and not only that, at



that time seven new *pujas* were started in Calcutta which earned good reputation with the time .

Firstly ,Badamtala Ashar Sangha-this *puja* was started in 1939 by the local people. For last four decades the organizers of this *puja* have been engaged to present creative speciality in terms of the idol and the theme pandal.

Secondly, the Ahiritola Sarbojonin Durgotsav, one of the oldest *Baro yari puja*s near the shore of Ganges in north Calcutta. This *puja* was also initiated by the local people.

Thirdly, Mata Amba (another form of Devi Durga) used to be worshipped in every Navaratri at Chaltabagan, Lohapatty in North Calcutta which was transformed to Durga puja in 1942 onwards and became famous.

Fourthly ,*puja* of Ekdalia Evergreen was started in 1943 by the people of Gariahat at south Calcutta and has been still maintaining the traditional form amidst the theme *pujas* by the committee members.

Fifth is the Singhee Park Puja and sixth is the Sarbojanin *Puja* at Sovabazar Beniatola that was started in 1944. Halsibagan *puja* was started in 1945 and continues till today as an innovative well themed *puja*.

We have to keep in mind that the people of Bengal time and again fell in dire financial crisis and thereby suffered a lot. In 1943 there was famine and people of Bengal were compelled to spend the days by starving. Moreover, the Calcuttans had another problem. People had to leave the city in fear of the bombing from Japan. Not only the problem of fooding but people were stricken with the problem of clothing as well. Human being has basic three needs –food, shelter and clothing, even when these were at stake then also Bengalees never hesitated to take preparation for *Durgapuja*. Professor Barada Datta Roy, in his article *Pujaye Banglar Bastra Samasya* published in Desh patrika in 1942 portrayed clearly the clothing problem in Bengal during world war and more clearly and nicely etched the sentiments and emotions of Bengalees centering *Puja* even in the critical times.

*To all the Bengalees high or low Durgapuja is the most joyful event in general to which Bengalees call ‘pujo’. During this puja wherever and in whatsoever manner Bengalees are staying usually try to connect all their relatives and try to show their heart felt feelings of respect, feelings of love , feelings of affection by offering at least some new clothing, if not something else. This is the usual custom of Bengal, the Bengalee Hindus. Since when this custom of greeting each other had been started in practice and followed by the people*

*of Bangladesh in the remote past, nobody knows. But that what was the sample of joy once has become today a custom to exception of which is not possible in Bharat-Bangladesh though it may be possible in some other country. Those who are acquainted with the social life of Bharat specially of Bengal, they know that the foundation of the social ties of Bengal is linked to this custom. Bengalees can borrow, can pledge the ornaments, can even sell out his ancestor’s residential house but never ever ready to change casually the custom laid down by the ancestors. With the good number of wars , the abnormal price of clothes, and the disastrous days when there was no incoming fund the main problem for Bengalees was how could he please, bring smile in the face of his relatives, dependents , the fostered as well as the affectionate little ones ?*

We all know that post second world war, independence of Bharat and the blow of the division of the country distorted the foundation of Bengalee families, specially of East Bengal . As a whole this is the one tragic history of Bengalee. At some places in East Bengal people were deprived of this festivity fervor for ever. But if we analyse the entire history we can accept this as an exception. Anyway, the people of East Bengal then suffered pain for leaving their native land on the one hand and on the other hand their inability to perform *puja* any longer in the land of their past fourteen generations. People in Calcutta were celebrating *Durgapuja* in a grand way whereas the ever bubbling, sparkling courtyards in East Bengal stood dark, unlighted. This inexorable significant picture was portrayed in words on 19th Oct, 1950 in the Editorial column of Yugantar, where the duality of Bengal was aptly sketched.

*Calcutta, the great city is full of joy because of Durgotsav ,the grandest festival of Bengal’s communal life .Thousands and thousands of male and female, boys-girls, have gathered and are swarming on the streets, in the narrow lanes and bye lanes. Each and every day of the whole of the year is wrapped with the need, the pain. Children of Bengal get the sense of relief at least for these 3 -4 days being free from that monotonous sorrowful torture .Seeing the bright faces of family the guardians feel satisfied. New tides come in businesses, work centers even in literature and newspaper circles due to Durgapuja. In a word, almost all people in Bengal save few unfortunates, wait for these puja days. So looking at the resounding celebration, illumination with lights and the brightness of the capital city like the conjugal night of the bride and groom we extend our good wishes and greetings to the people ,delirious with joy. We hope that our social life will be healthy , bright and beautiful one day as it is now.*

*Where is that glitter of gold in the lives of East Bengal today? Where is the newly bloomed hope and*



dream in the Saradiya festival? Where is that resonance in the strings of Golden harp? Today that lotus -forest is afflicted by communal disturbances. The altar of worship is abandoned. The villages are as quiet as cremation ground. Only the howling of jackals and barking of dogs can be heard in the night times but during day times the cackling of children, the sounds of the bangles of quiet village maids are lost in the shriek. The terror stricken women are fleeing , the youths are asylum seeker, and the old people are almost dead. That huge Hindu society of East Bengal now in tents, in fields as unidentified, friendless, kinless can be found at Bihar, Odissa, Madras, Mysore or in Andaman. No one is left to light up the lamp in the land of their past fourteen generations. No mother is awaiting her son, no wife is awaiting her husband no one is awake till the night in those dreamless villages. There is no one left who can worship. Bramhins, Priests, blacksmiths, potters, all have fled. The large society is now landless, seeker of asylum. The penniless and robbed of middle

class are but heaving deep, weary sighs in puja days thinking of their predecessors. We know that tears rolling in the eyes of numerous family members- Durga , symbol of power will not be invoked. No chanting of slokas for fame, life, prosperity, success will be there in the Mandaps. Devi Durga, herself is seeking shelter today. Being landless, so many families of East Bengal have stopped celebrating puja today. They are roaming around like the lost case with the ration card. Their present with the glorious past is enveloped with tremendous sorrow, while the future is under the veil of darkness.

Until and unless ousted as in the above portrayal, history reveals that Bengalees never failed to organize their own *Durgotsav*, an ethnic festival, in spite of hundreds of obstacles.

This time presumably Corona situation will not be an exception.

However, please abide by the health rules as laid down by the Government. Be healthy, be elated.



Dreamstime

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