

Singing farewell to Devi Durga

SURANJIT DEBNATH

Thousands immersed the image of Devi Durga in river waters to wrap up their five-day Hindu festival yesterday that began amid wispy autumn clouds in the translucent blue sky and fragrance of Sheuli flowers that marked the arrival of the goddess from heavens.

Conch shells blew and sounds of bells, metal cymbals and high-pitched ululation were heard all around when she arrived on October 19 to the greetings of her intent devotees with offerings and drumbeats.

Every puja mandap housed the 10-handed clay image -- fierce yet beautiful -- of the goddess sitting atop a lion flanked by her children Lakshmi, Saraswati, Kartik and Ganesh.

The Durga Puja, the greatest extravaganza of Hindus, is the worship of 'shakti' or the divine power. Durga symbolises the fight between the evil and the good with a message for mankind that the dark forces succumb to the divine in the end.

Breaking religious barriers, the Durga Puja has become a social event for the Bangladeshis to share pleasure exchanging puja gifts among their loved ones.

The great festivity began welcoming Durga, who is worshipped as the goddess of supreme power, on invitation on the Mahashashthi on Tuesday through Bodhon rituals.

"We worship Durga as the goddess of Shakti who overpowered the evil to establish peace and prosperity on the earth," said Jyotsna Rani Debnath, a devotee who came to Dhakeswari National Temple for prayer to the goddess.

Thousands in Dhaka celebrated Mahasaptami, the first day of the main puja on Wednesday, and

Mahaashami, the most important day, amid hymns and offerings to mark the goddess' victory over Mahishashur, the demon symbolising the win of good over evil.

Mahadashami is the day for the devotees to bid farewell to the goddess along with her children and immerse the image in water.

The leaders of Bangladesh Puja Uddjan Parishad, Bangladesh Hindu Bouddha Christian Oikya Parishad and Mahanagar Sarbajaneen Puja Committee directed their district committees not to use loudspeakers and musical instruments during iftar, tarabi prayers and sehri -- a call that came as the Hindu festival coincided with Ramadan this year.

The leaders also scheduled the immersion of the goddess in the Buriganga river for 2:00pm to 5:00pm, 6:00pm to 7:30pm and after 9:00pm on October 23.

The Dhakeshwari National Temple provided the main puja mandap in the capital. Large puja mandaps have also been put up at Jagannath Hall of Dhaka University, Ramakrishna Mission, Ramna Kali Mandir, Siddheswari Kali Mandir, Tanti Bazar, Shankhari Bazar and Bangla Bazar.

Official sources said 19,799 puja mandaps were put up across Bangladesh this year, 140 of them in the capital. At the press briefing on Tuesday, Hindu Religious Welfare Trust Secretary Mangal Chandra Chanda said the numbers of puja mandaps were 17,834 last year, 17,282 in 2002 and 16,181 in 2001.

"The problem to visit puja mandaps is overcrowding and traffic jam on the way," said Juthi Debnath, an Eden College student, adding rickshawpullers demand high fares on the eve of

puja.

"I feel easy visiting the Jagannath Hall puja mandap at Dhaka University as it is spacious and people can laze out in the field there," said Panchham from Sylhet.

HEFTY AMOUNT

"Up to Tk 1 lakh is needed to organise a puja mandap in the capital," said Nirmal Chatterjee, president of Bangladesh Hindu Youth Welfare Foundation.

The surrounds of puja mandaps were abuzz with fairs that sold a variety of products to the visitors. "Daily sales amounted to Tk 3,000 to Tk 5,000 during the festival," said Titas Roy Rana, who sold religious books at his stall at Dhakeswari National Temple.

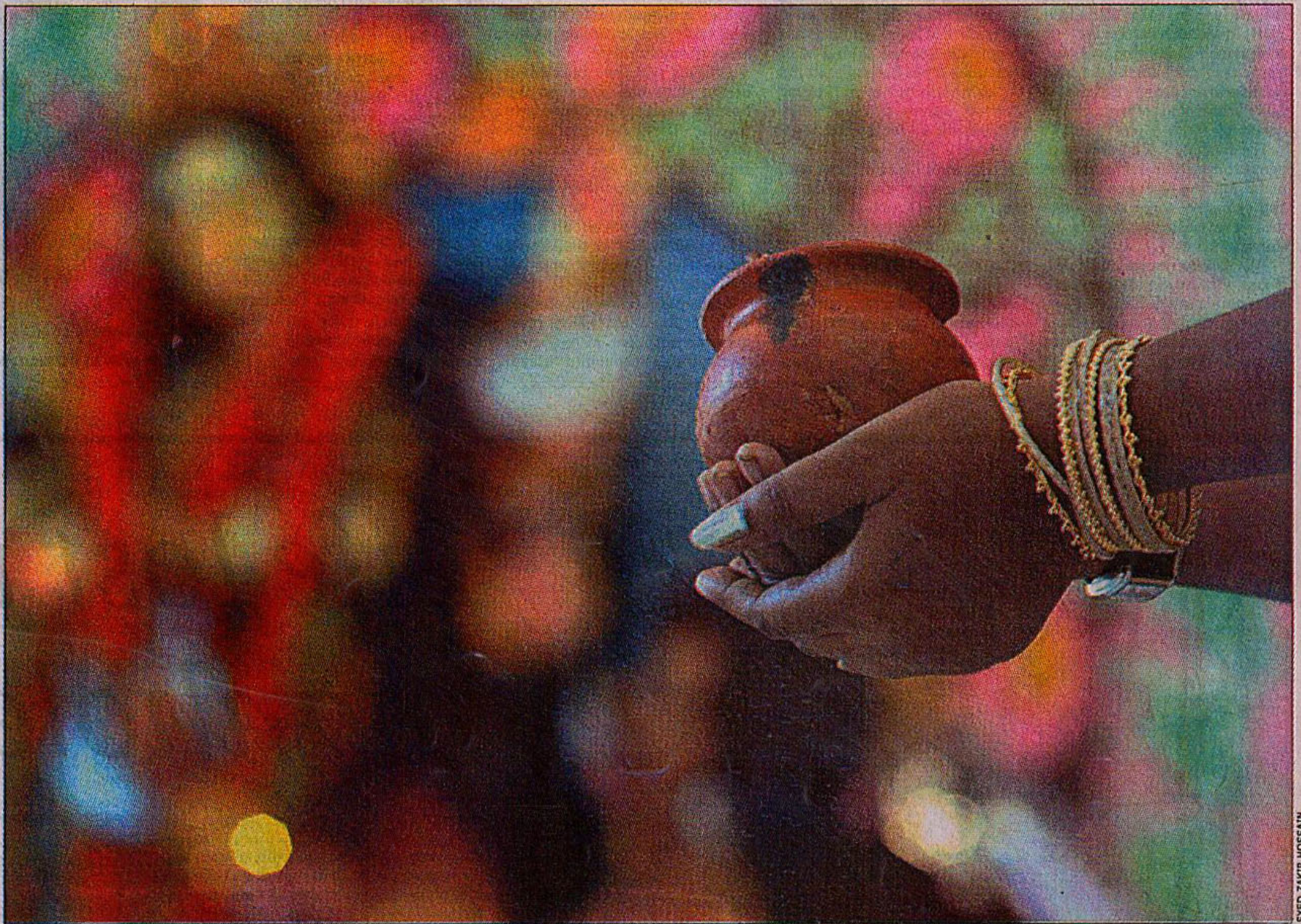
PUJA FEATURES

The puja highlights include Kumari Puja, Sandhi Puja, Aroti, prasad distribution and anjali from Tuesday to Saturday. The goddess is worshipped in various forms during her stay on the earth: one of them is the kumari, the virgin form.

A girl aged between six to 16, symbolising the kumari form of Devi is worshipped in front of Durga. Kumari Puja is held on Mahaashtami or Mahanabami. This year, Kumari Puja was observed on Thursday and Ramakrishna Mission Temple is a popular spot for the celebration.

An integral part of the Durga Puja, Sandhi Puja is performed from the last 24 minutes of Mahaashtami until the first 24 minutes of Mahanabami.

"During this time, Durga killed Chando and Mundo, the two asuras," said Dhaka University Jagannath Hall Purohit Sadhan Chakrobarty, referring to a Hindu belief.



A devotee offers prayers in the presence of Goddess Durga, invoking blessings for peace and prosperity.

Chawkbazar bustling with Iftar shoppers

KAUSAR ISLAM AYON

Chawkbazar, one of the oldest business hubs in the city, has a bit lost its prominence over the years. But it still carries the more than hundred-year-old tradition of being the city's biggest and most popular Iftar market.

In every Ramadan afternoon hundreds of fasting Muslims from all corners of the capital flock to Chawkbazar to buy delicious Iftar items. The huge rush makes the entire area, popularly known as Chawkbazar, bustling with Iftar sellers and buyers.

The Iftar sellers display a wide variety of items in their makeshift shops in front of Chawkbazar Shahi Mosque. The roads in the area go off-limits to all types of vehicles from 12:00pm everyday as Iftar shops and buyers occupy every inch of the area.

Chawkbazar is famous for certain special items, apart from the traditional *beguni*, *piazu*, *chihola* (gram) and others. Delicious items like *kebab*, *halim*, *zeelapi*, *doi-bora* and *pitha* (cake) attract the most customers.

"In Chawkbazar you can find 10-15 kinds of kebab like *suti*, *shik*, *boti*, *hari*, *shami*, *zalli* and *reshmi* at one place, which are not available at any other places," said Hazi Mohammad Mohsin, a kebab seller, the third generation into this business.

These kebabs are sold between Tk180 and Tk240 a kg. *Halim*, available in different tastes like mutton, chicken and beef, is another item that attracts buyers for its delicious preparation. A pot of *Halim* costs Tk15 to Tk200.

'Boro Baper Polai Khay,' probably Chawkbazar's most renowned Iftar item prepared

with more than 50 ingredients like all kinds of pulses, spices, boneless chicken, flattened rice, potato and gram, is sold at Tk180 a kg.

"Everyday we sell 80 to 90 kg of Boro Baper Polai Khay," said Mohammad Hasan who is selling Iftar for the last 15 years in this market.

Abdul Monaf, chairman of Rahmatganj Lentil Traders Association, said "Since last 35 years I have been buying Iftar from this market in every single day of Ramadan. I just cannot think of any alternative to this market."

Most sellers, however, expressed dissatisfaction at the price hike of essentials and different ingredients of Iftar items. "This year we may not see expected profit for the price hike as we did not revise the price of our items."

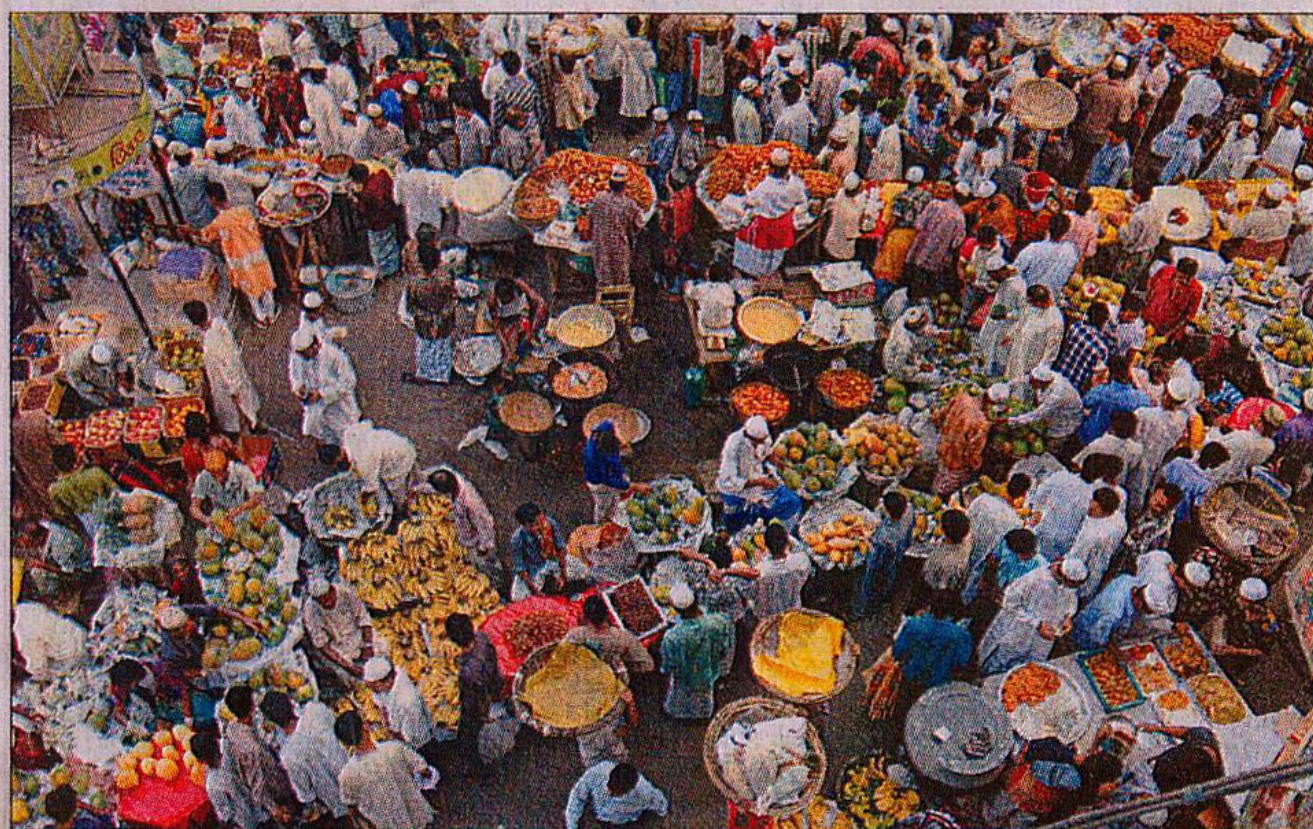
But customers say the prices of some items have gone up.

The Chawkbazar Iftar makers introduce innovative items such as new kinds of sweetmeats and cakes every year. But this year customers hardly find any new item in Chawkbazar, said Siddique Raman, a regular customer.

The price hike of Iftar items has made a dent in the pockets of limited-income people who regularly buy Iftar from Chawkbazar. Some of them are trying to balance their limited budgets with the rising prices by buying less in quantity.

Seasonal fruits sell in the west corner of Chawkbazar Iftar market. "The number of customers has decreased as the prices of even locally produced fruits are beyond the reach of many," said Samser Ali, a fruit seller.

The price of a small papaya is Tk30-35 while a medium size watermelon is selling at Tk75 to Tk100 at the market.



Crowds gather in front of the Chawkbazar Mosque to buy wide varieties of Iftar items.

Travellers lose time to traffic jam at Sonargaon intersection

CITY CORRESPONDENT

Waste of time in the blazing sun for pedestrians, drivers or passengers during Ramadan. Citizens face serious problems crossing any side of the street at the Hotel Sonargaon intersection, the busiest point in the city.

Affected most are pedestrians of Panthapath, Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue, Green Road, and the stretch from Panthapath to Tongi Diversion Road, spending more time at crossing points than the actual work they do.

Adding to the already overburdened streets are the visitors to the Bashundhara City shopping mall, the largest of its kind in the country, opened to the public as recent as October 4. Shoppers for the forthcoming Eid festival contribute more to the congestion.

According to a Dhaka Transport Coordination Board (DTCB) study, more than 10,000 vehicles ply through the Sonargaon intersection an hour. Mindful of the congestion, DTCB experts suggested that permission for the shopping complex should not be granted, but Rajuk thought otherwise.

"I travel along the Panthapath Road regularly in my vehicle. A few weeks ago, it took me only half an hour to get across, but now I spend more than an hour," said Tajul Islam Chowdhury, a Green Road resident and businessman.

"After the inauguration of Bashundhara city, we control more traffic," said Sadrul Hoque, traffic police officer on duty at the Hotel Sonargaon intersection.

"We have arranged parking facilities for 1,200 vehicles at two levels with 36 employees assigned to maintain it. No other shopping mall has this infrastructure, Bashundhara City does not contribute to the traffic jam in the area," said Bashundhara Group's Resident Director, Latiful Hossen.

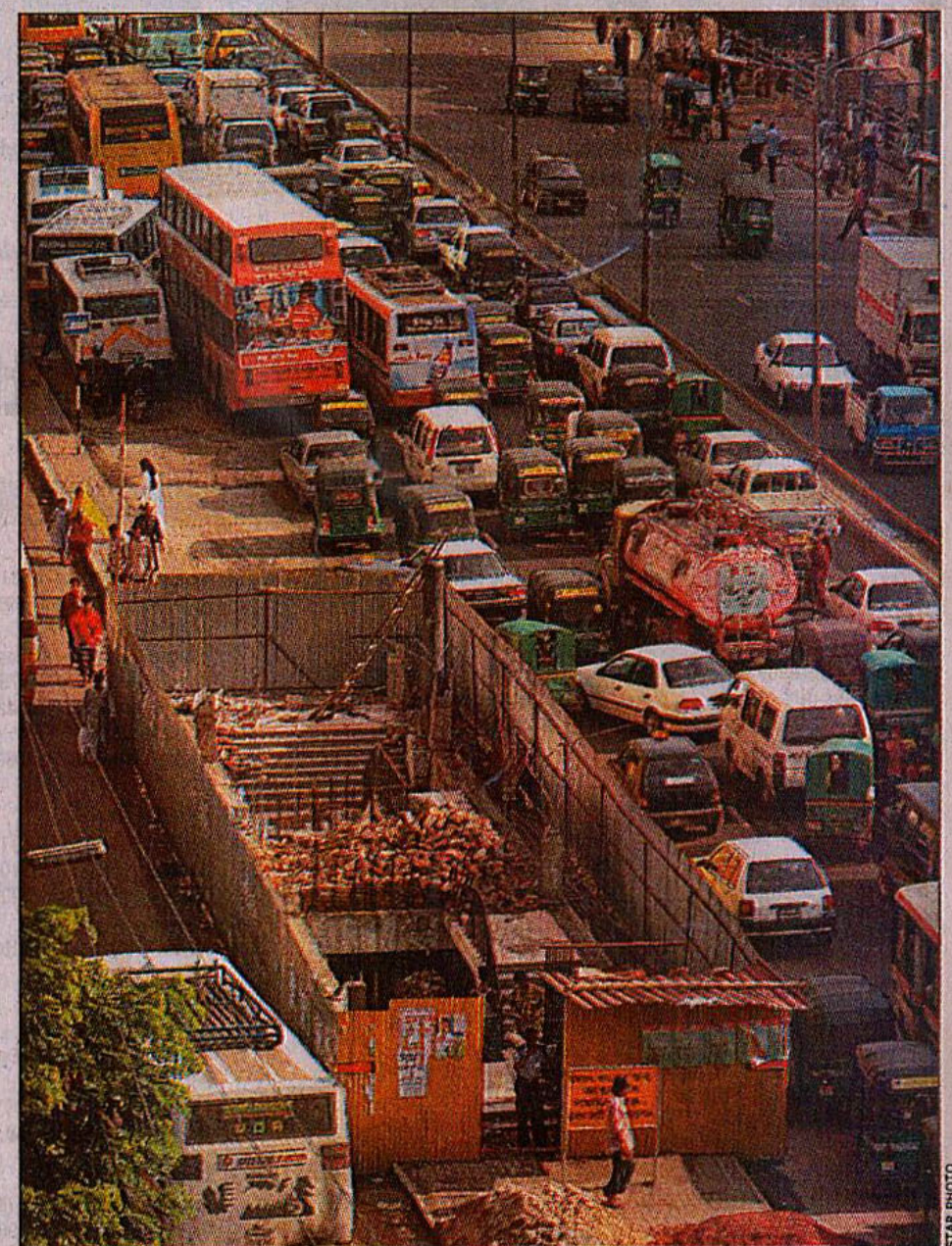
Another problem hampering the smooth flow of traffic transport is the removal of the railing on the median and renovation of the Karwan Bazar underpass. Pedestrians tend to cross the streets at all angles.

"I have waited for over 35 minutes at this intersection on my way to the public service commission office on the old Airport area. The CNG-driven autorickshaw fare costs an extra Tk18 for waiting at the intersection. It was simply intolerable especially during the traffic week," said Mahmud Alam, who works for a non-governmental organisation (NGO).

"The number of rickshaws seems to have increased on different city roads because of Ramadan. The removal of the railing from the centre of the VIP road, Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue and renovation of Karwan Bazar underpass are some other causes of jam," said Ansar Uddin Khan Pathan, deputy police commissioner-traffic (south).

"We initiated a drive against illegal rickshaws and assigned armed police for the job on October 13. Two hundred more community traffic constables and 24 mobile courts under magistrates will be responsible for controlling the traffic during Ramadan and Eid-ul-Fitr," he said.

Another problem hampering the smooth flow of traffic transport is the removal of the railing on the median and renovation of the Karwan Bazar underpass



Long lines of vehicles queue at the Hotel Sonargaon intersection while pedestrians cross the roads as the Karwan Bazar underpass is under renovation.