

The look of Goddess Durga changes with the change of time.

Changing look of Durga

Tradition meets modernity at the puja mandaps

SHAHNAZ PARVEEN

Tradition meets modernity at the puja mandaps as the image of goddess Durga takes new look to keep up with the pace of contemporary life.

The deity gracefully taking centre stage at the mandaps, spreading joy and blessings to the devotees, has taken a new look in recent times. Her posture, physique, curves and ornamentation have deviated from the traditional form, say puja organisers.

With the entry of modern artisans in the process of idol making and the hiring of designers from Kolkata and fine arts students for puja mandap decoration, Durga is taking a sleeker mould in a new imaginative ambience.

Durga Puja is the biggest festival of the Bangalee Hindu community. At the mandaps, Durga is flanked by her four children Kartik, Ganesha, Saraswati and Lakshmi representing youth, wealth, education and prosperity.

Now the city's two main puja mandaps -- Dhakeshwari Temple and the Mahanagar Sharbojanin Puja Mandap at Lalbagh -- wear a 'corporate look' with various private companies sponsoring the festival. Their stalls are a new addition to the festivity. Swarming devotees seem to be enjoying the difference.

"It is true that the face of Durga differs from its traditional feature these days. Her figure resembles the body of a sophisticated figure-conscious woman. In the last decade the pratima (idol) has undergone some major changes," said

Kajal Debnath, vice president, Mahanagar Sharbojanin Puja Committee.

"But Durga Puja is ultimately Matripuja, which means it is the worship of the Mother Goddess," he said. "She is the slayer of all evil, who restore the truth. Her primary mythological function is to combat demons who threaten the stability of the divinity."

Debnath explained that the basic facial feature of Durga idol has to resemble the tradi-

tion for the villagers.

Later it became a community puja, which added the taste and imagination of many to the process. Popular demand influenced the idol making. "The features that we see today is the imagination of organisers and modern artisans," said Debnath.

"However, we haven't gone too far to mould the feature of a film actress like they did in Kolkata," he added.

There are 162 puja mandaps

case the dexterity of the artiste. With time, a sense of competition has evolved among the organisers and artisans," he added.

Paul inherited the trait from his father and uncles and made his first Durga pratima in 1972. He explained that the idol makers follow the physical and facial features of the deity illustrated in various religious books. There is no permanent set of rules.

However, the weapons she

at the Mahanagar Sharbojanin Puja Mandap.

So far the tradition goes, 'Ekchala Pratima' was the most popular in the earlier days where Durga and her children stood in a single platform. Durga had a strong round body with less curves, which gives the impression of soft heart. Yet she is a warrior.

Later, the Ajanta style became popular, in which she had beautiful curves. Today both artisans and devotees admire the artistic Durga that has all the features of modern woman in her. Making her exterior attractive became important. Durga and her four children stand in separate platform on the mandap. They are prepared separately.

No matter how much the deity is changing her mould, the spirits are all the same, said Ranajit Chakravarty, priest of the Mahanagar Sharbojanin Puja Mandap.

"The basic religious conviction is still there. The worshippers still believe Durga is the portrayal of an eternal Bangalee mother. She is the slayer of all evils. She is the giver of youth, wealth, education and prosperity," he said.

"When devotees kneel before her they see the image of a divine mother spreading blessings to all," he added.

The priest does not think the changing faces violate religious aspect in any way. Orthodox priests however differ with this statement and bluntly protests the changes. So most of the idols in villages are still made with traditional mould.

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tional Bangalee mother and she should also possess all her quality, the giver. "The idol is the result of imagination of the worshippers and artisans. Imagination differs from person to person and it changes with time," he said.

The involvement of the middle class in the puja arrangements is, another aspect that played an important role. Durga Puja in the past was a rich family based puja. Wealthy family used to organ-

in the city this year which was around 100 last year. About 20,000 puja mandaps have been set up all around the country.

Sukumer Paul, a renowned pratima shilpi (artisan), said, "Before independence when I was just an apprentice I remember that the idol was intended for worship only."

"With the passage of time it has also become an object of display. Idol making has become an occasion to show-

carries, presence of her children and the symbolic animals, their attitude -- all this must not be altered.

"Durga portrayed in the book Chandi and the writings of Ramchandra is the most popular. These days organisers occasionally give us instructions how to portray her feature. I try to blend the popular demand with the basic original feature," he said.

This year Paul adorned Durga with a red Benarasi sari

DYING ARTS OF SHANKHARI BAZAR-I

Shankha makers having a hard life

DURDANA GHAS

The artisans at Shankhari Bazar who hold the rich tradition of making shankha are now struggling to survive as their centuries-old profession is going through hard times.

Made from conch shells, shankhas are white bangles traditionally worn by married Hindu women, seeking well-being of their husbands. But there is nobody today to think about the welfare and survival of the shankha craftsmen.

A stroll through the slender lane of the once vibrant hub of the shankha craftsmen will easily remind one the bygone days when this place wore an impressive look of its own.

Shankhari Bazar still boasts the making of beautifully decorative bangles that is craved by women even from outside the country. But today shankha, which was once the identity of Shankhari Bazar, is now on the verge of extinction.

During pre-liberation period there were around 400 shankha craftsmen. Now there are around a hundred shankha designers and only seven shankha cutting craftsmen.

The designers used to cut conch shells by hand until shell-cutting machines were introduced some 18 years ago. They used to slice a shell into four to five pieces separating its head and tail, and earn Tk 125 selling a hundred pieces.

At present the designers use machines for cutting conch shells. The cut one shell into eight pieces and the price of one hundred pieces is now Tk 75.

According to the shankha traders and craftsmen, the number of the shankha cutting craftsmen and designers are diminishing due to various reasons that include high import duty on conch shells, fall of demand, invasion of

Indian shankha and price fall due to the introduction of machines. Migration of Hindu community is another major reason.

Amiya Kumar Sur, proprietor of New Laxmi Bhandar, a 60-year old shankha outlet, said short supply of raw materials is one big reason for their dwindling business.

"One reason is the high import cost of raw materials. Conch shell is imported from Sri Lanka. Now we have to buy 100 pieces of conch shells at Tk 35,000," he said.

In early 80s, the price of 150 pieces of conch shell was Tk 2,800, said another craftsman.

"Besides, there is a 33 per cent import duty on conch

shell. For these reasons importers are buying less and the artisans are not getting enough work," said Amiya.

"To save this traditional art, the government should come forward and first of all this high import duty will have to be brought at a reasonable level," he said.

A pair of ordinary shankha



A shankha craftsman at work at Shankhari Bazar.

Myths of the divine shell

According to Hindu mythology once Shankhachur, a powerful fiend conquered the heaven and expelled all the gods from the place. Then the gods sought the help of Bishnu, the lord of the gods. Bishnu said that the source of Shankhachur's power is his virtuous wife Tulsi. If her virtue can be ruined then heaven can be saved. So it was decided that Tulsi's honour will have to be ruined to defeat Shankhachur and Bishnu was the only one who could perform the task. Then Bishnu turned himself into Shankhachur and went to Tulsi. She could not recognise him and lost her virtue. Consequently gods defeated Shankhachur and killed him. When Tulsi realised what happened she threatened Bishnu with a curse of burning him to ashes. Bishnu requested her not to cast any spell and offered her a wish to be fulfilled. Tulsi wished that the bones

of her husband should be reposed at the seabed from which conch shells would grow up. From this conch shell shankha should be made for married women who will wear these for the wellbeing of their husbands. Following this married Hindu women wear shankha for the safety of their husbands.

According to another legend, Shiva planned to visit his in-laws' house in the Himalayas and wanted to present his wife Parvati, an incarnation of goddess Durga, a pair of bangles made from conch shell. To fulfill his desire Agasta Muni, a very powerful sage in the Hindu myths, invented shankhar karat or a saw made of conch shell. The Muni cut the shell with his saw and Bishwakarma made the designs on the bangles. Then Shiva presented the bangles to Parvati and following that married Hindu women wear shankha.

costs as low as Tk 100 while an expensive pair can cost Tk 500 or more. Women from the middle and lower middle class are the main customers and most of them do not afford to buy one pair at more than Tk 200, said traders.

Shambhunath Dhar, a shankha cutting craftsman who has been in this profession for the last forty years, said that in his prime time there were at least 50 katai shilpi or shankha cutting craftsmen at Shankhari Bazar. But now there is only seven. Almost none of their children would come to this profession once they are dead, he said.

Shambhu blamed high import duty on conch shell, resulting in invasion of Indian shankha, as the key reason for falling shankha market in Bangladesh.

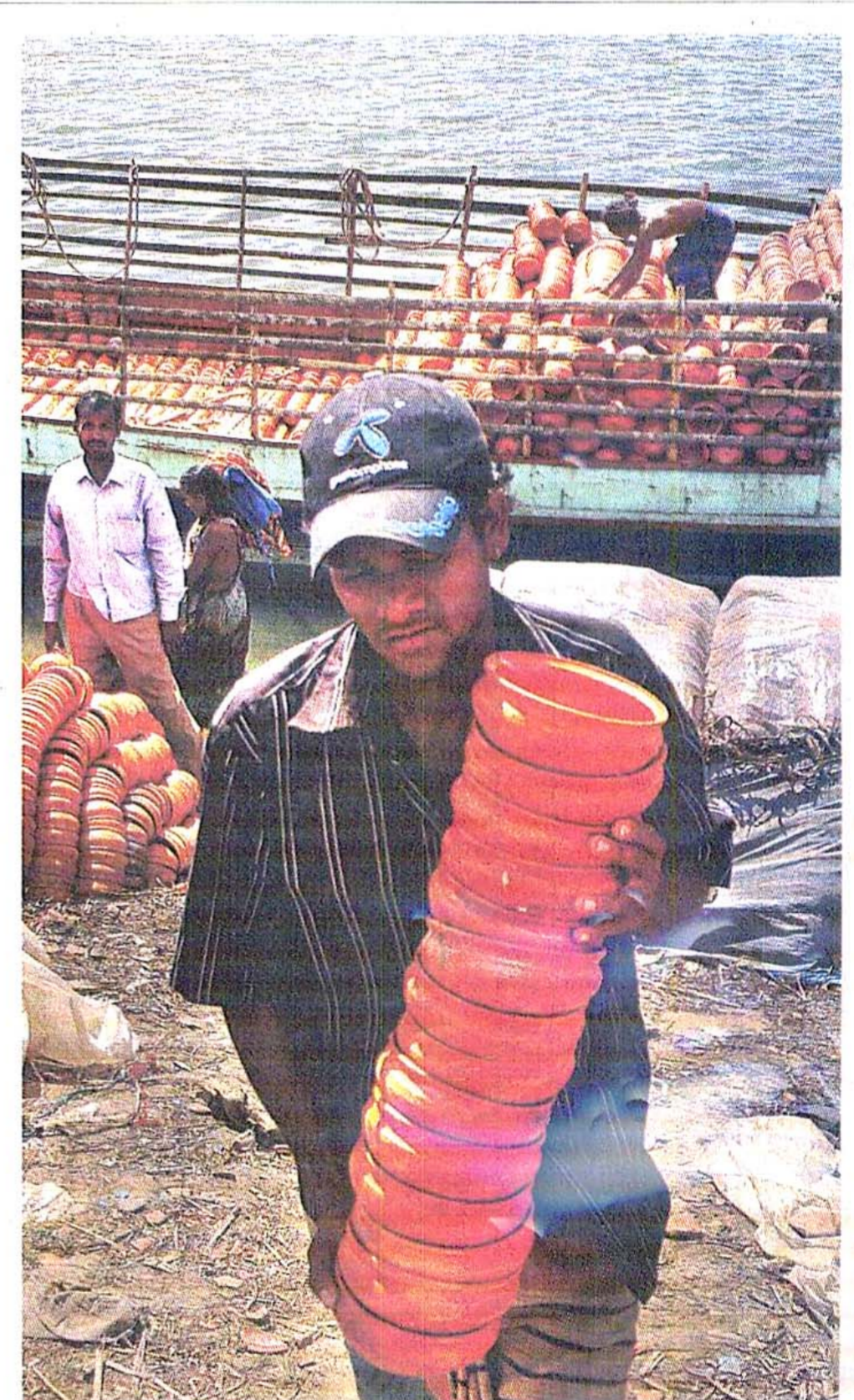
"Once shankha was supplied to all districts of the country from Shankhari Bazar. But now we are facing shortage of raw materials due to high import duty while Indian shankhas are flooding the market. Indian shankhas are being sold in Shankhari Bazar. Is it acceptable?" said Shambhu with regret.

"Now it is difficult for us to survive. I have to sit idle two days if I work one day. I have to wait three days if I work for two days. I won't get any other job at this age so I have to do this work," he said.

Asked what happened to the craftsmen who had to leave the profession facing hard times, Shambhu said, "They are mostly unemployed. Those who could not fit into other professions silently starved to death."

"At least I will not let my children come to this profession," said Shambhu.

Asked what will happen if none comes to this profession after the death of the existing craftsmen, he said, "I don't know."



SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN

Clay pots are being unloaded from a vessel at a point of Buriganaga at Rayer Bazar, once famous for making earthenware. Days were when Rayer Bazar used to supply pots for the city but now the art is dying. Today, other districts supply clay pots for the city which ironically are unloaded at Rayer Bazar.