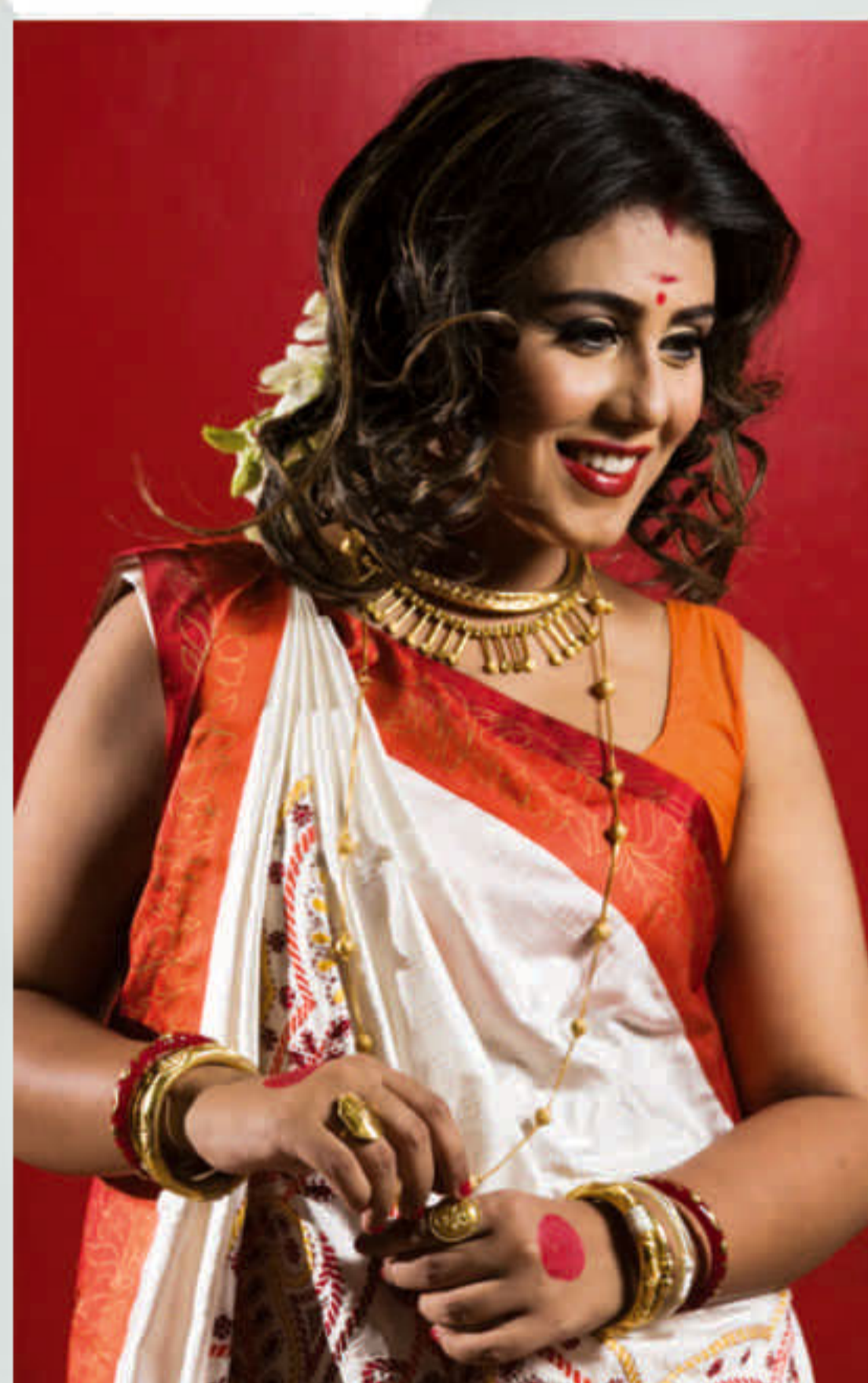


DURGA

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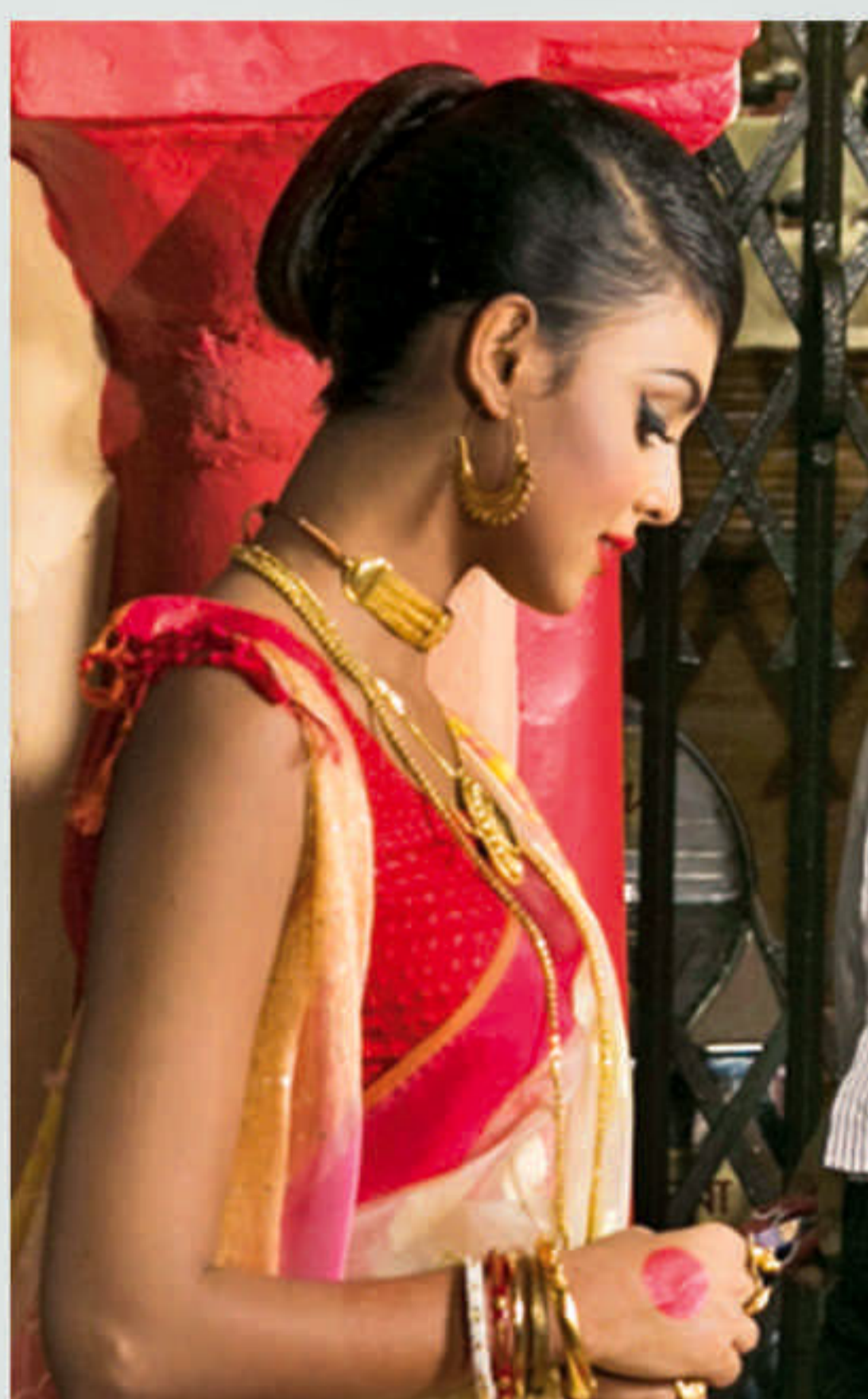
CHANGING TIMES



A young Chandra Shekhar Shaha used to wake up at dawn for puja. The day would begin when the first rays of the sun just timidly started to reveal the temples, the mandaps and the idols; when the silence of the night got ravaged by the deafening beats of powerful 'dhaks'. Shekhar would, at that odd hour, leave his bed and go to the mandap, ready to embrace a busy and fun day.

But today, such involvement in Durga Puja among the mass people is seldom found. It is a charm of a bygone era. "Nowadays, most people inquire about the time when the worships begin, and simply arrive there on that time," Shekhar opines.

Chandra Shekhar Shaha, a veteran designer and researcher, remembers how involved he was with the events of Durga Puja. He used to play dhak and dhol. He used to help the priests prepare for the



rituals. He helped in distributing prashad. And when he was an art student, he kept busy designing and decorating mandaps.

Indeed, with changing times, lifestyle of people has altered quite a lot, and with it, Durga Puja too, has evolved.

One of the most noticeable changes can be seen on the dining table. Previously, vegetarian dishes used to be the main focus. While they are still loved and grab attention of people, there is now a lot of flexibility in the menu, with even meat making an appearance in many households.

And the recipes - vegetarian or otherwise - are now very varied. No longer do families limit the menu to the traditional dishes. With enormous media exposure and the media fervently exploring and introducing recipes from all across the globe, the modern puja celebration includes a selection of dishes that are old and new, traditional and mod-

ern. "It was not that the previous generations were not interested in culinary pursuits, but they didn't have YouTube back then," Shekhar exemplified.

Things have changed enormously. Shekhar's mother, Renuka Saha, a senior citizen, informs that when she was a child, the festival had more to do with religion than with fashion and food. "I used to cleanse dust off the flowers that then were given to the deity as offerings," she said. When I got a little older, I helped in the kitchen, by doing things like cutting fruits."

The fair surrounding the puja mandap or temple - which went for days and nights - was one of the main attractions, and the charm of it now lies more in her memory than in reality. "There were glass dolls, watermelons and sweets to buy," she remembers. "I longed for delicacies like 'bombai mithai'. You would have to buy a



lottery ticket, and then how many sweets you got depended on your luck."

Today, Durga Puja celebrations are a perfect opportunity for entertaining art. "The religious rituals continue. But there is an increasing focus on things like innovativeness of the stage and presence of celebrities on cultural programmes and so on," Shekhar explains.

Previously, going to a restaurant on the days of Durga Puja was uncommon. But now, it is common practice. "While it's true that households try out new recipes, it is also true that many people don't want to take the hassle of preparing food on all the days of Durga Puja. Special cooking is reserved for 1 or 2 days, like Dashami. Restaurants provide a convenient solution."

Is it because of the fact that our lives have become busier and more hectic? Shekhar doesn't think so. "The days of Durga Puja are holidays in our country. So you cannot really hold lack of time as an excuse," he rationalised.

Durga Puja is one of the most cherished memories for any Bengali. But with time, the contents of memories are changing. Naturally, a 90-year old had very different experiences in his childhood than a 50-year old, who, in turn, enjoyed Durga Puja very differently from that of a child of this generation.

That's perfectly all right, as long as that child too grows up to cherish beautiful memories that he can narrate to his future generation. Across ages and generations, and through traditions and innovations, Mother Durga lives on.

By M H Haider
 Photo: Sazzad Ibne Sayed
 Concept: Chandra Shekhar Shaha,
 Designer and Researcher
 Model: Hridi, Meghla
 Wardrobe and Jewellery: Aarong
 Make-up: Farzana Shakil