

A FESTIVAL OF **ARTS**



PHOTOS: DARSHAN CHAKMA & ANURUP KANTI DAS



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Be it painting, music, or any other form, art has managed to combine the ordinary in physical existence with the mystique in imagination. Sculpture, in particular, has always been revered for its aura of symbolism – Stonehenge and the Sphinx are just a few to name. The very mention of sculpture is inevitably followed with a reference to big names like Michelangelo or Raphael. Although authors like Dan Brown have managed to popularise renaissance sculptors with their writing, few are aware of their contemporary counterparts – let alone those in our country. As Durga Puja comes around each year, every mandap comes alive with the works of these unsung heroes – our very own Raphaels and Berninis. A pantheon in tribute to the Mother Goddess, conceived in myriad poses donning a variety of ornaments, are set on display. Durga Puja is a kaleidoscope of art and sculpture – and its ingredients are wet clay, inspiration and faith.

Durga Puja is a celebration of the Hindu Goddess Durga, who, accompanied by her divine children – Lakshmi, Saraswati, Ganesh and Kartik – descends on earth each year to vanquish the demon Mahishasura. In an almost surreal explosion of colours and lights, Durga Puja is celebrated as an ode to the classic triumph of good over evil. Amidst the stifling heat and fickle rains, hundreds of pandals will be erect all over town – and this is just Dhaka alone. These

festivals in Bangladesh. And Dhakaites greet the sprouting pandals with gusto. It's also a time when some Dhaka residents leave town to be with family. "It's a part of the year I await with great anticipation. I get to go home to my family, indulge in the great home-cooked food and feel at one with my culture and upbringing. In short, it's a time for family and celebration for me," said Anindya Banerjee, a student of IBA, Dhaka University.

sorships in the last decade, these works of art have become even more extravagant and innovative than their predecessors. Last year, a pandal in Chittagong took inspiration from Greek mythology, fashioning the idols after ancient Greek deities; another had an underwater theme with Durga perched on a stage resembling a coral reef. When it comes to creativity, these pandal organizers push the envelope every year. Most of these pandals take months to organise. "For the bigger celebrations in the cities, preparation starts immediately after

"A basic Durga idol takes around 25 days, whereas, a larger idol takes over 40 days to perfect. If you have 4-6 sculptors working at a time, the entire process takes about two weeks," added Aadinath. From getting the clay to the ornamentation, the creation of the sculptures is a process involving many rituals. Idols are often adorned in golden jewellery, exquisite saris and flowers. "Every statue is sculpted and painted using techniques that have been around for generations. Durga Puja is not only a time of worship but also a celebration of beautiful artistry that is very indigenous," said Aadinath.

Pandals and sculptures characterised by particular themes have become a trademark of the tradition of Durga Puja. Popular themes around the world include ancient civilisations, such as the Mayans and the Egyptians. Some themes have become immensely popular whereas others certainly raised public curiosity, if nothing else. In 2007, a pandal in Kolkata garnered worldwide attention as it was fashioned after Hogwarts Castle from the *Harry Potter* series. When asked about the strangest themed pandal she's seen, Aishwarya Tilottama Sarker, a student of Southern Medical College and Hospital, Chittagong, said, "I saw a puja on Satish Babu Lane once where Durga and her companions were made to wear jeans and t-shirts. It was pretty strange."

Theme or not, there's no denying that Durga Puja is also a festival that celebrates arts. The music, dancing and art at the pandals play a pivotal role in connecting communities across the country. "The intricately detailed statues, the art, and the whole ambiance give our dreams and imaginations a depiction, thereby, connecting us all," said Aishwarya.

Today, the culture of Durga Puja has evolved to become "Sharbojanin" (involving all). As a part of the Bangladeshi experience, it transcends its religious confines in many aspects. Even with all its mass appeal, Durga Puja maintains its air of mysticism. As Francis Bacon so rightly put it, "The job of the artist is to always deepen the mystery."

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pandals are 'assembled' at open spaces – even in the most inconceivable venues. From fields to narrow alleyways, they transform the landscape into a mesh of energy and frantic activity. Thousands visit Dhaka during this time – one pandal organizer estimates that approximately 10,000 visitors come to the city prior to the largest Hindu

Perhaps the biggest attraction of the festival is the pandals themselves. At the heart of these intricate constructions are stages on which Durga reigns, atop her majestic lion, wielding weapons and offering blessings in ten hands. Not only is this central to the religious festivities but also, the most anticipated. With the advent of corporate spon-

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the previous ones. For smaller puja, it usually takes three to four months to get everything in order, including the idols," added Anindya. The budget for these puja can range anywhere between BDT 50,000 to 40,00,000 – all depending on the level of grandeur the organisers are aiming for. This is what sustains local artisans and sculptors – vital to the preservation of the art and tradition. "Making the idols cost us artists many sleepless nights on end," said local sculptor Aadinath Paul.