



SPECIAL FEATURE

The coming of Durga

A long drive outside the city would have you gaping at the miles and miles of silvery feathery *kashful*. And while the white clouds of early autumn playfully shade you against the golden sun, you remember a festival of colours, traditions and spiritual harmony. Whether it is on an elephant, boat, palanquin or the horse, the arrival of 'Maa Durga' marks the biggest event of the Bengali calendar.

Waking up early, I excitedly put on my newest set of clothes and prepare for the Puja, as per the instructions of my friend, Avni. Mutual respect and tolerance is key in all religions, and as a non-Hindu attending the Durga Puja, one must remember to respect the rules and customs of all the rituals.

It has been two days since the Deity, along with her four children — Devi Lakshmi, Devi Saraswati, Lord Ganesha and Lord Kartik — has arrived. Mahastami, which is the eighth day of the Durga Puja, consists of a series of rituals throughout the day to celebrate all nine forms of the Goddess Durga.

While preparations for the holy festival begin right when the deity sets out for the mortal world, it is not until the sixth day (Mahashasti) when the Goddess has arrived that the actual puja starts. As soon as the idol of Durga is unveiled through an incitation ceremony, Durga Puja begins with great gusto. Signifying a mother's love for her child, Mahashasti is especially celebrated by mothers who fast and participate



in prayers for the well-being of their children. Alternatively, Mahasaptami starts with the bathing of and prepping the 'Kola bou', who is then worshipped by the devotees.

The day of Ashtami begins with the recital of Sanskrit hymns by the pundits, followed by the *pushphanjali*, which is a prayer performed with bael leaves, marigold petals, paddy, durba grass and tulsi leaves. The ceremony ends with a sweet herbal drink being passed around. Called

the 'choranamrita', everyone takes a few drops of it, along with other sweet delicacies.

The grand preparation for Mahashtami often takes a long time as devotees leave no stones unturned to collect the best puja flowers, leaves and sandalwood milk, as well as to find the perfect gifts for their loved ones. On the day of the event, families and friends set out to visit the Puja 'mandaps' throughout the city. Starting from the buzzing Dhakeshwari to the colourful mandaps in Kalabagan, Khamarbari, Ramkrishna Mission and Dhaka University, one finally finishes on the elegant mandaps of Banani and Baridhara.

Quite often, stalls selling shakhas, bindis, and vermilion set themselves up beside the puja venue. From puja ingredients to traditional sweet delicacies to even toys for the little ones, these fairs soon turn into a meeting point for friends and families. So, don't be surprised by the long queue in front of the stall selling narus, halwa and moa. The legends of the gods are expressed in forms of dance, music, storytelling, poetry and drama and one can often find themselves marvelling at the deity's grace, resilience and kindness.

Entering one of the 'mandaps', I notice a girl of about eight dressed in a beautiful red sari adorned with jewellery and flowers. The 'kumaripuja' has started where the girl, who is considered a childhood form of the deity herself, is showered with prayers and offer-

ings by the devotees.

As one drives into the last 24 minutes of ashtami, the main ritual of the festival begins. The Sandhi puja, which extends to the first 24 minutes of Navami, is performed during the Sandhikaal. This time period was exactly when the notorious pair of Chanda and Munda was slain by the fiercest form of Goddess Durga.

I watch in awe as exactly 108 earthen lamps are lit in front of the Goddess, and an offering of 108 lotus flowers is made. Then through mantras and a complicated ritual that includes further offerings, the force of the Deity is celebrated in full splendour and utter grandeur.

The day finally arrives when Maa Durga has to return to Mount Kailash. Her teary-eyed devotees pray for a good upcoming year, and celebrate Bijoy Dashami by putting vermilion in the parting of Durga's hair and feeding her sweets. Once again, the aura of festivity fills the air as married women play with vermilion and dancers offer the 'dhunuchi' dance over the beats of the 'dhaak'.

"It's mainly celebrating the victory of good over evil. Our legends such as Ramayana are prime examples of such values and morals. No matter what, good will win, and thus, that's the side we should always be on," Avni explains.

By Adiba Mahbub Proma
Photo: LS Archive/Sazzad Ibne Sayed