



All my life, I was on the other side of the ritual. I would watch women apply sindur on each other's cheeks, laugh, and share the joy of being a part of something I never understood, as my cousin dragged me into the section where all the young unmarried girls celebrated and danced to the music of the dhaak.

She is every

WOMEN



Today's game plan was to hold onto the thali no matter what, as a defence against participating in the dhanuchi dance.

As we entered the mandap, the women went straight towards the stage where Durga awaited her departure. My eyes searched through the crowd for my father-in-law who was already supposed to be here. As I followed the women of the family making their way, someone grabbed my arm from the back—it was my father-in-law, "Maa, pass me a laddu before they're all gone," he says with a grin. I sneak one off as stealthily and efficiently as possible, whilst not losing sight of my mother-in-law.

An entire portion in front of the stage has been cleared off. Women dressed in white saris with red borders, flowers in their hair, and big red teeps, are seen making their way up to the stage, partaking in the dhanuchi dance, or rubbing sindur on one another's cheeks.

The air fills with palpable excitement—the noises, laughter, intermingled into the smell and smoke from the dhuup made the men and women dancing seem almost like a trance. As they sway so effortlessly to the rhythm of the dhaak, it reminded me of my childhood, when I would wonder (and still do), how they balanced the dhuup in their hands, without dropping it.

"Come quick, we need to finish the Devi Boron," said my mother-in-law, who, by this time, was already on the stairs towards the

stage. Her semi-yell was just what was needed to break through my momentary daze.

As I walked up to the stage towards Maa Durga, I realised I had never been this close to her image. Truth be told, it's quite daunting, especially if you can relate to her tenacity and ferocity heard in stories. I first touched the sindur on Durga's feet, and then forehead, passed the betel nut leaves to the pandit as offerings for the puja, and lastly, broke off a piece of the laddu and placed it on Durga's lips.

They say that this ritual is a celebration of Durga's marital status as she prepares to depart for her heavenly abode, hence the name "Shidur Khela," because sindur signifies the married status of a woman.

In some sense, this was coming full circle, to finally be part of a ritual that women in my own family had always performed; I wasn't just bidding Durga adieu and asking for her blessings, I was paying homage to the women who had raised me too. Although, having them physically there would've meant the world to me, this was as close as I could have them with me today.

I sought solace in knowing I was carrying heirlooms of their marital lives with me today—clad in my thakurmoni's red and white gorod sari, my mother's favourite long-chained gold pendant, and my own wedding shakhas, polas, and golaap balas; a wave of emotions engulfed me as I stepped

aside, allowing others to do the same.

Personally, it felt like the celebration of a union, one which could only be sealed by two individuals and a particular red tinted powder. There's no bias or misogyny here, just a newly married woman, happy to have shared this new phase of her life, with her newfound family, and the one that had nurtured.

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As I walked off the stage, distracted by my own bittersweet feelings, out of nowhere two hands smeared my cheeks with vermilion red powder. Caught off guard, I saw a beaming mother-in-law who then fed me a piece of laddu, waiting for me to do the same. I smudged some sindur on her forehead and smiled. Unfortunately, this only welcomed more women to do the same to me and others around us,

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LIFE STYLE

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