

A bittersweet Durga Puja

DOWEL BISWAS

Dhaka city seems to have experienced a juxtaposition of tradition and trepidation during this year's Durga Puja celebrations.

The joyous return of Mahadevi Durga, the goddess of shakti (power), to her maternal home in Martya is a time of celebrations and unity. However, a feeling of unease permeated the festival – an aftereffect of the distressing incidents that happened targeting the minority communities.

Durga Puja, the largest festival of Bangalee Hindus, has always been more than just a religious observance. It is a vibrant celebration that transcends sectarian boundaries, uniting Hindus and Muslims in a shared cultural heritage. The festival's roots lie deep in Hindu spirituality, celebrating the triumph of good over evil. But beyond its religious significance, it fosters social harmony, encouraging communities to unite in joyful reverence.

In the capital, the festival itself was a spectacle of grandeur. Hundreds of mandaps were erected across the city, adorned with intricate decorations and colourful lights. Devotees offered prayers, sang hymns, and participated in various rituals at Dhakeshwari temple, Siddheswari Kali Mandir, Shankhari Bazar puja mandaps, and Ramna Kali Mandir, among others.

But the shadows of recent communal disturbances loomed large. Reports of idol vandalism and threats against minority communities cast a dark cloud over the festivities. From singing of a song calling for Islamic revolution at a mandap in Chattogram to what locals said was a molotov cocktail thrown inside a mandap in Old Dhaka, this year's celebrations highlighted a critical need for understanding and acceptance of a festival that has been a cornerstone of Bangalee culture for hundreds of years.



PHOTO: ARSHADUL HOQUE ROCKY

Mrinmoyee Mitra, a devotee at Ramna Kali Mandir, shared her apprehension. "The security measures that have been taken are commendable, but I don't feel safe or included anymore."

"Our identity and existence have long been under threat. We are celebrating the puja nonetheless, but will we be safe for the rest of the year?"

Another devotee, speaking anonymously, shared a similar sentiment. "My hometown is not Dhaka. My house was attacked, and I received threats after the fall of the Awami League government. Since then, I have been taking refuge

at relatives'. I do not want to comment further on this, as I know there is no solution to this problem."

Amid it all, the rituals of Durga Puja pressed on. The goddess was bathed, adorned, and worshipped with great devotion. The city buzzed with life, the chants and beats of drums filling the air.

Ujjal Biswas Guru, the maestro who crafted the grand idols for Dhakeshwari National Temple, said, "Creating the idols of Durga Maa demands a unique blend of immersion and reverence."

"While I go about this process with the same solemn dedication as always, I must

admit there was an underlying anxiety this year due to the current political climate."

Durga is not only a nurturing mother but also a fierce protector. Her mythic battles against injustice and evil serve as timeless reminders of her strength and resilience. In this tumultuous time, when Hindu and other minority communities face adversities, Durga stands as a beacon of hope.

Kajal Debnath, a member of Bangladesh Hindu-Bouddha-Christian Oikya Parishad, lamented the recurring violence against Hindu communities. But he emphasised that the number of troublemakers was far smaller than those who had supported and celebrated alongside the Hindus.

Jayanta Kumar Dev, president of the Mohanagar Sarbojanin Puja Committee, pointed to a recent incident in Puran Dhaka where a Hindu temple was targeted but was protected by the local residents and the army.

Despite the challenges, Dev said, he remains hopeful about the future. "Bangladesh has a rich history as a non-communal nation where people of all backgrounds come together to celebrate Durga Puja."

"These celebrations are more cultural than religious, and we are confident they will continue to thrive."

In a display of solidarity, notable figures including Chief Adviser Professor Muhammad Yunus and Chief of Army Staff General Waker-Uz Zaman had visited Dhakeshwari National Temple, reinforcing their support for the temple and the Hindu community.

As the Durga Puja festival comes to a close, the Hindus reaffirm their commitment to a non-sectarian society and aspire to a future where their traditions are celebrated as an integral part of the national identity.

Set example by ensuring safety of everyone

Urges Tarique in Durga Puja message

STAR REPORT

BNP acting chairman Tarique Rahman yesterday called for collective efforts by all the communities to set an example in ensuring everyone's safety, regardless of their identity.



Tarique said in a message on Durga Puja on Facebook that he believes every Bangladeshi citizen must enjoy equal rights, freedoms, and protections without any distinction between Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, or Christian.

The country belongs to all Bangladeshis, the BNP leader remarked.

He added that as a united nation, Bangladesh stands to form a "collective community 'shield'" and set an example by ensuring the safety of everyone, regardless of their identity or background."

Tarique, who has been in exile in London for over one and a half decades, also included a photo of Hindu Goddess Durga in his post and extended "warm" greetings to all those celebrating Durga Puja.

"May this festival bring peace, harmony, and prosperity to every household, and foster cohesion and togetherness among all communities."

Hilsa catching ban begins

STAR REPORT

A 22 day government ban on catching, selling and transporting hilsa will come into effect from Saturday midnight to save mother hilsa during the peak breeding season.

The Department of Fisheries issued the ban on catching all types of fish, including hilsa, in the Padma and Meghna rivers.

The ban will remain until November 3.

Those caught fishing or selling hilsa during this period may face up to two years of rigorous imprisonment, a fine of up to Tk 5,000 or both.

Bangladesh slips 3 notches to 84

FROM PAGE 1

Besides, 23.6 percent of children under the age of five in Bangladesh suffer from stunting and 11 percent of the children under five experience wasting (a child being too thin for his or her height), it said.

Among the other South Asian countries, Sri Lanka ranked 56, Nepal 68, India 105 and Pakistan 109.

In South Asia, hunger remains serious, reflecting rising undernourishment and persistently high child undernutrition, driven by poor diet quality, economic challenges and the increasing impacts of natural disasters.

With 281 million undernourished people, South Asia accounts for nearly 40 percent of the global total and has the highest child-wasting rate of all regions in the GHI.

Globally, hunger is serious or alarming in 42 countries, with dozens of countries still experiencing a level of hunger that is much too high.

Six countries are experiencing alarming levels of hunger: Burundi, Chad, Madagascar, Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen.

In another 36 countries, hunger is designated as serious.

Furthermore, many countries are slipping backwards: in 22 countries with moderate, serious or alarming 2024 GHI scores, hunger has actually increased since 2016.

In 20 countries with moderate, serious or alarming 2024 GHI scores, progress has largely stalled: their 2024 GHI scores have declined by less than 5 percent from their 2016 GHI scores.

This year, 22 countries with GHI scores of less than 5 are not assigned individual ranks but rather are collectively ranked 1-22. Differences between their scores are minimal.

The top five countries in the index are Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Chile, China and Costa Rica.

Journo hacked to death

FROM PAGE 1

He lived in Majhipara area for the past 15 years.

After the attack, locals rushed him to Mymensingh Medical College Hospital and was declared dead.

On information, police went to the hospital and sent the body to the morgue for autopsy. They also arrested Sagor, 18, an alleged drug addict and peddler in this connection.

Around 5:00pm, the victim's wife Sabita Rani Bhadra filed a case with Kotwali police, accusing Sagor.

"During primary interrogation, Sagor confessed to the murder," said OC Saiful.

"We believe he committed the murder because Swapon had posted about his drug consumption and peddling many times on Facebook."

In the evening, Sagor was produced before a Mymensingh court, which sent him to jail.

People want a party helmed by the youth

FROM PAGE 1

this moment, people are hoping for a new party to emerge.

"The emergence of a new party is also significant for the existing parties, as it'll increase pressure [on all] to do well. The people want a party led by young people."

He added, "We've spoken to the local coordinators and those who are from martyrs' families. We've also had discussions with local political leaders. Many leaders and activists, who perpetrated the genocide, are still in the country. They're involved in various forms of economic irregularities under the shelter of a specific political party. There's a business going on centring the political cases."

Speaking to The Daily Star, another central coordinator, Tarikul Islam, who attended the meetings in Rangpur division, said, "Speaking to people in different districts, it seemed they want an alternative force in power."

Following the district-level discussions, the central coordinators held another meeting with the coordinators and co-coordinators from educational institutions across the country at Dhaka University's TSC on September 20.

They discussed how the Movement could organise itself better.

Since September 8, representatives of the movement have visited eight divisions of the country in phases. The tour began with a meeting in Munshiganj and ended on September 18 in Shariatpur.

However, meetings in nine districts – Khagrachhari, Comilla, Barguna, Natore, Jhenaidah, Habiganj, Sherpur, Bogura and Chandpur – saw scuffles and commotion among the students.

The meeting in Narsingdi was postponed due to conflicts between two groups of coordinators. In Habiganj and Bogura, meetings were disrupted by a party-affiliated student organisation, while the meeting in Sherpur was disrupted due to conflicts among local coordinators.

Moreover, central coordinators from Dhaka were unable to attend the meeting in Mymensingh in the face of opposition from local coordinators.

EXPANDING ORGANISATIONAL ACTIVITIES
The Anti-Discrimination Students Movement and the Jatiya Nagorik Committee will expand their organisational activities as both the platforms have decided to form district-level "teams".

Both are likely to announce the committees next week, while the Movement is also mulling overhauling their central coordination team.

At least three Movement coordinators and the convenor of the Jatiya Nagorik Committee have confirmed the developments to The Daily Star.

"The primary reason for forming teams at the district level is to clearly differentiate those engaging in misconduct under the guise of coordinators. If any team member is found involved in misconduct, they can be expelled and appropriate action can be taken to bring them under the law," Sarjis told The Daily Star.

Meanwhile, representatives of the Jatiya Nagorik Committee, launched on September 13 to consolidate the power of the uprising and work towards national reconstruction, have already met leaders from AB Party, Ganosamhati Andolan, and Gono Odhakar Parishad.

They plan to gradually sit with all political parties, while informal meetings with the BNP, Jamaat-e-Islami, and Islami Andolan Bangladesh have also been planned.

Jatiya Nagorik Committee Convenor Nasiruddin Patwari on Monday told this correspondent that these informal discussions will be held to be acquainted with the party leaders and convey their messages back to the youth.

Build a nation protecting rights of everyone

FROM PAGE 1

must face immediate consequences."

The chief adviser said following a student-led mass uprising an opportunity has arrived to rebuild the country.

"We should not let this opportunity to transform our country slip away. Do not allow it to be lost. If it is lost, it may never return."

This year's Durga Puja celebrations have taken on a special joy, a sentiment felt across the country as people could enjoy the festivities because of a four-day holiday.

The joy has further increased as the festivities have been held smoothly, he said, adding that everyone has made an effort to ensure that everything goes perfectly.

Both the government and various organisations have worked sincerely to achieve this goal, said the chief adviser.



Bangladesh Puja Uddjan Parishad presents a crest to Chief Adviser Muhammad Yunus when he went to visit the Dhakeshwari National Temple yesterday to see the Durga Puja mandap there.

PHOTO: PID

He thanked police, army, Rab, Border Guard Bangladesh, Ansar and other agencies of the government for their dedication in ensuring safety of

the people.

"This is a difficult task, not an easy one, and they have managed to execute it exceptionally well."

Last 15 years a show of absolute power

FROM PAGE 1

Reducing the government's term to four years will prevent autocracy, he said, adding that, almost 80 percent of the developed countries have government terms shorter than five years.

He also recommended reintroducing the caretaker government system to the constitution. The government's chief adviser would be someone who has broad parliamentary support.

Badiul Alam Majumdar, head of the reform commission on Election Commission, said no reforms will work without a consensus among political parties.

Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) leader Mujahidul Islam Selim said the task of amending the constitution should be left for the next elected government.

Prof Anu Muhammad said many provisions in the constitution were originally democratic, but through amendments, these provisions became communal and autocratic.

CPB General Secretary Ruhin Hossain Prince said only constitutional amendments that are needed for a free and fair election should be done.

People talking about rewriting the constitution probably want to make

the Liberation War debatable, he added.

Razequzzaman Ratan, joint general secretary of the Bangladesher Samajtantrik Dal, said most of the amendments to the constitution curtailed the democratic environment.

Nazrul, Anu Muhammad, Prince and Ratan said they were against a province-based federal government, and proposed strengthening the current local government system.

Dhaka University Prof MM Akash moderated the discussion presided over by Tajul Islam, president of Samaj Gobeshona Kendra.

35yrs for men, 37 for women

FROM PAGE 1

35 years. They blocked the Shahbagh intersection during demonstrations on numerous occasions.

The protests intensified after the government on September 22 announced that it was not planning to increase the age limit. It formed the review committee on September 30 after hundreds of jobseekers staged a massive demonstration in front of the chief adviser's residence.

Led by former caretaker government adviser Abdul Muveed Chowdhury, the committee considered some key factors, including the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, the "deprivation" of candidates during the Awami League government's tenure, and economic strains from the Russia-Ukraine war.

It also took into account global practices. The committee found that countries like the US have no age limit for government job entry, while Nepal has a limit of 45 years, and some Indian states allow candidates aged up to 36 years.

Other members of the committee are Mokhles Ur Rahman, senior secretary to the public administration ministry; Kowsar Zahura, former joint secretary; Muhammad Iqbal, former additional secretary; and Saiful Islam, an incumbent additional secretary.

The committee members also looked into the factors behind the demonstrations, said sources.

Public service recruitment came to a near halt during the pandemic. Although the previous government announced an age relaxation due to the pandemic, the recruitment process was slow, and fewer new opportunities were created.

But before the country got over the pandemic, the Russia-Ukraine war affected the national economy and limited job opportunities in public and private sectors, the sources said.

They said that numerous students were unable to complete their education because of politically motivated cases and harassment during the tenure of the AL regime. It affected their ability to apply for government jobs.

"The committee considered all these factors to recommend an age increase exceeding the demands of the students," said an official.

The committee members consulted educators, hiring authorities, and student organisations.

It analysed the legal and administrative barriers to making reforms and their possible impact on the labour market and the economy.

Recently, Bangladesh Administrative Service Association (BASA) wrote to the cabinet secretary, requesting an increase in the entry and retirement

ages for government jobs.

A senior official of BASA said if the government accepted these recommendations, it might also increase the retirement age, which is currently 59.

The official said government employees typically need to serve at least 25 years to qualify for a pension. Therefore, if the entry age was raised to 35 years, the retirement age would also need to be adjusted accordingly.

The source, who has knowledge of the report, said they did not deal with the retirement age limit.

However, there is optimism that the government may address both issues simultaneously.

Former additional secretary Firoz Mia, a civil service expert, said the government should temporarily increase the age limit to 35 or 37 considering the impacts of the quota system, the pandemic, and political instability.

However, raising the age limit permanently could have "negative" impact, he added.

Increasing the entry age significantly would also necessitate raising the retirement age, he pointed out.

Candidates who are 18 years old can seek posts that need educational qualification below Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC). They would have 12 years to get the job.

"Extending this opportunity from 12 to 18-19 years is entirely unnecessary. Additionally, millions apply for government jobs. Increasing the age limit would further swell the number of applicants, making it harder to manage the process in the long run," the former bureaucrat said.

The government could have considered adjusting the age limit for higher-grade jobs temporarily, such as the next two rounds of the Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) exams, according to him.

The recruitment process itself takes at least a year, and in some cases, it can take two to three years. Those who apply at the age of 35 might only be hired at 37 or 38, by which time their enthusiasm for the job may wane, Firoz said.

"I believe that if young people spend too much time pursuing government jobs after graduation, many will lose interest in becoming entrepreneurs. Moreover, starting an entrepreneurial journey after the age of 35 would have its own complexities."

However, the government could permanently raise the age limit to 35, 40, and 42 years for ethnic minorities, the transgender community, and people with disabilities, respectively, Firoz said.

Nuclear deterrence still at heart of great power strategy: experts

AFP, Paris

Nuclear-armed powers have no intention of giving up the atom bomb as part of their military strategy, experts said after the Nobel Peace Prize committee urged against any weakening of the nuclear "taboo".

Awarding this year's peace prize to Japan's Nihon Hidankyo, a grassroots movement of Hiroshima and Nagasaki survivors pushing for a nuclear weapons ban, the committee said on Friday the atom bomb attacks

on both Japanese cities in 1945 had led to a "nuclear taboo" which had, however, come under "pressure" since.

While none of the countries possessing nuclear weapons have used them in war since 1945, the implicit or even explicit threat to do so is part of their arsenal.

Moscow has repeatedly brandished the nuclear threat in a bid to dissuade the West from supporting Ukraine, which has been fending off Russia's invasion since February 2022.