



OFF CAMPUS

A VISITOR'S GUIDE TO DURGA PUJA MANDAPS

PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

BIPRA PRASUN DAS

During Durga Puja, Bangladesh lights up. In cities, streets glow with decorations and buzzing crowds, while in towns and villages, *mandaps* carry their own charm – sometimes simpler, sometimes deeply traditional – but always full of warmth. The *mandaps* themselves, decorated with vibrant colours and artistry, draw in not just devotees but people from all walks of life.

Over the years, these spaces have grown beyond their religious roots, and are now cultural gatherings where food, art, and community meet. It is a space where anyone, regardless of faith, can experience the joy. But with so many people coming together, a little awareness goes a long way. Knowing what to expect, how to move through the crowds, and the small gestures of respect that matter can make your visit smoother and more enjoyable, while keeping the celebration welcoming for all.

One of the first things you will notice at *puja mandaps* is the sheer energy. Expect a huge crowd, especially in the evenings of *Ashtami* and *Navami*, which, this year, fall on September 30 and October 1, respectively. The atmosphere can feel overwhelming. There will be a constant hum of conversations, the sound of dhaks, and music being played pretty loudly.

The *mandaps* themselves are a treat for the eyes. Though temporary, they are built with astonishing creativity, some drawing from mythology, others inspired by modern themes. It isn't just the aesthetics, though. Many *mandaps* host cultural programmes, which include music, dance, plays, or recitations. In some *mandaps*, there are concerts of popular artists too.

Timing plays a difference when it comes to enjoying *Puja mandaps*. If you are not a fan of navigating huge crowds, it's a good idea to visit later at night, after 11 PM. By then,

the rush has thinned, so you can take your time and admire the decorations and the festivities. *Puja mandaps* stay illuminated all night, and the festive mood doesn't change. For a different kind of experience, mornings are a great option. The atmosphere is quieter, the streets are easier to navigate, and you can take in the spiritual side of the festival before the day gets busy.

Dashami, the day of immersion, is a different story. It's emotional and chaotic at the same time. But it's also worth witnessing if you want to see the festival's closing chapter. This year, however, the government has set restrictions to ensure immersion proceedings finish before nightfall. That means rituals will end much earlier in the day, and idols will begin being loaded by noon. If you're planning to see *Dashami* rituals, it's best to go out early in the morning so you don't miss them.

While enjoying these festivities, being a bit mindful can make the celebration comfortable for everyone.

Photography

The *mandaps* and idols are stunning, and it's natural to want to take photos. Feel free, but try not to use flash during rituals, and never block someone else's view for the perfect shot. Remember, for many, this is a moment of prayer, not just a photo-opportunity.

Queue and patience

Crowds are part of the experience. Instead of pushing or cutting through, follow the natural flow. It might take longer, but it keeps the atmosphere calm and enjoyable for everyone.

Inside the mandap

When you step inside a *mandap*, you're entering not just a decorated space, but a temporary temple. Out of respect, some *mandaps* may ask visitors to remove their shoes before entering the vicinity. Even if there isn't a sign, it's

always a good idea to notice what others are doing and follow their lead.

Once inside, keep in mind that the idol, the altar, and the ritual items (like lamps, conch shells, and offerings) are sacred. Avoid reaching out to touch them or leaning too close, even if you're curious. If you want to observe closely, it's fine to maintain some distance and observe. This gives space to those who are there to pray and ensures the rituals aren't disrupted. It's also polite to keep your voice low and avoid crowding right in front of the idol for too long, especially if many others are waiting their turn.

A little planning can make your *Puja* visits far more enjoyable. Around bigger *mandaps*, especially in Dhaka and other cities, expect road closures and traffic diversions. Parking is often a nightmare, so the easiest way to get around is by rickshaw, or simply on foot. Not only does this save time, but it also lets you soak in the festive atmosphere along the way.

If you plan to do *pandal-hopping*—going from one *mandap* to another—Old Dhaka is a good place to start. In that case, you'll likely be walking a lot, often in dense crowds, so carry a bottle of water and maybe a light snack. Comfortable shoes are a must. Plan your routes in a way so that you can visit *mandaps* that are close to one another at one go. For example, if you are visiting Dhakeshwari National Temple, Ramna Kali Temple, Shib Bari Temple, and Jagannath Hall *mandaps* in the Dhaka University area are nearby.

Durga Puja mandaps are more than just beautiful decorations or religious rituals; they are spaces where a community comes together to celebrate, share, and create lasting memories. By visiting with respect, patience, and a little planning, you can fully enjoy the colours, music, food, and spirit of the festival.

Bipra Prasun Das is an undergraduate student at North South University