

PHOTOS: MEHEDI HASAN

Artisan Tapan Baidya paints the eyes of an idol of Goddess Saraswati on the morning of Mahalaya at the Ramna Kali Mandir workshop in the capital

A GODDESS a home, and a culture

HOW DURGA BECAME INGRAINED IN BANGALEE SENSIBILITIES

DOWEL BISWAS



Every autumn, Durga arrives in Bengal with her children, weapons held across ten hands, and a lion crouched at her feet. To the wider scriptural world, she is *Mahishasuramardini*—the terrifying, ten-armed sovereign forged to crush cosmic chaos.

Yet within the Bengali imagination, her armour softens into something profoundly intimate: she is Uma, the child returning to her maternal hearth (*bapbari*) for a fleeting visit before her inevitable departure. This meeting of cosmic power and domestic kinship lies at the heart of Durga Puja, a festival where an unapproachable deity is received with the warmth of a family reunion.

The first inception of the grand celebration of Durga Puja unfolded under distinct political and sociological limitations.

Raja Kangshanarayana of Rajshahi's Tahirpur played a pivotal role in bringing Durga Puja to Bengal as it is known today. Living during the late 16th century, the feudal administrator and nobleman sought to perform a grand, sovereign-tier sacrifice—traditionally the *Rajsuya* or *Ashwamedha Yagya*. He was advised, however, that such royal Vedic horse or imperial sacrifices were impossible or forbidden in the modern iron age (*Kali Yuga*).

To establish his supreme political authority and spiritual merit instead, he turned to the counsel of his court scholar Rameshwar Bhattacharya and chose the autumn worship of Goddess Durga as the ultimate, all-inclusive alternative for his worship. By orchestrating a magnificent, multi-lakh-rupee public spectacle that united scriptural grandeur with broad societal participation, Kangshanarayana created a monumental precedent that permanently reshaped the cultural and ritual landscape of the Bengali delta.

Yet, Kangshanarayana's claim to the first grand autumnal Durga Puja remains disputed: some accounts date his celebration to 1480, while others place it around 1580; Bhabananda Majumdar of Nadia is associated with 1606, and Lakshmikanta Majumdar with 1610.

What began as a grand, aristocratic enterprise resembling a *Rajsuya* or *Ashwamedha Yagya*—requiring mammoth wealth, resources, and manpower—gradually transitioned from elite zamindari courtyards into the collective, democratic, cultural, and communal fabric of the Bengali public sphere. Despite its democratisation into modern community-owned (*Sarbajanin*) celebrations, the underlying ritual grammar of Durga Puja retains an astonishingly complex, paradoxical materiality, remaining adaptive and always open to improvisations. Beyond the vast inventory required for the sacred *Maha Snaan*—such as waters from oceans and holy sites, precious metals, and specific soils like *Varaha Danta Mrittika* from a boar's teeth—the ritual demands *Punya Mati*, or sacred soil collected directly from the doorway of a sex worker.

For rulers and landed families, an elaborate puja could display wealth, prestige and political authority. Raja Krishnachandra of Nadia became known for patronage of goddess worship. Later, Nabakrishna Deb's puja in Calcutta after the East India Company's victory at Plassey in 1757 entered popular history as the ***Company Puja***. Such celebrations brought priests, artists, musicians, cooks and other specialists into the household courtyard, turning worship into a public spectacle even when the privilege of hosting it remained restricted.

The festival's social character changed as communities began pooling resources to organise worship. The *barowari* tradition and later *sarbajanin* pujas shifted the centre of celebration from the wealthy household towards the neighbourhood. This did not remove caste or class divisions, but it widened participation: the puja increasingly became something a community could organise and experience together. Its inclusiveness lay not in the disappearance of social boundaries, but in the many ways people could contribute to and gather around the festival.

That capacity for adaptation remains visible in Bangladesh. Dhakeshwari National Temple, Ramna Kali Temple and Siddheshwari Kali Temple are among Dhaka's important centres of goddess worship, while local temples, university halls and neighbourhood *mandaps* give the festival different expressions across the country.

At the Gulshan–Banani Sarbajanin Puja Foundation in Dhaka, this year's theme, *Jalaj* – born of water – places the goddess within the relationship between water and life. Theme artist Partho Protim Saha draws on water as a source of creation, linking the natural world to the goddess's creative power. Such interpretations show how the festival can remain rooted in religious observance while responding to contemporary concerns. The *mandap* becomes a place where inherited beliefs and present-day ideas meet.

That meeting begins long before the first day of worship. Bamboo and straw provide the structure of the image; clay gives it form, and the sculptor shapes the face that devotees will recognise as the Mother. Ritual traditions also prescribe particular materials and acts of preparation. In some parts of Bengal, *punya mati* – sacred earth associated with the threshold of a sex worker's home – is included in the making of the image. The practice is not universal, and its use in Bangladesh should be confirmed locally, but its symbolism is significant: the sacred draws material from a social world that often excludes the people connected with it.

For idol-maker Ratan Pal, who has worked in the tradition for more than 26 years, this work carries the weight of inheritance. Many image-makers, he says, enter the craft through their families and learn through knowledge passed from one generation to the next. "This is not a profession for us. We take it as a prayer," he said, describing the process as one that continues to inspire new creative ideas.

The completed goddess brings many traditions into one space. Priests recite Sanskrit verses; the *dhak* sounds; conch shells announce the rites; offerings, flowers, clothing and ornaments prepare her for worship. Around the central rituals, people gather to celebrate and the festival's cultural life cannot be separated from its religious meaning. It is through these practices that devotion becomes collective memory.

In the end, the genius of the Bengali sensibility lies in its refusal to worship power from a distance. By weaving sacred earth, artistic expression, and domestic warmth into the fabric of absolute authority, the delta transformed a distant celestial warrior into an intimate mirror of human grief and joy. As the goddess's eyes are painted at dawn, devotees do not merely gaze upon a deity; they see their own resilience, their shared history, and their eternal capacity for homecoming reflected back at them.

THE EVOLUTION OF DURGA PUJA

Late 16th–early 17th century – The Aristocratic Origins: Tradition credits Raja Kangshanarayana of Rajshahi's Tahirpur and other landed families with establishing lavish autumnal Durga Pujas; the precise chronology and claim to the "first" puja remain disputed.

Early 17th century– Courtly Patronage: Bhabananda Majumdar of Nadia is among the figures associated with the early history of elite-sponsored Durga Puja; the often-cited date of 1606 is not firmly established.

1757 – The Colonial Courtyard: Popular accounts link Nabakrishna Deb's puja in Calcutta to the East India Company's victory at Plassey, though details of the event remain disputed.

Around 1790 – The Community Tradition: Guptipara is associated with an early barowari puja; scholarship identifies the commonly cited 1790 celebration as a Jagaddhatri Puja, while the origins and date of community Durga Puja remain contested.

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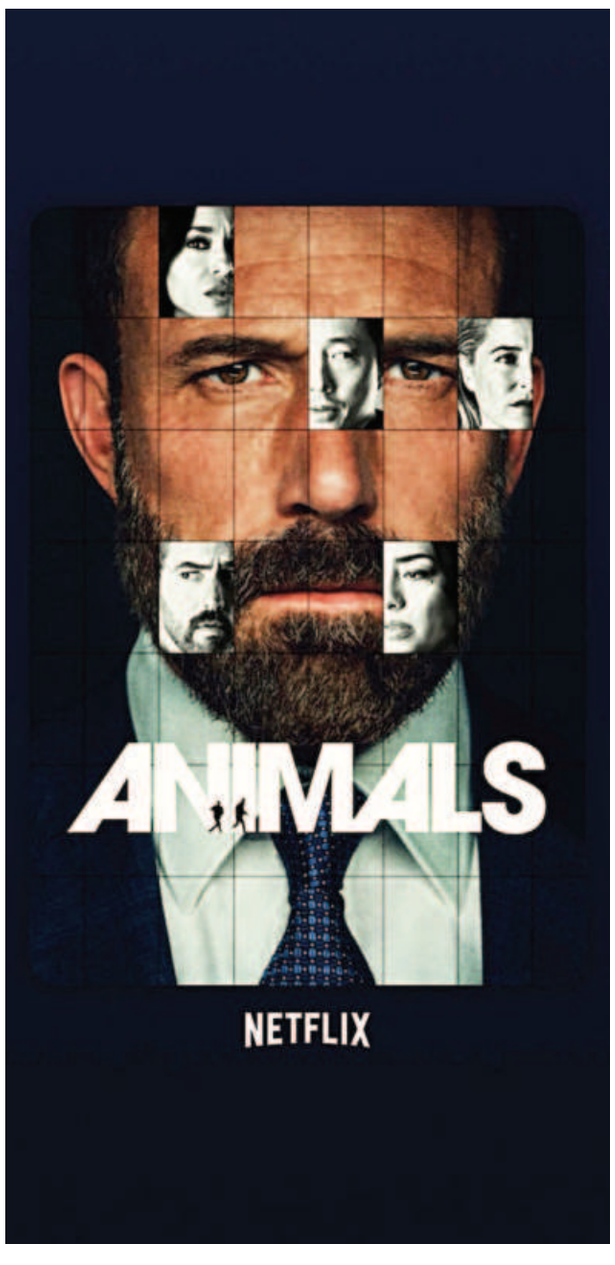
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TV TALKIES

'Animals'

Animals is a political thriller about a mayoral candidate and his wife whose son is kidnapped. Desperate to raise the ransom, the couple resort to extreme measures to bring him home. However, their choices expose dark secrets that threaten to ruin them. As they struggle to save their son, the consequences of their actions put both their family and the candidate's political future at risk.





WHAT'S PLAYING

'Stairway to Heaven' by Led Zeppelin

Led Zeppelin's ***Stairway to Heaven*** begins so quietly that its explosion can be forgotten. Jimmy Page's finger-picked acoustic guitar and John Paul Jones's recorders create a calm, while Robert Plant introduces a woman convinced that everything can be bought.

Across eight minutes, the song changes shape. Acoustic folk gives way to electric guitar, drums arrive through, and the tempo tightens until Page's solo breaks the restraint. Plant's vocal then rises into one of rock's most recognisable climaxes before the music withdraws, leaving a final line.

Released in 1971 on the untitled album commonly known as ***Led Zeppelin IV***, the track was never built like a conventional single. Its meaning remains deliberately elusive, moving between materialism, spiritual longing and the possibility of choosing another path.