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DURGA PUJA
The joy of coming home

White clouds drift across the blue autumn sky. Shiuli flowers spread their sweet fragrance, while kash sways gently in the breeze. Along with these familiar signs of autumn come the rhythmic beats of the dhak, the sound of shankha (conch shells) and the recitation of Chandi Path.









DIPAN NANDY *and* **ARAFAT RAHAMAN**

Sharadiya Durga Puja is here again.

Across Dhaka, temples and puja mandaps are dressed in festive colours, ready to welcome devotees. Families gather, friends reunite, and children accompany their parents to see the goddess. Devotees bow before the idols, offer anjali and receive prasad.

Beyond the prayers and rituals, these few days bring something people look forward to throughout the year: the joy of being together, renewing old bonds and sharing moments with loved ones.

For the artisans who make the idols, however, the festival begins much earlier, long before the first beats of the dhak announce the goddess's arrival.

At Dhakeshwari National Temple, artisan Sukumar Pal has once again crafted the idols beside the mandap. He began work about a month and a half ago. The main work is complete, with the final painting and decorations now under way.

According to the organisers, it is Sukumar's hands that give shape to the idols at the temple grounds every year.

The work demands patience, precision and a deep understanding of the craft. Bamboo and wooden frames are bound with straw to form the figures. Layers of clay are then applied and left to dry before the surfaces are smoothed, painted and adorned with ornaments.

Slowly, the goddess and her family take shape.

The expressions on their faces, the carefully drawn eyes, the positions of their hands and the intricate designs of their clothing all bear the mark of the artisan's skill. What visitors eventually see at a mandap is the result of weeks of labour, years of experience and a craft passed down through generations.

Behind the goddess's arrival lies a story that has been told and retold for centuries.

At the heart of Durga Puja is the triumph of good over evil. According to the Puranas, when the gods were overwhelmed by the tyranny of Mahishasura, Durga emerged from their combined powers. After a long battle, she slew the demon, a story narrated in detail in the Devi Mahatmya, part of the Markandeya Purana.

Her ten arms, the weapons she carries and the lion she rides symbolise strength and courage in the face of injustice and evil. She also represents women's power.

For devotees, the arrival of Dashabhuja carries both religious significance and the affection of welcoming someone dearly loved. It is this sense of closeness that makes the festival more than a series of rituals.

The anticipation begins with Mahalaya, which marks the start of Devi Paksha, a time to remember ancestors and prepare for the goddess's arrival.

At dawn, devotees observe the occasion with Chandi Path, tarpan and special prayers. For many Bangalees, Mahalaya is inseparable from Mahishasuramardini, recited by Birendra Krishna Bhadra on Akashvani Kolkata.

His familiar recitation, "Ya devi sarva-bhuteshu bhranti rupena samstitha; Namastasye namastasye namastasye namo namaha" (To the Goddess who dwells in all living beings in the form of delusion, we bow to her again and again), has accompanied the occasion for generations, becoming part of the memories of countless Bangalee families.

The main rituals begin on Maha Shashthi with bodhon, amantran and adhivas, through which the goddess is formally welcomed.

Saptami is marked by Nabapatrika Puja, while Maha Ashtami brings anjali and Sandhi Puja. Special worship takes place on Maha Navami.

Each day has its own significance, leading to Bijoya Dashami, when the idols are immersed and the celebrations come to an end. The joy of welcoming the goddess is accompanied by the knowledge that, within days, it will be time to bid her farewell.

Traditional beliefs about the goddess's arrival and departure add another dimension to the festival.

Different almanacs sometimes offer varying accounts of her mode of transport, each associated with the weather, harvests and signs of good or ill fortune.

According to this year's almanac, Durga has arrived on horseback, traditionally associated with political unrest and disorder.

Her departure will be by boat, which is believed to signify better harvests and rising water levels, including the possibility of heavy rainfall or floods. These interpretations belong to religious and cultural traditions rather than scientific forecasts.

While the rituals follow traditions observed for generations, the celebrations take on a different character from one part of Dhaka to another.

From Dhakeshwari National Temple to Shankharibazar and Tantibazar in Old Dhaka, each area has its own way of welcoming the goddess. Some mandaps are known for their longstanding traditions, others for elaborate lighting and decorations, while some draw visitors with the craftsmanship of their idols.

At Dhakeshwari, preparations extend well beyond making the idols. Organisers have completed arrangements for decorating the mandap, managing visitors and distributing prasad.

Bangladesh Puja Udjapan Parishad and the Mahanagar Sarbajanin Puja Committee are jointly organising the celebrations at the temple grounds. This year's theme is "Environment-friendly Durga Puja".

The celebrations at Dhakeshwari are part of a festival observed across Bangladesh, bringing together devotees in cities, towns and villages.

According to Basudeb Dhar, president of Bangladesh Puja Udjapan Parishad, Durga Puja is being held at 33,851 temples and mandaps nationwide this year, compared with 33,355 last year, an increase of 496.

In Dhaka metropolitan area, however, the number has fallen slightly. According to the latest figures provided by the organisers, 258 temples and mandaps are hosting the festival this year, compared with 261 last year.

But numbers tell only part of the story of Durga Puja.

In Shankharibazar and Tantibazar, the narrow streets and old neighbourhoods carry memories of celebrations stretching back generations. The puja is woven into the lives of these communities, where religious traditions have long been closely tied to the bonds among neighbours and families.

Elsewhere in the capital, from Ramakrishna Mission to Ramna Kali Temple and mandaps in residential neighbourhoods, local residents come together to organise the celebrations.

The arrangements may differ, but the familiar activities remain: visiting the idols, offering prayers, attending cultural programmes and sharing prasad.

For many, Durga Puja is also an opportunity to meet people they rarely get to see during the rest of the year.

Old friends find time for one another, neighbours exchange greetings, and families take their children from one mandap to another. Some come to pray, others to admire the idols or spend an evening with loved ones.

People of other faiths also visit the mandaps and take part in the celebrations, creating opportunities for neighbours and friends from different communities to share in the occasion.

Amid the prayers, gatherings and festivities, there is also an awareness that the celebrations will soon draw to a close.

On Bijoya Dashami, the idols will be immersed, the lights at the mandaps will go out, and the familiar beats of the dhak will gradually fade. The city will return to its usual bustle. Families will head home, friends will part, and another year's celebrations will be over.

Yet there is something comforting in this familiar farewell. The autumn sky, the fragrance of shiuli, the flowers offered during anjali and the sound of the dhak will remain in people's memories, along with the moments spent with those they love.

And as the goddess departs, devotees will carry the familiar hope of welcoming her again next autumn.

"Aaschhe Bochhor Abar Hobe, Uma asben ghore."