COVER STORY

DURGA PUJA for Bangladeshi students abroad

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As the riverbanks around the country are increasingly adorned with the blinding white hue of the *kash-phool*, the Hindu community prepares for the annual Durga Puja – the largest celebration of ethnically Bangalee Hindus on both sides of the border. It is a time which for many symbolises the community aspect of the social group — from families coming together to listen to the recital of Chandipath on the auspicious morning of the Mahalaya to shopping for one's friends and family. However, for students who have moved away from Bangladesh, it can be a difficult time as they not only struggle to adjust to their new lifestyles but also navigate feelings of homesickness while missing out on the celebrations back home.

Durga Puja, for them, does not feel the same without the shared anticipation with their loved ones. "The Bangladeshi Hindu community has a separate spark in the days leading up to the festivities," said Atoshi Golder, a second-year undergraduate student at Rhodes College. Recalling experiences from her childhood, she said that the entire calendar in a Bangladeshi Hindu household is orientated around Durga Puja – an aspect of celebration she misses being in the air every October. Despite her homesickness during the period, Atoshi feels lucky to be able to go to a Durga Puja hosted by the Bangladeshi Hindu community nearby. However, many do not share a fate similar to hers.

Nabonita Paul, a third-year undergraduate student at The University of Sheffield, shared how Durga Puja is not something that is often at the back of her mind these days. "Sometimes I will just forget that it is Durga Puja, and I will only realise it when I talk to my parents back home," she shared. The lack of a Bangalee Hindu temple in Sheffield means that she misses out on any and all festivities surrounding Durga Puja.

"While there is a lot that happens on campus during Diwali, I cannot really say the same thing about Durga Puja." When asked if she thinks that Diwali might be able to make up for some of the missed aspects of Durga Puja, she said, "Nothing really replaces Durga Puja for me because I miss dressing up for it, the food that my mother would make, and just being able to invite my friends to our house." For her, celebrating Durga Puja now boils down to just going out and getting a meal with her friends, and that too, if she actually remembers that it is the day of the puja.

Even for those who have a Durga Puja celebration near them, the idea of going to a puja pandal can be daunting because of their unfamiliarity with the community. Aritra Saha, an undergraduate student at the University of British Columbia, shared that he was hesitant to go out for the festivities last year because he didn't know anyone involved with the Bangalee community in Vancouver. "I am researching my options this year," he said. Speaking about his experience last year, he said that he attended his school's Diwali festivities to compensate for the fact that he was unable to celebrate Durga Puja.

Unlike Nabonita, however, Aritra feels that it is plausible that Diwali can make up for some of the missed festivities during Durga Puja. Shedding light on his brother's experience – who lives in a part of Canada where there aren't many Bangalee Hindus – Aritra said that his brother celebrates Diwali and Navratri with his friends. The former is a festival that is also dedicated to the Goddess Durga, which coincides with the festivities of Durga Puja.

"My brother now engages in Gujarati festivities such as going to a 'Garba Night' with his friends during Navratri because all his friends are from that part of South Asia," he shared.

Reflecting on this, he stated that people seek out that festive essence from other celebrations such as Diwali or Navratri when their own festivities are not available. On the other hand, Shawhardo Shopan Singha, a first-year student at the University of New South Wales, is attempting to convince the Hindu student groups on campus to celebrate Durga Puja in a more active fashion. "I believe that if many people can show up for Garba – a predominantly Gujarati tradition, as a part of Navratri celebrations – there has to be interest in celebrating Durga Puja amongst non-Bangalee Hindus too," he commented.

While some do have a community of people to celebrate Durga Puja with while abroad, several core aspects of the celebration might feel imperfect to them. According to Shawhardo, the pujas which happen in Sydney often happen over a span of two days or a weekend. "It just feels wrong to be celebrating Durga Puja on the wrong day, especially when it is constrained within two days," he shared. He further added that this is the only feasible option for many members of the community given that Durga Puja is not a public holiday in Australia. Similarly, students studying abroad often do not take holidays for religious observation, even if they are allowed to take a break.

The difficulty of having to catch up with academics and other extracurricular commitments means that religious or cultural commitments often have to take a backseat. "My engineering degree is extremely intensive, and I am often attending lectures for very long periods of time, so taking a day off means that I have to miss out on material which is difficult for me to later catch up on," said Nabonita. "I literally had a midterm exam during the puja last year, so taking a day off was not an option for me at all," noted Aritra.



Durga Puja Mandap in East London in 2025 PHOTO: **DIPITA SAHA SHWETA**

The students pursuing their education and other career opportunities abroad often have to give up on important aspects of their culture as a trade-off. As such, the feeling of alienation can feel more pronounced when you are so removed from the festivities.

Sharing her melancholy surrounding the issue, Atoshi remarked, "I honestly do not have a strong desire for any holidays during any other time of the year, but I really wish that I could get time off during that period and visit Bangladesh." She further shared how she sometimes thinks about the implications of permanently settling in a country that is not her own and how she pensively wonders if she'll ever even be able to go back to celebrate it in a proper manner.

It is rather ironic that, while Durga Puja is celebrated as homecoming for the Mother Goddess as she returns from her husband's abode to unite with her family, it is that one time of the year that Bangladeshi students cannot afford to return home, given that it often overlaps with the midterm examination season of the academic term. As one learns to adapt to these social changes around them when studying abroad, there is still a part of them that clings to aspects of their culture and traditions. While one might tweak or shed some aspects of the culture, they still try to retain the core essence, whether through participation in Diwali festivities for a sense of belonging or just celebrating through a meal with their friends.

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