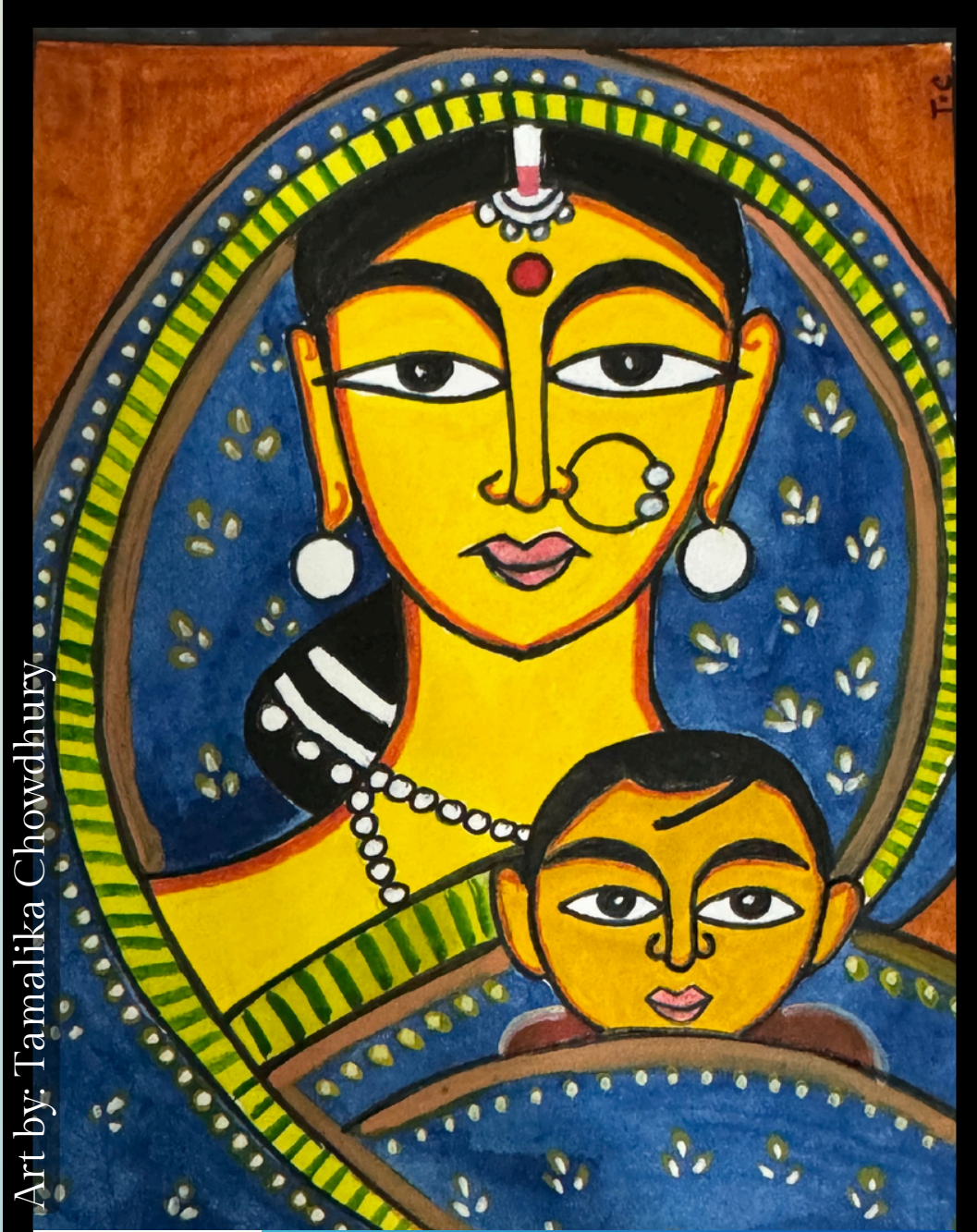


# P.R.A.N.A.M.

EST. SEPT. 29, 2023

## AALOK INSIGHTS & INSPIRATIONS



Art by: Tamalika Chowdhury



### শারদীয়া পত্রিকা

TOGETHER FOR CHANGE EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES,  
ENRICHING LIVES

শারদ সংখ্যা || প্রথম সংকলন || ১৪৩১  
SHAROD MAGAZINE || 1ST EDITION || 2024

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# সম্পাদকীয়

**Dear Community Members,**

As we gather to celebrate the auspicious occasion of Durga Puja from October 11th to 13th, we reflect not only on the rich tapestry of traditions that shape our identity but also on our collective power to effect meaningful change. Durga Puja celebration, recognized by UNESCO as an intangible cultural heritage of humanity, is a profound reminder of our shared heritage and values.

At PRANAM, our mission "together for change—empowering communities, enriching lives," continues to guide our actions. We are driven by core values of selflessness, equality, tolerance, excellence, and integrity. Our objectives are clear: to build resilient communities through initiatives that protect and restore nature, promote sustainable living, empower individuals, measure impact, and drive improvement.

## **This Year's Highlights:**

- Community Engagement: Blood donation drives, charity walks, meal packaging, and food distributions, food donations.
- Cultural Significance: Celebrating Durga Puja as a pivotal social and cultural event.

## **Looking Forward:**

- As we unveil this souvenir on October 11th, we celebrate not only a festival but the spirit of community and shared aspirations for a better world.
- This publication not only reflects the vibrancy of our festival but also underscores our collective journey towards societal enhancement.

Let this festival be a time for joy, reflection, and renewed commitment to our shared goals. Together, we are making a difference, and your continued support and participation is invaluable.

With heartfelt thanks and warm wishes for the festivities.

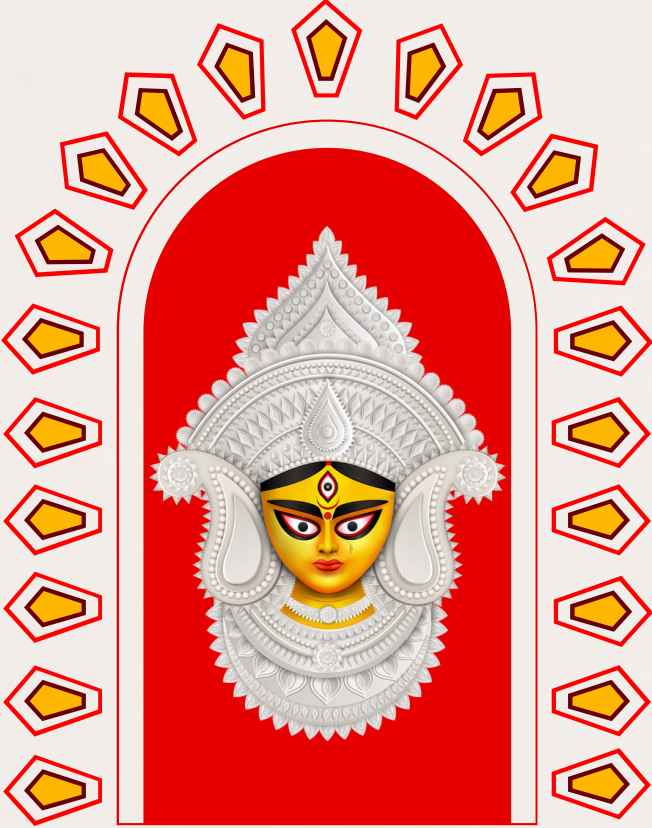
Thank You,

*Debashish Bhattacharjee* || *Santanu Biswas* || *Shiladitya Gangopadhyay*  
[Debashish Bhattacharjee] || [Santanu Biswas] || [Shiladitya Gangopadhyay]

Founders, **P.R.A.N.A.M.** (Progressive and Resilient Association Noble American Mission)



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# The Story of Durga Puja A Grandma's Tale

Susmita A Talukdar



In the bustling streets of Kolkata, the air was heavy with the scent of incense, flowers, and the distant rhythm of dhak drums. The city was gearing up for Durga Puja, and little Ananya, visiting from America, sat on her grandmother's lap, curious to understand the excitement that surrounded her.

"Didun," Ananya began, her eyes wide with wonder, "why is everyone so excited about Durga Puja? It's like everyone's waiting for something big to happen!"

Grandma smiled, adjusting her saree as she settled in to tell the tale. "Ah, Durga Puja is more than just a festival, darling. It is the time when we celebrate the arrival of Maa Durga, our mother goddess, who comes to visit her children on earth."

"Who is Maa Durga?" Ananya asked, tilting her head.

"She is a powerful goddess, the symbol of strength and protection," Grandma explained, her voice soft but filled with pride. "Long ago, the demon Mahishasura was causing havoc in the world. No one could defeat him. The gods came together and created Durga, who fought him bravely and won after nine days of battle. That's why we celebrate Durga Puja with such devotion—to honor her victory of good over evil."

Ananya's eyes sparkled. "Wow, so she's like a superhero!"

Grandma chuckled. "Yes, you could say that. But Durga Puja is not just about her victory. It's about family, coming together, and feeling the presence of Maa Durga as if she's right here with us."

"What about Mahalaya? I heard people talking about it this morning," Ananya asked.

"Mahalaya marks the beginning of Durga Puja," Grandma said, her voice taking on a more reverent tone. "It is the day when we invite Maa Durga to descend from her heavenly abode to earth. The story of Mahishasura Mardini is sung in the early morning, reminding us of her power and grace. It's a call to the goddess to come and protect us."

Ananya was quiet for a moment, taking it all in. "So, is it just people in Kolkata who celebrate Durga Puja?"

Grandma shook her head, smiling warmly. "Oh no, my dear. Bengalis all over the world celebrate this festival. Whether they are in Kolkata or America, like you, Durga Puja brings us all together. We might be miles apart, but during these five days, it feels like we are one big family. Even if you grow up far from Kolkata, Durga Puja will always remind you of who you are and where you come from."

Ananya smiled, her heart swelling with pride. "I want to celebrate Durga Puja every year, Didun. It sounds so special."

Grandma kissed her forehead gently. "And you will, Ananya. No matter where you go, the spirit of Durga Puja will always be with you, in your heart, connecting you to your roots."

The two sat in peaceful silence, the distant hum of festive preparations growing louder. Ananya felt a new connection to the vibrant city of Kolkata, her heritage, and most importantly, to Maa Durga.



# ব্যাক ডেটেড

অঙ্কিতা চ্যাটার্জী

**প্রবীণ** বলে, ওহে নবীন পুজো-পাক্বনের দিন  
বোচকা বেঁধে চললি কোথা, থাকবিনে বাড়িতে?

**নবীন** বলে, সত্যি বলছি; ইচ্ছে মনে মনে  
টিকিট পেলে যাবো চলে, একদম পশ্চিমে ।

“আমরা যেতুম দেশের বাড়ি; দাদু ঠাকুমার কাছে  
গ্রামে ঘরে আনন্দ - গান আজও মনে আছে ।”

“ব্যাক-ডেটেড তোমরা, সবাই ঘরকুনো একদম  
ঘরের ভিতর কাটিয়ে দিলে, বাইরে গেলে কম ।”

“বিজয়াতে প্রণাম দিতে কোথায় কখন যাবে ?  
মা মাসিদের হাতে গড়া, নাড়ু মোয়া খাবে ।”

“ফোনেই এখন সারি প্রণাম, ম্যাসেজ পাঠাই ফোনে  
ব্যাক-ডেটেড তোমরা দাদু, থাকো ঘরের কোণে।”

“বেশ বলেছো, বেশ বলেছো ওহে নতুন যুগের ছেলে  
ঘরের কোণে আছে যে সুখ, অন্য কোথাও কি মেলে ?”

# Canvas

সৌজন্যে — প্রণাম পরিবার



**The Golden Hour —**  
captured by Krishnendu Saha



**Artistry by —**  
Tamalika Chowdhury



# মায়ের আগমনে বাঙালী

রূপালি মিত্র

চঞ্চল মন অপেক্ষায় দিন গানে,  
চোখ মেলে তাকায় দূরে আরও দূরে;  
নীল গগনের দিকে অবাক পানে চায়,  
মেঘগুলো বলে অপেক্ষার হবে শেষ।


শরৎতের মৃদু বায়ু বইছে ঘন ঘন,  
কাশফুলের বনে সাদা মুকুট যেন দোলে;  
প্রকৃতি তার ইশারায় বার বার জানায়,  
মা আসছে, মা আসছে, করো আয়োজন।

তিনশো ষাট দিনের অপেক্ষার অবসান,  
মায়ের আগমনে হবে পাঁচ দিনের উৎসব;  
ষষ্ঠী, সপ্তমী, অষ্টমী আর নবমী আনন্দে ভরা,  
দশমীতে মায়ের কৈলাস গমনে মনে অবসাদ।

আবার অপেক্ষায় থাকবে বাঙালী,  
করবে আগামী শারদোৎসবের আয়োজন;  
যুগ যুগ ধরে চলছে রীতি,  
মায়ের আগমনে বাঙালী করবে জয়ধবনি।

কণ্ঠে আমি পুজোর সুর ধরেছি,  
ঢাকি ধরেছে তার ঢাকের তাল;  
মন আজ আমার ঢাকের তালে নাচে,  
ধুনি নাচ আর ধুনোর গঞ্জে আনন্দের সমারব।

# উফ! কি dilemma !

Krishanu Bandhan 

## Disclaimer (আগেই বলে দিলাম)

All characters and events depicted in this act are fictitious but mythological. Any similarity to actual events or persons, living or dead, is awkwardly coincidental and will be of immense historical value. Readers are requested to enjoy with a pinch of humor.

## Narod thinking aloud....

নারায়ণ ! নারায়ণ !

বলি এবারের দুগ্গা পূজো হবে কিনা সেদিকে কারো হুশ আছে? মা দুগ্গা তো America vacation এ গিয়ে আটকে গেছেন, stay-cation mode থেকে বেরোনোর নাম নেই; আর ওদিকে মহিষাসুর বেপাত্তা.... Corona r ভয়ে social distancing তো মর্তে চলছে, যদিও মা দুগ্গা আর মহিষাসুর কখনই social ছিল না.

But, এদের লড়াই না হলে মহালয়া হবে কিভাবে, আর, মহালয়া না হলে, দুগ্গা পূজো হবে কিভাবে? সব চিন্তা কি আমার?

What a dilemma !

নাহ ! দেখছি একটা meeting করতে হবে... আগে মা দুগ্গা কে contact করি....

## Narod calling Maa Dugga.....

**Narod:** Hello Madam, আমি ইয়ে নারদ বলছি, স্বর্গ থেকে, নারায়ণ ! নারায়ণ !... সব ভালো তো?

**Maa Dugga:** ও নারদ, এই অসময়ে, what is the matter?

**Narod:** Madam, অসময় কি বলছেন, সময় তো এসে গেল... আজ তো মহালয়া, তারপর মর্তে travel... এদিকে মহিষাসুর out of touch, তো এবার কি fight ইয়ে মানে মহালয়া কি cancel নাকি?

**Maa Dugga:** ও তাই বল, আবার সেই annual event, bore হয়ে গেছি.... যাই হোক, মহিষাসুর কে contact কর. Video conferencing করে plan করে নেওয়া যাক.



**Narod:** Okay Madam, নারায়ণ ! নারায়ণ ! তাহলে আপনি ওই Dhishoom meeting এ join করুন, আমি invite পাঠিয়ে দিয়েছি... এবার মহিষাসুর কে call করে join করতে বলি.

### **Narod calling Mohisasur.....**

**Narod:** আরে এই তো মহিষাসুর, আমি নারদ বলছি রে. বলি, এবার কি মা দুগ্গার সাথে fight করবি না, আজ তো মহালয়া?

**Mohisasur:** Disturb করো না তো, Instagram e photo upload করছি, এখন time নেই... এরপর facebook, twitter, and snapchat. তারপর WhatsApp e forward করতে হবে... আর তারপর আবার Instagram... Uff, খুব busy....

**Narod:** ওহ ! তুই দেখছি social app এ ডুবে আছিস. ওদিকে মা দুগ্গা Dhishoom meeting এ wait করছেন, এখুনি join কর.

**Mohisasur:** ও তাই বুঝি? আচ্ছা join করছি....

### **Video Chat: Narod, Mohisasur and Maa Dugga ....**

**All:** Hello ! নারা... Hello ! যণ ! নারায়ণ !... Hello !

**Maa Dugga:** কিরে অসুর, এতো late কেন? আজ মহালয়া, তুই এমনিতেই late অসুর হবি আমার হাতে মরার পর.

**Mohisasur:** হি হি হি হি... হা হা হা হা !!!

**Maa Dugga:** হাসছিস কেন?

**Mohisasur:** এই বার not possible. আপনি America এ আটকে আছেন... corona r কারণ no flight entering India.... হি হি হি হি... হা হা হা হা !!! তাই আমি এই facebook, twitter, Insta নিয়ে busy... অ্যাঁই, আবার comment এলো...

**Maa Dugga:** তুই দেখছি phone আর social app ছাড়া থাকতে পারিস না....

**Mohisasur:** এইগুলি cool....

**Maa Dugga:** ত্রিশূলের একটা খোঁচা খেলে cool-এর আচার হয়ে যাবি... এই নারদ টা আবার কোথায় গেলো? নারদ, নারদ... hello নারদ....

**Narod:** Hello, শুনতে পারছেন?

**Maa Dugga:** এখন পাচ্ছি শুনতে... কোথায় ছিলিস?

Mohisasur continuously swiping his phone.....

**Narod:** Sorry, ইয়ে মানে I was on mute.....বলছি, সব তো শুনলাম... তো এবার fight হবে কিভাবে?

**Maa Dugga:** সেটাই তো ভাবছি....

Mohisasur still swiping on his phone.....

**Narod:** Madam, বলছি আপনার অস্ত্র গুলো গেল কই? দশটা হাত একেবারে empty লাগছে...

**Maa Dugga:** সব dishwasher এ দিয়েছি.. এখানে আর হাতে ধুই না... এরপর সব cloud e upload করে দেব.. No ঝঞ্ঝাট... যখন যা লাগবে cloud থেকে টুক করে download করে নেব... আর সাথে নিয়ে ঘুরতে হবে না..

**Narod:** বাহ! বাহ! সেই ভালো... এই যে মহিষাসুর... তুই এখনো phone e মাথা গুঁজে আছিস? Are you paying attention?

Mohisasur still looking at his phone and smiling, giggling.....

**Maa Dugga:** এই যে অসুর... অসুর...hello... অসুর... ওরে এ তো facebook, twitter এ addicted...

**Mohisasur:** অ্যা.. অ্যা... অ্যাই তো.. 1000 likes on my DP. এবার Instagram টা check করি...

Maa Dugga thinking, thinking, still thinking..... and then, smiled... 😊

**Maa Dugga:** বাবা অসুর, তোকে friend request পাঠাবো ভাবছি....

**Mohisasur:** friend request? নিশ্চই, নিশ্চই... এখনই পাঠাও, আমি accept করে নেব....again swiping his phone...

Maa Dugga took out her cell phone and typed .....

Mohisasur's cell phone said 'Ding, Ding'...

**Narod:** কি যে চলছে ???.....

**Mohisasur:** "Maa Dugga has sent you a request".. হি হি হি হি... হা হা হা হা !!! পেয়েছি পেয়েছি... অ্যাই accept করলাম..... যাহ !!! এ কী হলো...phone টা lock হয়ে গেলো ... আর এ কি হলো? আমার facebook, twitter, Whatsapp, Instagram সব lock হয়ে uninstall হয়ে গেল.... যাহ !!! যাহ !!! যাহ !!!

মা দুগ্গা, ওটা কি ছিল?



**Maa Dugga:** ওটা friend request নয়, ওটা software virus পাঠিয়ে ছিলাম....

**Mohisasur:** অ্যাঃ অ্যাঃ অ্যাঃ অ্যাঃ ... বুকে pain ..... অ্যাঃ অ্যাঃ অ্যাঃ অ্যাঃ.....

**Narod:** Oh my God! মহিষাসুর gone! Heart attack !! তার মানে মহালয়া done.... No more dilemma...  
Joi Maa Dugga...

**উফ! কি dilemma দিলে, Maa !**

**Dhishoom meeting closes .....**

Virus kills, but it has positive outcome if it kills the evil...

----- আসছে বছর আবার হবে-----

# সবার দুর্গাপূজো

## কৌশিক রায়

কেউ কিনছে দামী পোশাক, বড়ো দোকানেতে ।  
কেউ করছে দরাদরি, দাঁড়িয়ে ফুটপাথে।।  
কেউ করছে অপেক্ষা, কখন আসবে পূজোর বোনাস।  
কেউ ছেঁড়া পোশাক পরে, ফেলছে দীর্ঘশ্বাস।।

কেউ চেয়ে রাস্তার দিকে , NRI ছেলে ফিরছে ঘরে।  
কেউ আবার পূজোর ছুটিতে , যেতে চায় একটু দূরে।।  
কেউ অপেক্ষায় মহালয়ার , কিনবে চরকি আর ফুলঝুরি।  
কেউ আনন্দে ব্যাগ গুছাচ্ছে , পূজোয় আবার মামা বাড়ি।।

কেউ নিচ্ছে গুছিয়ে দোকান, একটু বেশি রোজগারের আশায়।  
কেউ জমিয়ে রাখছে টাকা , যাতে পূজোয় খরচা করা যায় ।।  
কেউ দেখবে দুর্গা মাকে , জীবনে প্রথমবার।  
কেউ জীবনের শেষ বেলায় , মাকে দেখতে চায় আরেকবার।।

কাশফুল, শরতের মেঘ , বাতাসে পূজোর গন্ধ।  
মা আসছে ফিরে ঘরে , ফিরছে জীবনের ছন্দ।।  
নিম্ন মধ্য উচ্চ বিত্ত , জাতি ধর্ম বর্ণ।  
সব ব্যবধান যাও ভুলে , দুর্গাপূজো সবার জন্য।।



# Tiny Forest Savers

Ishan Chatterjee



Once upon a time there was a little bee and her colony. The little worker was named Kristine. Their queen, Mabee always makes a poem when trying to explain something. After a long day of looking after larvaes Kristine decided to look for pollen. Before Kristine set off to find pollen another bee came crashing down into the hive. The bee told her where the bee found yellow, sugary pollen. Pleased Kristine zipped to the location and started scooping up pollen. Thump!

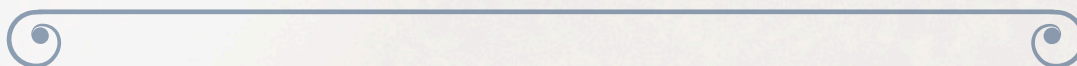
Kristine jerked her head up and spotted trees dropping like flies. Next a gigantic, yellow machine popped into the scene. It had a bowl like hand and 1 arm. "I got to warn Mabee!" she exclaimed and dashed to the colony. As she told the queen bee the situation, big footsteps sounded. Curious, Kristine and her fellow bees checked outside the hive. Standing still outside was a giant, tall lumberjack with a orange shiny chainsaw. As the saw whirred he yelled over the sound saying,

"Oh bees,  
If you think you can stop me,  
With your little stinger,  
Then you're wrong.  
You just don't know what I have up my sleeves.

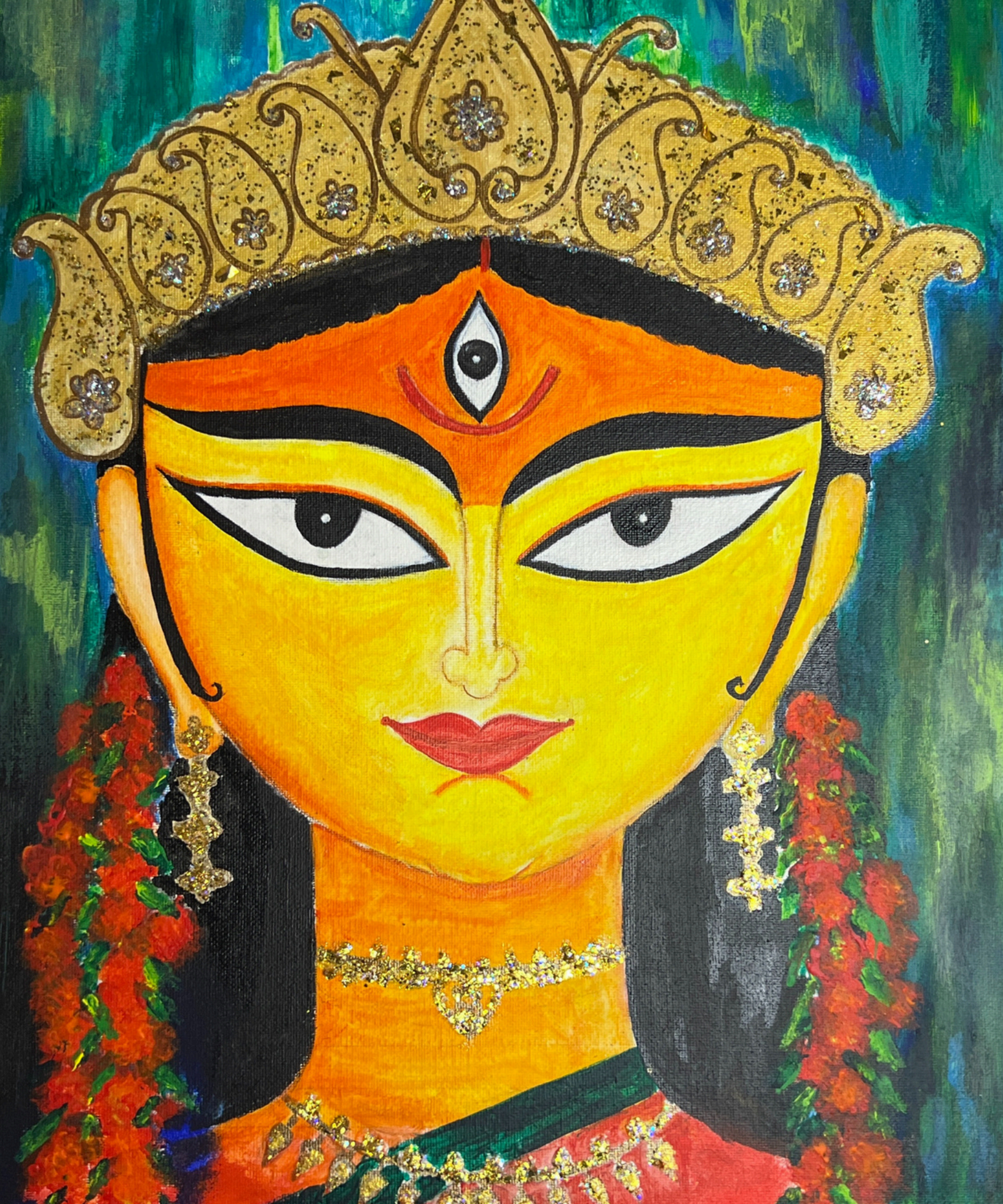
So step aside,  
And let me cut down this old tree."

But before he could inch his chain saw anywhere near the tree the bees attacked. Angrily the man swatted some of the bees and put on a protective, beekeeper suit. He chuckled an evil chuckle and cackled “I know how to take care of bees!” Just then the queen bee flew out of the hive. Facing the lumberjack the queen bee hissed,  
“Oh giant lumberjack,  
We are aware of your danger,  
If you cut this tree,  
Then you and your human race will disappear,  
And regret what you have done.”

After hearing this the lumberjack just laughed hard and said “How can me and my human race disappear by cutting this simple tree?” Mabee sighed and rolled her eyes. Then she explained  
“The world will be in no good,  
If you keep cutting down trees.  
If creatures like us disappear,  
Then the world will be done for,  
No picking pears, pineapple or peach.  
Pollination is what we do,  
To produce seeds and keep the human race alive.”  
Stunned the man stood quietly for few minutes. Then he shook his head and said softly “I never knew that could happen.”  
So he walked away without a trace.







Art brought to life by the fabulous Soma Rudra



# Durga Puja in Kolkata

Shakya Mukherjee 

Every year, during 5 days of autumn, Kolkata, the largest metropolitan area of eastern India, transforms into a wonderland. The temporary temples (Pandals), the festive lighting all over the city, the music of drums, and the gorgeous aroma of Bengali food make it an experience to behold. The festivities around clearly announce the advent of Durga Puja, the largest cultural phenomenon of Bengal.

Durga Puja is a 5-day long celebration to honor goddess Durga's win over the demon Mahisasur. The ten-handed goddess was created with the power of all gods to defeat the shape-changing monster. A 5-day long battle ensued, ending with goddess Durga stabbing Mahisasur in the chest with a spear.

Rituals of Durga Puja date back to the 14th century, based on the earliest surviving manuscript. The first large-scale Durga Puja was started by a Bengali landlord back in the 17th century. Over the years, it gradually became a community festival. In December 2021, the Kolkata Durga Puja received the prestigious status of being a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage event.

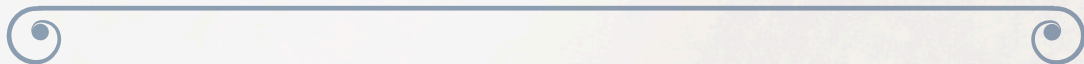
Lots of thought and work go into preparing pandals for Durga Puja. Planning for Durga Puja starts practically the second after the year's puja is over. Designers travel all over the world for ideas. The actual building of the pandal can start 6 months before Durga Puja.



The result is absolutely gorgeous. From 1:1 recreations of Vatican City to 10:1 recreations of traditional village huts, the look of Kolkata transforms from being a normal city to a particularly crowded Disneyland.

Even though entering the pandals does not require a fee, everything else does! Revenue from rickshaws, autos, taxis, restaurants, street food, and tourism nearly triple during Durga Puja, making this the most economically active time of the year in West Bengal.

However, the environment takes a serious toll during and after Durga Puja. Most pandals use non-biodegradable materials and lead-based paint, both of which are harmful to the environment. However, some pandals have begun to use bio-friendly materials, and I hope more will soon follow.





## Durga Puja bringing joy

Ahana Roy

As the leaves on the trees begin to brown, as the Texas heat slowly starts to subside, and as Halloween decorations fill shelves in stores, I know that the Autumn season is nearing. As Autumn comes into full swing, I know that Durga Puja is coming closer and closer.



As Bengalis, every year without failure, my family celebrates Durga Pujo. Ever since I was as young as I could remember, I have memories of getting dressed in jewel-embellished lehengas, wearing my mom's jewelry, and putting on makeup to run around with other kids at the Hindu Center of Charlotte. For me, Durga Puja always lasted one weekend. We would go to the center the weekend of and celebrate. Growing up in the United States, we did not get a holiday for Durga Puja, but despite not being able to celebrate to the full extent of it, Durga Puja was one of the events I looked forward to the most growing up.

In India for these ten days in the autumn, many refer to the festival as Navratri, however in eastern and north-eastern India, Nepal, and Bangladesh the celebration is slightly different -- during the last five days of Navaratri, which celebrates the nine avatars of Goddess Durga, during Durga Pujo celebrates Goddess Durga's victory in her battle against Mahishasura. Other than that, the celebrations and food are different for the two festivals. During Navaratri, celebrations include cultural dancing such as Garba and Dandiya, however, during Durga Pujo the highlight of celebrations includes creating and viewing stunning pandals, offering flowers and sweets to Goddess Durga, kumari puja, and sindoor khela. Along with that, during Navaratri meat, onions, garlic, and eggs aren't eaten, however, during Durga Pujo they are eaten.

As I've mentioned earlier, Durga Puja is celebrated across various places in east and northeast India, Nepal, and Bangladesh however, it is without doubt that the place it is celebrated in the biggest manner is in Kolkata, West Bengal, India. With a population of over 15 million people, most of whom are Bengali and Hindu, the people of Kolkata celebrate Durga Puja to the fullest.

It is undoubtedly the most festive season in the city, with Kolkata's Durga Puja being named a UNESCO world intangible heritage event. With thousands of thousands of stunning pandals and millions of people parading during the festive days of the puja, the city is booming, beautiful, and festive.

Personally, I've never seen how Durga Puja is celebrated in Kolkata in person. Ever since I was young, I would listen to my parents and grandparents tell me about how amazing Durga Puja is back home. They would tell me about fun stories with their family members, the gifts and clothes they would receive during the puja season, and how gorgeous the lit-up Kolkata would be during puja season. Over the past few years, my mom started to show me pictures of different Durga pandals in Kolkata and I was awed at the sight of each and every one of them. I saw one statue covered in diamonds, one state with one thousand arms, and statues covered in lights. I understood why my family missed being in our home city during the festival.

It is not an understatement to say Durga Puja is the most exciting time of the year for most Bengalis!

For the 2024 year, Durga Puja will start on October 8th and last through October 12th. On October 13th, the festivities will end with Goddess Durga leaving her home on Earth.

May your Durga Puja festivities be blessed and enjoyable!





# Journey to Japan

PART 1: THE ISLAND NATION OF WONDERS

WRITTEN BY SAPTARSHI MUKHERJEE



**Preface:** The excerpts in this article are gathered from the field notes I have foraged throughout my extensive travels across the planet to bring the world onto our palms at our homes.

## Why East?

Japan of all nations has been an esoteric land to even the most seasoned of travelers, recreational day dreamers and gourmards from every corner of the planet. Everybody seems to know a thing or two about Japan but then does anybody really know this ancient archipelago nation? Noble laureate and the world-renowned Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore visited Japan in 1916, 1924 and 1929 because of his interest in the Japanese culture, progress and art marked by simplicity and harmony.



**Getting there:** Tokyo has two major international airports that acts as the gateway to the nation. Haneda international and Narita international airports have major international carriers coming in from all over the planet. You could fly to Haneda, which is closer to the city, saves time and money. Flights to Narita usually have a bit more generous fares given that it is about 1 hour and 15 mins from Tokyo while Narita is around 30 mins drive.

## Etiquette

Japan is a nation built on the foundation of civil obedience and order. There exist certain sections of the Japanese society so polished that they dwarf the Europeans in a heartbeat, a well-travelled cognoscenti would agree.



*Michelin restaurant Japan*

Trains run perfectly on time, excruciatingly down to the last microsecond on the clock hanging in a station. There is no room for tardiness. But for those of us who like a bit of disorder in a perfectly organised pantry, Japan can seem a bit claustrophobic in the beginning. Personal contact is usually avoided and so it is good to brush up body language basics before heading there. Be prepared to bow gently rather than shaking hands. Even a little toddler I met, who couldn't speak yet, and bowed to was quick to bow back! I was shocked in awe and before I could recover his parents smiled and did the same to me, a gaijin (Japanese for foreigner). I loved it far more than a casual and often half hearted "Hello".

## Tokyo

A tiny fishing village in 1600s called Edo (estuary) had become the largest city on the planet by 1954. Although Tokyo dealt with heavy damage during World War II, it surprised the world by hosting the 1964 Tokyo Olympics.

Tokyo is where I came to feast. To eat like there is no tomorrow. If New York has 26,000 restaurants, Tokyo has over 150,000! Tokyo is regarded as the top dining destination for a gourmand offering food to suit any palate with the highest number (183) of Michelin star restaurants on the planet since 2007.



Being 6000 miles away from sleep, early in the morning, I stumbled into a subway entrance with much aplomb. As the city woke up, I kept observing how clean every nook and alley is. It was difficult to find a piece of trash laying casually on the pavement. Before I knew, I had reached Shibuya station above which lives and breathes the planet's busiest pedestrian crossing that churn pedestrians day and night.

Contrary to the popular myth that taxi rides are expensive in Tokyo I found them to be at par or even cheaper than one would pay for in the United States. A 15-minute ride is about 2000-3000 Japanese Yen which is around \$14. Although for the train enthusiasts Tokyo subway system offers 13 lines, 285 stations and a daily ridership of around 6 million passengers.

This is where the world comes to for experiencing the very best of sushi, sake, ramen, technology and much more. Each iconic in their own ways.

### The Bullet Train

Possibly one of the most iconic symbols of Japanese technology, efficiency and perfection is the bullet train, better known as the Shinkansen. I have been on high-speed trains in Spain (Renfe AVE) but this felt and looked completely on a different level of transportation. Bullet trains coming in and leaving platforms in matter of minutes. Within a blink of an eye the train is almost gone!

You could be on any of the 9 Shinkansen lines and can be whisked away to some magical part of Japan within hours. That morning, I was taking the Nozomi Shinkansen that runs from Tokyo to Osaka and stops at Kyoto, the spiritual capital of Japan. Even here cleanliness is a very serious aspect, and each train car is immaculately cleaned after the passengers deboard at the terminal stations.

Once out of Tokyo the train gathered speed and by the time I was looking into the speedometer app on phone, the train was peaking 320 kmph. One could feel the ears hurting a bit, just like in planes, when the train enters the tunnels. I kept gazing at the beautiful mountainous landscape and rice fields that rural Japan portrayed as the train cut through the thin morning air.



*Bullet train Tokyo*

2 hours and 8 minutes later I realized I was transported to Kyoto, an enigma and a world of its own. A drive would have easily taken 6 hours or more. That's how fast I went.

### The Hangover

Sleep deprived and excited beyond limits, a Japan hangover is hard to come out of. All that great food washed down by rivers of local sake at small izakayas (a Japanese bar) strewn around the cities. The exceptional politeness and courtesy of every individual I came across. The matcha latte that tasted far rich than anything I had tasted before. All these bits and pieces of memory clings on to the heavy eyelids. For now, I shall write, to come back with many more stories from this land of wonders.

**To be continued...**



### About the author

Saptarshi was born in Kolkata, India, that has earned the moniker “gastronomic capital of India”. He has been a globe voyager since he was 5 years old and travels to examine food, history and the way of life of native individuals in different countries. He has been collaborating with writers, restauranteurs and Michelin guide awarded chefs worldwide to produce exclusive articles.

**Follow more journey of the author on Instagram @saptarshimkj  
Pictures courtesy: Author.**





प्रणाम परिवारेर पम्क थेके सकलके जानाई  
शारदीयार प्रीति, शुभेच्छा ओ अभिनन्दन