

Durga Puja

Durga puja (Bengali:দুর্গা পূজা, pronounced [ˈd̪ʊrg aː ˈpuː d̪ʊ aː]; (listen:🔊 Durga Puja (help·info)), ‘Worship of Durga’), also referred to as **Durgotsava**(Bengali:দুর্গোৎসব, listen:🔊 Durgotsava (help·info)), ‘Festival of Durga’), is an annual Hindu festival in South Asia that celebrates worship of the Hindu goddess Durga. It refers to all the six days observed as *Mahalaya*, *Shashthi*, *Maha Saptami*, *Maha Ashtami*, *Maha Navami* and *Vijayadashami*. The dates of Durga Puja celebrations are set according to the traditional Hindu calendar and the fortnight corresponding to the festival is called *Devi Paksha* (Bengali:দেবী পক্ষ, ‘Fortnight of the Goddess’). *Devi Paksha* is preceded by *Mahalaya* (Bengali:মহালয়া), the last day of the previous fortnight *Pitri Paksha*, ‘Fortnight of the Forefathers’), and is ended on *Kojagori Lokkhi Puja*, ‘Worship of Goddess Lakshmi on Kojagori Full Moon Night’).

Durga Puja is widely celebrated in the Indian states of Assam, Bihar, Jharkhand, Orissa, Tripura and West Bengal, where it is a five-day annual holiday. In West Bengal and Tripura, which has majority of Bengali Hindus it is the biggest festival of the year. Not only is it the biggest Hindu festival celebrated throughout the State, but it is also the most significant socio-cultural event in Bengali society. Apart from eastern India, Durga Puja is also celebrated in Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Punjab, Kashmir, Karnataka and Kerala. Durga Puja is also celebrated as a major festival in Nepal and in Bangladesh where 10% population are Hindu. Nowadays, many diaspora Bengali cultural organizations arrange for Durgotsab in countries such as the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Australia, Germany, France, The Netherlands, Singapore and Kuwait, among others. In 2006, a grand Durga Puja ceremony was held in the Great Court of the British Museum.

The prominence of Durga Puja increased gradually during the British Raj in Bengal. After the Hindu reformists identified Durga with India, she became an icon for the Indian independence movement. In the first quarter of the 20th century, the tradition of *Baroyari* or Community Puja was popularised due to this. After independence, Durga Puja became one of the largest celebrated festivals in the whole world.

Durga Puja also includes the worship of Shiva, who is Durga's consort (Durga is an aspect of Goddess Parvati), in addition to Lakshmi, Saraswati with Ganesha and Kartikeya, who are considered to be Durga's children. Worship of Mother Nature is also done, through nine types of plant (called "Kala Bou"), including a plantain (banana) tree, which represent nine divine forms of Goddess Durga. Modern traditions have come to include the display of decorated *pandals* and artistically depicted idols (murti) of Durga, exchange of *Vijaya* greetings and publication of Puja Annuals.

History

A considerable literature exists around Durga in the Bengali language and its early forms, including *avnirnaya* (11th century), *Durgabhaktitarangini* by Vidyapati (a famous Maithili poet of 14th century), etc. Durga Puja was popular in Bengal in the medieval period, and records

show that it was being held in the courts of Rajshahi (16th century) and Nadia district (18th century). It was during the 18th century, however, that the worship of Durga became popular among the landed aristocracy of Bengal, the Zamindars. Prominent Pujas were conducted by the landed zamindars and jagirdars, being enriched by emerging British rule, including Raja Nabakrishna Deb, of Shobhabajar, who initiated an elaborate Puja at his residence. Many of these old puja exist to this day. Interestingly the oldest such Puja to be conducted at the same venue is located in Rameswarpur, Orissa, where it has been continuing for the last four centuries since the Ghosh Mahashays from Kotarang near Howrah migrated there as a part of Todarmal's contingent during Akbar's rule. Today, the culture of Durga Puja has shifted from the princely houses to *Sarbojanin* (literally, "involving all") forms. The first such puja was held at Guptipara — it was called *barowari* (*baro* meaning twelve and *yar* meaning friends)



Image of Durga in an early 19th century lithograph.

Today's Puja, however, goes far beyond religion. In fact, visiting the *pandals* recent years, one can only say that Durgapuja is the largest outdoor art festival on earth. In the 1990s, a preponderance of architectural models came up on the *pandal* exteriors, but today the art motif extends to elaborate interiors, executed by trained artists, with consistent stylistic elements, carefully executed and bearing the name of the artist.

The sculpture of the idol itself has evolved. The worship always depicts Durga with her four children, and occasionally two attendant deities and some banana-tree figures. In the olden days, all five idols would be depicted in a single frame, traditionally called *pata*. Since the 1980s however, the trend is to depict each idol separately.

Durga Puja Mantra

Mantras, the integral part of Durga puja are accompanied by the rhythmic beatings of the dhak, smell of the incense sticks, 'dhoono' and flowers. These create the atmosphere of Durga puja. Chanting of mantras in Sanskrit is essential part of the Durga Puja Festival. This is a part of Durga Puja's Pushpanjali Mantra:

“ Om Jayanti, Mangala, Kali, Bhadrakali, Kapalini. Durga, Shiba, Kshama, Dhatri, Swaha, Swadha Namahstu Te.

Esha Sachandana Gandha Pushpa Bilwa Patranjali, Om Hrring Durgaoi Namah^[22]

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Durga Slokas (which is also known as Devi Mantra) praises Durga as symbol of all divine forces. According to the sloka, Durga is omnipresent as the embodiment of power, intelligence, peace, wealth, morality etc. A part of Durga Sloka is as follows:

“ Ya Devi sarva bhuteshu Matri rupena samsthita
Ya Devi sarva bhuteshu Shakti rupena samsthita
Ya Devi sarva bhutesu Shanti rupena samsthita
Namestasyai Namestasyai Namestasyai Namoh Namah
Translation:The goddess who is omnipresent as the personification of universal
mother
The goddess who is omnipresent as the embodiment of power
The goddess who is omnipresent as the symbol of peace
I bow to her, I bow to her, I bow to her ”

Creation of the idols



Durga Puja Idol in the making at Kumortuli, Kolkata

The entire process of creation of the idols (murti) from the collection of clay to the ornamentation is a holy process, supervised by rites and other rituals. On the Hindu date of Akshaya Tritiya when the Ratha Yatra is held, clay for the idols is collected from the banks of a river, preferably the Ganges. There is age-old custom of collecting a handful of soil (punya mati) from the nishiddho pallis of Calcutta, literally ‘forbidden territories’, where sex workers live, and adding it to the clay mixture which goes into the making of the Durga idol. After the required rites, the clay is transported from which the idols are fashioned. An important event is ‘Chakkhu Daan’, literally donation of the eyes. Starting with Devi Durga, the eyes of the idols are painted on Mahalaya or the first day of the Pujas. Before painting on the eyes, the artisans fast for a day and eat only vegetarian food.



Chakkhudan at Kumortuli

Many Pujas in and around Kolkata buy their idols from Kumartuli (also Kumortuli), an artisans' town in north Calcutta.

In 1610, the first Durga puja in Kolkata was supposedly celebrated by the Roychowdhuri family of Barisha. Though this was a private affair, community or 'Baroyari' Durga puja was started in Guptipara, in Hooghly by 12 young men when they were barred from participating in a family Durga puja in 1761. They formed a committee which accepted subscriptions for organising the puja. Since then, community pujas in Bengal came to be known as 'Baroyari – 'baro' meaning 12 and 'yar' meaning friends. In Kolkata, the first 'Baroyari' Durga Puja was organized in 1910 by the 'Sanatan Dharmotsahini Sabha' at Balaram Bosu Ghat Road, Bhawanipur. At the same time, similar Baroyari Pujas were held at Ramdhan Mitra Lane and Sikdar Bagan. The Indian freedom struggle also had an influence on Durga puja in Kolkata. In 1926, Atindranath Bose initiated the first 'Sarbojanin' Durga puja in which anybody, irrespective of caste, creed and religion, could participate in the festivities. This was consciously done to instill a feeling of unity.