

DURGA THROUGH CURIOUS EYES

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'Akaal Bodhan', or the untimely invocation of Goddess Durga in the month of *Ashwin* (mid-September to mid- October), has been an intergal part of Bengal's social and religious culture, for centuries. When the first British merchants entered Bengal in the seventeenth century and came in contact with Hindu religious festivals, their initial reaction ranged from curious appreciation to outright horror. The strange deities, the colourful costumes and the cacophony of weird flutes, pipes, cymbals and drums of all types, conjured an impression that evoked either admiration or disgust.

One of the earliest accounts of the celebrations of Durga Puja that we get is from James Mitchell, a clerk to a Sea Captain, who visited Calcutta in 1748. His diary-notes of 29th August, 1748, make interesting reading, though as P.T. Nair points out, Mitchell had mistaken Durga for Jaggannath. Here is an excerpt from it in the style of mid- eighteenth century English where 'Gentoo' means 'Hindu' and 'Chintz' refers to a colourful cloth.

"In September, the Gentoo's grand annual Feast was celebrated by every individual that, by parsimony and hoarding throughtout the year, could afford the expense; a great emulation prevailing on that occation to excell in show and splendour. At the upper end of a large oblong half decorated with figured Chintz hangings, large wax candles and ca., day being excluded, on a Pedestal raised from the Floor by a flight of Steps under a Canopy with Curtains of rich silk or Chintz is placed in a hideous figure of painted wood superbly dressed with Jewels, Pearls and ca. to represent their favourite Deity. On each side the hall are covered Table with benches furnished with all the delicacies of the Country; and one with the choicest Viands and Liquors for such Europeans as are admitted.

"When a Gentoo enters he approaches by the Area in the middle of the Hall with much seeming devotion to the foot of the Steps and having made a low obeisance and short Prayer retires to his place at one of the Tables. Music, Dancing Girls with every Festivity that can be devised is exhibited for two days; On the third the Idol is placed in a Budjero or Barge, with a procession of much pomp, accompanied with the country music and embellished with Flags. Streamers, and ca. and rowed to the middle of the River, covered with numbers of the same description; the air resounding with music, blazing with Fireworks and roaring with repeated discharges of Cannon until the whole is concluded by loud acclamations on throwing Jagernaut with all his ornaments from each Budjero into the Ganges the water of which is deemed sacred; it would be considered Sacrilege in a Gentoo to touch any of the floating Idols or their ornaments; but Mahometans and other sectarys think it no impiety to strip them of such ornaments as they judge worth saving and afterwards to split and burn the Image".

Towards the close of the 18th century, we have a French Army Officer, L De Grandpre, who visited Calcutta in 1789 and 1790, giving us a graphic, albeit exaggerated narrative:

"This madam Dourga, who has deified the Ganges, is held in great veneration: festival is celebrated every year in the month of October, and while it lasts nothing is known but rejoicing; the native visit each other, and on three successive evening assemble together for the adoration of their divinity. Her statue is placed in a small niche of clay, which is gilt and adorned with flower pieces of tinsel, and other similar ornaments. The statue itself is dressed in the most magnificent attire they can procure, is about a foot high, and the niche with its appendages about 3 feet and half.

"All the rich celebrate a festival of this kind in their own houses, and are ambitious of displaying the greatest luxury, lighting up their apartments in the most splendid manner. Such as cannot afford to observe this solemnity at their own house, go to that of some neighbour; there is one of these celebration at least in every quarter

of the town, so that all the inhabitants have an opportunity of paying their devotions.

"The room is furnished with seats for the guests, and the statue is placed on a small stage concealed by a curtain, as in our public theatres. The curtain being drawn up by the servants, a concert begins, in which the principal instrument is a sort of bagpipe. The reed of this not being flexible, and the performer being wholly ignorant how to modulate its tone, nothing can be less musical than the sound it produces, unless it be the tunes that are played upon it: the most vile and discordant clarinet is melody itself compared with this instrument, which would literally split the ears of any other audience".

Twenty five years later, when the British had settled down and Calcutta was the capital and the undisputed centre of the English possessions in the eastern part of the world, Durga Puja had acquired the stature of the major festival of the year, accompanied by unprecedented pomp and pageantry. Here is a clipping from a contemporary newspaper:

" DURGA PUJA"

Calcutta Gazette, 20th October 1814:— "The Hindu holidays of the Doorga Poojah began yesterday and will continue until the 25th instant. Many of the rich Hindoos, vying with one another in expense and profusion, endeavour by the richness of their festivals to 'get a name amongst men'. The principal days of entertainment are the 20th, 21st and 22nd, on which Nikhee, the Billington of the East, will warble her lovely ditties at the hospitable mansion of Raja Kishun Chand Roy and his brothers, the sons of the late Raja Sookh Moy Roy. Nor will the hall of Neel Money Mullick resound less delightfully with the affecting strains of Ushoorun, who, for compass of voice and variety of note, excels all damsels of Hindusthan. Misree, whose graceful gestures would not hurt the practiced eye of Parisot, will lead

the fairy dance on the boards of Joy Kishun Roy's happy dwelling. At

Raja Raj Krishna's may be viewed with amazement and pleasure, the wonderful artifices and tricks of legerdemain of an accomplished set of jugglers, first arrived from Lucknow.

Baboo Gopee Mohun Deb, urged by his usual anxiety to contribute to the amusement of the public, has besides a selection of the most accomplished nautch girls, engaged a singularly good buffoon, whose performances and those of a boy, who has the uncommon faculty of being able to dance with impunity on the naked edge of two sharp swords, make claim title of unique. Besides these, the respective residences, of Baboo Gopee Mohun Thakoor and Gooroo Pershad Bhowe have each its individual cause of attraction and promise to repay by a full measure of delight those who are content to forsake the calm repose of peaceful slumbers for the hum on men and squeeze of crowded assemblies".

The second and third decades of the nineteenth century were famous for the introspection of their religion that many educated Bengali Hindus started — through debate that would ultimately lead to several socio-religious reforms and to the banning of heinous practices, like infanticide and the burning of the widows on the funeral pyres of their husbands. William Bentinck and Raja Ram Mohan Roy stand out as towering personalities during this period, but the *nouveau riche* Bengali 'babu' appeared more interested in establishing his superiority over his rivals — in the battle of ostentatious entertainment.

Another description of the festivities that appeared on 12th October, 1826, in the Calcutta Gazette, (taken from 'Hurkaru') reads as follows:

"The splendid mansion of Baboo Gopee Mohun Deb, during the annual festival of Doorga Pooja, is the Theatre of many a novel spectacle; his hospitality is surpassed by none, and he seldom spares any expense in providing for the gratification of his guests.

"On Monday evening last he entertained a very large company of Ladies and Gentlemen of distinction. Among the amusements provided for the occasion, was a dance by some Burmese females. The group was composed of eight blooming girls all in their teens, direct from the Empire of the Golden Foot; and they tripped it (we won't say on the light fantastic toe) but with a degree of grace and agility seldom equalled by the fair of Hindostan; the dancing was accompanied by a song and the chorus which seemed intelligible to none but themselves."

The 'Friend of India' reported that some seven thousand images of the goddess were made for the Puja in 1839 in Calcutta and about twenty five Lakh rupees were spent. Rich individuals, however, continued their display of opulence. An advertisement that appeared on September 20, 1827, in the Calcutta Gazette will bear ample testimony:

"GRAND NAUTCHES
Doorga Pooja Holidays
BABOO PRANKISSEN HOLDAR
of Chinsurah

Begs to inform the Ladies and Gentlemen, and the Public in General, that he has commenced giving a Grand Nautch from this day, that it will continue till the 29th Instant. Those, Ladies and Gentlemen who have receive Invitation Cards, are respectfully solicited to favour him with their Company on the days mentioned above; and those to whom the Invitation Tickets have not been sent (strangers to the Baboo) are also respectfully solicited to favour him with their Company.

"Baboo Pran Kissan Holdar further bags to say, that every attention and respect will be paid to the Ladies and Gentlemen who will favour him with their Company, and that he will be happy to furnish then with Tiffin, Dinner, Wines, &c., during their stay there.

PRANKISSEN HOLDER

Chinsurah, September 14, 1827".

Ironically enough, this Pran Kissen Holder was to be convicted for forgery and sentenced for seven years, hardly a couple of years after this announcement. His property was also put up for auction.

But how did the *Sahibs* take it ? We have accounts of most of them making best use of the hospitality offered, even though many loathed the entire celebration. An editorial piece that appeared on 5th October, 1829, in the 'Calcutta Gazette' will make attitude of the better-placed Englishman clear:

"These festivals caused enormous sums and the numbers who attend them are generally very great; but of late years a falling off has been observed in both respects — a degree of lukewarmness in short, whence it is inferred that the better educated classes of Natives no longer entertain the same sentiments on the subject as were formerly prevalent. Once in a way on the principle of seeing every thing that is to be seen in a foreign country, an European may derive amusement from a Nautch — but on the whole it is, at best, but an insipid and monotonous exhibition."

The Puja Holidays had also come to be accepted as a way of life among the Company's servants in Bengal, as an escape from the monotonous grind of daily routine. Mr. J.H. Stocqueler, founder editor of 'The Englishman', wrote about his experiences in Bengal in the 1830s and 1840s. Let us glance at an extract from his "Social Life in Calcutta":

"But what are termed which Doorga Pooja holidays, which usually commence about the middle of September and last eight or ten days, from the period of time which admits extended excursions of almost all classes of men of business from the metropolis, and there is much deadness then in Calcutta as there in London at or near the same time of the year. The Hindoo natives lay aside all kind of business, save what daily necessity renders it indispensable to pursue, and shops and offices are shut up, or their tradeful hum and bustle all

but stagnated, while that great religious ceremonial is in course of being observed.

"Then the European merchant, the clerk, the official, the lawyer, the shopkeeper and artisan, all absent themselves, some for several days and some for a few weeks, in the certainty that competition can not be active while they are gone, and that the general stagnation is such that little could be profited by their remaining at their business. Pinnaces and budgerows are then hired for trips into the *Mofussil*, and the exploring citizen, who gets the hundred miles inland, fills from that our at liberty to relate, when he revisits England, that he has travelled into the interior of India and surveyed men and manners in the ruralities of our empire".

But what ever be the attitude of the Englishmen, the Bengali babu was having field day. With increasing acceptance of Community Pujas came the privilege of raising subscriptions from the public at large — a power that was often misused, just as it is done nowadays. The Calcutta Courier of 1840 reports:

"In consequence of the oppressive extortions of money by some young men belonging to the family of the Saborna Chowdhries of Bihala, of Zillah 24-Parganas, under the pretext of meeting the expenses of a *Barrowarry Poojah*, it was impossible for anybody, especially females, to pass that road in a conveyance without satisfying their unjust and illegal demands. When they happened to see a woman coming in a palanqueen, they immediately stopped it and if a handsome present was not offered, a volley of abuse was heaped on the poor creature. As women, from a sense of decency and decorum, were unable to resist these demands, they were sometimes compelled to give their clothes and ornaments when they had no money about them".

The hundred years or so that lie between the middle of the eighteenth and the middle of the nineteenth centuries were indeed a tumultuous one for the British in their new 'Colony' of Calcutta. It was an age in which they reconciled themselves with Hindu manners and

customs as practiced then in Bengal — through a curious mix of discovery, wonder, repulsion, acceptance and adaptation.

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