

East India Worships Lakshmi Now — Not During Diwali

Jawhar Sircar

Tonight is Lakshmi Puja in Bengal and much of the East, comprising of Assam, Odisha and Tripura. South India has a different tradition of worshipping Lakshmi during 3 of the 9 nights of Navaratri, which ends just five days before. This is how diversity thrives amidst unity in India, for several millennia. Much of Eastern India insists on invoking Lakshmi on the full moon day of the lunar month of Ashwin, as the Kojagori Purnima — while the North and West of India worship Lakshmi Puja a little later, on the darkest moon night of that fortnight. Their Diwali fills up the whole world with a million lamps on dark Amavasya, when Bengalis and other neighbouring cultures worship the darkest goddess, Kali, during that pitch black night.

There are, of course, sections of Bengalis among 'ghotis' of western Bengal (or those families that were originally from north India) who worship Deep Lakshmi on Diwali or Dipannita. But that the majority worship her in Bengal during this Kojagori Purnima is evident from the thousands of Durga Puja pandals where community Lakshmi pujas are invariably held in Bengal. In those almost deserted massive pandals where Durga Pujas were celebrated five days before, with lights, sounds, crowds and dazzle, Lakshmi looks somewhat lonely and forlorn. She occupies only a fraction of the great stage meant for the Durga Parivar and she does appear a bit too small.

But Bengalis and many Easterners are quite devoted to Lakshmi when it comes to their own households. The fervour at home is more intense than the community worship at the pandals. The ladies of the household draw footprints in white or red — pairs of little feet, often along with a wavy pattern bearing curlicues — so that Lakshmi can find the path to their homes. It is believed that the goddess visits every household at night and enters the rooms where the footsteps are drawn. Hence we find the footsteps drawn all over the house, even the staircase is not spared.

This Alpana art of floral designs with a chalk-like khori mati or white paste made of powdered rice is both an auspicious tradition and an artistic exercise among women in Bengal — just as kolam, rangoli aripana and mandna are elsewhere. Interestingly, in modern times, the alpana has been slowly taken out of its ritualistic context and given a more secular feel, especially as street art. We find elaborate alpanas being drawn during the seasonal festivals at Viswa Bharati campus, the university built by Rabindranath Tagore.

Nowadays, huge and imaginative alpanas are created on the streets and thoroughfares during festivals. Alpanas were invariably white in

colour, but in modern times, this art has been strongly influenced by the colourful rangoli. Hence use of modern paint and paint brushes have crept in.

Bengal's Lakshmi is seated on a lotus, with her pot of wealth on her lap and her owl at her feet. She does not appear in a standing position, being bathed by two elephants— as in other parts of India. The iconography is so different.

On Lakshmi Puja day, two mangalik kalash or pitchers are covered with coconuts on top are placed at the entrance of the home as an auspicious Hindu tradition. Women and men bathe early to welcome Lakshmi to their houses and seek her divine blessings. Small sheafs of ripened paddy in husks with stalks are strung up as symbols of prosperity.

In the past, we used to gather round our mother to listen to Lakshmir Panchali — the prayer songs of the goddess — but these rituals are fading away nowadays.

In many places, a sweet pudding is made and placed under the bright moonlight as a holy offering, before it is shared with all family members the following day. Special vegetarian khichuri (khichri) and simple fried vegetables are prepared, along with dry sweets — like 'taaler bora' (fried and sweet dough filled with palm sugar) and 'nadu' (tight balls of grated coconut with gur). Some others make 'mishti moa' (sweetened puffed rice balls) and chirey (chudwa or flattened rice). These are offered to goddess along with fresh fruits and then partaken.

But however sincerely Bengal and the East may worship Lakshmi, the goddess does not seem impressed — as she does not appear to sprinkle wealth and prosperity over this region.