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Durga Puja in Bengal an Ode to the Sacred Feminine

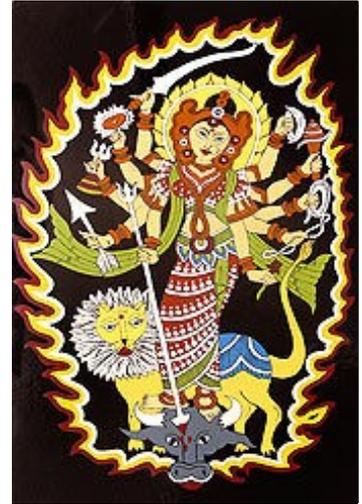
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"*Ayi girinandini nanditamedini
Vishvavinodini nandanKrittibasute|
Girivara vindhya shirodhnivaasini
Vishnuvilaasini jishnunute|*"

O, Daughter of the Mountain, the One who brings joy to the whole Earth, who makes the entire Universe rejoice, the One praised by Nandin, residing on the peak of the great Vindhya mountain; You are praised by all those desirous of victory.

The above are the first 4 lines of the Mahishasuramardhini Stotram, a hymn on the highly adored, worshipped and celebrated Devi Durga. Durga, an aspect of Parvati, Lord Shiva's consort, is also one of the Trinity of the Sacred Feminine Energy. In Sanskrit, Durga means "inaccessible" or "invincible". In Bengali, her name implies the "one who can redeem from utmost distress". This supremely powerful and radiant Goddess is shown with ten arms, riding either a tiger or a lion, wielding several weapons, also holding a soft lotus flower in one hand. She is shown to have a meditative, love-filled smile and practices Yoga mudras or symbolic hand gestures, many used in Tantra.

Durga is considered the Adi Shakti or the Primordial Power, who created the entire Universe out of her womb. An embodiment of Prakriti or the creative feminine force, Durga, the Warrior Goddess, is both fierce and compassionate. While fighting with terrible demons, she exhibits her raging side. But with devotees, she is gentle and benevolent and grants all their wishes.



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DURGA

The Legend of Devi Durga

According to the Devi Mahatyam, Durga was created in order to fight an asura or demon, called Mahishasura. He had a boon that he could not be defeated by any man or God. Filled with arrogance and false pride, Mahisha unleashed a reign of terror on the Heavens, the Earth and the Netherworld. In order to find a way to tackle Mahisha, Brahma and the other Devas approached Shiva and Vishnu. The Gods were so angry that a fierce radiance emerged from their bodies. This light met as one at the Ashram of a priest, Katyayan. Devi Durga then emerged from this brilliant light. Hence, Durga is also called Katyayani.

Each of the major Gods gave her their weapon. Hence, she held Shiva's Trishula (Trident), Indra's Vajra (Thunderbolt), Vishnu's Chakra (Discus), Rama's Bow, Kubera's Ratnahara, Brahma's Kamandalu and so on. Himavan gave her a lion, on which she rode majestically.

Introducing herself in the language of the Rig Veda, she declared that she was the form of the Supreme Brahman and was the Creator of the entire Universe.

Durga Wages Battle against Mahisha

When Durga came face-to-face with Mahisha, the asura underestimated her, thinking that a mere woman, and that too, one as soft-looking as the one before him, could never ever defeat him. However, Durga's roaring laughter created an earthquake and this made him somewhat aware of her powers.



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DURGA SLAYS MAHISHASURA

Mahishasura fought against her, changing forms many times. First he became a buffalo demon - she defeated him with her sword. He then became an elephant that tied up the goddess's lion and began to pull it towards him. Durga cut off his trunk with her sword. Then Mahisha took the form of a lion, and then a man, but Durga slew both forms effortlessly.

Then Mahishasura again started to take the form of a buffalo. When Mahishasura had half emerged into this form, he was paralyzed by the radiant light emitting from the goddess's body. She then roared with laughter and in one swift stroke, cut off his head with her sword.

Legend has it that the Goddess took up severe penance for many days before facing Mahisha in the battlefield. The fierce battle went on for 9 days. On the 10th day, the day of Vijayadashami, she finally won against the mighty demon.

Temples Dedicated to Durga

The main temple for Devi Durga is situated on the Trikuta Parvata near Katra in Jammu, in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. This temple houses one of the most popular shrines of the Goddess, also called Mata Vaishno Devi. Other important temples include Kanak Durga Temple in Vijayawada; Durgamba Temple in Karnataka; Chamundeshwari Temple in Mysore; Ammathiruvadi Temple in Thrissur, Kerala; Matrimandir near Pondicherry; Maa Bamleshwari at Chattisgarh; Shitla Mata Temple at Patna; Ambika Mata Temple in Rajasthan; Ambaji Temple near Gujarat; Kalighat Temple in Kolkata; Kamakhya Temple in Guwahati; Katak Chandi Temple in Cuttack; Shanta Durga Temple in Goa and so on.

Major Durga temples can also be found elsewhere in Asia, such as Prambanan Temple in Indonesia; Dhakeshwari Temple in Dhaka, Bangladesh and so on.

Worship of Devi Durga

Durga is worshipped all over India. She is revered equally by all Hindu communities, especially by the Shaivas and the Shaktas. This ten-day worship is undertaken with great fervour by Hindus all over the world.

In North India, the tenth day of Navratri signifies Lord Rama's victory over the demon King, Ravana. Ram Lila sessions are conducted, wherein artists enact the story of Rama and straw effigies of Ravana are burnt in designated open spaces.



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RAMA BATTLES RAVANA

In Gujarat, the Garba dance is performed with great vigour, in order to celebrate the Goddess' victory over Mahisha. In Maharashtra, Ambabai and Tulja Bhavani are worshipped as forms of Mahishasuramardhini.

In Tamil Nadu, people keep the Golu (or Kolu), which is a certain arrangement of dolls, and offer prayers, flowers, fruits, incense and naivedya to the deity. Women then call their female friends over for the distribution of haldi-kumkum. This is a predominantly ladies' festival, signifying that each woman is an aspect of the Sacred Feminine.

In Bangladesh, there is a four-day long Sharadiya Durga Puja. This is celebrated with great religious fervour by all Hindus residing there.

The Durga Puja in Bengal

The Navratri festival, though, is celebrated with the most devotion and fervour in Bengal, where Goddess Durga is considered the Supreme Almighty. The four-day Durga Puja ceremony, starting from the Saptami (seventh day) to the Dashami (tenth day) is the greatest annual festival in Bengal. All through the period of the Navaratri, the Navadurga or nice aspects of Durga are meditated upon, each Devi being worshipped on one particular day of the Navratri. This type of worship is especially undertaken by Shaktas or Shakti worshippers.

Durga as the Great Unifier

Goddess Durga emerged from the united powers of all the major Gods. She therefore embodied their ideals and principles and even adopted their weapons as her own. Durga, hence, united the Gods to help them collectively win their individual battles against evil. For this reason, Durga is considered the personification of unity.

Durga as a Spiritual Power



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DURGA WITH HER FAMILY

At any Durga Puja festival in Bengal, Durga is depicted as the mother of Ganesha, Kartikeya, Lakshmi and Saraswati. In actuality, these deities represent four different powers necessary to create the existence of a certain spiritual state. Ganesha is the Lord of physical strength; Kartikeya is the God of valour and celibacy; Lakshmi is the Goddess of wealth and business; and Saraswati is the Goddess of purity and knowledge. Hence, these idols collectively embody physical strength for both

agricultural and industrial workers; chivalry and bravery for soldiers; wealth for those in business; and the enhancement of knowledge for intellectuals.

Durga symbolizes unity even in the psyche of man. Her fight against Mahisha symbolizes the fight against the darkness of evil and the ultimate victory of good over evil. This victory is not only physical in nature, but also implies the inner struggle faced everyday by man in all fields of his life. This struggle aims to reach man to the highest levels of Sattva or pure consciousness, where his soul meets the One Universal Soul, embodied by Durga Herself.

The seeker then reaches a state of complete bliss, which can be attained only after eliminating the base emotions or Rajas. The base emotions are embodied by the lion, which is forever under the control of the Goddess. Thus, only surrendering the mind and letting the Devi take over it, can free the seeker of this material world and grant him or her a permanent state of bliss.

The fight between Durga and Mahisha actually symbolizes our internal fight between good and evil. The slaying of Mahisha is actually the slaying of the Tamas or the impure lying within all of us.



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DURGA FIGHTS THE DEMON

Akal Bodhon - the History of Durga Puja

There is no clear record as to the actual history of the Durga Puja festival. The first mention of the Puja dates back to the Ramayana. It is believed that Lord Rama invoked Durga before leaving to fight against Ravana. The Goddess was traditionally worshipped in spring, but he had to invoke her during autumn, when she was in deep slumber. In fact, this time of the year is considered inauspicious, according to Hindu mythology. Hence, this is termed as Akal Bodhon, which in Bengali, literally means, "untimely awakening" or "invocation".

The most auspicious time for the Goddess' worship falls in the month of Chaitra, which arrives approximately between March or April. Also termed as the Uttarayan, this coincides with the time of the Spring Equinox. The Dakshinayan is considered to be the resting time for Gods and Goddesses. This extends for the entire Winter Solstice, which is the time period between 23rd June and 22nd December every year.

According to Krittibas' Ramayan, the war between Rama and Ravana kept raging for some days. Rama succeeded in slaying Ravana into two halves. But a boon from Brahma enabled Ravana to regain his original form. Ravana then began to worship Devi Ambika, requesting her to support him in his battle against Rama. The Devi immediately obliged and joined Ravana on his chariot.

Vibishana then suggested to Rama that he should try to appease Durga by offering her 108 blue lotuses and praying to her fervently. At Rama's behest, Hanuman flew to Debidaha, the only region where he could find the lotuses.

Gathering the lotuses, Rama started his worship of the Goddess. To his dismay, however, there were only 107 lotuses. Rama promptly proceeded to pull out one of his own lotus eyes to offer to the Devi. This pleased Devi Durga, who immediately appeared before him and stopped him from this act. She also promised Rama that she would leave Ravana's side and help Rama win the battle and rescue Sita.

Rama started the Puja on Shashti or the 6th day of Ashwin. The Goddess gave him darshan on the Ashtami or the 8th day. On the start of the 9th day, she entered Rama's weapons and thus enabled him to slay Ravana on the Dashami or the 10th day.

Other Stories of Akal Bodhon

According to Shri Shri Chandi, King Surath had invoked Durga in autumn, in order to get back his lost kingdom. Samadhi Vaishya had done the same to attain Brahmagyana or the knowledge of the Ultimate Truth.

There is also a legend of Indra, the King of Gods, waking up the Devi in autumn, in order to request her to slay Mahisha.

These different versions of Akal Bodhon possibly indicate that this legend is purely mythological in nature.

Preparations Undertaken for the Elaborate Durga Puja

The preparations for the Durga Puja in Bengal are elaborate and are undertaken with much religious fervour. First, clay idols of the deity are created. Then pandals are erected in chosen locations and then the Puja festivities follow from there. Let us discuss these preparations in more detail:

Creating the Durga Idol

Bengal specializes in creating beautiful clay idols of Devi Durga. The best artists create and showcase their masterpieces during this festive occasion. The process of creating the idol starts months before the event. First, bamboo sticks are cut in different shapes so as to support the main statue of the Goddess and also to create a platform to place her idol. The artisan then painstakingly creates a clay figurine of the Goddess. This is the most difficult part.

An outline of the idol is created by tying up pieces of straw with jute strings. This is done by one group of artisans. The second group goes about mixing the clay for making the idol. Yet another group comprising the top artisans, applies the clay onto the straw skeleton, thus giving shape to it.

The first coat of clay used to make the image of the Goddess is watery. This helps fill up the gaps created by the straw structure. The second layer is applied very carefully, since this is what actually gives shape to the idol. The mixed clay has to be pure and fine, so that there are no lumps and such while mixing. The palms, feet and head are all made separately and are then attached to the torso.



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DURGA IDOL

The face, which is the main part, is created with a great deal of effort. Liquid Plaster of Paris is first poured over it, creating a mould. Then the mould is separated from the clay. The mould is then used to create many other similar heads.

In the final stage, cloth soaked in fine clay, taken from the river bed of the Ganga, is applied to the joints of the figurines. This develops cracks while drying and essentially strengthens the joints. The image is then painted with white earth. Once this dries, the statue is painted with pink or yellow earth colours. Then comes the blood colour. The fine detailing of the eyes is done by the main

artist. A coat of varnish is applied to the idol and hair, made of jute, is pasted onto the idol's head and is then ornamented.

Pandal-Making for the Puja

Constructing a Puja Pandal is considered a form of art. This Pandal is the abode of Goddess Durga for the four days of Durga Puja. In the bygone days, the landed aristocracy or the Zamindars used to conduct the Barwari Puja or a community Puja, which was generally an extension of their own residence.

But today, Puja pandals are erected in almost every street corner. Bamboo poles, several wooden planks and reams of cloth are required to construct these mammoth structures. Artists make full use of their creative skills to make the most intricate designs, so as to make viewers catch their breath. Such is the architectural splendour of these structures. These pandals are then decorated with bright lights and chandeliers. On the walls are several scenes depicted from mythology.

The Durga Chalchitra

The Durga Chalchitra, also referred to as Devichal or Chali, is the painted background of the Durga idol. Originally, these were used to give proper proportion to the structure. Gradually, this took the form of a slab, known as "Prabhamandali" or halo of the idol. This tradition is very ancient and is still maintained.

Though the Chalchitra is painted on materials like canvas of Potas or paper, a few varieties are also engraved on ivory, wood, stone or even metals. Originally, Chalchitrakars used to be potters by profession. But there are also two other sects; the Grahabipras (idol makers who might have been Brahmanas by caste) and the Patuas or Sutradhars (the painters of scroll patas).



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DURGA IDOL WITH CHALCHITRA

There are four varieties of Chalchitra - Bangla Chal, Markini Chal, Mothchouri Chal and Tanachauri Chal. Three more extinct varieties are Girje Chal, Sarbasundari Chal and Dothaki chal. Among the commonly seen chali is the Markini Chal. This comes in a semicircular shape, extending from one end of the idol to the other, propped up by two pillars. The Bangla chal follows the tradition of temple architecture. It stretches on both sides of the idol in a suspended pattern and is long enough to fit all the idols present there. Shiva is a vital part of Chalchitras. He is depicted in different postures and moods, such as playing a Vina, dancing, smoking ganja, riding the Nandi and even sleeping.

The lack of patronage has caused this wonderful art to fade away from mainstream art. Moreover, challis are usually immersed along with the idols and hence, no official legacy is found. Nowadays, the Chalchitra is used only as a part of decoration.

Bengalis Prepare for the Big Event

Bengalis prepare in a big way for the event. They purchase lovely new garments, prepare good food and invite friends and relatives over to their place, also giving away gifts to them. Some may even consider revamping their homes. The Durga Puja, therefore, not

only has religious significance, but is also relevant socio-economically. It is the entire community's pride.

Shopkeepers also try to sell the maximum amount of wares, offering free gifts and discounts with every purchase. Generally, the atmosphere continues to remain charged with joy and gaiety throughout the time of the Durga Puja.

Ritual Worship Associated with the Durga Puja

There are several interesting ritual Pujas undertaken, mostly by women, during the Durga Puja in Bengal. The most important ones are as follows:

Kumari Puja

Bengalis worship Durga as the Goddess Shakti who is also a daughter, making an annual visit to her parents' place, accompanied by her children, for a period of four days. The Goddess, during her stay here, is worshipped in several forms. One of these is the Kumari, which is the Kanya or Virgin form. This is considered the most powerful form of Mahashakti.

A girl aged between one and sixteen, is worshipped in front of the idol of Goddess Durga. Interestingly, the scriptures emphasise Kumari Puja in order to enhance the purity and divinity of the women of the Indian society. Sri Rama Krishna had said that Kumari is another form of Devi Durga. He hence worshipped Sarada Ma as Kumari. This concept of Kumari Puja is very ancient. In the Mahabharata, Arjuna had performed Kumari Puja.

Selecting the Kumari

The scriptures mention the qualities required in the girl to match the dynamism, purity and serenity of the godly Kumari. The Kumari has to be calm, serene and unmarried girl, who should not have yet reached her puberty. Therefore, she would be bereft of desire, worldly pleasures and anger.

Depending on the age of the girls, they are worshipped in the different forms of the Goddess.

- A one year old is worshipped in the Sandhya form of the Devi
- A two year old is worshipped in the Saraswati form
- A three year old girl is worshipped in the Tridha form
- A four year old is worshipped in the Kalika form
- Subhaga and Uma are the forms for a five and a six year old respectively
- A seven year old is worshipped as Malini, while an eight year old represents Kujjika
- Kalsondarbha and Aparajita stand for a ten year old and an eleven year old respectively
- Bhairavi is represented by a twelve year old and Mahalakhmi by a thirteen year old
- Pitnayika, Khetrageya and Ambika are worshipped by way of fourteen, fifteen and sixteen year old girls respectively

Kumari Puja Vidhi

Kumari Puja is held on Ashtami or Nabami. At early dawn, the Kumari is bathed in Ganga water and is clad in a red Benarasi sari. She is adorned with jewellery and flowers and alta (a type of watery red paint) is applied to her feet. A tilak of sindoor is applied on her forehead.



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The Kumari fasts the whole day until the puja is over. She is made to sit on a decorated chair, facing the goddess and a flower from the Devi's hand is placed in her hand. Placed before her are flowers, bel (wood apple) leaves, incense sticks, lamps and other things required for puja. The purohit then chants appropriate mantras to complete the yagna.

It is believed that after the puja, the divinity of the Goddess Durga can be seen in the girl. The Kumari is then gifted with gold, silver and clothes, as it is considered a pious act to gift the now divine Kumari.

The Sandhi Puja

As a tradition, the Nabadurga or the Nine Durgas are propitiated during the Durga Puja festival in Bengal.

The Sandhi Puja, a vital part of the Durga Puja, is performed during the juncture of the 8th and 9th lunar day. The Sandhi Puja lasts from the last 24 minutes of Ashtami till the first 24 minutes of Nabami. Durga is worshipped in her Chamunda form during this time.



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NAVA DURGA

The Legend of Chamunda

Devi Durga had killed 2 demons, Chanda and Munda, at Sandhikhan. Hence, she has the name, "Chamunda". While Durga and Mahishasura were battling with each other, the two generals of Mahisha, Chanda and Munda attacked the Devi from behind. Durga then appeared before them, a luminescent woman, her hair knotted on her head, a crescent moon above her forehead, a tilak on her forehead and a garland around her neck. Her earrings and yellow sari gave her a golden glow. Her ten hands held ten different weapons. Though beautiful, her face turned blue with anger when she faced Chanda and Munda.

From the Devi's third eye emerged a Goddess with a large falchion and a shield. She had an angry-looking face, bloody tongue and blood-shot eyes. This fearful entity, Devi Chamunda, leapt forward and killed the demons, right at the juncture of the 8th and 9th lunar day.

Sandhi Puja in the Past

In the times of yore, a bronze bowl with a tiny hole was placed in a bucket full of water. The hole was made in such a way that it took precisely 24 minutes for the bowl to completely submerge in the water. The moment the bowl submerged in the water, cannon balls were fired in order to announce this moment of Sandhi Puja.

This very popular technique for measuring the Sandhikhan was employed by Rajbaris, including the Zamindar of Sutanuti of Sobhabajar. The people residing in and around Sobhabajar waited for this indication to proceed with their Puja. So popular was this ritual, that Raja Krishna Chandra, the King of Krishnanagar, was given the cannon of Plassey as a gift from Robert Clive.



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THALI WITH FOOT IMPRINTS

In Shikharbhum Rajbari, a platter with sindoor (vermilion) used to be kept in front of the Devi. It was believed that the foot prints of Goddess Durga could be seen in the platter. This moment also indicated the commencement of Sandhi Puja.

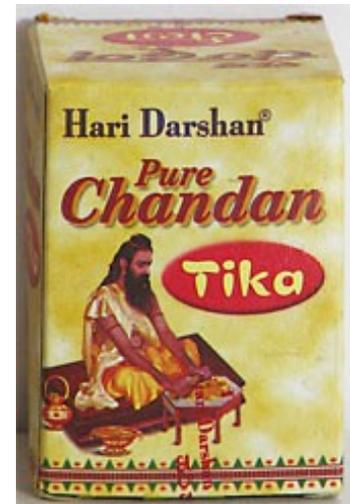
Kolabou

Considered to be Lord Ganesh's consort, Kolabou in actuality has no relationship with the Elephant-Headed God. But she is referred to in scriptures as the Nabapatrika. Interestingly, Nabapatrika was a popular ritual performed by the farmers to appease the Gods for a good harvest. As idol worship was not so popular at that point in time, they worshipped Mother Nature instead. The Sharat Ritu or season of autumn was the time of Amondhan - the time for reaping a harvest.

When Durga Puja got popular many centuries later, the Nabapatrika rituals were also added with it. The Nabapatrika, hence, signifies a primitive form of the Durga Puja. Each of the nine plants used in the Nabapatrika worship are considered to be one aspect of Devi Durga.

Early in the morning on Saptami, twigs of the aparajita plant, along with nine bunches of yellow threads, are used to tie the Nabapatrika. It is then bathed, signifying the Abhishek of all the nine Goddesses representing Nabapatrika. It is bathed with waters from 8 different holy places and the ritual is accompanied with the chanting of mantras and playing of musical instruments for different goddesses. Also, different ragas or melodies are sung with the Abhishek done with each pot.

Nabapatrika is then adorned in a white sari bordered with brilliant red and vermillion is smeared on her leave. Then, placed on a decorated pedestal, she is worshipped with incense sticks, sandalwood paste and flowers. Afterward, she is placed on the right side of Lord Ganesha. This is why she is regarded as Ganesha's wife.



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SANDALWOOD PASTE

The Nabapatrika ritual used to be a big affair with the Babus of the yesteryears. Once idol worship came into being, this ritual slowly lost its importance. Now, people perform this ritual on a minor scale.

Ritual Offerings

Various types of ritualistic offerings are made to the Goddess during this time, as a means of worship. Here, devotees offer various foods, sweets, incense, ghee, oil, money and even gold and silver ornaments at the Feet of the Goddess.

These offerings symbolize the devotee surrendering material and worldly pleasures to the Goddess, thereby signifying the shedding his or her mortal ego, trying to reach the higher planes of spiritual existence.

Bisharjan

On the last day of Dashami, Devi Durga is sent back to Kailash, to her Lord Shiva. This ritual is referred to as the Bisharjan. A branch is marked before the commencement of the Puja. It is then cut from the tree and tied to a mirror. This mirror is kept on a platter in an angle that the reflection of the Devi can be seen in the mirror. The mirror is bathed with water. After the Dashami puja, the Bisharjan implies the immersion of the mirror in a platter of water, while shaking the idol at the same time.



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GHAT OR BRASS VESSEL

The ghat puja is important here. Four arrows are placed in a rectangular plot, their tips tied with a red thread. The ghat, an earthen or brass pot is placed in the middle of the plot and the loose end of the thread is tied around the idol of the goddess. Later, the red thread is also wrapped around the idol.

After completing the Dashami puja, the purohit asks the Goddess to forgive him for errors committed while conducting the Puja. Then, inviting her to visit again, he takes a flower from the ghat and, chanting mantras, throws it behind his back, shakes the ghat and tears off the thread. This concludes the Bisharjan ritual.

Sindoor Khela

The Sindoor Khela is an important event of the Dashami. All married women take the blessings of Devi Durga for the last time before her immersion. They perform arati, place betel leaves in the palms of the Goddess and put sweets on the lips of the idol. They then wipe the eyes of the idol, as one does to wipe off tears. This is called the Durga Baran. They then apply vermillion to the Devi's head and also to each other.

Just before the idol is immersed in water, the women take the sindoor from the Devi's forehead and place it on their own. The sindoor that remains on the finger is applied on an iron and gold bangle, which is termed as the Loha. This is usually gifted by the mother-in-law and is supposed to be worn by the married woman, all her life.



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VERMILLION POWDER

Devi Durga is finally given a warm send-off, by way of the Bisharjan. This marks the conclusion of the very beautiful and very elaborate Durga Puja festival in Bengal.

This article was written by Priya Viswanathan, a teacher/performer of Bharata Natyam, Classical Music and Classical Instrumental Veena. A recipient of several awards for both music and dance, Priya is also a freelance writer online. She currently writes for About.com, a subsidiary of the New York Times Company (<http://mobiledevices.about.com>)

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