

# **Festivals of Pollution**

***The Statesman***

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Once upon a time, festivals were times for joy and celebration. We met relatives and friends, feasted on delicious food and offered Pujas at community pandals with devotion. Festivals brought a sense of belongingness. When they were over, we felt sad, as if a part of us had disappeared.

In these days of globalization, where money is equated with joy and happiness, and religion like everything else has been commercialized, things obviously are different. Every god and goddess now spawns an elaborate industry. No wonder the number of pujas is growing exponentially, choking roads and city space. Religion is served to people, neatly packaged, at a price, devoid of any religiosity. Every additional puja means more money to raise and spend, and since money is happiness, more happiness. In 2017, there were 2600 pujas in Kolkata alone, and some 25000 across West Bengal.

Pujas in fact have ceased to be times of joy and celebration - instead they have become stressful nuisance, with perpetual blurring of mikes much above the permissible decibel limits pounding at and pulverizing our senses, and the crowds taking over the roads. Arguably, they must be enjoying but there was a time when one's enjoyment did not intrude upon others' peace. Worse, one cannot raise a voice in protest – unless one wishes to be lynched by defenders of faith, with no support from any quarter whatsoever.

It is said that the idea of community puja evolved in Kolkata in the 1830s. The first community puja in Delhi was celebrated in 1910 at the Kashmiri Gate. Today there would possibly be a few hundred Pujas in Delhi NCR. Like the Hoogly river in Kolkata, all these idols find their ultimate resting place in the sacred waters of the Yamuna associated with Lord Krishna, choking and suffocating a river already in an advanced state of decay, and hastening its demise in the name of faith. But in the 21<sup>st</sup> century India, no questions can be asked on matters of faith which would promptly be flagged as heresy by the Hinduttva brigade, and punished with ruthless administration of instant justice by a mob. According to the environmental NGO "Toxics Link", approximately 100,000 idols are immersed in India's water bodies each year.

In the olden days, when Ganga and Yamuna were worshipped as life giving and life-sustaining mother rivers, idols of gods and goddesses used to be made from clay and painted with natural colours. Today they are made of anything but natural products: metals, Plaster of Paris which contains gypsum, sulphur, phosphorus and magnesium, synthetic colours that contain toxic chemicals and heavy metals like mercury, cadmium, lead and chromium, besides non-biodegradable materials like plastics and thermocol. All these highly contaminating substances are discharged into the waters at the time of immersion and disintegrate into the waters, damaging the aquatic ecosystem irreversibly. Plaster of Paris idols take several months to dissolve, poisoning the waters in the process. Rivers are also obliged to receive polythene bags, foam cut-outs, puja articles like flowers and food offerings, decorations, metal polish, plastic sheets, cosmetic items, all of which add to the pollution.

There have been numerous advisories and guidelines issued by various authorities – right from the Supreme Court to the Central Pollution Control Board; there is also the Water Act 1974 that prescribes the do's and don'ts – but they have all been observed only in their blatant violations with impunity. Many eco-friendly alternatives have been prescribed, again only to be violated, while the Government looks helpless and impotent in the face of such abuses. Faith is a strictly No-Go area for any government dependent on the *aam admi's* vote. *Aam admi* is equated with one always at the receiving end of injustice and hence deserving of every sympathy, but when it comes to faith, it is the *aam admi* which treats the law and the state with utter contempt. Before Puja this year, responding to a PIL, the Allahabad High Court had ordered a blanket ban on immersion of all idols in the UP-rivers, but later had to relax it, presumably under pressure, knowing that the order couldn't and wouldn't be enforced. The *aam admi* just won't comply, knowing they can always blackmail the government as regards faith.

In an article in "Down to Earth", Soma Basu quotes a 1993-95 study by the Central Pollution Control Board to inform that every year, 15,000 idols of Goddess Durga are immersed in the Hooghly river alone, releasing 16.8 tonnes of varnish and garjan oil and 32 tonnes of colours in the water, containing heavy doses manganese, lead, mercury and chromium, with significant increases in their concentrations many times beyond the safe limits. Their effects on human body are indeed devastating. When inhaled, chromium compounds irritates in the respiratory tract, and may cause cancers of lung, nose or sinus. Lead is absorbed and stored in bones, blood, and tissues causing anemia and damage to kidney and brain. High exposure to mercury damages the gastrointestinal tract, nervous system and kidneys. Manganese, while essential for health in trace quantities, poisons the body when exposed to an overdose that can cause hallucination, amnesia, nerve damage, bronchitis and Parkinson. The effects of these toxins on marine life would be much more shattering. Idols are painted with these colours and like some farmers who apply lethal colour to their vegetables to make them look fresh, the idol makers also apply these paints without any qualms. The secretary of the Kumartuli Mrit Silpa Sankriti Samity (association of idol makers in Kumartuli) is reported to have said: "If we use such colours, the cost of each idol goes up by Rs 600 to Rs 800. The puja organisers simply refuse to pay the higher amount." So for a mere Rs 800, they don't mind playing with environment and public health including their own.

As with water, so with air. Diwali is the festival of light widely celebrated all over the north and east India, but it has become one of the most toxic festivals in the world. After every Diwali, the air turns extremely noxious from the bursting of firecrackers and remains so for several days. Delhi NCR region is especially vulnerable because this also coincides with the notorious stubble burning in Punjab, Haryana and UP after paddy harvesting in October. This year, despite a ban by Supreme Court to burn only "green crackers" for 2 hours on the Diwali night from 8 to 10 PM and Government's unusual resolve to enforce it, the *aam admis* of Delhi had burst 20 lakh kilograms of traditional crackers of the non-green variety, making the air quality index soar to an emergency level of 980 and raising the density of toxic particles over 40 times above the safe limit. The most dangerous PM-2.5 micro-particles that can pierce the lungs and enter into the bloodstream had shot to the level of 2000 compared to their safe limit of 60, aided and abetted by a low wind-speed. Though 2776 kilograms of banned crackers being sold clandestinely were seized by the police, ten times as much were burned illegally, under the very eyes of the police who were helpless because the *aam admi* had decided to flout the Court directive. *Aam admi* can do anything with complete impunity. They can lynch innocent individuals in a mob by circulating rumours over WhatsApp, kill

innocent people in the name of gau-raksha and take law into their hands anytime they choose. The state must always be sympathetic to the perennially wronged *aam admi*.

If citizens are allowed to treat the law with such utter contempt, then the State need to assert itself so as to prevent the country from sliding into certain anarchy. People have turned our religious festivals into abiding nuisance and this needs to be changed. Change involves law as well as attitudes. Religious practices are not cast in stones forever. We can redesign and readapt them, say, by stopping immersion altogether by using permanent stone idols and performing only symbolic immersion while reusing the same idols every year. "Green cracker" is a no-brainer, Instead of promoting them, we can banish firecrackers for good from our festivals. We can stop the use of mikes in all temples and public places of worship including in the mosques to reduce the noise pollution. Law can help us in all these. If some jobs are lost as a consequence, governments can help rehabilitate the affected persons or communities. In any case, the social benefits will far outweigh the social costs. As regards changing the attitudes, we must start with the young, by incorporating environmental consciousness in every school curriculum in an integral manner. Half-hearted measures won't serve any longer. We must either decide to go the whole hog, or resign ourselves to the reign of terror by those who have no respect for life, health and environment for what they think is faith.