

Durga Puja adjusts itself to the pandemic and its caveats

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FULL TEXT

Like every other festival, this year's Durga Puja will also be a more low key and understated celebration. Most organizers are strongly encouraging patrons and visitors to tune in to the celebrations from home. Some have even dropped the installation of an idol, and instead will put an urn in place, and do a ghot puja. Perhaps how it was done more traditionally, in the yesteryears.

Putting in place an urn, restricting the number of visitors to pandals and venues, and in some cases, even creating a 'Bio-bubble' at the pandal, where chemicals sprayed on surfaces will ensure that viruses that come in contact will be killed almost immediately –this is the new normal. At this year's Durga Puja. Be it at venues in Mumbai, Kolkata or Delhi.

Bombay's Durgabari Samiti, the organizer for one of the city's oldest Durga Pujas, has shifted venue from the grand Tejpal Hall in Gowalia Tank to the smaller Sangam Hall on Marine Drive. The pujas such as the Maha Ashtami Puja, the Sondhi Puja, the pushpanjali and the cultural programmes in the evening will be telecast live. On the Samiti's social media channels such as on their Facebook page and on YouTube. This is the 91st year of Durgabari Samiti's Durga Puja celebrations, but because of the pandemic, the committee has decided to keep the festivities low profile. Says Susmita Mitra, the Samiti's President, "We cannot put members in danger. The puja will be more compact this year. We have even cancelled the serving and distribution of bhog and prasad this year, because medical professionals have advised us against it. Our priests performing the puja will also live at the venue for that period to avoid risks that may be incurred if they travel. By worshipping an urn this year, it's like we have gone back to ancient times, and are conducting the puja how it was done in the past, when there was no concept of an idol." For the Mudiali Club in Kolkata too safety during corona is the most important concern. The club hopes that every pandal in the City of Joy will take the best precautions to keep the virus under control when people visit. In Kolkata unlike Mumbai almost every pandal will be open for visits by devotees, under certain conditions. That the pavilions be kept open on three sides and everyone be masked. Mudiali's committee has also cancelled the serving of bhog and even though crowds will be allowed in, they will be required to maintain social distancing. They can enter and pray in batches, and the club will enforce masks and hand sanitization on entry. Another of the club's initiatives this year is to employ unemployed artists and workers in the construction of their pandal. The club has identified out-of-work labourers and made it a point to give them a job on site, in the making of their pandal. Mudiali's durga puja theme this year is Daay –which means responsibility, tells us Sumit Shaw, who takes care of the club's digital media and press relations. And the committee wants to make sure that it fulfils its social and public responsibility through charity work and handing out jobs.

The Navi Mumbai Bengali Association's (NMBA) Vashi Durgotsav is one of the most chic Durga Pujas in Navi Mumbai, and this year they too "will spend a bomb", as Tridib Ghosh from the organization tells us to telecast the rituals and ceremonies live. Commemorating its 41st year this year, the pujas during the festive days will take place with practically no one there. The puja will go from a big, pompous celebration which saw nearly 1.2 lakh visitors to a quiet one. Shares Ghosh, "It's a sad thing to happen. There is no theme this year for the carnival and we had to cut down the height of the 'pratima' as well. However we could not give the puja a miss this year. We planned it any way." Ghosh adds that the association has its own Home for Cancer Patients –which offers cancer

patients visiting the city for treatment a 'homestay' at a reasonable cost. Around 500 patients benefit from this facility every year says the association's website. "We also arrange for their food (at a nominal rate)." During the corona scourge, the organization has donated "a lot to the underprivileged," adds Ghosh.

The Bengal Club at Shivaji Park, in Mumbai has also helped medical tourists to the city. Especially when they were stuck here in a lockdown. About 350 –400 such patients in Bombay received free meals from the club for a month. The club will also donate a sum of Rs. 5 lakhs to the Chief Minister's COVID relief fund. At its annual puja revelries this year, there will be no pandal, and only a small idol inside the hall in the premises. Like last year, art director Nitin Desai has been roped in to design the premises, but the puja this year will not be of the magnitude and scale of the one last year. On October 15th, the club conducted an online 'Healthion' on Zoom on emotional freedom therapy for the anxious and the stressed out, a result of the lockdown, and today also conducted a blood donation camp, in the morning, at the club itself.

The bhog of Delhi's Chittaranjan Park Durga Puja festivities at the Kali Mandir there will cost Rs. 1500 per day and can be pre-booked. Says the CR Park Kali Mandir Society Secretary Sreebash Bhattacharjee, "We will serve khichdi, pulao, sabzi, paneer, chutni, payasam and other sweets to those who have booked it. The bhog will be sent to patrons in dabbas straight to their houses." The pujas will be performed throughout the festive time at the temple and can be watched online live on YouTube and Facebook on the society's social media. The public will not be allowed into the temple. To bring in festive cheer, the society is presently holding online dance and singing competitions advertised on Facebook, where prizes can be won. Bhattacharjee reminisces about a time when drum beaters were called in for puja from Kolkata. This year only locals will do the job. "There will be no hulla gulla this year. Our Puja will be a silent one this year."

Durga Puja will be celebrated this year, in an unusually subdued manner, from October 21st to October 26th. You won't need to create a ghoroa atmosphere. The puja will come to your house, to your desktop or TV set. It will literally be a ghoroa puja this year.

Social media handles of the various pandals for virtual darshan:

Bombay Durga Bari Samiti, Mumbai

Instagram: [bombaydurgabarisamiti](#)

Facebook: [Bombay Durga Bari Samiti](#)

YouTube: [Bombay Durga Bari Samiti](#)

Website: www.bombaydurgabari.org

Bengal Club, Mumbai

Facebook: [Bengal Club 1922](#)

Instagram: [bengalclub_shivajipark](#)

Mudiali Club, Kolkata

Facebook: [Mudiali Club](#)

YouTube: [Mudiali Club](#)

Website: <http://www.mudialicclub.org>

Navi Mumbai Bengali Association

Facebook: [Navi Mumbai Bengali Association](#)

YouTube: [NMBA Community](#)

Website: <http://www.nmba.in>

Chittaranjan Park Kali Mandir Society, Delhi

Facebook: [CR Park Kali Mandir, New Delhi](#)

YouTube: [KMS CRPARK](#)

Website: www.kalimandircrpark.org

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