

Idol makers face losses as India prepares for major festival amid Covid-19

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ABSTRACT (SPANISH)

By Shubhomoy Chatterjee, Patna, India, Sep 30 (EFE).- Idol makers in India are struggling with their businesses as the Covid-19 crisis has cast clouds of uncertainty over the celebrations of one of the largest cultural and religious carnivals in India that begin next month. The government has come out with its guidelines, allowing the celebration of the five-day Durga Puja festival, which is popular across the country but mostly celebrated in the eastern and northern parts of India. It involves

FULL TEXT

By Shubhomoy Chatterjee

Patna, India, Sep 30 (EFE).- Idol makers in India are struggling with their businesses as the Covid-19 crisis has cast clouds of uncertainty over the celebrations of one of the largest cultural and religious carnivals in India that begin next month.

The government has come out with its guidelines, allowing the celebration of the five-day Durga Puja festival, which is popular across the country but mostly celebrated in the eastern and northern parts of India.

It involves congregational worshiping of the 10-armed goddess Durga to commemorate her triumph over a mythological demon king that draws crowds.

Thousands of well-decorated marquees are set up across the country, mostly in West Bengal, to place the idols of the deity showcasing diverse themes and craftsmanship by artisans and famous idol makers.

But this year, idol makers and artists say they suffered a massive business setback because of the pandemic.

Still, many of them have continued the tradition of idol making.

"We have suffered big losses this year, let's say to the tune of 4-5 lakh rupees (roughly \$5,400-\$6,800) per establishment as there have been around 30 percent decline in orders, and the prices have also fallen," Tapan Pal, an idol maker from Kumartuli, the traditional potters' neighborhood in Kolkata famed for its idol makers, told EFE.

"I have never witnessed our business getting hit this bad in the 30 years I have been working as an idol maker," Pal, 45, said.

The idol maker said thinking of profits was "out of the question" at the moment, and they were barely looking to "make ends meet."

He underlined that it was only recently that the state government announced that Durga Puja festivities would be allowed this year, but by then, the damage was done as orders were scarce amid doubts whether the festival will be celebrated at all.

The number of Covid-19 cases in India mounted to 6.2 million on Wednesday with nearly 80,500 infections reported in the 24 hours from Tuesday.

The disease has claimed nearly 98,000 lives in India, the second worst-affected country after the United States with 7.4 million infections.

On Monday, the government of West Bengal laid down strict guidelines for the festivities, which included mandatory use of face masks, hand sanitizers, and social distancing, among several others.

"If this had been declared two months earlier, it would have been better for us," Pal stressed.

The annual celebration marks the homecoming of Goddess Durga, one of the major deities in the Indian pantheon

of gods and goddesses, and her victory over the forces of evil.

Clay models of the goddess - who also symbolizes female power - flanked by her two daughters and two sons and a slain demon at her feet, are worshipped all over Bengal during the festival.

This year, the Durga Puja falls between Oct.22-26.

Besides Bengal, this festival is celebrated with grandeur in places with Bengali diaspora communities, including in the United States and the United Kingdom. Bengalis from all over travel to celebrate Durga Puja with friends and family.

However, this year, the festivities are expected to be subdued due to the pandemic and the government restrictions, which includes curbs on gatherings and the scale of the celebrations.

"Festivals are a matter of joy, and Durga puja is a very important and inseparable part of our community, and look how it is affected," concluded Pal. EFE

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