



Bengali women celebrate Durga Puja in Kolkata

FESTIVE TIMES

October flags off a series of festivals that last till the year-end. We take you through three of the major, and some of the minor ones

VARIED CULTURES AND RELIGIONS, different traditions and events... all brilliantly fusing to come together to create the heady cocktail of Indian festivals. Is it any surprise then, that friends from abroad envy us for our

round-the-year celebrations?

But while we Indians are known to celebrate our various festivals throughout the year, it is only when we leave September behind that things start to get more exciting. And it all begins in

the eastern part of the country with the frenzied, colourful Durga Puja Festival.

Two other big festivals - Navratri and Dussehra - also announce the continuation of enthusiastic traditions, this time in larger areas of the country. But there are also a few smaller, unknown, region-specific festivals. They wrap up our special report on the festivals in October.

DURGA PUJA

WHEN DIVINE POWER TRIUMPHS

It is often joked in HR circles that companies with a substantial number of

Bengalis on their rolls, dread the month of October. For that is when the community members decide to visit their home state en masse for their beloved *pujo* celebrations. It is during this four-day stretch of the Durga Puja festival that the Bengali finds an opportunity to mend his jaded nerves, frayed mind and fatigued limbs. It is during this autumn festival that the Bengali psyche is rejuvenated and re-furbished as well.

Legend has it that routed by the atrocity of King Mahisasura, empowered with the death-defying boon granted by Lord Brahma, the gods in the heaven sought protection from the trinity of the Supreme Gods - Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. Enraged at the reign of terror led by the demon, the Supreme Gods breathed out flames, which illuminated the cosmos - the heaven, the earth and the nether world - with a luminescent beam of light.

At a certain point when the licking flames coalesced into a single ball of fire, there appeared the figure of a woman, a paragon of beauty. It is said that her face was formed by the ray of light from the third eye of Lord Shiva, while her 10 hands were from Lord Vishnu, and her legs from Lord Brahma. The Goddess pitched a fearsome battle against the demon and the inevitable happened: the dark forces succumbed to the power of the divine.

Durga Puja unleashes a new mood in the Bengali. The festive frenzy gets the better of him. A 'Ma-has-returned-home, so-she-will-take-care-of-everything, there-is-nothing-to-worry-about state of mind' persists in every Bengali household during these four days. To feel the tempo of the festival in Kolkata, one has to be here at least a week before it starts when the city decks up gradually.

Durga Puja officially starts early, on the morning of Saptami, the seventh day of Navratri. A special ritual is performed to infuse the energy of the Goddess into the idols, installed on podiums across the city. Accompanied by drum-beats and the chants of mantras, by a priest, the Kola Bou (a small banana plant wrapped in a saree) is taken for the holy dip to a nearby river. Dressed up in a saree with a red border, the banana plant is carried back in a procession to the podium, and is placed alongside Lord Ganesh (son of Goddess Durga).

As night approaches and the city is flooded with an incredible architecture of lighting, Kolkatans cannot stay at home, and they surge ahead down the thoroughfares. They call this *pandal*-hopping. The main attraction of Durga Puja is visiting *pandals* (see box item) where the Goddess Durga is displayed following different themes.

Four days soon glide. On the last day of Durga Puja, known as Dashami, the



Girls decked in their brightest attire during Navratri celebrations

festivities include Sindoor Khela, a ritual performed by married women who throng at the *pandal* to place a pinch of the powder on the idols of Goddess Durga. The rite is followed by a short session of smearing each other with *sindoor*. Evening sets in and the idols are taken to the river for immersion.

NAVRATRI

MORE THAN SONG AND DANCE

Navratri is one of the most exciting and vibrant Indian festivals and is celebrated with a high degree of pomp and pageantry in Gujarat. Observed over the nine nights before Dusshera (October 5 to 13), the Nav Ratras or nine nights are dedicated to Navdurga - the manifestation of Durga in nine different forms.

The preparation for Navratri begins much before the festival. Girls and women wear chaniya-choli-odhni sets, comprising of a skirt, blouse and veil. The dresses are accompanied by artistic jewellery - the *tikka* on the forehead, earrings, necklace, choker, *bajubhand* (on the arms), and *paya* (on the ankles) are all bought for Navratri. Even the male dancer is quite the peacock with his colourful turban, embroidered shoes and jackets, paired with brightly coloured *lahengas* or pyjamas.

Come Ashwin Sud, the first night of the Hindu month of Ashwin, and the costumed boys and girls, and men and women, take to the streets of Gujarat dancing at street corners, in their

6 MUST-VISIT DURGA PUJA PANDALS IN KOLKATA

Kumartuli Park: Located near the Sovabazar Metro railway station, this *pandal* has built up a name over the last few years with its unusual themes.

Suruchi Sangha: Every year, a rich cultural extravaganza and outdoor display that carries themes based on a different Indian state each year, is put up. It has often won awards for the best-decorated *pandal*.

Mohammad Ali Park: An attractive display is the main feature at this *pandal*.

Bagbazar: One of the oldest *pandals* in the city, located along a river, the emphasis here, is on simplicity and tradition.

Santosh Mitra Square: Very close to Sealdah Railway Station, the *pandal* here, has been popular since the late nineties.

College Square: Crowds throng at night to watch festivities taking place next to a beautiful lake. The *pandal* is located near Kolkata University.

Large crowds throng at an outdoor Dussehra celebration



hedi, paintings on cloth in honour of the mother goddess, have special significance when they are bestowed at shrines to the goddesses as temple curtains.

The typical Mata ni Pachhedi depicts the mother goddess as Amba, in a fighting pose, clutching weapons in each of her 10 hands, with images of other deities, priests, devotees and narratives from epics arranged in columns around her.

DUSSEHRA

VICTORY OF GOOD OVER EVIL

If there is one festival that is celebrated with great pomp across different parts of India and is associated with age-old traditions, it has to be Dussehra. According to legend, it is believed that this festival celebrates Lord Rama's victory over the demon king Ravana and connotes the triumph of good over evil.

Celebrated on the tenth day of the Hindu month of Ashvin according to the Hindu calendar, this day falls in the month of September or October. The day culminates in the nine-day fasting period of Navratri. The day also celebrates the killing of demon Mahishasur by Goddess Durga. Many Hindus also believe that it is auspicious to start a new venture, project or journey on Dussehra.

residential localities, at clubs, in their schools and colleges, or on stage at the theatres. It is a social event and community activity, with entire neighbourhoods being a part of the event.

A popular dance during Navratri is the Garba in which women dance in a circle, clapping hands, snapping fingers or striking small sticks to the *taal* or beat. The Garba gets its name from the perforated, illuminated pot known as *garbi*, placed on the floor of every house during Navratri. The fire in the *garbi* is a symbol of fertility, and worships the

mother goddess as the bearer of life.

The Dandiya Raas is a group dance during which people of both sexes participate. It gets its name from the *dandiya* or stick that is struck together during the circular dance movements, and the *raas* represents the circular pattern of the dance. The large crowds at such events attract corporate sponsorship for prizes handed out to the best performers and best costumes.

For art connoisseurs, a unique aspect of Navratri is the Kalamkari paintings done in honour of Durga. Mata ni Pach-

NINE NIGHTS IN AHMEDABAD

During the nine nights of Navratri, Ahmedabad is ablaze in colour. The streets and markets are lined with costumes and ornaments for sale. Everywhere in the city, from hobby classes to dance academies, dance classes attract the patronage of children and adults who wish to look poised when they dance during the festival.

Passes and tickets to events that have well-known singers or celebrity guests are especially sought-after. For instance, Mahesh Desai of Friends Cultural group is known for his thematic Navratri night programmes, with great attention to detail in the decoration, the gates, the grounds and the stage, and lighting design.



Ahmedabad is popular for Navratri shopping

AND THERE ARE MORE...

This month also features some more festivals, a few unknown, yet interesting nevertheless. Take, for example, Rajasthan's Ashwa Poojan Festival during which horses are honoured. The tradition dates back to the state's martial era when horses played an important role in battles. Rajasthan also celebrates the Marwar Festival, devoted to the music and dance of the region.

Pinjore Heritage Festival in Haryana is an annual event. The grandeur of the magnificent Yadavindra Gardens - fortress walls, ramparts, bastions and palaces - offer a perfect setting for the festival. Triveni Sangam is where the Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal meet. A dip in the holy waters here, during the Cape Festival in Kanyakumari is considered auspicious. During the festival various cultural programmes are organised including music and dance performances. October is also when the spectacular Ganga Mahotsav is held in Varanasi, the town along the holy Ganges. Tourists from all over India and abroad visit the river fronts.

Evening *aarti* at the Ganga Mahotsav



HIGHLIGHTS OF MYSORE DASARA 2013

The Mysore Palace (below) is built in Indo-Saracenic style and is a repository of exquisite carvings and works of art collected from all over the world. Designed by an English architect, Henry Irwin, the new palace is an interesting combination of Hindu and Muslim styles of architecture. Known as the 'Amba Palace', it was the former residence of the royal family - the Wodeyars. In all, 2.5 million tourists visited

this palace last year.

Mysore's most recent attraction is the Son-et-Lumiere, a one-of-a-kind Sound and Light Show held in the vicinity of the Mysore Palace, showcasing 50 minutes of Mysore history and culture, narrated in Kannada, English and Hindi.

- This year Mysore Dasara starts from October 5 and will end on October 14.
- The Dasara Exhibition 2013 will be plastic-free.

● Physically challenged citizens can avail of the facility of battery-operated vehicles.

● A set of high-end buses will be plying and tourists can board or disembark at any point.

● Mysore city will showcase its street food culture through an event called Street Chat.

● The Forest Department has finalised a list of 14 elephants to participate in the grand finale.



Gaiety, art, culture and fun marks Dusshera celebrations in India. Performances of the Ramlila (a short version of the epic Ramayana) in north India is a common sight. Kolkata soaks in festive fervour with the nine-day Durga Puja celebrated with gusto in *pandals* that see huge idols erected and is characterised by the preparation of special foods, including Luchi (deep fried flat bread) and Alur Dom (deep fried spiced potato snacks). The last day sees the idol being immersed akin to Ganesh Utsav in Maharashtra.

Other famous Dussehara celebrations in India take place in the hill town of Kullu in Himachal Pradesh, and in Orissa, where the festival is preceded by week-long celebrations. People visit the *pooja pandals* wearing new clothes, prepare traditional food at home and celebrate the festival with their friends and families. Effigies and statues of Ravana are burnt everywhere in several

parts of India on Dussehara, and in Delhi the event is attended by political dignitaries at the Ramlila Maidan.

The week-long International Dussehara Festival of Kullu will be organised between October 14 and 20 this year. Kullu Dussehara begins when Dussehara ends in other parts of the country. Hundreds of deities in their palanquins are assembled in Kullu to pay obeisance to Lord Raghunath (Rama), the presiding deity of the festivity. It makes for an interesting collage of fun and colour.

One of the most popular Dussehara celebrations in the country is the Mysore Dasara Procession. Dasara in Mysore is a carnival of festivities, tradition and culture and is an event that must not be missed. The celebration of this festival was started in the 15th century by the kings of Vijayanagar Dynasty, and is now a state festival of Karnataka.

-Partha & Priyanka Mukherjee, Anil Mulchandani and Bindu Gopal Rao