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The thrill of surrender

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Now the fun starts... We have been waiting all year. The Pujas. Everybody in Bengal knows what that means and savours the magic sound of that endearing word. The pull towards Calcutta, to 'home, sweet home', becomes irresistible. Planeloads land from New York and Los Angeles, from Singapore and Bangkok, every passenger with the Pujas "written on his glad brow". It is a homecoming not only to family and friends, but to the *para* and to Bengali food, to syrupy Bengali sweets, and, of course, to the *pandals* with Durga and her famous retinue... to these oh-so-familiar vibrations of exuberance in the air.

Students, whose noses are being pushed down to their books all year by their parents and teachers, can look up and disembark from their torture chambers and, with no feelings of guilt and remorse, abandon themselves to all the distractions, holy and worldly, that come their way. After all, their teachers let themselves go in much the same way. The Pujas are a time out of time.

They are basically a celebration of family life. Look at the pantheon of gods... They, too, have sons and daughters. This time of the year it is not just Kali and Shiva, Krishna and Radha, but the entire divine joint family taking up position as if for a group photo. Next we will see Kartik taking selfies of his clan. Bengali society is so family-friendly that the celestial population has just no choice but to mirror this trait. As in life on earth, the gods too are not known simply by their names, but by their ranks in the family hierarchy and their relation to the seniors. Isn't it heart-warming that the gods are so human?

The gods descend on earth to assume the life of humans or, more precisely, of Bengalis. Our gratitude goes to the gods that they love exactly what Bengalis in their festive moods love: brightly coloured *saris*, *creme*-coloured *dhotis* and wide *panjabis*. Do they also like Bengali sweets? *Rosogolla*, *sandesh*, *payesh*? Look how they gobble them

up when these are reverently placed in front of them. The only difference is that the gods never get a tummy upset even after eating so much sugary stuff. It proves that they are truly divine.

Bengalis are tremendously fun-loving. After Durga Puja follows a string of other *pujas*; the *purna kumbha* forever overflows. The energy infused into fun and banter, into the pride of new clothes and the camaraderie never seems to ebb away. It's a gift which is one of the reasons why, in all these decades, I have never wanted to move away from West Bengal, it's why I live here: to savour the joyous energy, particularly of young people. When I arrived in India at the age of 24, I participated in every *puja* available in the course of the year: I lived in the Rama-krishna Mission Ashrama in Narendrapur where certain *pujas* were celebrated in a very different way from the *para pujas* in the city. They had a *sattvic* atmosphere of sanctity and reverence. Extrovert enthusiasm was muted, but the vibrations of other-worldliness were all the stronger, supported by wafting scents and music, by bells and an abundance of flowers. Which did I love more, the *para pujas* with their deft charm, or the *ashram pujas*? I enjoyed them both for what they are...

Where in Germany would we have milling crowds as in Calcutta, such a sea of gleaming faces with glittering white teeth? In German we have that picturesque expression, to take *ein Bad in der Menge*, literally meaning, to take "a bath in the crowds". It is that feeling of letting oneself be pushed and shoved by wave upon wave of human bodies and yet not get drowned.

But we do need such teeming crowds to conjure up that special celebratory mood. We need the glaring lights and the blaring noises to give us that overwhelming sensation of "too-muchness" (as Salman Rushdie characterized Indian city life) to which we surrender our senses. It is like in a Bollywood blockbuster which drives the story from one climax to the next at a frenzied speed. 'Mood' is the keyword here. Oh, don't Bengalis have their moods... That make them amiable and that make it sometimes difficult for them to steer an even, disciplined course.

Those moods give the city the gift of celebrating with abandon.



True, it makes people prone to forgetting practical considerations, but it also makes them less money-minded, less consumerist, less ambitious for quick and easy recognition. It makes them inclusive, reaching beyond one's own community of caste, class and religion. These moods are normally graced by magnanimity. Moods are, alas, also a good reason to shirk hard work and adamant perseverance. Khushwant Singh related the following episode in his autobiography: after Partition when all educated young people in India grabbed any work they could get, the young men in Calcutta were choosy; many said, on being offered a particular job, that it did "not suit their temperament". On the one hand, it is the reply of a proud and confident mindset, on the other, it is fraught with dangers if you have material survival or even a career on your mind.

Looking at them with the calculating mind of an economist, the Pujas are a colossal waste of money.

So much could be done with it. The hungry fed, the unhoused sheltered, the sick given medicine, the illiterate schooled. But on the balance sheet of life not only rupees figure. I imagine that the thrills of the Pujas, enjoyed to the full, give many Calcuttans the will and fortitude to persevere during the coming months, maybe the entire year, accepting the many obstacles and vexations that they must overcome daily to just survive with dignity. The Pujas are a therapy, a tonic, a consolation in the face of the inequalities and inequities of one's life. It is an investment in mental equilibrium and strength. It is also an investment in the artistic qualities of common people who have so little opportunity to develop and express them in their humdrum daily life.

The Pujas give us the opportunity to be, for once, in harmony with ourselves, our human environment and with cosmic reality, including the gods and goddesses, the *asuras* and the *rishis*. The Pujas envelop us with a grand universe of symbols and meanings, reviving them, making them relevant for us once again and thus nurturing our souls. Even the noise and the fun, the *hoi-halla* of the Pujas are part of establishing that harmony all around us and feeling one with it.

Yet, I will be excused to insert a 'but' here. This feeling of being in harmony with ourselves and with the universe can be obtained only at a price. That is: only after hard and dedicated work can celebrations be enjoyed. It is like breathing: we can breathe out only after having breathed in first. Habitual loafers are unable to celebrate; superficial and insincere persons cannot really surrender themselves to the cleansing waters of celebrations. Their sense of celebration will, too, remain superficial, and the benefit they reap from it will be minimal. So the agenda of the Pujas is simple: let us work sincerely and earn the grandness of the celebrations and their spiritual benefits of being one with family, friends and all humanity.