

UPAHAR 2015



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Welcome

There comes a time for every person to seek an encounter with life. An encounter that takes him from the orb of daily tasks and shows him his place in the universe, an encounter that lifts the fog of confusions and points where his road leads to, an encounter that brings him close to his Creator, and experience His blessing of love and peace.

For many communities in Eastern India, Durga Puja is such an encounter. As the sun rises on the day of Mahalaya, we feel the presence of Durga Durgatiharini in every aspect of the visible world. In the blue skies of Aswin, the green fields of the villages, the clusters of Kash flowers, we feel the presence of the Goddess.

It is the time for children to get new clothes, workers to get bonus checks, new songs to be published, new films to be released. It is the season of happiness, the season of cleansing, the season of love, the season of celebrating the joy of living. Durga Puja is a lease of life celebrated with pomp and pageantry.

This year, we have formed a non-profit organization "Protima" to share with you this feast of life and spirituality. And what can be more relevant to this celebration than artistic creativity? This is why we are presenting a small publication, true to Durga Puja traditions. We invite you all to participate in this endeavor and contribute your thoughts and creations.

I am sure you will support our organization and help it grow.

With warm Puja Greetings

Asish Mukherjee On behalf of Protima Inc. team



Praise Mata Durga!

**As autumn wanders in
The colors of pandals and
murtis awaken the soul
We celebrate the triumph of
Good over Evil**

**For Mata Durga struck
Mahishasur with her bolt
And so we pray that Durga
blesses us**

**As she blessed Ram and
Lakshman**

**So with pompous celebration
and prayer,
May the happiness of Dusshera
be shared!**

Tanusree Dey
Whitehouse, OH

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BACKGROUND OF DURGA PUJA – A PRIMER

D*urga Puja* is the most significant religious, and socio- cultural event in Bengali society. Here the goddess is adored as the *mother* who is dear to us all.

In *Kolkata* the festivities of *Durga Puja* reach a pinnacle of grandeur and lavishness. Idols of the goddess *Durga*, her four children, and *Mahishasura* (the buffalo- headed demon), are newly constructed each year in varied models and artistic styles by special groups of skilled potters called *Kumors*. These figurines are then painted with bright colors, and dressed in beautiful costumes and fancy jewelries to make them appear gorgeous and life-like.

These concrete forms are considered divine when the priest supposedly kindles life into them by uttering special *mantras* or sacred hymns at the beginning of the five day long *Puja* ceremonies. This ritual is called the *Pran Pratishtha* of the goddess, which implies giving life to these idols. After this they are considered to be alive and able to accept prayers and devotional offerings of humans through religious rituals.

Idols symbolizing gods and goddesses had possibly helped mankind connect with the spiritual world emotionally. For centuries, humans have pursued support and guidance from the unknown in the complex journeys of their lives. They craved for the blessings from gods and goddesses whom they considered omnipotent. Ceremonies and rituals facilitate communications of mortals with infinity and abstract power.

Although the idols are considered to be supremely divine, they still are imagined to be the part of a family, and related to other family members.

Durga has two daughters; *Lakshmi*, and *Saraswati*. *Lakshmi* is the symbol of wealth, prosperity and peace, while *Saraswati* represents scholarship, and artistic abilities. *Durga's* son *Ganesh* (he has the head of an elephant) brings financial success, and the other son *Kartikeya* denotes masculine grandeur, courage, and athletic abilities.

Durga supposedly lives in the heavens in a place called *Kailash* with her family, and comes to pay yearly visits to her parents' home on the earth. The five days of her visit are celebrated as *Durga Puja*. At the end of this period, all the clay figures are immersed in the holy waters of the *Ganges*, as *Goddess Durga* supposedly returns to her husband in *Kailash*.

Worshipping *Goddess Durga* is not exclusive to *Bengali* speaking people only, as *Durga* and her husband *Shiva* are revered under varied names in temples throughout the sub-continent of India.

Such temples have been named *Shakti Peethas*. Interestingly, each temple with the idol of goddess *Durga* happens to have an adjacent smaller holy place where *Durga's* husband *Shiva* is worshipped.

The old myth behind the creation of *Shakti Peethas* is based on the notion that life evolves in three cycles; creation, preservation, and destruction, and this process continues endlessly. The story of a pompous, and powerful king called *Dakshya*, illustrates the above. *Dakshya* had a beautiful daughter named *Sati* or *Durga* who married *Siva* or *Rudra* against her father's wishes, infuriating *Dakshya*.

Dakshya wanted revenge, and performed a religious ceremony or *Yagna* at his palace where he invited everyone except *Sati* and her husband. *Sati* was very upset at her father's actions but decided to attend the event without invitation. During the festivities, *Dakshya* started to make offending statements about *Siva*. *Sati* was unable to tolerate her husband's insult, and created a *yogic* (spiritual) fire from her own body, which destroyed her own life in her fury.

Sati's death gravely enraged *Siva*, who immediately demolished *Dakshya's* ceremony and started to roam around the worlds and heavens with *Sati's* body on his shoulder, while dancing the dance of destruction in his rage.

Vishnu is said to be the god of preservation, so in order to maintain equilibrium, and stability, he tried to calm *Siva's* anger by dissecting *Sati's* body into pieces using his *Sudarshan Chakra* (disk weapon). *Sati's* body parts and jewelries were scattered over different parts of India and its surrounding areas. *Shiva* was calmed, and peace and harmony were reestablished. *Vishnu*, then revived *Sati* in a new birth naming her *Uma*.

According to popular belief; stones and rocks with distinctive shapes and sizes resembling the body parts of *Sati* and her jewelries rose from the ground or were discovered in caves in specific locations where her body parts supposedly fell. Later temples of *Sati* or *Durga* were built in such spots. These sites came to be called as the *Shakti Peethas*, and are considered to be highly sacred places of pilgrimage for the *Hindus*.

There are about fifty one *Shakti Peethas*, and the following are a few examples.

In the city of Kolkata, temple of *Kali* is where *Sati's* small toes supposedly fell, the idol-goddess is called *Kali*, and her husband is called *Nakuleshwara* who is worshipped in another nearby temple called *Nakuleshwartala*.

Sati's lower lip has said to have fallen at a place called *Attahashya*, (meaning loud laughter) in a village called *Labhpur*, in West Bengal. The goddess is named *Fullara* (blooming) here and *Shiva* is called *Vairava Vishaw* (lord of the universe).

Sati's right ankle fell in *Kurukshetra* in the district of Haryana, where the famous battle between *Kurus* and *Pandavas* (who were two sets of cousin brothers in the epic of *Mahavarata*) were fought. Here the goddess is called *Savitri* and *Shiva* is *Ashwanatha*.

Pashupatinatha's temple is renowned in Nepal, where *Sati's* two knees fell and the idols are called *Mahamaya* and *Kapali* respectively.

Sati's right hand or palm fell in a place called *Manasa* in Tibet. Goddess is called *Dakhayani* meaning *Durga* and *Shiva* is *Amar* meaning immortal.

Sati's elbow fell in *Ujjyaini* where the temple is called *Mahakaleshyar*.

In Sri Lanka (Nellore), *Sati's* anklets or *Nupur* fell and the mother goddess, and *Shiva* are called *Indrakhi* and *Rakchasewara* respectively. *Ravana*, the demon king from the Epic of Ramayana has said to have performed prayers in these temples.

The *Shakti Peethas* continues to remain spiritually vibrant even today with the cosmic energy created through the prayers of many, and also are becoming major modern tourist attractions.

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Teaching Indian parent about the concept of American football, is like teaching an old dog new tricks...It's just not possible! Americans are crazy about football and Indian parents just don't get it. Football has been around for a very long time, as early as the late 1800's when Rutgers and Princeton played the first official college football game. Football has been an enormous part of American life for a very long time, and the love of the game is spreading to other cultures too, India being one of them. Football is not just all fun and games, but it is also is a money and job creating machine. On average the National Football League (NFL) makes a cumulative revenue of ten billion dollars and has about two thousand employees, while the average division one college football team has 200 employees and makes a cool net profit of roughly 100 million dollars!

Americans try to teach their children the wonderful game of football from a very young age. That's why almost all high schools in America have a football stadium, some of these stadiums holding thousands of people and costing millions of dollars often times making football more important than education, a big red flag in all Indian parents' eyes. Additional red flags for Indian parents are the fact that football is very physical, and a huge time commitment. Some schools have practices that can last longer than six or seven hours during the summer, and three or four hours during the school year which drain energy, and cut into valuable study time, Lastly, Indian parents are scared that their kids will get hurt. They do have a point as most Indian kids are small scrawny kids who would literally get squished by huge Americans.

Indian parents really can't be that mad though as their equivalent to American Football is Cricket. Cricket is HUGE in India, and is just as much embedded in Indian culture as football is in American culture. Indians view certain cricket players, as Americans view famous football players such as Terry Bradshaw, Brett Favre, and Peyton Manning. Indians take it to another level as certain cricket players in India are literally treated as gods. For example, when great cricketer Sachin Tendulkar retired the Indian public literally started praying to him and treating him as a God. But still, in Indian parents' eyes cricket is seen as "superior" to football, and football is still seen as a waste of time, even after they have lived in the United States for over a decade. They don't realize how much they have in common with Americans for their love of sports or the passion Americans have for football. For, example Indian parents would not understand why Americans would pay hundreds or even

thousands of dollars to watch either a collegiate or professional football game. Indians would rather use the money to maybe go on a vacation, buy a car, or eat at a nice restaurant.

One of the main reasons Indian parents don't understand the concept of American Football is the huge difference in how Indians and Americans are brought up. First of all India has a population of nearly 1.3 billion people, of whom many are or beneath the poverty level while The United States has a small affluent population of a mere 319 million people. Thus when it comes to opportunities in India it is very competitive to get into a good college, or a good school, while in America any person can go back to college at any point in their lives and earn a degree. When Indian parents come to America they bring a very competitive mentality which they have been accustomed to while growing up. They ultimately want their children to do well and focus on their studies which in most circumstances means no time for extracurricular activities, and definitely no time for American Football.

Indian Parents should at least give American Football a chance, most Indian children are born ABCD'S (American Born Confused Desi's) meaning they are Indians born in American society who are trying to please their Indian parents by following Indian culture, while at the same time trying to fit in and be an American. Fitting into society as a child can be very hard, and having parents who grew up in a completely different country with different values is even harder. Indians parents often forget that their children live in America, and if they can adapt to both cultures it will ultimately benefit their children.

I believe both Americans and Indians take American Football to two opposite extremes. There needs to be a balance. Indian parents should let their children try the American obsession for Football, and check out its benefits. From a personal experience I've gone through the struggles of begging my parents to let me play American football before they finally let me play my first year of football in seventh grade making me the first Indian football player in my school district's history (Anthony Wayne). Since joining, football has greatly benefited my life and my families' life in many ways. Joining the sport has taught me time management skills, discipline, teamwork, and my grades are very good. Joining American Football has made my Grandma happy because after practicing so much I eat more, have gained weight, and grown a lot taller (making any Indian grandma proud). Joining football has made my sister happy, because after practice I don't have the energy to annoy her, while personally football has helped me become a lot more social and has

greatly benefited me in the ladies department. The only complaint anyone in my family would have is I smell like socks all the time, but I guess you win some and lose some right?

Overall, football has a lot of benefits, some serious and some not so serious these benefits are very rarely seen by Indian parents because immediately when they think of American football they think their child will get hurt, and that the game is very uncivilized. Indians should let their kids try football because chances are they'll take over America's football industry just like Indians take over every other industry in the world, and also In Rome do as the Romans do, and ultimately this is not India, this is The United States of America.



MANY THEMES, BUT ONE HOLY GODDESS



Not only in Mahanagar Calcutta (let's use the old charm and recollect it's valued theme) but also the districts, adjacent and distant states where probasi Bengalis are settled, the crowded pujas today are theme-based and carry glitter, creative ideas and experimentation. It's because, 'theme is the in-thing. Modernity has eclipsed the age-old tradition of puja performance and gaiety. Festivals in the past, gave us simple but emotional pleasures even in the absence of showy decoration and abstract ideas. Theme-puja is now synonymous with modernity and intellectual disposition. The organizers cannot therefore ignore the attraction, and make efforts to make the puja environment attractive and charming in this manner.

Theme-based puja is an audio-visual open-book for pandal hoppers. In addition to entertainment and enjoyment, a vast store of visual knowledge lays open before us. Even common people try to understand what these theme-based pandals want to convey. In a maze of themes, nevertheless, it becomes a little difficult to remember and follow the subtle messages when we flit around various community pujas. Themes changes from pandal to pandal and are rarely identical. So, it becomes rather too heavy for the common man to imbibe their unspoken virtues. As a result, we tend to forget inner meanings of such themes. How far such themes are relevant in our practical living could be carefully evaluated and put to good use at one's choice. If carefully observed, it can be discerned that theme is neither ultra-modern nor an innovative concept.

PICTURES OF THEME-BASED PUJAS FROM KOLKATA



Theme is deeply ingrained in our past, in our religion, social system, rituals, tradition and ethos, continuously enriched by our forefathers and handed over to us over the generations. We need only to explore the new contemporary themes in our ever evolving tradition. Themes have become ingrained in puja festivity for everyone's participation, without any discrimination, fear, favor or fervor. We have long ceased to confine this ceremony within the realm of 'Durga Puja' and given it a much wider canvas of "Sarodutsav" avoiding rigidities of religiosity. Today's Sarbajanin Durga pujas are unbiased and truly secular

In the context of ethno-religious misunderstandings which are often

engineered with ulterior motives, may this simple tradition flow on, without any special theme, like the lyrical and stirring 'Mahishasura Mardini' morning program, composed by legendary late Bani Kumar, Pankaj Kumar Mullick and Birendra Krishna Bhadra long ago, which we are never tired of hearing. They have stood the test of time and have become everlasting. Such themes and traditions are irreplaceable and must be preserved by all of us, at all times, by all means.

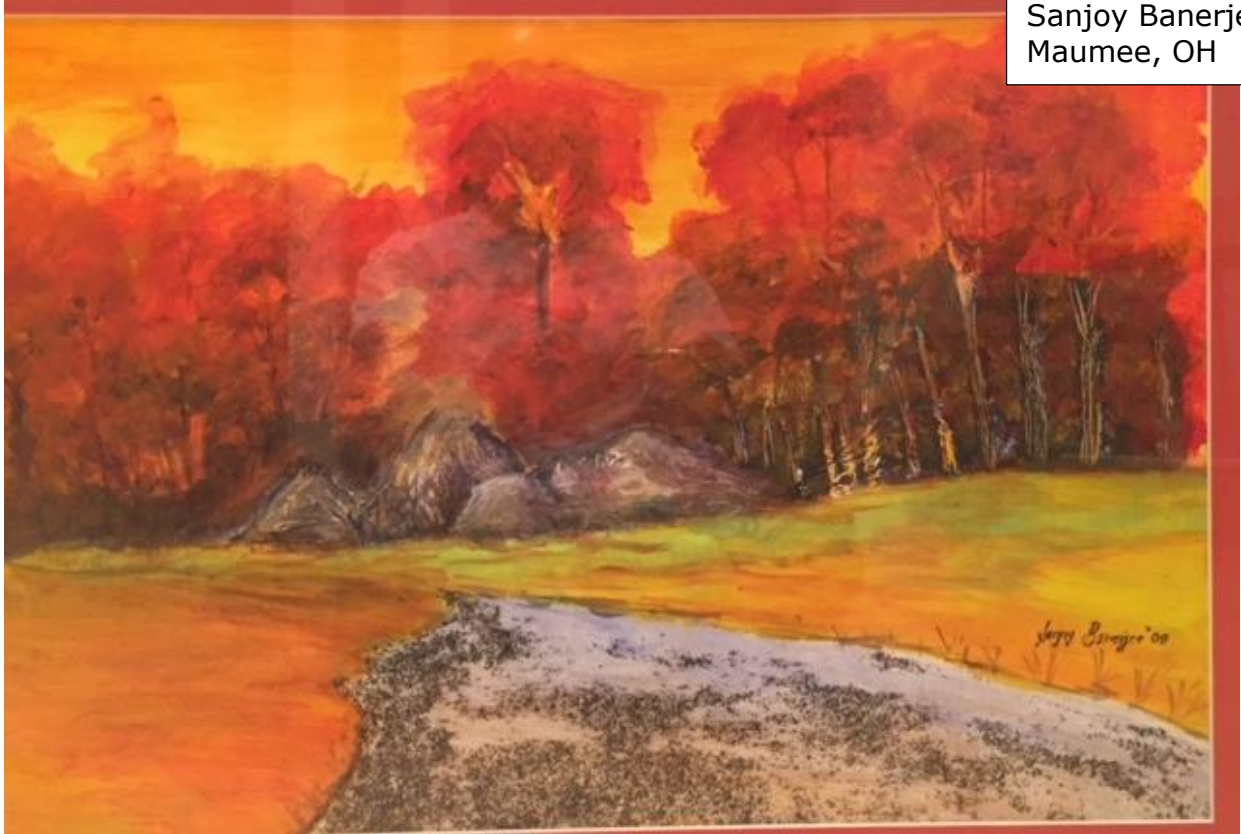
This way, rich ingrained theme was always our means of worship. The first community Durga puja organized in Calcutta in the year 1926 was a Theme-puja indeed. The Simla Byam Samity founded by Biplabi Atindranath Bose, had based their theme of worship on patriotism and love for motherland. The puja pandaI was erected using Hogla leaves found in abundance those days when tarpaulins were scarce. The pratima of the Holy

Goddess was attired in Khadi bastram. The prasada of humble sugar candies (batasa), soaked chana-moong, banana etc. were cherished by the visitors; poor, rich, the down-trodden alike. People used to call this puja "Swadeshi Durga" and visited en-masse for a glimpse. Various aspects of the national freedom movement were depicted by means of exhibitions, paintings etc. The occasion of worshipping goddess Durga had turned out to be one of the main platforms for our anti-British movements during the heady days of Indian freedom struggle. The theme of Swadhin Bharat reigned supreme. So, theme-based puja has always been there. What is required of us now is to adopt suitable themes which are visionary and patriotic. Without being allured by frivolous ideas which are commercially motivated in the interest of funding, let's keep the budget for expenditure manageable and realistic according to our own social wealth in the neighborhood, but not limit innovative ideas in any case. The question of creation of lasting physical assets which could be of use to society at times of distress alongside intellectual nourishment and festive splendor, could also be examined. Just imagine what a colossal wealth of physical assets for the society could have been created over the years since Durga Puja became sarvajanin, if small amounts were saved for such purposes. Let's take a hard look and not say that it's too materialistic and degrading. Merriment is all good, but welfare funds for society would also be immensely beneficial to all of us and future generations as well.

In recent years in Calcutta, theme puja was initiated in early nineties at Adi-Ballygunje, Mudiali, Sunil Nagar, etc. in the South and Kashi Bose Lane in the north. Rabindrasangeet, Indian classical songs and music of Pandit Bhimsen Joshi, Hariprasad Chaurasia, Ravisankar and other maestros played in such theme-based pujas came as a pleasant surprise, in place of the cacophony of film songs. Gradually, theme-based puja spread to the eastern fringes of the city. The Ultadanga Yuva-Brinda, Telengabagan, Kar-Bagan Sarbajanin, Salt Lake, etc. are now the pioneers. In the year 2001, Bose-Pukur Sitalamandir sarbajanin became a must-visit due to its unique theme of 'matir-bhar'. During the past few years, Badamtala Ashar Sangha, Naktala Udayan Sangha, etc. have also worked with newer themes and made the pandal-hoppers wait in line for long hours.

The Holy Durga puja is ever evolving. Besides fresh themes, new concepts are also being explored. Since change only is constant, the prime festival of Bengal, Eastern and North-Eastern parts of India is coming up with new attractions every year. Pray to Goddess Durga to let prosperity of mind and means be granted to all of us and help us becoming self-reliant, righteous and un-hypocritical, having empathy to others, without being shepherded by the various machinations and mischievous designs which we often come to face. Surely, we shall forge ahead.

Sanjoy Banerjee
Maumee, OH



Pritha Dutta 7 yrs
Sylvania, OH



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HAUNTED

Gaurav Choudhury
New York, NY

I am haunted –
By a damsel's vanishing mango scent,
Startled out of dullness.
By the stranger who knew what my silence meant,
My many faces for once had a oneness.
By a spark of madness,
That overwhelms sterile sanity

I am haunted – once more
By echoes of past visions,
Blurred images blinded in the present.
By unrelated puzzles,
Bound tenuously by unseen rhythm.
By the silent laughter,
Of he who is alone, but a complete sum.

I am haunted – forever
By a reluctance to see the present,
With a restlessness to forge the future.
By a constant drifting search,
That splits me, so I see clearer.
And I begin to wander,
Melting out of my haunt,
Till..... it begins to taunt.
In my pure life and dance,
I always found myself in the solitude of trance.
(Written: New York, September 10, 2004)

*a*s the years roll on, Anil has realized that gazing back can be more delightful than looking ahead. Often he takes leave from the present and pushes back the dusty drapes of time. Like a distant landscape emerging through purple mists, a sunny verandah with red floor emerges into view. For most of his childhood and youth, this had been his watchtower. In early 60s he was not even tall enough to reach above the brick balustrade. He would push away the potted cactuses his mother had carefully arranged, and fit his tiny head into the concrete filigree. He gazed at the bubbling flow of life and inhaled its flavors.

He could see a wide vista of five main roads intersecting. The area was called Ekdalia. In those days there were few tall buildings to hinder his view. Most houses were three to four storied painted yellow or off-white. They had large windows with green shutters and black bars, and often a large verandah. To the east he could see as far as the railway station, and marvel at the constant flow of hopeful people walking into town for a living. They would bring in all kinds of merchandise. Some had baskets balanced on their heads, while some carried strange contraptions like stringed equipments for treating cotton or wheels for sharpening knives. Towards the West he could almost see the red roof of a movie theater. In front were wide avenues with tram tracks. The clank of tramcars' metallic wheels used to wake him up early. They used to carry myriad folks up and down to their diverse destinations, from four in the morning till midnight. Anil smiled to himself, as distant visions started getting clearer. He realized he had learned more of life from his verandah than his books.

Right in front was a rickshaw stand. A row of hand pulled rickshaws were always lined up in a rank, On hot summer afternoons their sturdy pilots would rest, making a dough of gramflour in shiny aluminum plates or slapping "khaini" to prepare their favorite addictive. At busy times, their hand held bells would make a delightful concert with the honking of cars and cries of street vendors.

Seasons came and went. Summer was oppressive and tar surface of roads started to melt. Monsoon beat upon the busy roads with ferocity. Roads got flooded, cars got stuck, and rickshaws had their heyday. Then something seemed to change. As Anil looked out of his balcony one September morning and followed the waterman spraying the streets, he sensed

that the sunrise was mellow and the sky so blue. His mother told him that Goddess Durga is coming to Earth.

“What are you doing? Dreaming in the verandah?” a little girl’s voice would cry out. This was Mala, Anil’s cousin who was his constant childhood companion.

“Come, see what we are getting for Puja gifts”, Mala cried out in glee.

Every relative sent a gift to their extended family members, especially the youngsters. What joy Mala and Anil felt at the sight of new clothes and shoes!

The ring knockers at the front door sounded. Local boys have come to collect contributions for the public Puja. In those days, twenty rupees used to bring a broad smile to their faces.

“Aunty, do come early for Anjali every day, and do not forget the special lunch on Astami” the collecting boys said.

Barely a month remained for the Pujas. Road workers started patching potholes, sidewalks started getting paved, and some homeowners put a fresh coat of paint on their weather ravaged walls. Bamboo structures started raising their heads everywhere, and soon underwent a metamorphosis into architectural marvels called pandals where the Goddess would be worshiped. The view out of the verandah now took on a different hue. As evening fell, streams of people in elegant dresses flooded the roads. They carried large shopping baskets and held on to excited children, quite oblivious of the heat and dust. Street peddlers shouted “whole sale- whole sale” in distorted English as they spread out their wares of cheap jewelry and clothing on uneven sidewalks, while the more affluent elbowed their ways into crowded departmental stores. Life seemed to have acquired a new meaning for these weeks. The impoverished city had changed into something rich and wonderful by miracle.

Anil went shopping too. His mother and sister held on to one of his arms each, so he did not get lost in the crowd. They visited large stores, where sales persons opened up heaps of saris for each customer with a smiling face, sometimes only to hear that they were not to their liking. Very few stores were air conditioned, and Anil could soon feel his clothes get drenched with sweat. His moment of happiness came when they stepped into his favorite store. In those days, there were no readymade garments, most clothing had to be tailored to fit. Anil’s favorite fabric was terrycot made by Gwalior Suitings. He stood proud as the tailor took measurements of his tiny frame. His father was a busy physician, who was mostly absent from these shopping expeditions. Anil’s biggest delight was walking to his dispensary in triangular park after an exhaustive evening of shopping. His father would

immediately order his favorite treat – ice cold drink from nearby Spencers. What a crowning finale!

“Wake up wake up” his father’s stentorian voice broke into Anil’s slumber. “It is Saptami”. Anil opened his eyes to the golden sunlight, and saw the heap of newly tailored clothes and a shiny pair of shoes by his bed. His father held out a package for him with a twinkle in his eyes. Anil’s heart leaped at the sight of a bunch of illustrated classic comics, a love for which was shared strongly between father and son.

The house was now swarming with people. Anil’s oldest aunt and his son had come from Asansol to spend the puja with them. Mala and his mother had arrived in their shiny Hindusthan car. They were all getting ready for visiting the local puja.

The local Puja was called Ekdalia Evergreen, situated in a green island at the confluence Ekdalia and Gariahat. In those days it was a homey club and had not sprung into the top five pujas of the city.

Local boys were doing rounds in the streets and announcing in steady monotonous rhythm “those who want to do Anjali, please come to the pandal”. Anil’s mother had prepared an offering for every lady of the family. This was a red earthenware plate with fruits, flowers, sweets and vermillion. Everyone carried their assigned offerings and walked to the puja venue. Anjali started. Fresh flowers were distributed to each participant and a priest started chanting



Sanskrit hymns. Anil understood some of the meanings. The priest was saying “Goddess Durga, you are everywhere – you are present in our slumber, in our errors, in kindness, in anger, in love, in peace, in knowledge, in ignorance, in shame, in death - you destroy evil and show us the way to light.” He felt he was on the brink of a strange realization he could not fully understand- like the fragrance from a hidden garden, like the glow of the unrisen sun. He wondered if there was a mysterious beauty in this universe which his books have not taught him yet. He had decided to request God for good scores at his exams, but suddenly that seemed too puny a prayer. All he could do was hold out his folded hands.

Everything in Bengali culture culminates in a big feast. This was usually held at Mala's house. There were long rows of people seated on tiny rugs on the ground. Food offered to God was served first. Then came many varieties of fried vegetables, Khichuri- a mixture of rice and lentil cooked together, vegetable curries, many types of sweets and yogurt, and on the last day of Puja fish was also included.



As evening fell, lights came on. The city's gritty concrete jungle became a wonderland for a few days. Lights glittered everywhere, people were smiling and greeting each other. There were families, groups of arrogant youths, and shy dating couples, all out to taste the feast of life. There was no longer a separation between people, only goodwill and love.

Those heady days of Puja were soon over. School would still remain closed for a few more weeks. Guests have all left by now. This was when father made his delightful announcement.

"So I have worked hard all through the Puja days" he said smiling, "and now is my turn to spend time with my family. With a lot of effort, I have been able to get four train tickets for our family for a trip to Mussoorie – the queen of hill stations."


Anil now realized why their compounder had been leaving very early every morning and returning exhausted. He must have been standing in line for train tickets at Howrah Station. Of course, this was the only way to make reservations in those days.

A flurry of thrilling activity followed. Mother fished out an ancient "holdall". This could hold beddings and then could be rolled up with straps. A couple of steel trunks appeared from somewhere and all their warm clothes were neatly packed into them. Anil made labels with father's name and their destination and stuck them with glue on every item of baggage. Sister produced some pictures of Mussoorie and the hotel they will be staying at. Finally the day came when they all got into a taxi and headed towards the station. The long train known as Doon express with many red coaches pounded into the platform pulled by a hissing steam engine. Everyone rushed to the doors. Anil's family found their reserved seats and sat down. Mother had brought a domestic help to make beds for them and was carrying

a basket filled with dinner goodies. The ticket checker in black coat and white pants made his rounds and somberly checked all documents.

As the whistle sounded Anil saw the platform pulling away, and his known world receding. A tingle went up his spine. He stared into the darkening night at the changing landscape. Villages were passing by as the train gathered speed. Anil turned to his elder sister and said "Didi, now I know the meaning of the new word you taught - romance!

He now smiled wistfully as he came out of his reverie. He thought time is powerful, but memory is even stronger. Wonders from the past have melted away like Cinderella's castle, but they still shine bright and show the way through the changing tracks of life.



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Every year my family visits relatives in Kolkata during winter break. It is a festive and fun tradition, visiting family and friends and enjoying holiday celebrations. One year we decided to visit a charitably funded school in the outskirts of Kolkata, as my sister Shreya's Girl Scout Gold Award project was related to school students and social service. We had found a school because one of the teachers was one of my uncle's close friends. Therefore, out of curiosity and as an 'activity' during our winter break, we planned a day-trip to the school imagining an afternoon of mingling and playing games with school kids.

What we experienced was a far cry from what we had imagined. Students walked to school barefoot, without basic school supplies, such as a backpack, notebook, and pencil, and their meal during the day was only a serving of rice and lentils. One classroom had a cemented floor with rickety benches and a table and chalkboard for the teacher. The other classrooms just had bare floors.

We researched school systems in India and learned that government sets up and runs most, if not all, rural schools in India. We were moved to learn that amenities and basic teaching aids taken for granted by students like us are lacking in many of these schools. Also, the student volume fluctuates frequently as many drop out to tackle family needs. Our observations mirrored the statistics reflected in a recent Brookings Institute publication – 29% drop out before finishing primary school (Grade 5) and 43% before finishing high school. There is shortage of teachers and basic amenities such as drinking water and functional toilets (<http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2015/01/20-primary-education-in-india-progress-challenges-sahni>)

While we grasped these stark differences and realized how fortunate we have been to attend a public school in New Jersey, we were deeply inspired by two important observations. The first was the tremendous enthusiasm of the students to attend school whenever they got the opportunity. Many of the students lived miles away from the school and walked to school. The second was the dedication of teachers. We learned that the teachers worked on a minimum salary which was not always paid. However, they persevered as many were alumni from the school and they strongly felt the importance of an education for these children.

Thus, the concept of Student to Student was formed in 2013 by my sister Shreya, as a way for students like us to help underprivileged students in a meaningful way. Our motto was For Students, By Students. The objective was to provide basic educational supplies to benefit the students and hopefully enhance their interest in staying in school. We took the concept a step further by incorporating the organization as a nonprofit. It took hard work and perseverance to form a 'Board' of like-minded peers, obtaining the Employer Identification Number (EIN), and addressing questions from Internal Revenue Service to finally get incorporated in August 2014. We were grateful for advice from Shreya's Girl Scout Troop leader, legal assistance from my mother's acquaintance, and the encouragement from friends and family.

Our first service project was in December 2013, at Nurshikdarchak B.M. primary School in a rural region called Nepalgunge, outside Kolkata. The school, with 150 students from grades one through four, survived on nominal government support and was in great need for supplies. This was learning experience in fund raising and managing logistics. With assistance from our parents and using much needed donations from family members, we were able to put the service event into action. We visited the school on Christmas Day. Although it was a holiday for the students, they were excited to come to school and crowded in the school's biggest classroom with many gathering outside because there was no more room in the classroom. We distributed crayons, pens, pencils, and backpacks containing snack cakes and juice boxes. We engaged in an art project of simple Christmas-themed drawings, so that students could enjoy using the supplies and celebrate the holiday and Shreya played the flute to entertain.

Inspired by the faculty and students we had visited in 2013, we created a new initiative called STRIVE— Students to Readily Improve Village Education. Because the school had identified school uniforms as a pressing need, attaining the uniforms became our goal for our 2014 return to the school. Shreya donated her summer earnings; I requested donations in lieu of gifts at my birthday party and received support from friends, family and local businesses. We raised enough for 150 sets of uniforms along with donations of pens and backpacks. On Christmas Day in 2014, the students waited in the classroom with great anticipation and with eager smiles. We distributed the uniforms and holiday treats and decorated foam ornaments with holiday-themed pictures which the students proudly displayed. The kids' excitement for the supplies helped them engage in the activity and learn how to make the crafts. At the end of the event, we left feeling accomplished and inspired to continue with the service.

Thus far we have distributed >300 uniforms and backpacks, >750 snacks and juice boxes, >1000 pens, pencils, crayons and hopefully countless number of smiles from the students.

Our efforts to create awareness and complete projects over the last 2 years has certainly stimulated interest. Our membership has grown – with 2 members from a local business and 2 teenagers from my school. We have plans to support schools in the US and Mexico and request the following from our readers.

VISIT : <http://www.studenttostudentnj.org/home.html>, to learn more



Picture time with some of the students



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Alisha Chakravarty.
(age 9 years)

PUMPKINS

Pumpkins are orange and colorful,
When carved, they look wonderful.
They stand there with delight,
While they keep still for the night.
Enjoying Halloween with all the fun,
The kids think their faces well done.
Pumpkins are show-offs with decorations,
Some kids think it's a great recreation.
The pumpkins are really cute.
Now someone will step on them with a boot.
Hopefully they will not turn wrinkled,
But they will be crinkled.
It's time for Halloween,
Their faces will look mean.
We did our best,
It's pumpkin's time to be blessed.

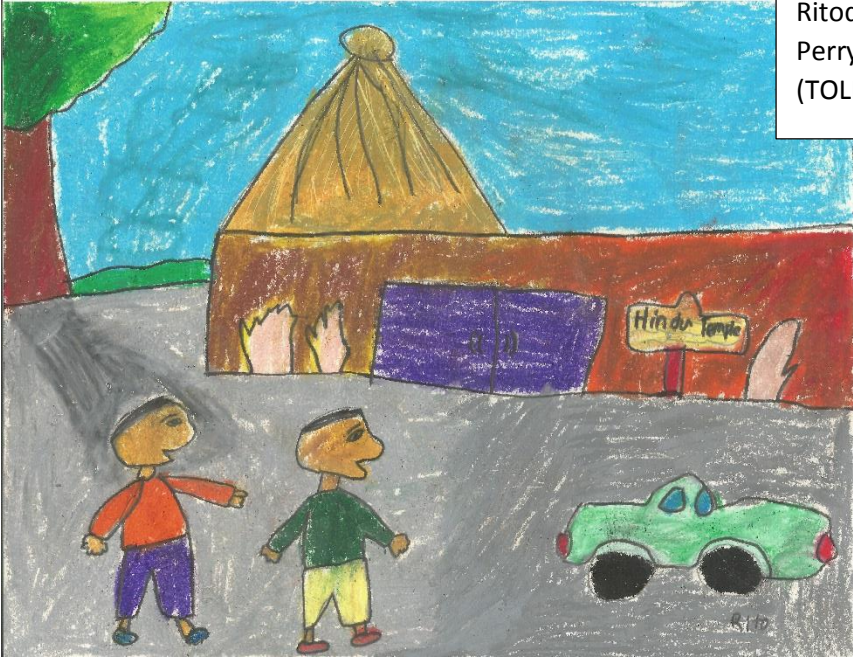


টোলিডোতে পুজো এলো

সোমনাথ দত্ত

সিলভানিয়া, ওহাইও

আমেজ ভরা এই শরৎের বাতাস,
কাশ ফুলের ঢেউ।
টোলিডোতে আবার আসবে মা
যাসনে তোরা কেউ।
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কয়েক্ষন বাকি।



Ritodeep Roy 8 yrs
Perrysburg, OH
(TOLEDO HINDU TEMPLE)

উফ, কি গরম পড়েছে। আজ বৃষ্টি হবেই হবে। জুলাই এর শেষ, তাপমাত্রা ৯০ পেরিয়েছে বেশ কিছুদিন। মিড-ওয়েস্ট এর আবহাওয়া প্রায়ই এরকম অতিমাত্রা হয় – যেমন শীত তেমন গরম। দূরের ঘাস গুলো সব বর্ণহীন। আজ কোন কাজ করতে ইচ্ছে করছে না। এতক্ষনে প্রচণ্ড বৃষ্টিও নেমেছে। কফির কাপে চুমুক দিতে দিতে শৈশবের স্মৃতিতে ডুব দিলাম।

এইরকম বৃষ্টি হোত বোকারোতে। বিহার রাজ্যের (অধুনা ছত্তিশগড়) হাজারিবাগ জেলার অন্তর্গত ছোট্ট বসতি। দামোদর ভ্যালি কর্পোরেশন এর সর্বপ্রথম কয়লাজনিত বিদ্যুৎ উৎপাদন কেন্দ্র। সত্তর দশক এর প্রথম দিকের কথা। একটি ছোট্ট রেলওয়ে স্টেশান ছিল। দিনে দুটিমাত্র ট্রেন আসত – রাত্রে কোলফিল্ড আর ভোরের দিকে রাঁচি-হাতিয়া এক্সপ্রেস। এছাড়া ছিল অনেক মালগাড়ি যেগুলি সারাদিন ধরে কয়লা বয়ে নিয়ে আসত। পৃথিবীর সঙ্গে যোগাযোগ রাখার আরেকটি উপায় ছিল হাজারিবাগ রোড। ছোট্ট একটি নদীর ধার দিয়ে আর ঘন জঙ্গলের ভেতর দিয়ে বাঁক নিত এই রাস্তা গিরিটির দিকে।

বোকারোর বাসিন্দাদের মধ্যে সব প্রাদেশের লোক ছিলেন, এবং বেশিরভাগ-ই কাজ করতেন বিদ্যুৎকেন্দ্রে। শহরের প্রানকেন্দ্র ছিল recreation ক্লাব। রোজ সন্ধ্যাবেলা বাবা সেখানে যেতেন ব্রিজ খেলতে, আর আমরা দুই ভাই বোন স্কুল ছুটি থাকলে ব্যাডমিন্টন খেলতে যেতাম। বয়স তখন আমাদের সাত বা আট। মা'রা যেতেন মঙ্গলবার হাউসি খেলতে। আমরাও শিখেছিলাম হাউসির ডাক দিতে। খেলার শেষে কাগজের স্লিপ গুলি যোগাড় করতে বড় আনন্দ হোত।

আবহাওয়া ছিল কিছুটা আমেরিকার midwest এর মত। হাড়কাঁপানো শীত নয়তো কাঠফাটা গরম। বাবা আমাদের প্রথম শিখিয়েছিলেন প্রকৃতির সঙ্গে জীবনের কি সম্পর্ক। যেমন শিলাবৃষ্টি কাকে বলে – সে কি আনন্দ ছিল উঠোন থেকে শিলা কুড়োতে। শরতের আকাশ থাকত খুব স্বচ্ছ। নীল আকাশ, কাশফুল আর শিউলি ফুলে যখন প্রকৃতি মেতে উঠত তার মানে ছিল পূজো এসে গেছে। পূজো মানে বন্ধুদের সঙ্গে হইচই করার পাঁচ পাঁচটা দিন। মা আর "কাকীমারা" ছেলেমেয়েদের জন্য সেলাইকলে জামাকাপড় তৈরী করতে বসতেন একমাস আগে থেকে। সেও এক প্রতিযোগিতা – কার জামা কত সুন্দর হল। মা খুব বাহবা পেতেন নানা ধরনের ফ্রক বানাবার জন্য।

পূজোর সঙ্গে জড়িয়ে আছে আরও দুটি ঘটনা। বাবা ও কাকুরা অমাবস্যার রাতে শিকারে বেরোতেন। কাপুর আঙ্কেল সেই অঞ্চলের নামকরা শিকারী ছিলেন। তাঁর একটি এয়ার গান ও ছিল। বাবার কাজ ছিল তাঁকে বুলেট দিয়ে যাওয়া। নানারকম পাখি শিকার হত, এক দুবার চিতাবাঘ – ও শিকার হয়েছিল। পূর্ণিমার রাতে আমরা সবাইমিলে কোনার নদীর তীরে চাঁদের আলোয়ে পিকনিক

করতাম। জঙ্গল দেখাত মায়াবী, নদীর জল করত চিক চিক। আমরা সবাই গান ধরতাম "আজ জ্যোত্স্না রাতে সবাই গেছে চলে "। এর পরেই আসত দুর্গাপূজা।

প্রত্যেক গরমের ছুটিতে আমরা কলকাতা যেতাম। যাবার কথা শুনেই মন নেচে উঠত। এই সময়ে ঠাকুমা কলকাতায় নিজের বাড়ি ফিরতেন। দিনগোনা সুরু হয়ে যেত আর তারিখটা ক্যালেন্ডার -এ লাল কালী দিয়ে দাগ দিয়ে রাখা হত। শুরু হত আমার ও ভাইয়ের কেনাকাটার লিস্ট তৈরী করা। আমার লিস্টে থাকত পুতুল, খেলার রান্নাবাটি, গল্পের বই। ভাই চাইত লাটাই, গুলতি, মার্বেল, জ্যামিতি বাক্স, আর কোনো এক গল্পের বইতে পড়া "ইলেকট্রিক চাবুক"। ভাই ঠাকুমাকে জিজ্ঞেস করেছিল "কলকাতায় ইলেকট্রিক চাবুক পাওয়া যাবে তো" ? ঠাকুমা এককোনে বসে জপ করছিলেন। ফোকলা দাঁতে হেসে বলেছিলেন "তুই কিসের কথা কস, কঞ্চি?" "পাওয়া যাবেখন কৃষ্ণনগরের মেলায়, তুই কঞ্চি দিয়া কি করবি?" ভাইয়ের উত্তর "তোমাকে জন্দ করব, মাছ খেতে আর বলবেনা তাহলে।"

মা একমাস আগে থেকে স্যুটকেস হোল্ডল নামিয়ে একটু করে গোছাতে থাকতেন। আমাদের ভীষণ আনন্দ হত। ঠাকুমা রবিবারের হাট থেকে দুটো কুঁজো কিনতেন। আমাদের সঙ্গে যেত। তার একটি উপহার দেওয়া হত ঠাকুমার বোনকে। এত ভালো কুঁজো নাকি কলকাতায় পাওয়া যেতনা।

এরকমই কলকাতা যাবার আগের একটি ঘটনা মনে পড়ে গেল। যাবার দিন এসে গেছে। মা সব গুছিয়ে রেডি। দুটি কুঁজো যোগাড় হয়ে গেছে। এদিকে হোল্ডল গেল ছিঁড়ে। খোঁজ খোঁজ দড়ির। ছুটির দিন, কোনো দোকান খোলা নেই। বিপদ দেখে ভাই অমনি ফোন তুলে অপারেটর কে বললে "বৈজনাথ কো দো " বৈজনাথ আর রামাধীন ছিল তাবর টেকনিশিয়ান। মার্কিন ইঞ্জিনিয়ার দ্বারা শিক্ষাপ্রাপ্ত এই লোকেরা পাওয়ার প্লান্ট চালাতেন দুর্দণ্ড প্রতাপে। কিছুক্ষণের মধ্যে রামাধীন এসে উপস্থিত। মা অবাক হয়ে জানতে চাইলেন "কি ব্যাপার তুমি এখন?" রামাধীন বলল "কেয়া করেরা মাইজী। ছোট্ট বাবু বোলা। অবিভ রশ্মি লেকর ঘর পৌছাও" . বাবা তো রেগে অস্থির। রামাধীন দড়ি দিয়ে হোল্ডল বেঁধে ভাইয়ের গাল টিপে হাসতে হাসতে সাইকেল চেপে ফিরে গেল। তখনকার দিনের মানুষের সরলতা আর আনুগত্য আজও মনে দাগ কেটে রেখেছে। যাক রসির ব্যবস্থা হলো, গোছগাছ শেষ, সন্ধ্যাবেলা ড্রাইভার এসে স্টেশন পৌছে দেবে। ট্রেন রাত্রি সাড়ে এগারোটা নাগাদ। সন্ধ্য হতে না হতে মুরলী ড্রাইভার উপস্থিত। সে সাঁওতাল পরগনার লোক, মহয়া খেয়ে বেহুশ, কাঁপা কাঁপা গলায় বলল "স্যার, যখন বলবেন তখনই গাড়ি বার করব, বারোট্টা বললে যাব, একটা বললেও যাব। কিন্তু এখন রাত আটটার সময়ে যাবনা"। বাবা বুঝলেন নেশাগ্রস্ত মুরলী কে দিয়ে কাজ হবেনা। সবাই চিন্তিত, এই ছোট্ট সহরে আগে থেকে না বললে ড্রাইভার পাওয়া যায়না। অনেক ভাবনা চিন্তা করে ঠিক হলো আমরা হেঁটে চলে যাব স্টেশন। স্টেশন এক মাইল দুরে,তখন এইটুকু হাঁটা আমাদের কাছে কোনো ব্যাপার ছিলনা। সন্ধ্য নামতেই চারিদিকে ঘন অন্ধকার ছড়িয়ে পড়েছে। বাবা মাথায় স্যুটকেস আর ঘাড়ে হোল্ডল নিয়ে রাস্তায় নামলেন। মা

ধরলেন ঠাকুমার হাত। ভাই খিল খিল করে হেসে বলল "কুলী বাবা"। মার অমনি ধমক "দেপমি না করে তাড়াতাড়ি পা চালাও"। অগত্যা আমরা দুই ভাইবোন কুঁজো নিয়ে হাঁটতে শুরু করলাম। নিঝুম সহর, আরো নিঝুম রাস্তা। মাঝে মাঝে রাস্তার আলোর হালকা রশ্মি চলার পথ দেখতে সাহায্য করছে। আমরা লাইন ধরে হাঁটতে থাকলাম। বাবা উৎসাহ দিতে লাগলেন, স্টেশন এ পৌঁছোতে পারলে, কালকে কাটাব কলকাতায়। প্রায় পৌঁছে গেছি এমন সময় দেখি দূরে একটি সাঁওতাল ছেলে হাপসু নয়নে কাঁদছে। আমরা কাছে গিয়ে তার ঝুড়ির দিকে তাকাতেই অবাধ হয়ে দেখলাম দুটি বাঘের বাচ্চা। বাবা জিগ্যেস করলেন "কোথায় পেলি"? সে বলল "সাহেব আমি মজদুরের কাজ করি, সকালে আসার সময় এই দুটি পেয়েছি। এই বাচ্চা গুলো নিয়ে গ্রামে ফিরলে, মা বাঘটা আমাকে মেরে ফেলতে পারে। তাই বসে আছি। আমরা খুব আদর করতে লাগলাম বাচ্চা গুলোকে, যেন দুটি বেড়ালছানা। বাবা ছেলেটিকে আশ্বস্ত করে বললেন, স্টেশন থেকে ফোন করে সব ব্যবস্থা করে দেবেন। করলেন-ও তাই। স্টেশন মাস্টারে র ঘর থেকে অনেক গুলি ফোন করেছিলেন। এর পর ট্রেন সময়মতই এলো, এবং আমরা কলকাতা চলে গেলাম। ছুটির পর আবার বোকারো ফিরলাম। ততদিনে বাঘের ছানা দুটো লالا আঙ্কেল এর গ্যারেজ এ বাসা নিয়েছে। প্রত্যেক সন্ধ্যের সময় খেলা শেষ করে বাঘের ছানা দুটো না দেখে বাড়ি ফিরতামনা। কোনো এক আঙ্কেল নাম রেখেছিল ঝুমরু আর ডুমরু। তারপর অনেক বছর কেটে গেল। আমরা হোস্টেলে থাকি। ছুটি তে বাড়ি ফিরেই আগে ছুটেছিলাম লالا আঙ্কেল এর ঘরে, কিন্তু বাঘের বাচ্চা দুটি তো নেই! আঙ্কেল বলেছিলেন ঝুমরু আর ডুমরু কে হাজারিবাগ চিফ ফরেস্ট অফিসার নিয়ে গেছেন। কিন্তু লالا আঙ্কেল গেলেন কোথায়? এর সঠিক উত্তর কারুর কাছেই পাইনি, প্রতিবেশীরা বলেছিলেন, আরে বাঘের বাচ্চা কখনো পোষ মানে? যে মনিব খাইয়ে দাইয়ে বড় করে, একটু বড় হলে তাকেই শেষ করে দেয়!



আমার ছোটবেলার বন্ধু দেবীপ্রসাদ খুব সরল আর আন্তরিক মানুষ ছিল, আর ছিল বাংলা সাহিত্যের প্রতি প্রচন্ড ভালোবাসা . সারাজীবনের প্রচেষ্টার বিনিময় সে পেয়েছিল সুদূর নিউজিল্যান্ড এ একটি সরকারী চাকুরি . তার আপন বলতে ছিল বউ আর প্রিয় বিড়াল . কিছুদিন আগে খবর পেলাম সে এই পৃথিবী থেকে বিদায় নিয়েছে. তার লেখা একটি অনবদ্য কবিতা এই সংকলনে অন্তর্ভুক্ত করলাম .

আশিস মুখোপাধ্যায়

লবঙ্গলতা ২০০১

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তোমার কি মনে পড়ে, কবে বলেছিলে
“অন্য কোনো পৃথিবীর দিকে চলো যাই
যেখানে শখনীল রাত্রি নামে নদীর নির্জনে
নক্ষত্র নিঃশব্দে- ঝরে মৃত কোনো জোনাকীর মত
নর নিঃশব্দে .চাখে চাঁদ দেখে ঘুমভাঙ্গা ঘুঘুর শাবক,
সে কথা রাখোনি, ভুলে গিয়েছিলে হযত অচিরে”

২

বত্রিশ বছর পরে, এ গ্রহের অন্যপ্রান্তে দক্ষিণ সাগরে
অজস্র হাওয়ার রাতে চাঁদ ওঠে বাঙ্গলার কোজাগরী পূর্ণিমার মত
দূরে বুঝি শাঁখ বাজে, কারা ঐ দেয় উলুধ্বনি
আমার সর্বাঙ্গ জুড়ে কে যেন পায়ের চিহ্ন ঐঁকে দিয়ে যায়
অকস্মাৎ তন্দ্রা ভাঙ্গে - কোথায় লবঙ্গলতা? বৃকের ভেতর
বৈশাখের ধুধু মাঠ দিকচক্রবালে মিশে গেছে !

দেবীপ্রসাদ মজুমদার
ডুনেডিন হাসপাতাল
২০ অক্টোবর ২০০১

ভালো আছো ?

যশমান বন্দ্যোপাধ্যায়
মেরিল্যান্ড

ভালো আছো ?

বৃষ্টির জল দেখেছো কখনো ?

হ্যাঁ হ্যাঁ জানি জানি, তা দেখার জন্যে ইউ টিউব লাগে না তাই না? .. কিন্তু কি জানি !

চারপাশে লোক দেখেছো কখনো?

হ্যাঁ হ্যাঁ জানি, খুব ব্যস্ত কিন্তু ফেসবুক-এও তো ..দেখা যায় !.. কিন্তু কি জানি ?

শৈশব কৈশোর বা যৌবন দেখেছো কখনো?

হ্যাঁ হ্যাঁ জানি, নদী বয়ে গেলে ফিরে তাকিয়ে কি লাভ ?,

তোমার বাগানে ফুল গাছে সব ছবি ধরা আছে

হ্যাঁ হ্যাঁ জানি কিন্তু কি জানি !

কান্না দেখেছো কখনো ?

হ্যাঁ হ্যাঁ জানি, ছোট পর্দায় প্রায়....

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যীশু নয় .. মানুষ !

হয়ত ... কিন্তু কি জানি!

এত ভেবে কি লাভ? এসব কোনো কবিতায় মানাতে পারে হয়ত ... কিন্তু তুমি কি জানতে চাইছ ??

শুধু এইটুকু

- ভালো আছো?



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