

IGNCA INVENTORY ON THE INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

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Name of the element: Durga Puja in West Bengal.

Community: Bengalis of all religious denominations residing in the state of West Bengal.

Region: Durga Puja is celebrated not only in West Bengal but in other regions such as Bihar (Biharis), Odisha (Oriyas) and Assam (Ahomiyas) as well as in other states of India where Bengali community reside. Bengali migrants residing in Europe, America and Australia also celebrate this festival.

Brief Description: Durga Puja is the most important socio-cultural and religious event in the Bengali festival calendar, celebrated in autumn. The festival is to propitiate the Goddess Durga for her blessings as also celebrate her victory over the demon Mahishasur. It is also believed that Lord Rama had worshipped the goddess Durga to seek divine blessings before undertaking the battle against Ravana.

Durga Puja is a ten-day festival, usually in October, which starts from Mahalaya, the inaugural day of the event. Mahalaya is celebrated by Agomoni or songs of welcome. Festivities start five days later with the observance of Shashti, Shaptami, Ashtami, and Nabami. An elaborate community bhog or food-offerings to the Goddess, is prepared and then partaken by congregations on each day of the festivities. On the tenth day, or Bijoya Dashami, the goddess is borne away to the sounds of the dhak, or traditional drum for immersion in nearby rivers or water bodies.

The puja mandap or the main altar is essentially a platform inside a makeshift bamboo structure called a pandal. The rituals are performed by designated priests in front of the deities inside the mandap. Offerings of fruits, flowers, sweetmeats, incense and sandalwood are placed in platters in front of the deities while the congregation in the pandal repeat the mantras, or holy chants, after the priest, conducting the services. The makeshift structures, as well as the image of the goddess are adorned with meticulous artwork and stylistic themes made with local craft materials such as shola or pith, coloured jute, woven brocades, imitation jewellery, clay and terracotta ornamentation.

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