



Long lines are common as visitors explore the thousands of exhibitions at the festival.



# Calcutta creates a perfect world

BY DOMINICK A. MERLE

SPECIAL TO THE STANDARD-SPEAKER

CALCUTTA, India — Maybe I'm hallucinating, but I think I hear Beatle John Lennon singing "Imagine" above the near deafening din.

The rickshaw puller, the wealthy businessman, the Hindu, the Muslim, the Christian, the Jew — and perhaps even a few atheists — are all gathering together as one, setting aside their huge differences.

This is Durga Puja, Calcutta's annual catch-all festival that has grown to amazing proportions in recent years, and yet remains practically unknown to the rest of the world.

It lasts for 10 days each October, upwards of 20 million people participate in passion, peace, pride and serenity, and then suddenly the curtain comes down and everyone returns to their real lives.

Which, for Calcutta, isn't so bad. It's no longer "Imagine-Land," but on any given day this legendary city on the Ganges is a nonstop carnival of sights, sounds and surprises around every corner — some good, some bad.

"It could be worse," my guide Anil remarked with a smile. "This could be Delhi" (India's favorite whipping city).

Durga Puja is actually a Hindu festival that dates back to the 16th century, but only in the past 20 years has it grown to such an incredible size in Calcutta, attracting followers from all creeds and castes.

How it all began is fascinating in itself. After many men and gods tried and failed to rid the earth of a monster/creature/demon, some brave soul asked, "Why not send a woman?"

Enter the 10-armed Goddess Durga. According to one of the most widely accepted legends, she not only had to kill the demon, but do it without shedding even one drop of blood because it was believed a new monster would rise from each drop.

She accomplished this, the legend continues, by drinking the demon's blood before killing it with a type of pitchfork, which would make the tale a medical miracle wrapped in a legend. There are many variations of this recital, just as there are many different facets to the Hindu religion.

While Durga Puja is celebrated throughout all of India, the other festivals put together would not amount to half the size of Calcutta's big show.

Why? "Nobody really knows," said Jaydeep Mukherjee, owner of a travel and tour agency known as Meghdutam Travels, who often accompanied me during the 10-day event.

"It just took off on its own about 20 years ago. I got involved about 15 years ago and now find myself spending as much time and money in promoting Durga as I do tending to my own business."

With the help of India Tourism, Mukherjee has become a world ambassador for Durga Puja throughout Europe, has recently opened a tour agency in Montreal and plans on promoting the event at travel and tourism events in North America.

As for Calcutta (officially known as Kolkata in India), no such pro-



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Pandals, or exhibit centers, of various sizes and themes are on display during Durga Puja, the 10-day festival celebrating the Goddess Durga.

## If you go

### • Pack light casual cottons.

Dress codes for some religious sites may include head coverings, long pants, being barefoot.

### • Drink only bottled water.

Service charges are included in most hotels and restaurants.

• Bargaining is expected in open markets and small shops. A 75 percent discount is not uncommon.

• Don't try to explore Calcutta on your own. You could easily get lost. Use a certified tour guide.

motion is required. At this year's event, there were more than 3,000 "pandals" (exhibition centers) scattered about the city to honor the Goddess Durga.

Some of the pandals were spectacular, sponsored by businessmen and huge corporations, a few costing in excess of \$300,000 to assemble. Many were simple, resembling shrines, financed by private donations in each neighborhood.

At my boutique hotel, The Senator, the talk among the staff each morning went something like this: "How many pandals did you visit last night?" "Thirty?" "Did you sleep?" "No." "How many tonight?" "Another 30."

But by far the most impressive display was the people themselves — millions of them crowded onto the streets and sidewalks, walking from one pandal to the next throughout the night and early morning, patient, serene, joyful, thankful, proud.

It looked as though all 20 million or so Calcuttans had been nicely sedated. But in fact, they were in a beautiful and natural state of mind.



A Russian bakery sits next to Mother Teresa's house.

I watched one rickshaw puller — and there are tens of thousands of them still earning their living that way in this city — tie his rickshaw to a pole and join the long lineup to a major pandal at 2 a.m. He would not sleep that night, and perhaps the next night as well.

"That rickshaw man saves pennies all year for Durga Puja," Mukherjee told me. "He'll go to a nice restaurant to celebrate, and then start saving pennies again for next year."

On the other side of the coin, the wealthy businessman, who perhaps manufactured that very rickshaw tied to a pole, donates tens of thousands of dollars, and his time, to construct the same pandal that rickshaw puller just entered.

And so Durga Puja crosses that vast divide between the poorest of the poor in Calcutta's slums to the richest of the rich in Maharajah palaces. For 10 days and nights, they are one.

There is also a Christmas-like aspect to the festival. Before it begins, family members exchange gifts of clothing with one another. It is traditional for everyone, rich or poor, to wear one new piece of clothing for each of the 10 days.

While Durga Puja begins with the banging of drums calling everyone to the pandals, it ends with a splash as the city bids farewell to the Goddess Durga by immersing her into the Ganges.

By early spring, work will begin on the construction of the 2016 pandals.

It's fitting that Calcutta is enjoying such success with Durga Puja. This uncontrollable metropolis has always had a bit of an image problem. When's the last time you saw a "Greetings from Calcutta" postcard?

And yet, why all the happy faces? You won't see as many smiles in Delhi or Bombay. And why does the cream of the country's creative force continue to flock and prosper here?

And is it just coincidence that four Nobel Prize winners came from here?

Yes, there is pollution and indescribable misery and the traffic is clearly out of control. As one of our drivers put it, the ingredients for survival: "Good brakes, good heart, good luck."

But look closely. Your eyes may play tricks on you.

That old man going through the garbage is not looking for food, but for tinfoil. He rolls it up and sells it to a shopkeeper up the street. Others are collecting plastics or recyclable paper.

I walked the slums in one area and found mini-factories turning out pottery, clothing and floral arrangements. Despite the unsanitary conditions, I watched one man sitting on a curb bathing himself by an open faucet, slowly and

meticulously, as perhaps the occupants of Buckingham Palace. And yes, he was smiling.

Leaving the slum, I walked into a huge flower market, its blazing colors fighting for attention in the midst of the pollution and grime.

My final view of Calcutta, early morning of departure, was standing in front of my hotel and watching a street sleeper awake. He was unaware of my presence.

He took a cotton swab encased in a plastic covering from one pocket and cleaned his ears. From another pocket he took a small container and rubbed its contents under his arms. A third container held a toothbrush and powder, which he used to vigorously brush his teeth.

Another pocket contained a small can of a cleaning substance, which he spread slowly and methodically over his face and hands. Finally he withdrew a comb, parted his hair, patted it and combed it to his usual style.

With that, this now-distinguished gentleman brushed himself off and walked slowly off into wherever he goes each morning.

I headed back to my room for a quick shower.

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Hand-pulled rickshaws are still a major means of transport in Calcutta. There are tens of thousands of them throughout the city.