Daffodils for Durga? Not at this Puja in London

SUDESHNA BANERJEE

Calcutta: For organisers of the Sutton Bengali Association's Durga Puja in south London, one of the biggest challenges is keeping the *kola bou* upright beside Lord Ganesha through the festivities.

"The weather is cold here, so it will stay fresh. But what if it gets twisted? We seek quotations from three or four vendors and insist on quality assurance to ensure the banana plant does not bend during transit," said Sanjay Das, an IT professional from Ahiritola and one of the puja organisers.

Now in its third year, the puja has registered as a charity, with 43 families as members.

"We may be miles away from Calcutta, but deep in our hearts, we want our puja to be as close as possible to what we grew up seeing," Das said.

That means adhering as closely as possible to traditional rituals and using authentic puja *samagri*. But the costs involved pose a major challenge. "We need an average of 10 garlands each day, including those for Mahishasura and the *ghots*. That means a total of 40 garlands, which alone cost us ₹80,000 to ₹90,000 to import," Das said.

Asked whether they cannot make do with garlands of local flowers, Das is horrified at the suggestion. "Daffodils for Durga? What will our children learn?" he replied.

So chandramallika, rajanigandha and lotus have to be there, and all the way from Bengal, if need be, he said.



Last year's Sutton Bengali Association Durga Puja

Besides the eight plants tied to the banana plant to form the *nabapatrika*, the organisers also source banana leaves on which to place *naibedya* (offerings to the deity).

"We could use a steel plate. In fact, another prominent London puja serves offerings on thermocol plates. But such practices would not be true to the way things are done in Calcutta," he said.

Another major expense is *sindur khela*. "More than 200 women turn up specifically for it on Dashami. Even if they bring sweets, they often arrive without paan and *supari* and ask us to provide them. As organisers, we have to be prepared," Das said.

The Sutton Bengalis also take pride in adding a personal touch to the festivities. "We make Daalpuri for 2,400 people. There are Gujarati and Bangladeshi caterers available, but we refuse to hand over that responsibility to them," Das said.

Their commitment to authenticity also means spending £800-900 on *gorer mala*. "If we settle for garlands made of plastic beads, we could bring the cost down to just £10 for four days," he said.

Das recalled the year their *dhak* developed a puncture. "We spent £400 repairing it. A new *dhak* costs barely ₹10,000 to ₹12,000 in India, but transporting it here would cost us another £1,000. So repairing it made more sense," he explained, adding that the association had to collect another round of subscriptions that year to cover the expense.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 9 ▶

London puja

▶ FROM PAGE 8

The list of offerings at the Sutton puja also includes marigolds, Indian milkweed (*Akondo*), 108 lotuses and black tulsi for the morning worship of Narayana. The organisers also need 108 *bel* leaves every morning.

"The only item we can source locally is *dubbo*, which people collect from the grass in their backyards," Das said. The other requirements are split between an Indian grocery store and a Sri Lankan grocer who has learnt about the association's needs and established a supply line to meet them.

Beyond the rituals, members are also staging Rabindranath Tagore's play, *Balmiki Pratibha*.



Members of the Puja committee with a banana plantain from a Sri Lankan store in London

The effort, Das said, is ultimately about preserving Bengali cultural sensibilities, even thousands of miles from home.

"We do not tie up with the local Ganesh Puja committee just to attract more participants because we do not want to dilute our identity," he said.