

Business Line

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Life - Events

Down-to-earth Ganpati

For those who say 'no' to pollutant PoP, there are several artistically crafted eco-friendly Ganpatis to choose from..

Kaustubh Patwardhan;



Ganesh, naturally! A three-piece idol made of coconut shells.

Veena Patwardhan

This Sunday, millions of families across the country will joyfully welcome Lord Ganesh into their homes. Once a simple, family affair, Ganesh Chaturthi has, over the years, evolved into an ostentatious event far removed from its roots as a festival of the earth. A festival during which an idol of Ganesh, or Ganpati, was shaped out of mud scooped from the banks of a river and worshipped before it was immersed back into the waters.

Today, Ganpati idols have taken on a different colour, literally. Plaster of Paris (PoP), which takes months, even years, to disintegrate in water, has replaced the eco-friendly clay, while natural and safe colours have been replaced with chemical paints containing toxic substances such as lead, chromium and mercury that kill aquatic life and jeopardise human health too. Imagine the magnitude of pollution when lakhs of these idols are immersed in lakes, rivers and sea in different parts of India, year after year. Last year, 1.76 lakh Ganpati idols were immersed in Mumbai alone.

Thankfully though, in recent times "green" Ganpati idols are returning in strength, thanks to the tireless efforts of organisations such as Mumbai's Save Powai Lake Committee, IIT-Bombay, eCoexist, Pune, the National Green Corps, Andhra Pradesh, and scores of other eco-sensitive individuals and groups across India.

Make way for clay



Clay idol made by Pune-based eCoexist.

Manisha Gutman, the founder of eCoexist, a social enterprise involved in reviving the manufacture and use of clay Ganpati idols, says, "We are receiving a fantastic response to our clay idols and our customer base is growing faster than we can imagine. eCoexist idols are made by skilled artisans from the villages of Pen in Maharashtra and Sirsi in Karnataka according to scriptural injunctions." Only natural pigments such as turmeric are used in painting the idols.

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Conceding that idol-makers as well as sellers and buyers opt for PoP as clay idols are costlier and more fragile, she says, "eCoexist focuses on making smaller idols that are affordable and easier to handle."

It sells a range of attractive clay Ganeshas priced at Rs 350 to Rs 1,500 (www.e-coexist.com).

Coconut craft



Clay idol made by Pune-based eCoexist.

Although many families have long been celebrating Ganesh Chaturthi by symbolically immersing and reusing stone, brass or silver idols at home, their tribe is now increasing. Mumbai-based sculptor Ramesh Date has gone a step ahead with his three-piece coconut-shell Ganpati that is easy to assemble. A unique feature of this idol is that its belly is actually a whole coconut and this is the part that has to be replaced each year. After the idol is symbolically immersed in water, the coconut can be broken and distributed as *prasad*; alternatively, it can be left submerged in water until it sprouts a shoot, which can be planted to grow a new tree. Now, how environmentally deep-rooted is that!

Date's hand-crafted idols are strikingly beautiful and he does not use any paint or colours to embellish them. The idols were displayed at an exhibition in Mumbai during August 10-20. You can view Date's creations online (www.youtube.com/watch?v=XN-BCIDvIwU).

Asked what drew him to the cause of eco-friendly Ganpati celebrations, Date says, "Watching ridiculously large Ganpati idols being immersed with the help of ropes and cranes, the distressing post-immersion visuals on TV of dismembered Ganpati idols scattered across seashores, reports of dangerously high levels of toxins in water bodies after immersions... these were disturbing eye-openers. I realised it was high time we changed the way Ganesh *murtis* (idols) were made and decided to do my bit for a greener world."

Explaining why he chose coconut, he says the fruit is easily available and also commands a special place in Hindu rituals as a divine fruit — *shreefal*, and as a bountiful celestial tree — *kalpavruksha*. "When people use eco-friendly idols, they'll realise that it is possible to uphold our traditions and yet protect the environment the way our ancestors did," he adds.

Immersed in awareness

There are several eco-friendly options readily available, but devotees have been slow to move away from the PoP idols. Ritika Tickoo of Either Or, a Pune store that stocks clay Ganeshas from eCoexist besides other eco-friendly merchandise, makes an interesting observation. "How many people have stopped using plastic and switched to cloth or paper bags?... any movement towards eco-friendly options is a slow process. At Either Or, our aim is to see that whoever is eco-friendly at least gets the chance to be so... the others will follow as they realise its importance."

Environmentalists, however, are in no mood to wait. Clean water, on which our very existence depends, is in danger of becoming a scarce resource, they warn us, urging the Government to enforce the use of only eco-friendly *murtis*.

But others call for a more conciliatory approach. Anuradha Apte, who switched from PoP to Date's coconut *murti* last year, says, "In my family we are happy about our decision."

I feel that when people voluntarily decide to use nature-friendly Ganpati idols, the change will be harmonious and more effective. So, instead of using force, the Government should concentrate on spreading awareness about making Ganesh Utsavs environment-friendly."

After dithering for years, local governments are finally playing a more proactive role. Special urns are placed at immersion points for collecting the floral offerings or *nirmalya*.

Additionally, artificial water bodies are being created as a middle ground for those persisting with PoP idols. This year, the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation, under the leadership of Mayor Shubha Raul, is working on 34 artificial lakes, 15 more than last year. However, the creation of these artificial lakes is a costly affair and not a long-term solution.

It's time to celebrate in tune with nature, and pray for greater awareness on the use of eco-friendly and reusable Ganesh idols.

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