



'Tis the Season to be Green

Veena Patwardhan • Published on October 3, 2011

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The farmer pauses in his task of adding finishing touches to the Ganesh idol. He has lovingly sculpted it out of clay scooped from the nearby river that nourishes his crops.

"How's the garland coming along?" he shouts out to his daughter seated in the shade of the gulmohar tree in their tiny courtyard.

"It's almost ready, Baba," she replies, adding one more flower to the others she has strung together using fibers from the stem of one of their banana trees. "Mother is plucking a few more mogras and jaswandi flowers from the garden," she adds.

It is Ganesh Chaturthi. The family has been up since dawn and in a short while, will instate their idol and start the puja. There will be no pomp, no show, just a profound gratitude for the bounties of nature and a heartfelt prayer that the next year be as harmonious and prosperous as this one. And on the day of immersion, the small Ganesh idol will be reverently immersed in the same river flowing nearby, where it will slowly disintegrate and become one with the source from which it has come.

Rituals like these above, once a loving tribute to the circle of life and gratitude to the regenerating powers of earth and water, have been subverted into noisy, commercial, public affairs, leaving in their wake a trail of environmental destruction and pollution.

But with increased environmental awareness, trends are changing, as Indians at home and abroad are figuring out ways to celebrate their festivals in a way respectful to the environment, while staying true to their traditions.

Festivals like Ganesh Chaturthi and Durga Puja were once simple family events. The image of Ganapati, the Lord of the "Earth" element (the other four elements or tatvas being water, fire, air, and ether), was once shaped out of mud and then worshipped. The significance of immersion of the idol, whether that of Ganesh, the elephant god, or Durga, the destroyer of evil, was a symbolic portrayal of the truth of returning to the essence of being after having taken physical form, one that is also embodied in the phrase "From dust to dust, from ashes to ashes," that is recited during Western burial services.

Today eco-friendly earth or clay has been replaced by a man-made substances like Plaster of Paris (PoP) that takes months, even years to disintegrate; safe, natural colorants like turmeric have been supplanted by chemical colors laced with toxic substances like lead, chromium, and mercury that kill aquatic life and adversely affect eco-systems and, through the food chain, affect human health as well. Instead of using only flowers as adornments, we now use decorations made out of non-biodegradable substances like styrofoam, plastic, and zari.

Imagine the collective effect of such harmful substances on our eco-system when hundred of thousands of such idols are immersed in Indian wells, lakes, rivers, and seas, in the fall months year after year. Last year, around 190,000 Ganapati idols were immersed in Mumbai alone, over 10,000 of which were large community idols, some so gigantic they required cranes to immerse them. A similar number of Durga idols are immersed each year, amounting to thousands of tons of non-biodegradable waste in the sea and other water bodies.

With fresh water being a dwindling resource, the repercussions of water-polluting activities are likely to be catastrophic. Caught up in religious fervor, messages about environmental pollution and its consequences have been slow to percolate into the mainstream.

Other Festivals and Pollution

Festivals like Diwali, Dassera, and Holi can also be toxic for the environment. Diwali is now more a festival of noise rather than a festival of lights. Despite warnings from doctors about the harmful effects of the sulfur dioxide, carbon monoxide, and carbon dioxide fumes released

into the atmosphere, the practice of lighting firecrackers continues unabated.

Holi, meant to be a joyful celebration of the arrival of spring, was once celebrated with natural colors prepared from blossoms. Now toxic chemicals like lead oxide, copper sulfate, and Prussian blue, and even carcinogenic chemicals like aluminum bromide, and mercuric sulfite are used for preparing Holi colors. The gulals (dry colors) are made up of a toxic, heavy metal-containing colorant, and the base is usually asbestos or silica, both of which are known to be harmful to health.

In the United States, apart from the July 4th celebrations that mimic the noise and air pollution of Diwali, Christmas can be an orgy of energy consumption as houses compete to dazzle with outdoor displays.

Encouraging New Trends

Thankfully, the future is not entirely gloomy. Spurred by environmental education and activism, India is witnessing a revival of the ancient practice of worshiping “green” Ganpati idols. Though still a trickle, the flow towards environment-friendly celebrations has been gathering strength. Thanks mainly to the tireless efforts of organizations like eCoexist, the Jignyasa Thane Trust, Mumbai’s Save Powai Lake Committee, IIT Bombay, the Mumbai-based Sadguru Shree Aniruddha Upasana Trust, the National Green Corps, Andhra Pradesh, and scores of environmentally conscious individuals and groups across India and around the world, a steadily increasing number of worshippers and even Ganesh mandals are now switching over to clay idols. The trend of using metal or stone re-usable idols is also gaining in popularity.



eCoexist (www.e-coexist.com), based in Pune, has always been committed to environmental education and promoting nature-friendly festival celebrations. Manisha Gutman, the founder of eCoexist says, “We realized that we needed to give people a solution as well, and we started the production of eco-friendly Ganesh idols.” Her organization uses the services of skilled artisans from the villages of Pen in Maharashtra and Sirsi in Karnataka to make a range of clay Ganesh idols in a variety of designs, all colored with natural pigments.

Devotees in India have also begun using and creating idols made out of recycled paper or natural fibers. Mumbai-based sculptor Ramesh Date has gone a step further down the eco-friendly route. Date’s beautifully hand-crafted coconut shell Ganpati idol is a collapsible, re-usable, three-piece marvel. The only part that has to be replaced each year is the whole coconut that forms the belly of the idol. After the final puja, the coconut is symbolically immersed in a bucket of water at home, following which it can be distributed as prasad, or soaked in water for a few weeks till it sprouts a shoot. Subsequently it can be planted to grow a new coconut tree.

Asked what made him choose coconut shells as a medium, Date explains, “Ancient Hindu texts refer to the coconut tree as kalpavruksha, a celestial tree. Moreover, the coconut itself has a special place in Hindu rituals and is also called shreefal, a divine fruit.”

Impressed by Date’s novel concept and his superbly sculpted creations, my own family switched from using PoP Ganpati idols to Date’s coconut shell murti two years ago. So far, we have planted two coconut palm saplings, one each year, and the experience has been very gratifying.

Preserving Our Traditions and the Environment

Uday Kunte and his wife Vera of Yardley, PA, symbolically immerse a silver idol they have been using for years. Vera also uses the floral offerings to prepare compost for her garden.

While metal or stone idols can be reused each year, clay or paper mache ones can be left to disintegrate in a tub of water at home, though the latter takes a long time to do so. Gutman says, “If you immerse the clay idol in a bucket and pour the water into a garden, you are sending it back to nature, which is soil in this case. So, it’s not only traditional but also eco-friendly.”

Many NRI associations across America organize community Ganeshotsavs and pack away their idol after the final puja each year to re-use it the following year. Nitin Vaidya, President, Maharashtra Mandal of South Florida, says, “For Ganeshotsav, though we do aartis and the traditional puja, we mostly skip having noisy processions and the immersion. We re-use the same idol every year, so the issue of polluting the environment doesn’t arise.” Prasad Prabhu of State University of New York, Stony Brook, concurs. “We use a PoP Ganpati idol, but we only immerse it for a few minutes into a small tank of water prepared by us, and use the same idol each year.”

Dakshini, an organization that serves Bengalis in Southern California, has begun curtailing the amount of disposable waste at their Durga Puja celebrations. Says founder Sarnath Chattaraj, “We try and minimize the use of plastic by opting for banana leaves and other compostable serving material.” The pandal at Dakshini’s puja is also made with as much recyclable material as possible and water fountains are created for the devotees’ use to minimize the use of bottled water.



"We also don't immerse the idol," adds Chattaraj, whose festival attracts over 1,200 celebrants each year, "we reuse it. Instead we immerse the flowers and leaves used in the celebration in the sea or compost them."

Asked how they incorporate eco-friendly practices into their Holi celebrations at Iowa State University, Divita Mathur, President of the university's Indian Students' Association says, "For Holi, we use only natural colors. We celebrate this festival on campus in one of the grounds so that the water used is absorbed by the lawn. Apart from that, we are very particular about cleaning up the place whenever we have an event—be it inside the campus or outside in a park." Abhishek Bharad, President, Indian Student Association, Louisiana State University, says, "We celebrate Holi with gusto at LSU, but we use natural, not synthetic colors."



Greening Christmas

Cynthia James and her environmental geologist husband Paul from Plano, Texas, have cut out outdoor lighting all together, putting out just a lone Christmas star instead, a symbol that is perhaps a much more poignant reminder of the heartwarming story of the star of Bethlehem that led the wise men to the infant Jesus.

Artificial or real Christmas trees—which is the more eco-friendly option? As Paul puts it, "Where you live should help you pick the better option. In my home state of Maine, where there is an abundance of pine trees, it makes more sense for people to use real trees which are later recycled as mulch. But in places like say, the southwest where tree farms are unsustainable, an artificial tree that can be re-used year after year would perhaps be the smarter option." At the annual Christmas party organized by GEMs (Goans, East Indians and Mangaloreans), an organization of which Cynthia is a member, they use the same artificial Christmas tree each year. But Cynthia adds, "Of course, however hard we try, we could never invent anything more recyclable than a real tree."

There are lots of options today for celebrating Christmas the more eco-friendly way. Those who love the smell of pine as it makes the whole house smell like Christmas, yet would rather not have a real tree, could opt for a fresh pine wreath or garland instead. And for those who would prefer to keep plastic trees out of landfills and would rather support the cultivation of real Christmas trees there's a modern solution. Companies like the Living Christmas Tree Co. in Southern California and San Jose Christmas Tree Rentals in the SF Bay Area let you rent a tree for Christmas and take it back after New Year's Day. The tree is then replanted at the farm. Some people hang strings of lights and other decorations on one of the potted plants or trees in their garden and use it like a Christmas tree.

Cynthia and her family also recycle old Christmas cards to make gift tags, and she encourages her children to make their own decorations. Last year, the James children, Isabella and Rohan, learnt how to make home-made Christmas decorations at an event organized by a church nearby.

Indian Americans have also figured out a way of leveraging technology to reduce waste that accrues with planning large events like festivals. Subodh Kirtane, Secretary, Seattle Maharashtra Mandal, says, "We have almost completely eliminated paper-based communications. We use periodic email blasts to intimate our members about festival celebrations and other upcoming programs."

To the concerns that such attention to the environment detracts from the enjoyment of the event, the Kuntess suggest that being spared the cacophony of loudspeakers blaring from morning till night, the deafening "music" belted out during processions, and the earsplitting noise and toxic fumes of crackers—all of which have become an integral part of our festivities in India—makes for a deeper spiritual experience.

Desis can also take a page from the rising trend in eco-friendly music festivals in the United States. Large music festivals have traditionally been sources of many different kinds of pollution—air pollution from the diesel generators and cars of attendees, garbage from cans, cups, and plates, chemical toilets, and discarded food. Partying is an inseparable part of most festivals, but it also creates millions of tons of non-biodegradable trash. Now festivals vying to be the most responsible have a "leave no trace" policy and enlist volunteers to clear garbage and sort out recyclables. Some offer solar-powered booths and bicycle powered cell phone chargers for the convenience of the concert-goers. Even musicians have got into the act, preferring bio-diesel touring buses and redesigning their itineraries to minimize travel.

At Iowa State, Mathur says they try to follow some of these practices not just during parties but also at all events where they serve food and beverages. She adds, "We strictly use disposable plates and dishes that are recyclable." Such "green" products may have a slightly higher price tag, but they certainly don't cost an arm and a leg. With many restaurants in California adopting compostable containers for take-out, one hopes that the practice will slowly gain currency in private celebrations as well.

A change to eco-friendly practices is a slow process. But the message about "greening" our



celebrations would be more widely acceptable if we can convey that such behavior actually takes us closer to our traditions and that protecting God's creation—nature—is a wonderful way of worshipping Him.



For more details about eCoexist products, environment-conscious devotees in the United States can contact Natalie Leek (nrleek10@gmail.com).

Those interested in finding out more about Date's innovative idols can contact him at (91-9869124306).

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Green Ideas For This Festival Season

For the worshipper or festival enthusiast, being environmentally conscious doesn't imply having to make any significant compromises in either the spirit of the festivals or the traditions we try so hard to maintain. Here are some sensible choices we can make in the upcoming festival season:

- If you are keen on going through the immersion rites, get a clay idol or any eco-friendly/biodegradable one. Getting a reusable metal or stone idol that can be reused is also a good idea, as it is the symbolism that is most important, not the disintegration.
- Participate in community celebrations. By performing rituals in a communal fashion rather than individually, you can help reduce usage of possible pollutants.
- When it comes to Holi, always use natural colors. You could even make some in your own kitchen using materials like leaves, flowers, turmeric, beetroot, or pomegranate peel. Here's some information to help you get started. http://hinduism.about.com/od/holifestivalofcolors/a/naturalholi_2.htm
- Use diyas (earthen lamps) instead of electric lights this Diwali. They may not produce the same kind of wattage, but their soft light will help you connect to the traditions of your ancestors in a way no set of string lights can. They are also reusable.
- Use bio-degradable or reusable cups, plates, and flatware in your celebrations. These are now widely available even in box stores and discount warehouses.
- The festival season is often a time to shop for new clothes. Take a moment to clear your closet and donate your well-preserved items to a local charity. Consider exchanging infrequently worn festival outfits with friends or family. Look for apparel rental services.
- Recycle whatever you can. Last year's decorations, gift wrap, and even the greeting cards can be saved and re-used. Re-invent these items and give them a new lease on life.
- Consider renting a Christmas tree from a tree farm.
- Real trees for Christmas must be recycled in accordance with your city's regulations. Check your city's website for more information.
- Look for LED lights this Christmas; these are more energy efficient than traditional bulbs.

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