

## **Childhood and Durgapuja and Some memories**

When the drumbeats of Durgapuja are heard, mind takes a big leap back. That was around 50 odd years ago. It was childhood. The place was Calcutta. At an even earlier age, I used to feel fearful about the sounds of drum. Straight sanctuary was father. He used to hug me tightly and the fear used to seep out of my mind. The bold and assuring hug and the smell of father and nicotine, was quite reassuring. How do the children of today feel? Probably they are bold from the birth!

I still remember the day I had gone out to see Durgapuja with father. Our destination was the Durgapuja at the famous Fire brigade pandel; we used to call it "Damkaler Pujo". When we reached there, the crowd was thick and the place was jam packed. I couldn't even breathe. I yelled for help from my father. He was 6 feet 2 inches plus. In one sweep, he picked me up, and held me high, above his shoulder level, that was quite a height, and I felt oddly reassured. I could see the whole Puja. No more was I getting choked, thanks to the reassuring strength that was father.

Those days are still alive in our mind. Father is no more. I have become a father and then a grandfather. We were returning from a friend's house in Mumbai – my wife, our grandson and I. It was crowded and heavily so. It was Ganapati immersion day. Suddenly I heard a mild call from my waist height. Our grand-son was telling me that my mobile, connected on my belt was ringing. I could not hear it. I was touched; I bent down and hugged him tightly. He was a bit tall for me to lift him up in my arms by then.

Another pre-puja day at Calcutta. I had gone out with father. On the occasion of Puja, we used to get a new pair of shoes. We were traveling by a Tram and the shop was passing by. Father asked me if I could jump out of the running tram. Yes, I thought and jumped after him. When he could do it, why not I? He had forgotten to tell me that I had to take my head and shoulder back, so that the speed at which I descend would make me straight. I landed but as a straight stick. And I fell forward, with some injuries on the knees. Embarrassed father got me a shoe of the quality a notch higher than what he would have

normally bought. Smell of new shoes was delicious. So was the smell of the new Puja issue book from Dev Sahitya Kutir. The trick was to open the new book in the middle, put one's nose close to it and take a deep smell. It was quite educative. My hunger to read was insatiable. I used to read whatever I could lay my hands on. When none was available, I would read Bengali Panjikas, a treasure trove! Before reading those, I never knew there were so many publications of small booklets, so many types of 'Special' amulets (we used to call these "Maduli") where the potency is directly proportional to the price. You want ordinary, it was half-a rupee. One rupee would fetch special ones. In five rupees, I think one could get all problem solving super-special ones. I could never try.

Radio-kit from Jullandhar was also an attraction. The price was merely five rupees, but I could ill afford. But somebody had tried. It was rumored that he got a packet with some nails inside. Quite some special nails, they must have been!

My son's childhood was a blur. I was busy with national projects of importance and he grew up quietly. He was a child full of smiles. At 6 months plus, he had started taking a turn and his favorite past time was seeing us having our lunch. On holidays, he was quite a matured kid. One day he jumped from the cot, asked my wife when I would come home, and next jumped face-on over the sharp corner of a metallic trunk. The gash on his right eye brow had to be stitched. I'm sure it did help too – by providing him with an identification mark for his passport! After we shifted to Colaba, he was still young and smiling, but the life became serious. Pujas came. My in-laws were quite regular in their visits and unlike many I used to enjoy their presence. My father-in-law was a great friend and the mother-in-law a great cook. So I cherished their presence and did play all tricks to extend their stay in Mumbai. My son used to get all his comics read by his "Dadu" and though he could not read then, he knew all lines of each comic by heart. So my father-in-law was duty bound to read each comic thousand times over, and missing of any single line was allowed.

We still attend Durgapuja and meet some old friends. Some have left us and we too are fading a bit. Drumbeats on the Puja day still takes us back to the past. I wish we could travel backwards, once in a while.