

Redefining worship, festivities

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Harini Nagendrathe. Credit: DH Illustration

After a two-year gap, festivals -- and festivities around festivals – are back in Bengaluru. And so is the garbage, waste and pollution.

For two long years, people were restricted from celebrating as they desired, for fear of infection and disease. Many lost their jobs, others faced challenges of large medical bills, and money was tight. In 2020 and 2021, the Ganapati and Dasara pandals that are usually set up across the city could not be seen. But this year, they were back – along with the tents selling Deepavali crackers now.

After two years of an unnatural way of life, surrounded by tales of doom and gloom, we are right to celebrate. But what should such a celebration, which is a thanksgiving offered to the gods, entail?

After the Dasara festival this year, about 5,000 tons of wet waste – bananas, lemons, ash gourds, flowers, coconuts and other discards – were dumped in small and large piles across the city. The BBMP had to press 70 extra compactors into service. A lot of the waste was mixed with plastic, making it difficult to segregate and compost. Idols of Durga, many made of Plaster of Paris and painted with lead paint, were immersed in the lakes of the city.

After the Ganesha pujas of August, 1.5 lakh Ganesha idols were also submerged in Bengaluru. This year, it was a pleasant surprise to see the large increase in idols made of mud, resplendent in natural earth colours, without toxic paint. But even here, the community pandals that were set up for the festival contributed to the noise, light and waste.

When we leave such a massive mess for someone else to deal with, the task falls on the city's long-suffering pourakarmikas, who have to dirty their hands with our trash on a festival day. Close to four months after a series of protests, when pourakarmikas were assured that they would become regular employees with fixed wages, many of them continue to be casual employees, at the mercy of the contractor who employs them.

Bengaluru is gearing up for one of the last major festivals of the year – Deepavali. After this comes Christmas. We hope the New Year that follows will herald in a 2023 that is very different from the three pandemic years that have gone by. In anticipation, thanksgiving, and celebration, all we want to do is to burst a few crackers, set a few noisy bombs alight, and fire some spectacularly coloured rockets into the sky, some say, why is the Karnataka State Pollution Control Board being such a damp squib this year – only permitting us to burst crackers from 8-10 pm?

Delhi and Haryana have banned the sale and use of all firecrackers, with violations punishable by fines and jail sentences – unprecedented in Indian history. Haryana and West Bengal have imposed restrictions similar to those in Karnataka.

Many residents are annoyed and are speaking of plans to resist such a ban, which they term an imposition. But how much more pollution can an already stressed city take? Bengaluru is living beyond its means, depleting nature within and outside the city. The results are evident in the destruction of the lakes, wetlands and kaluves, flooding homes and offices, and continuing to ravage the city even in festive times. Some homes have been flooded over a dozen times this year, and the situation shows no sign of changing.

It is a sad feature of urban life that all of us -- people, vendors and community groups alike – close our eyes to the impact we have on the city and the planet. We want to be free to celebrate, without restrictions. Free to pollute the air and add to the noise in the city, oblivious to those with asthma and breathing disorders. We want to throw the trash that accumulates after a festival wherever we like. We close our eyes -- deliberately -- to the fact that on a festival day, we are committing a deed of deep uncharity, even himse – violence – on someone else. This cannot be an act of worship.