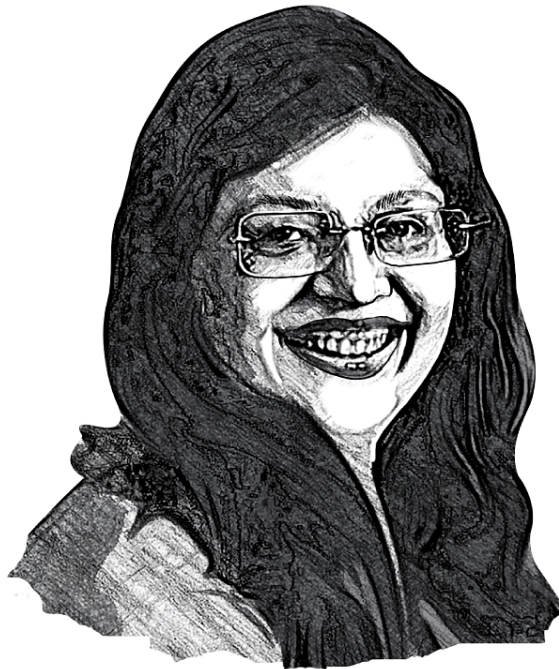


From earth to earth, living by the cycle of life

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The Gauri-Ganesha festival season has just concluded. After the worshipping and the feasts, it is now time for immersion of the idols. Many of us can remember a time when water was truly sacred, worshipped, protected, and kept clean – where Gange *puje* was conducted at the side of overflowing lakes, where traditional *bagina* was offered to the lake – an offering of natural materials, local grains, fruits and other produce like sugarcane, in trays made from bamboo and reeds. But our orientation -- as individuals, communities, indeed as a society – toward nature, water, worship has changed. For decades, vividly coloured Plaster of Paris (PoP) idols have been submerged in Bengaluru's lakes, their toxic chemicals and paints impacting the quality of our already polluted water bodies. Over time, the progress of modernity has distanced us from our relationship with sacred nature.

Thankfully, in the past few years, there has been a perceptible shift toward mud Ganeshas, made with wet clay, seeds, and other kinds of natural material – as people across the country once used to.

Of course, not all residents of the city follow this practice. Despite a BBMP ban on flex banners and PoP idols, manufacturing units in different parts of Bengaluru continue to flood the city with environmentally harmful idols.

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The Karnataka State Pollution Control Board units sprung into action, trying to enforce the ban. On the very first day of idol immersion, the BBMP documented 10,248 PoP idols (thankfully, in mobile tanks and kalyanis, and not in the lakes themselves, which are now

off-limits for immersion). This is a big number, but it is still only a small fraction, less than 7 per cent of the 152,965 idols that were immersed across Bengaluru on Day 1.

In addition to strict enforcement by the government, the effects of growing citizen awareness can also be seen this year, thanks to years of sustained effort by civic organisations and educational institutions. Even Kannada film-stars have been roped in for campaigns, distributing recyclable eco-friendly idols in the centre of the city, while environmental and civic organisations have expanded the scope of their active door-to-door campaigns.

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Changing urban cultures is not an easy task. Lecturing and proselytizing tends to put off people, but sustained efforts over time, backed with government enforcement of bans on polluting material, can make a real difference, as Bengaluru has seen.

Of course, this transformation is far from complete, and much still remains to be done. Large idols made of artificial material, adorned in brilliant colours by toxic pigments, are still seen across the city. Many large community feasts still use a lot of plastic, including flex banners and backdrops, and non-biodegradable plates and cutlery, adding to the already massive waste dumps in and around the city. Fireworks, once only used for the festival of Deepavali, are now being deployed for Gauri-Ganesha and other festivals throughout the year, polluting the air.

But the experience of the festivals this year shows us that there is still hope – that we can re-engage with the real meaning of our festivals, connecting ourselves to the soil, water and air. Many homes immerse their clay Gauri and Ganesha idols in a bucket of water, pouring the water into their garden -- for their trees, as an offering back to nature.

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In the peri-urban areas near Sarjapura, where I live, this year's festival arrangements were even more spectacular than in the previous few years – using magnificent arrangements of cane and bamboo as a backdrop for the festivities. In the city, students of local colleges have created massive Ganesha idols with recycled and biodegradable materials such as old newspapers and flour, showing how communities can creatively use local materials to create spectacular installations.

From earth to earth, these simple practices bring us back to our roots, binding us to the cycle of life. They remind us that in a time of climate change and global biodiversity collapse, there is much that each of us can still do.