

Durga Puja and Religious Practice in Australia

- Ajoy Kar, Canberra



Durga Puja is the most holy festival of Hindus. In Australia, only 12 families in New South Wales started Durga Puja in 1974, but today it is being celebrated in all major cities in Australia. The word 'Durga Puja' means 'remover of the bad fate'. The festival is a 'six-day' celebration commencing from Mahalaya to Bijoya Dashami. Bijoya means 'victory'. The central part of celebrating this Puja festival is displaying artistically depicted

idols (murti) of Durga and other God and Goddess, which are mainly imported from India. The Indian industries creating these idols are literally making their fortune from orders from temples and group worshipers in developed countries, such as Hare Krishna Headquarters in California (Source: Rush Our for the Gods by Dalrymple William, 2010).

We exist in a very religious world. In 2002, the Pew Global Attitudes Project surveyed 44 countries and found that 80% African, 90% Asian, 59% American and 38% Australian considered religion to be very important in their lives. It is now believed that the rights of people to religious faith, often mediated by cultural expression, can affirm their identities and strengthen governance in a multicultural society like Australia where Christians, Jews, Muslims or Hindus can participate in the same celebration of language and literature and enjoy the same kind of music. But this is quite different from the people who want to be identified only by its religious affiliation and share a religion, but don't share nationality. They often use religious divisions for purpose of perpetrating violence on people who do not share or respect their religion. When respect, tolerance, caring and awareness of each other are the norm in the society we live in, moving away from any of these causes discomfort, grief, fear and uncertainty.

Freedom of religion and belief are recognized as human rights in Australia, which is home of Christians (64%), no religion (19%), Jews (4%), Buddhists (2%), Muslims (1.7%) and Hindus (1%) (Source: Being me: Knowing You- Resource Leader Training, 2010). Immigrants from all over the world have brought their own religion here in Australia as they believe religion has influence in their lives. These faith communities have raised concerns that the practice of Parliament's opening prayers only reflecting Australia's majority faith. It is important that nation's leaders demonstrate acceptance and appreciation of diversity in Australia, through a rostered system of prayers and readings from the major faith and secular traditions (Source: Australian Human Rights

Commission's report on 'Freedom of Religion and Belief in 21st Century Australia', 2011).

Therefore, it has now raised broader questions about how Australia deals with religion and the issues raised by religious expression in democratic Australia which is partly a Christian country, partly a multi-faith country and partly a secular country.