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Bengali atmosphere recreated at Conn. event

Rituals, performances mark Saraswati puja; 80 attend

By AMISHI SHAH



MIDDLETOWN, Conn. — The sound of the conch reverberated in the hall and the smell of incense created an apt atmosphere for the occasion.

Added to this were the voices of women performing the ullo ritual, a distinct sound generated by clucking of the tongue against the roof of the mouth.

It was the perfect atmosphere for the Saraswati Puja celebrations organized by the Bengali Association of Greater Hartford. Bengalis paid their obeisance to goddess Saraswati at the event, held at the Connecticut Valley Hindu Temple in Middletown, Conn. on Jan. 27. Around 80 people attended the event.

Women, draped in colorful silk saris, were glad to meet others from their community, while children enjoyed themselves in their Indian outfits and looked forward to performing Indian dances on stage.



The Bengali Association of Greater Hartford held its Saraswati Puja in Middletown, Conn. on Jan. 27. Traditional pujas and performances by children marked the event. Photo by AMISHI SHAH

“Since my children are performing a dance to a song of Rabindranath Tagore, they have also been taught the meaning of the song,” she said.



A report on celebrations held by the Bengali Association of Greater Hartford is part of our Connecticut and Rhode Island focus section. Photo by AMISHI SHAH

The function began with the priest chanting holy verses. As the puja continued, the people who attended the function got to meet fellow Bengali friends and relatives. Towards the end of the puja, flowers were offered to the deities, and holy verses were recited. Holy water was then sprinkled on the people present there.

Manoj Ray, a resident of Prospect, Conn. performed the ceremony. Once the puja was over, Prasad (edibles sanctified by offering them to the deities) was distributed to all those present, which was then followed by lunch.

“I look forward to the puja every year as it is a good opportunity for my children to know their roots and some details of Bengali culture. Although I am spiritual, I am not a regular visitor to the temple. So this is a way for me to pray to the deity as well,” said Animita Saha, a resident of Simsbury, Conn.

Of a similar opinion is Rukmini Mazumdar. She said that she is very particular about her children understanding and speaking Bengali and knowing their customs and traditions.

If educating children was a reason to attend the puja, another reason was to socialize and meet people from the community. "I really appreciate the fact that although we are busy professionals, everyone still manages to come together for a religious function like this on the weekend. It is an excellent opportunity to meet people and also those who are new to the community. It is a good chance for them to know more people and acquaint themselves," said Nilanjana Maulik, a professor at University of Connecticut Health Center at Farmington. She added that she really appreciated the strength of the women who performed the ullo ritual, as it requires a lot of energy to give that resonating effect continuously.

Suresh Verma, a resident of Hartford, Conn. said he looked forward to coming to the Saraswati Puja for being a part of the ceremonies, and to receive the sprinkled holy water. "This also makes me feel closer to home as if I were in India, I would have gone to the temple," said Verma.

Apart from the function having religious importance, it was also a place for children aged two to 10 to showcase their abilities. There were two dances, two song recitals as well as one performance on the guitar. Trisha Deb and Dahlia Ghoshal, who have been training to play the guitar, performed two English songs. What really went well with the audience was a dance, which was performed on a medley of four Bengali songs that were played back to back.

The audience applauded and cheered the children, who regaled the audience with songs of yesteryear. "There were small mistakes that the children did and the 2-year-old looked at the 4-year-old for steps and the latter looked at the older child. But what mattered was that the children had practiced a lot and made genuine efforts to know the meaning of the songs they performed to," said Somnath Deb, general secretary of the association and a resident of Glastonbury, Conn.

For more information on the Bengali Association of Greater Hartford, please visit www.baghonline.org.

