

229. Celebration of Ganesh Festival: Environmental Issues in the State of Maharashtra, India

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Abstract. India is the country of festivals. The celebration of festivals today has become a subject of discussion. The proposed study enquires into the present state of the celebration of the Ganesh festival in the state of Maharashtra, India. The idealistic rationale behind the celebration of the festival has the socio-religious basis which inculcates among people the sense of unity and integrity. The analytical study of the initial stage of the festival and the current state of celebration indicates a drastic difference. The idealistic rationale seems to have lost and the celebration today is leading to several serious environmental issues. The study investigates the impact of the festival on the environment and presents statistically how it has led to a radical increase in the noise, water and air pollution in recent years. Today many NGOs are working to spread awareness about the issue but the communication has to be at a greater level and hence the masses need to know the hazardous impact of the celebration more effectively. The recommended model (as below) through this study endeavors to create this awareness on a larger scale.

Keywords: Communication, Environmental issues, Ganesh festival, Pollution

Introduction

India is well known for its culture all over the world. The Indian culture is an admixture of diverse cultures within the country. 'It appears as if the inhabitants from the Himalayas in the north to Kanyakumari in the south, and Kutchh in the west to Arunachal in the east are woven together into a beautiful tapestry'.¹ The unique feature of the Indian culture is its unity in diversity. The Indian society is secular and hence accommodates people from diverse socio-religious backgrounds open-heartedly. This discussion on diversity leads us to the varied socio-religious practices and ways of life of people in India. The celebration of innumerable festivals is an outcome of this dynamic socio-cultural set up. People of different religions celebrate the festivals which have been a part of their traditions since ancient times. The Hindus in India are said to celebrate the maximum number of festivals which have been recommended since the Vedic times. The very concept of worshipping the 'Pancha Yajnya', has led to different religious beliefs and practices. The Vedic scriptures such as Manusmriti and Rigvedas have recommended people the ideal ways of life. These practices gradually became larger and social communities started celebrating them on a greater scale. The celebrations of these numerous festivals lead to creating peace, harmony and social and cultural unity among the members of the society. It cannot be denied that these festivals have their base on many prescribed socio-religious concepts and hence they are an integral part of India's unique cultural identity. In modern times also, the people of India celebrate festivals quite vigorously and enthusiastically. It has been observed that in recent times, a majority of people seem to have forgotten the ideal rationale behind the celebration of the festivals and the extravagant celebrations are leading to create several environmental problems. The present study investigates the celebration of the Ganesh festival in the state of Maharashtra and probes into its impact on the environment leading to increase in the level of pollution. The major objective of the study is to make recommendations for the more effective mass communication of the eco-friendly Ganesh festival.

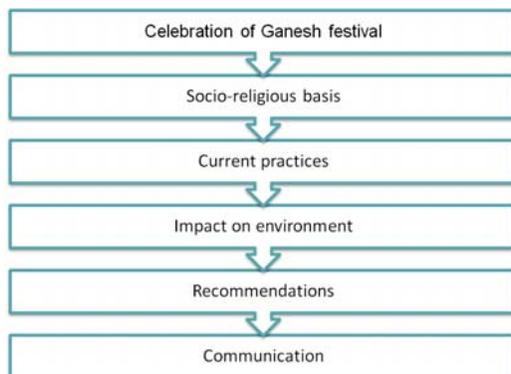
Background

The Ganesh festival is celebrated by the Hindus in India in the Hindu month of Bhadrapad (August/September) from the Ganesh Chaturthi (the Day of birth of the lord Ganesh) to the Anant Chaturdashi i.e. usually the period of 10 days.

The tradition of the devotion to Lord Ganesh among the Maharashtrian Hindus can be divided into two categories: a) The Sectarian b) The General or Universal. The sectarian Ganesh devotees (Ganesh Sampraday) can be traced back as early as the sixth and seventh centuries. The sectarian movement was limited to the Brahmins who worshipped Ganesh as their family deity (Kuladaivat) or devoted themselves to Ganesh for reasons of personal choice (Ishtadaivat). The Ganesh cult fully bloomed in Maharashtra during the reign of Brahmin Peshwas (Rulers of the Maratha kingdom in the 18th century). They themselves worshipped Ganesh as their Kuldaivat. They sponsored

Ganesh festival during the Hindu month of Bhadrapad (August/September) publicly to demonstrate their religious sentiments and invoke Lord Ganesh to protect them from obstacles. Today this Ganesh cult is limited to the Deshstha and Kokanastha Brahmins.

The general or universal devotion to Lord Ganesh is expressed by Hindus of all castes and sects. Hindus regard him as the 'Over-comer of obstacles'. The Ganesh festival which was restricted only to the Brahmins was brought into public and general observance through the efforts of Bal Gangadhar Tilak in Pune in 1893 as a means of mobilizing large number of Hindus for religious revival and political independence from the clutches of the British. Since then the Ganesh festival has been celebrated quite vigorously and enthusiastically by the Hindus in India.² The celebration of the festival today takes place on a larger scale through the intermingling of traditional and modern practices, which have been discussed below.



Traditional practices

The traditional practices can also be called as idealistic practices of the celebration of Ganesh festival as the rationale behind the celebration had been idealistic and the objectives were spiritual and social. Socio-religious integrity has always been an objective of the festival. The festival is celebrated at two levels A) Individual B) Social community. The ritualistic placement of the Ganesh idols on the day of Ganesh chaturthi and the immersion of the idols into water on the day of Anant chaturdashi is the traditional practice. During this period, the idols of Ganesh are worshiped by performing various religious rituals in the houses and the social pandals. On the day of the Anant Chaturdashi, public processions of the Ganesh idols of the social communities are conducted and at the end of the day the idols are immersed in sea, rivers and public lakes and wells.

Modern practices

Although the traditional practices are followed in the modern times also, the celebration has become more extravagant with the increase in population and therefore the number of individuals and social communities. The innumerable Ganesh idols (made of clay and plaster of paris by the local sculptors) are purchased at the individual and social community levels. The celebration of the festival takes place on a huge scale that is leading to several environmental issues. The immersion of the Ganesh idols and other material required to perform rituals lead to cause water pollution whereas the huge loudspeakers played during the whole festival increases noise pollution. The hazards are well-known but are little considered by the masses.

Impact on Environment

The Celebration of Ganesh Festival today, particularly, its immersion process has adverse effects on environment. It causes pollution quite severely, viz. noise, water and air pollution. The present study endeavors to analyse this issue and provide measures and recommendations for their effective communication. The detailed analysis of these 3 types of pollution has been presented in the subsequent points as below.

Noise pollution

The firecrackers used during procession, cause noise pollution. It has adverse effect on the health such as hearing loss (temporary or sometimes permanent), high blood pressure, heart attack and sleeping disturbances.

The drums, music systems used during procession create noise which is very much above the normal level.

According to D.B. Smith, 60 dB (decibels) is the normal level of noise during conversation, while 80 dB noise is painful³. As illustrated in Table 1, the noise level during Ganesh festival is far above these values.

Table 1: Noise level observed in major cities in Maharashtra during Ganesh Festival

Name of the city	Noise Level in dB 'A'				
	2007		2008		
	Min	Max	Min	Max	Min
Mumbai	63.4	102.7	50.2	91.3	46
105.8					
Navi Mumbai	85.9	100.6	51.3	95.8	42.1
93.3					
Thane	59.2	92.4	56		96.5
60.1	95				
Pune	56.8	99.3	62		107
53.3	101.8				
Nashik	40.2	89.3	41.9	99.8	
61.5	97.3				
Aurang- abad	65.2	114.1	51.3	99.5	
41.3	96.5				
Nagpur	62.2	98.3	60.7	85.9	53
89.6					
Kalyan	65.4	103.8	59.6	92.7	67.8
95.7					
Amravati	52.6	93.6	59	79.7	51.7
85.6					
Jalgaon	54.0	102.9	60	79	
54.5	96.3				
Kolhapur	56.9	105.4	65	86	
52.9	104.5				
Satara	62.5	96.7	66	100	
66.1	92.2				

(The data is excerpted from the 'Report 2009' of the Maharashtra State Pollution Control Board.)

Almost in all major cities, it is approaching to 100 dB. Decrease in trend in noise level is observed in Navi Mumbai and Aurangabad in the last 3 years. It is due to the various citizen awareness programs and campaigns conducted by Maharashtra Pollution Control Board and other Regulatory Agencies.⁴ It indicates that if communication is effective and on the larger scale, it will help in improving the situation.

Water pollution

The immersion symbolizes the return of Ganesh from the earth, after removing the obstacles and unhappiness of his devotees. If it is a small idol (upto 1 feet height) which is made up of natural soil, it will not affect the water after immersion. But due to giant sized idols (above 25 feet height), that too, made up of plaster of paris prove to be hazardous to the environment. Also the material used for the decoration purpose is non-degradable that comprises thermocol, plastic which again leads to pollution. All these factors are summarized in Table 2.

The water pollution caused by the immersion affects quite adversely the aquatic life as well. In the nutshell, it could be stated that the immersion of innumerable idols into different water resources causes serious pollution.

Table 2: Effect of immersion process on water

Cause	Contents	Effects
Immersion of idols	---	Block
		the waterflow resulting in stagnation and breeding of mosquitoes and other harmful pests
Plaster of Paris	Gypsum, sulphur, phosphorus, magnesium	Take several months to dissolve in water and poisons the water of lake, ponds, river, wells etc.
Chemical paints	Mercury, lead, cadmium, carbon	Increases acidity and heavy metal content of water
Decorative material pollution of water,	Thermocol, plastic	Being non-degradable causes

Air pollution

Firecrackers used during the procession lead to air pollution. The chemicals used in firecrackers are harmful to the health of living beings as indicated in Table 3.

Table 3: Effect of firecrackers on health

Chemical	Impact
Copper	Irritation of respiratory tract
Cadmium	to kidney
Lead	Anemia and damage to kidney
Lead	Affects the nervous system
Magnesium	Its dust and fumes cause metal fume fever
Sodium	Reacts violently with moisture and can attack the skin.
Zinc	Leads to vomiting
Nitrate	Could lead to mental impairment
Nitrite	Could lead to coma

(Data Excerpted from the official website of the *Kalpavriksh Environment Action Group, Pune5*)

Measures to Save Environment

- The idols of Ganesh should be strictly made of naturally occurring clay (shaadu) which dissolves in water within a few hours after immersion.
- ‘One idol per village or area or housing society’ will reduce the number of idols to be immersed. It is to be noted that nearly 1.5 crore idols are immersed in the major cities of Maharashtra.
- The immersion should be done at home in a small water tank and the clay can be utilized for plants. This will avoid the pollution of the natural water resources such as sea, rivers and lakes.
- Instead of immersing idols, betel nut which symbolizes the idol may be immersed. The same idol can be used every year.
- Use of permanent idols such as idols made of metal, silver, marble stone will avoid water pollution.
- Natural colours should be used for the idols.
- The decoration material should also be incurred from natural resources i.e. flowers and paper etc. The use of thermocol and plastic should strictly be avoided.
- The material used for the rituals during the festival should not be disposed of in water.
- The use of loud speakers and music systems should be strictly prohibited by law to avoid noise pollution.
- There should be control on the use of crackers during the festival.
- It is a responsibility of the individuals to limit the use of colours during the procession as they have harmful effects on skin and eyes.

Recommendations

As the measures suggested above are important and even several NGOs and Government agencies try to spread awareness about them, it has been observed that the implementation of these measures fails to a greater extent. The extravagance of the celebration of this spiritual festival continues to degrade the environment and increase the levels of pollution. The problem identified through the study is the ineffective communication of these measures which must be communicated effectively if they are to be implemented successfully. Several NGOs and Government agencies are trying to communicate the measures to masses but the communication needs to be done on a greater scale. The recommendations for the effective communication of these measures are presented as below:

- All these measures can be incorporated in the syllabus of the subject ‘Environmental studies’ in primary schools and colleges.
- Awareness programmes such as slide-show presentations, street-plays can be organized on a greater scale in schools, colleges and at public places.

- The government agencies, NGOs, schools and colleges may form groups for carrying out such awareness programmes on a greater scale.
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- Small video clips can be shown in the cinema halls before the movie starts or during intervals.
- The video clips may also be shown on national television for spreading awareness.
- Leaflets describing the measures can be circulated a few days before the Ganesh festival through newspapers.
- Posters and hoardings communicating the measures may also be displayed at public places.
- Banners prohibiting the immersion of idols may be displayed at seas, rivers, lakes and ponds.
- The print media such as newspapers and magazines may publish the measures for the eco-friendly Ganesh festival.
- A documentary showcasing the harmful impact of the current practices should be prepared and shown at public places.
- Public announcements regarding the Dos and Don'ts may be made before and during the festival.

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