Durga Puja may be one of the biggest festivals of the Hindus, but very few may know that the Jaintias, one of the indigenous tribes of Meghalaya too worship the goddess of power with equal fervour and devotion.

Hundreds of Pnar people — as Jaintias are locally known — both Christians and believers of indigenous faith, and tourists throng the ancient temple at Nartiang, about 65 km east of Shillong, during the five-day long Durga Puja to take part in the festivities.

The tradition goes long back to over 400 years, even as differences of opinion exist about its antiquity among the local historians and traditional tribal leaders.

Perched on a hill top, overlooking a stream Myntang, the Durga Bari at Nartiang in the Jaintia Hills district — named after the tribe, Jaintia — was built by the Jaintia kings sometime during the 16th-17th centuries.

“Nartiang was the summer capital of the Jaintia kingdom, which was set up at Jaintiapur, now in the Sylhet district of Bangladesh,” said noted historian Prof JB Bhattacharjee. “The palace, though in ruins, still stands there as a testimony to the Jaintia heritage,” he said.

The Jaintia kings used to spend the summer in the hills to escape the unbearable heat in the plains and return to Jaintiapur after Durga Puja.

The royal tradition continued till the British annexed the Jaintia territories in 1835, thereby ending the Jaintia reign in the plains.

“Twenty two generations of Jaintia kings worshipped Durga and Jayanteswari, the ancestral deity of the Jaintia kings, for centuries,” said the young temple priest, Molay Desmukh.

The 20-year-old boy took charge of the Durga temple five years ago after the demise of his father Gopendra Desmukh. Interestingly, Deshmukh
priests were brought to Nartiang by the Jaintia kings from Bengal, not Maharashtra as the surname may suggest.

They are there at Nartiang for generations, with Molay representing the 26th lineage, and are adapted well to the local culture, social milieu and even married to local tribal families.

Recently, the dilapidated centuries-old temple structure was demolished, and in its place a new one was built with minimal change in design and material.

Durga and Jayantewari are placed on the same place and worshipped together. Both the idols are made of "astadhatu" (eight precious metals), and each is about 6-8 inch tall.

“The rituals and religious functions during the Durga Puja are performed as per the Hindu ways,” the priest said. The ceremony begins with ablution of both the idols, which are then draped in colourful new attires and ornaments before the rituals.

On the day of Navami, as usual, sacrifice of animals is done.

“However, during the royal Jaintia rule there used to be a scary practice of human sacrifice,” the priest said. Pointing at a small square hole inside the temple near the altar of idols, the priest said he was told by his father that “the severed head used to be rolled through the hole connected to a secret tunnel that falls into the adjacent river Myntang.”

It’s believed that the practice was stopped by the British, after the sacrifice of a British subject.

“Instead, now, water gourds are sacrificed, along with goats, chicken, pigeon, etc,” the priest said. A human mask is placed on the gourds, as a symbolic act of human sacrifice.

Apart from this unique tradition, there is another indigenous feature that marks the Durga Puja at Nartiang. The Durga idol at Nartiang temple is permanent and is not sent for immersion after the last day of worship.

However, the priest instals a young banana plant beside the Durga idol, which is taken out after the completion of the worship and immersed in the nearby river Myntang.
The entire expenditure of the week-long puja is borne by the Dolloi (the traditional village chief, who is non-Christian) of Nartiang. An executive puja committee under him oversees the proceedings of the celebrations.

Even though the majority of the tribal population in the State of Meghalaya has embraced Christianity, a sizeable section of the community has retained its indigenous culture, religion and customs.


Get Connected With The Power Of Silence*
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Times of India
Sumit Dhanraj

What is silence? It is to retreat in wordless prayer, gazing out the window of your heart, and going for slow meandering walks in a garden.
You can look for silence in two ways: inner silence and outer silence. Outer silence helps us find inner silence. But inner silence is more precious. There are two kinds of inner silence: passive and active. In passive inner silence the heart and mind are at rest at the unconscious level whereas in active inner silence the heart and mind are at rest at the conscious level. We are consciously quiet and this is necessary to experience God.
In silence, we feel the presence of God though we may not see Him. Suppose we are seated in a room during the night and talking to one of our dear friends. Suddenly the lights go off. In the darkness as we are seated by the side of our friend, we do not hold our friend’s hand, we do not talk to him; we do not see him yet we feel his presence and that feeling implies strength, love, joy, peace, togetherness, and support. The same thing happens during the period of silence.
Silence is wordless prayer. Silence transcends thoughts, concepts, images and reasoning. It is a state of consciousness in which there are no words or images. In silence, if at all there are words or images, they should merge from inside and not from outside. Silence recharges body and mind.
Every week St Francis of Assisi, who is called the second Christ, used to go to a cave in a place called Portiuncula and remained there in silence. M K Gandhi observed silence on all Mondays. “For sheer adventure,” writes Patricia Clifford in her introduction to Sitting Still, “exploring the
inner space of the human spirit has to equal the exploration of outer space. Inner space holds a realm of existence not readily apparent when we are in the grip of a strident external world. A powerful launching vehicle for the discovery of the realm within is silence. It is in the vessel of silence that inner transformation can appear.”

Silence can be acquired by just letting go of thoughts, distractions, and images. Forced silence is of no use. You can try chanting mantras or prayers what is called centring prayer to enter silence. Attention is to be given to the correct pronunciation and intonation of the mantra. Sacred vibrations by their very nature have the power to put our spirit at rest. To fix our eyes on an object, preferably a sacred object and to gaze at it constantly, is called as icon prayer. What is basic is the act of gazing. Gazing by its very nature has the power of placing our spirit at rest to achieve intrinsic silence.

Just as we care for our bodies with good food and rest, so we must also care for our spiritual selves, that part of us that is connected to God. If we are spiritually ill, our bodies and minds also become sick. This is why regular prayer and times of silent contemplation are necessary parts of our daily lives. Periodic self-examination and learning help too. Meeting God becomes more achievable in an atmosphere of complete silence.