

Impact of Idol Immersion on the Environment

Amidst the heavy showers, Lord Ganesha makes a grand debut! Right now Indians across the globe are celebrating Ganesh Chaturthi with great fervor, especially Maharashtra. This ten day festival marks the birthday of Lord Ganesha, god of intellect and wisdom. And it will now end with great pomp and fun as the followers are gearing up for Ganesh Visarjan (immersion). Widespread campaigns are already on for Green (eco-friendly) Ganesh Chaturthi festival but still a large section of the society are unaware of the pollution and environmental damage caused by Plaster of Paris idols and chemical paints. Some large Ganesha Pandal committees, to attract maximum crowd or with the passion of celebrating this festival conveniently forget the environmental impact caused by the idols!

Image source:
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Eco_friendly_Ganesha_-_An_eco_friendly_Ganesh_idol_made_of_clay.jpg



Ganesh idols are generally made up of clay, Plaster of Paris (POP), plastic and cement. Toxic paints are also used in decorating the idol. After the immersion, the ingredients of the statue do not completely dissolve in water which then leads to environmental pollution. Idols are bid farewell by taking out grand processions leading to large water bodies. The cause for worry for several years has been the amount of pollution both, land and water that are caused during and on the day, the festival ends. Ganpati processions are known for their high use of loud firecrackers, drums and music. Even though the Maharashtra government relaxes restrictions on the use of loudspeakers for at least four or five days of the Ganesh festival, Ganpati processions are notorious for their loud firecrackers, drumming and music – often well beyond permissible limits – throughout the 10 days.

Over the years, citizen activists have repeatedly reported violations and filed petitions demanding compliance with noise pollution and silence zone norms, particularly during festivals. On the other hand, the Ganpati mandals – often backed by sponsorship from political parties – have been demanding the freedom to celebrate festivals without such restrictions.

A huge amount of waste is generated from the 10-day long festival. From flowers, fruits, incense sticks stuffed in polyethylene bags, idols made of Plaster of Paris that are toxic for under-water ecology, all go straight into local water bodies.

Pollution is created by:

- * Plaster of Paris (POP) is not a naturally occurring material and contains gypsum, sulphur, phosphorus and magnesium. The idols take several months to dissolve in water and in the process poison the waters of lake, ponds, rives and seas.
- * The chemical paints used to decorate the Ganesh idol contain mercury, lead, cadmium and carbon and this increases the acidity and heavy metal content in the water.
- * Several accessories used during the Ganesh Puja like Thermocole, plastic flowers, cloth, incense, camphor and numerous other materials are dumped carelessly adding more strain to the already polluted rivers and lakes.
- * Careless dumping of Ganesh idols in water bodies blocks the natural flow of water. This results in stagnation and breeding of mosquitoes and other harmful pests.

Impact of such pollutants on environment:

- * The polluted water causes several diseases including skin diseases.
- * The pollution from idols also damages the ecosystem, kills fishes and water plants.
- * In many areas, the same polluted water gets pumped into homes.

There are several eco-friendly ways that can be adopted to prevent reckless polluting of water bodies.

1. One could reuse the same idol every year and immerse a betel nut instead to symbolically complete the ritual.
2. Making idols out of naturally occurring materials like Clay or Sandalwood paste is always a better option, since the idols dissolve completely in water.
3. Decorating the idols with garlands, paint synthesized from plant pigments and turmeric.
4. Immersing the idols in small, closed tanks than water bodies helps contain the pollution.

Alternatives/ Solutions:

- * Use eco-friendly clay idols painted with natural colors.
- * Use permanent idols made of stone and perform a symbolic immersion and reuse the idol each year.
- * Avoid public water bodies to immerse the idols, instead immerse idol in bucket or tub.

Green move by Pune Municipal Corporation:

For the first time in recent years, aggressive campaigning by city environmentalists, schools, Pune Municipal Corporation (PMC) and organizations such as the National Chemical Laboratory and Cummins Group (India), has helped raise the city's eco-sensitivity index to a historic high during Ganeshotsav.

While increasing number of people than ever before have switched to ecofriendly clay idols and have pledged not to pollute the rivers with Plaster of Paris (PoP) Ganesh idols, even those with PoP idols plan to immerse them in special civic tanks or in buckets of water at home with sodium bicarbonate powder provided by the PMC.

Special initiatives such as the clay idol-making workshop organized by the PMC to create a Guinness World Record and workshops organized across the city by schools and NGOs have also helped raise awareness about the need for an ecofriendly Ganeshotsav.

PMC's initiative in association with the NCL and Cummins, to distribute packets of Ammonium Bicarbonate to idol sellers, to be given free with every PoP idol sold, seems to have picked up great momentum this year. The initiative was launched last year, along with the provision to immerse the PoP idols in civic tanks instead of rivers.

We all need to realize that although it is very important to worship the god and celebrate the festival, it is equally important to think about the environment consciously.

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