

Flood damper on Puja prep in Kerala

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Calcutta: Tapan Jana is worried. The idol-maker from East Midnapore usually has orders for five Durga pujas in Kerala. But with his train getting cancelled last Tuesday and no tickets available this Tuesday, his visit is getting pushed back.

Nor has Jana been able to contact one of his clients in Kozhikode where college students hold a puja. "That area, I hear, is badly hit. My calls to them are not going through. I hope the boys are safe," he said.

China Pal of Kumartuli is keeping an eye on the news. Her boys went to Kochi on July 29 and made the clay structure for a puja by the Bengali employees of a construction company. "They came back in the nick of time." But now they need to go back to finish the idol. "As time is running short, the organisers have sent us flight tickets. But the pictures on TV have left me scared."

Though the festival is two months away, the flood is sure to take the sheen off



Idols made by China Pal's workers for a puja in Kochi lie unfinished

this year's Durga puja in Kerala, what with resources running dry and cost of raw materials spiralling.

"The Pujas are the last thing on our minds," said Kaberi Sarkar, a resident of Aluva, in Ernakulam district, who is now on a train back home. When the water had started rising on August 15 evening, her family had

remained in their two-storeyed house. "When I called them next morning from Calcutta, my daughter was weeping that water was already chest-high on the ground floor. They were planning to move upstairs. But I told them to carry just the TV and the oven up, collect important documents and leave right away. They

could not even lock the door," said Kaberi.

The family has taken shelter in a relief camp and Saturday was the first time they could go back for a look. "All the furniture is ruined. The floors are covered in such odorous muck that we cannot go home till it is cleaned. Labour is available, mostly Bengalis, but they will not

charge a penny less than Rs 2,000 per day plus meals."

The puja, organised by Kerala Banga Sanskriti Sangha, of which Kaberi is a member, is held in Kadavanthra, an area that escaped inundation. It is the oldest puja of Kochi. But president Abhinaba Das is worried about getting sponsors. "All corporate budgets are being spent for flood relief. We too used our Onam celebration fund to buy relief materials."

"Even raw materials required for idol-making, like straw, are scarce. So we have asked our idol-maker from Bengal to push back his visit by a couple of weeks," said his wife Alpona.

The state capital Thiruvananthapuram largely escaped the deluge. "*Ebar pujo nomo nomo korey kortehabe.* (The puja will be down to bare essentials)," sighed Suparna Sengupta, president of Trivandrum Bengalee Association. The daily community lunch is likely to be scrapped. Cultural programmes will be curtailed. "Where will we get funds from? Even clay for the idol is costlier than rice."