

CLIMATE CRISIS & TRADITION

Remembering the Meaning of Puja in a Time of Climate Crisis

Dr. Ranjan Datta, PhD

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When I hear the word puja, many people immediately think of a religious ceremony, flowers offered before a deity, incense, or prayers inside a temple. My childhood memories are different. I remember the flowing waters of the Titas River, my mother's hands planting seeds, the fragrance of medicinal plants after the rain, the songs of birds returning with changing seasons, and the stories my elders shared while working on the land. For me, puja was never separated from everyday life. It was a way of living with land and land-based spirituality. Growing up in river-land in Brahmanbaria, Bangladesh, I learned that puja was an action rather than merely a ritual. It was an action of remembering, protecting, growing, healing, teaching, and building relationships. It connected us with water, land, plants, animals, insects, ancestors, and future generations. Every ceremony reminded us that we were not separate from nature but one small part of a much larger living community. Looking back today, I realize that these childhood experiences shaped my understanding of sustainability long before I learned the word in a classroom.

Story One: Water Puja—The River That Raised Our Community

Some of my earliest memories are of the Titas River (i.e., Name of the local river). Every morning and evening, our family offered prayers to the river. At that time, I simply followed my parents and grandparents. As a child, I did not fully understand why we prayed to water. Today I know that those prayers were expressions of gratitude, respect, and responsibility.

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The Titas River was the centre of our lives. It provided fish that fed our families throughout the year. It supplied water for cooking, washing, bathing, and everyday household activities. Boats travelled along the river carrying people, goods, and stories from one village to another. Cultural festivals, religious ceremonies, local trade, and family gatherings all revolved around the river. The river was not simply a source of water; it was the foundation of our community. Our elders often reminded us that the river carried the memories of our ancestors. It held our language, our songs, our histories, and our identity. To protect the river was therefore to protect ourselves. Water was not something we owned. Rather, we belonged to the river because our lives depended upon it. Looking back, I understand that water puja was also a lesson in environmental stewardship. It taught us that clean water requires care, that rivers should never be taken for granted, and that community wellbeing depends on healthy ecosystems. Every prayer strengthened our collective responsibility to protect the river for those who would come after us.

Story Two: Puja with Multispecies—Learning Biodiversity Through Everyday Life

Every season brought new harvesting celebrations. During these occasions, my mother collected vegetables, edible leaves, roots, and herbs from our surroundings. One of my favourite memories comes from winter when she prepared a curry using 101 different vegetable leaves. As a child, I was amazed that she could recognize so many plants growing around us. Each plant had its own story.

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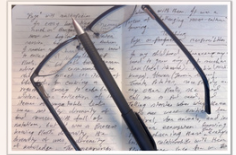
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Some appeared only during the rainy season, while others flourished in winter or autumn. Some were grown in our garden, others collected from roadsides, riverbanks, forests, or agricultural fields. Together they created an extraordinary diversity of food, colours, textures, and flavours. My mother never described these plants merely as vegetables. She explained how each one supported insects, birds, animals, soil, or human health. She knew where they grew best, when they should be harvested, and how they contributed to the wellbeing of the whole ecosystem. Collecting these plants became one of my earliest lessons about biodiversity.

Today I realize that this was also a form of puja. It honoured multispecies life by protecting diversity rather than promoting uniformity. Every plant represented a different form of knowledge and a different relationship. Diversity was not simply appreciated—it was actively nurtured. This understanding stood in sharp contrast to monocultural farming. Monoculture values one crop, one market, and often one way of thinking. My childhood taught me something different: resilience comes from diversity. A healthy community depends upon many plants, many species, many stories, and many relationships living together.



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Story Three: Puja as Responsibility—Seeds, Ancestors, and Food Sovereignty

Perhaps my deepest memories are of planting seeds with my mother. Whenever she planted bottle gourd, pumpkin, tomatoes, potatoes, flowers, or other vegetables, she invited me to join her. Planting was never simply a cultivated activity. Every seed came with a story. My mother spoke about our ancestors who had protected local seed varieties over generations. She explained why local seeds were essential not only for our family but also for birds, insects, livestock, and the entire ecosystem. Those stories transformed ordinary gardening into a lesson about responsibility. I learned that seeds carried memory. They preserved generations of observation, experimentation, and care. Losing a local seed meant losing part of our cultural heritage as well as our ecological resilience. Growing plants required patience, observation, and commitment. We watched them every day, protected them from pests, watered them during dry periods, and celebrated their harvest. This was puja. It was an action of growing life, nurturing relationships, and accepting responsibility. Today I understand that these practices also taught food sovereignty and self-determination. Families who preserved local seeds maintained greater independence from commercial markets. They retained the ability to grow diverse crops adapted to local environments while preserving cultural identity. For my mother, seeds were never commodities. They were living relatives entrusted to our care. Through them, she taught me that sustainability begins with responsibility rather than ownership.

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Story Four: Puja as Health Science—Healing Through Relationships with the Land

Modern healthcare often begins in hospitals and pharmacies. My childhood taught me that healing also begins in the land. Around our home grew Tulsi (holy basil), ginger, mango trees, banana plants, and many other medicinal species. These plants were used to treat fever, digestive illnesses, diabetes, wounds, coughs, and numerous other health concerns. Before seeking medicines elsewhere, families often turned first to the knowledge carried by plants.

The medicines themselves were only part of the learning. Equally important were the stories explaining when to harvest a plant, which parts should be used, how they should be prepared, and for whom they were appropriate. This knowledge passed naturally from elders to children through everyday life. Looking back, I cannot remember frequently visiting hospitals for common illnesses. Our surroundings provided much of what we needed. Of course, modern medicine has its place, but my childhood taught me that communities possess their own sophisticated systems of health knowledge developed over generations. Knowing medicinal plants, respecting them, and learning how to use them responsibly were all forms of puja. These practices reminded us that human health depends upon healthy ecosystems. When medicinal plants disappear, communities lose not only biological diversity but also knowledge, cultural memory, and self-reliance.

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Story Five: Puja as Multiple Ways of Knowing—Living Within the Circle of Life

Throughout my childhood, we celebrated many different pujas. We honoured the Sun God, Moon God, Water God, Rice Paddy God, Education God, and many others. As a child, I simply accepted these ceremonies as part of everyday life. Only later did I begin to understand their deeper meaning. These gods were not distant beings removed from the world. They lived within our surroundings, and we lived with them. Each represented a different relationship with the natural world, yet together they expressed a holistic understanding of life.

The sun sustained crops and warmth. The moon guided seasons and agricultural rhythms. Water supported every living being. Rice symbolized nourishment and gratitude. Education reminded us that learning itself is sacred. These ceremonies taught that there are many ways of knowing the world. Knowledge does not exist only in books or universities. Rivers teach. Forests teach. Birds teach. Seasons teach. Ancestors teach. Plants teach. Every living and non-living being carries knowledge. Most importantly, these ceremonies taught humility. Human beings are not above nature. We exist because of water, plants, insects, animals, soil, and countless other living beings. We are one part of an interconnected cycle of life. This understanding remains one of the greatest gifts of my childhood. It reminds me that sustainability cannot be achieved through human-centred thinking alone. It requires recognizing that all beings possess value and that our futures are inseparable from theirs.

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Today, many people understand puja primarily as a religious ritual. My childhood taught me something much deeper. Puja was never separate from everyday life. It was a philosophy of relationship. Through water puja, I learned that rivers sustain communities and deserve protection. Through multispecies puja, I learned that biodiversity is the foundation of resilience. Through planting seeds with my mother, I learned that food sovereignty begins with responsibility. Through medicinal plants, I discovered that healing grows from relationships with healthy ecosystems. Through many forms of puja, I learned that multiple ways of knowing can exist together without one dominating another. Together, these stories reveal that puja is much more than worship. It is a way of honouring reciprocity between humans and the living world. It teaches that sustainability begins with relationships—with rivers, forests, plants, insects, animals, ancestors, and future generations. It reminds us that community wellbeing cannot be separated from ecological wellbeing, and that responsibility is more important than ownership. As our world faces climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, and the erosion of local knowledge, I often return to these childhood memories along the Titas River. They remind me that the solutions to many of today's environmental crises are technological or political. They are also relational. They begin by remembering that we are participants in the living Earth, not its masters. For me, that remains the deepest meaning of puja: an ongoing action of remembering, protecting, learning, healing, and living together in reciprocity with all living and non-living beings. It is not simply a ritual performed on special occasions. It is a lifelong commitment to sustaining relationships that make life itself possible.

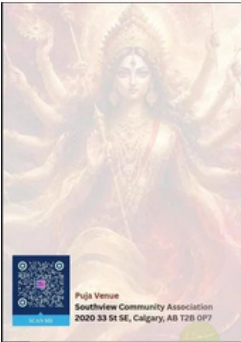
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CALGARY NEWS

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CELEBRATION

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We are looking for some writing for the quarterly publishing magazine.

Topics can be:

- | | |
|---------------------------|-------------------|
| 1. Canadian/ Calgary News | 2. Immigration |
| 3. Cooking recipe | 4. Art |
| 5. Interior design | 6. Gardening |
| 7. Travel | 8. Vaastu Shasta |
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