



SUBMITTED PHOTOS

**A child in Calcutta works on a drawing that will be sold to the general public, with proceeds used to provide residents of the city with much-needed food and supplies. BELOW: Many of the drawings are dedicated to Mother Durga, a 10-armed Hindu goddess, in hopes she will defeat COVID-19.**

# Calcutta cure

‘Crayons Conquer COVID’ project helps distribute food, supplies to India’s poor



**BY DOMINICK A. MERLE**  
CORRESPONDENT

**W**hile top scientists throughout the world continue to work nonstop in search of a cure for COVID-19, young children in the slums and red light district of Calcutta, India, are lending a hand with an item that costs less than a dime. An old-fashioned crayon.

“We will kill the demon,” vowed Ashok, 10, “with the powers of Mother Durga.”

Each day, Ashok and his friends render their versions of the kill with simple drawings, which are being sold to the general public and the proceeds used to provide the slum dwellers and children of prostitutes with much needed food and supplies.

“It breaks our hearts,” said Jaydeep Mukherjee, a Calcutta travel agent who has put together the program. “They truly believe in what they are doing, and who knows, it may take a mythical goddess to destroy an invisible monster.”

“At the very least, it is helping them survive.”

And just who is the all-powerful Mother Durga? For openers, she’s a 10-armed Hindu goddess. Way back in the 16th century, legend has it, many male gods tried and failed to rid the earth of a monster demon known as “Mahisasur.”

Someone finally asked, “Why not send a woman?”

Enter the multi-armed Goddess Durga. The deal was she had to kill the monster without shedding a single drop of blood, as it was feared that each drop would produce another demon. This she did with the aid of a pitchfork-type instrument, managing somehow to drink



**Jaydeep Mukherjee, a Calcutta travel agent who put together the Crayons Conquer COVID project, right, distributes food and supplies to residents of the city.**

all the blood without spilling a drop.

The legend gave birth to a 10-day festival known as

Durga Puja held annually throughout India, the largest of which takes place in Calcutta each fall with attendance upward of 40 million.

Mukherjee, who operates Meghdutam Travel Agencies in both Calcutta and Montreal, is one of the chief promoters of the Durga Puja

festival. Working with other “Puja Clubs” in the Calcutta region, he organized the distribution of food and supplies to those most in need,

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**Jaydeep Mukherjee**  
Calcutta travel agent

many who were literally starving.

“The children wanted to do their part as well and I suggested that maybe they could call on Mother Durga for help,” Mukherjee said.

So began the “Crayons Conquer COVID” project. “We’ve reached more than 5,000 families alone in the Songachi (red light) district and will continue until the lockdown is over,” Mukherjee said.

Funds to purchase the supplies are provided by Meghdutam Travel, the local Puja Clubs, private donations and now through the sale of the children’s drawings.

A typical food and supplies package includes rice, potatoes, cooking oil, biscuits and cakes, baby food, soap and sanitizers. Mukherjee, his wife, Swaguna, two daughters and even his mother packs and deliver the supplies.

“We cover about 150 families a day and when we go into the Songachi area, we’ll be bringing along a few crayons and pencils for our young artists, just in case,” Mukherjee said.

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