



Durga Puja in Kolkata: A Cultural Diaspora of Celebration

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Abstract: Kolkata is one of the most popular cities in the world when it comes to celebrating life. And Durga Puja is not just the emotion of the Bengali community; rather it is a larger than life experience for whoever attends it. UNESCO has also accredited Kolkata Durga Puja as the 'Intangible Cultural Heritage of the Community'. In this paper, I have tried to cover some of the aspects of Durga Puja. First a brief introduction has been given on Durga Puja in Kolkata followed by the basic and detailed identification and description of the Goddess and the process, mentioning the intrinsic repertoires for the celebration. In the further sections I have tried to mention some explanations of certain ceremonial rituals performed on different days of the festival. A brief discussion on the changing pattern of the celebration is also added with a chronology of recorded Durga Puja events. Furthermore there is also a section about the latest attraction of the festival- the Carnival. In my paper, I have also mentioned about the local artisans who are behind every aspect of this festive season. Lastly, I have concluded by mentioning how this festival is no less than a cultural confluence of every community.

Keywords: Durga Puja, Kolkata, festivity, rituals, Cultural confluence

Received : 28 October 2022

Revised : 26 November 2022

Accepted : 09 December 2022

Published : 23 December 2022

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Sharma, R. (2022). Practicing Child Birth Rituals: Reproducing Motherhood and Patriarchy, *Society and Culture Development in India*, 2: 2, pp. 355-373. <https://doi.org/10.47509/SCDI.2022.v02i02.09>

Introduction

Culture is what represents the living patterns of a group of people residing in a place, having a deeper bonding with the place and people for generations. Culture has always played a very important role in shaping and designing our social being. Shaping our everyday mundane activities to define our significant social festivals, culture alone has been a standard of identification for any society and civilisation around the world till date. Culture contains both a material and a non-material

aspect. In terms of material aspects, it reflects the daily commodities and consumer products that individuals use, which are tangible. On the other hand, immaterial or non-material culture is the one that depends on aesthetics that a group of people follow in their daily lives to identify with a unique social identity. It includes the values, customs, rituals and practices; the belief systems and morals that shape the inner psychological self of the individuals. Talking about culture led me to my topic of studying one of the biggest cultural affluence in Bengal, specifically Kolkata. Bengal has remained a hot-spot of discussion for different reasons. This year, the sole focus of the global panopticon has been this 'city of joy' because of its rich cultural background. Kolkata, which is more popular as the 'city of joy', turns out to be a 'canvas of happiness', during the most colourful festival of the Bengali community residing in Kolkata, the Durga Puja.

Tracing from the sixteenth century till date, the legacy and the age-old tradition of Durga Puja have continued to be passed on with hues of tradition as well as touches of creativity. During the festival, the city is more of a cultural affluence spot than a festive tool. People living in different communities and backgrounds enliven and enjoy this occasion of togetherness and prosperity. Noticing such cosmopolitanism and stout integrity, this occasion has received a global highlight this year. Last year, on December 15 and 16, a committee of UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) recognised and inscribed Durga Puja as an 'Intangible Cultural Heritage'. However, the person and the team whose every ounce of sweat and hard work has bloomed to such glory is none other than Tapati Guha Thakurata and her team. She is the former Director and an honourable professor of the research institute CSSS (Centre for Studies in Social Science). Her efforts took a decade's time to be recognised on a global scale. Their first application of inclusion of Durga Puja as a cultural heritage to UNESCO was rejected in 2012. However, she and her team continued with their relentless effort and published a book on this motive in 2015. The book is named 'In the Name of the Goddess: The Durga Pujas of Contemporary Kolkata'. In 2018, the cultural ministry had asked Guha Thakurata to create a dossier. The required work was completed by 2019. She had collected supportive documents and enthusiastic declarations from around 105 official puja communities and clubs throughout Kolkata. Some of the clubs included were Baghbazar Sarbojanin, Hindustan Park, Badamtala Ashar Sangha, Kashi Bose Lane, Kumortuli Sarbojanin Durgotsab, Chorebagan, Hatibagan Nabin Pally and many more (UNESCO 2019-20). The list also included spontaneous consent from the heritage houses that perform Durga Puja from generations. The Sabarna Roy Choudhury family had taken a remarkable initiative to contribute to this noble

mission. Guha Thakurata and her team had also collected consent from the idol makers, and designers and the local artisans. In the year of 2020, her dossier had undergone all the required changes and the final draft was submitted to UNESCO in 2021 (Ray 2017).

About Durga Puja

Durga is a deity that has a deep rooted connection with mythological perseverance. The traditions of the worship culture in the Indian subcontinent also contain deeper historical roots (Rodrigues 2003). During the lunar month of *Asvina* (Ashwin) of the Bengali calendar in India, on the first few nights of the waxing new moon, the Hindus indulge in the celebration of the greatest Goddess, Durga. The puja is held during the sixth to tenth lunar day from the New Moon of the Hindu month of Ashwin (Saha 2022). Durga is also popular as the *Mahadevi* in Hinduism.

Who is Durga?

The *Mahadevi* embodied and identified as Durga is an empowered Goddess. She is the rider of the king of all beasts, the lion. She wields all the weapons to complete her warrior image. There is an embalming duality present in the image of Durga that is worshipped in Bengal. On one hand, her body posture and the weapons indicate the '*ranang debi*' (the warrior self) of her nature. On the other hand, the tranquil peace in her eyes, the mesmerising charm in her facial expression, the tenderness in her vision and her sheer protective gesture of her family reflects on the mundane feminine figures of our society. Hence, Durga is the mother of all creations; she is also the holder of the equivalent power that can become the sole reason for destruction of the cosmos if required.

Various Aspects of Durga

The true meaning of Durga is a complicated one. Since there are a number of variations in the beliefs, the sculptures, the scriptures and the worshipping ritual, the meaning of Durga hence best should be identified as a multidimensional one. Durga is portrayed as the deity of creation as well as saviour of the whole living world. She is believed to have been protecting the souls from the suffering of the crisis. In Vedas, Durga is *Aranyani* (Sahoo & Malla 2007), the Goddess of the Forestry. In *Taittiriya Aranyaka* and *Upanishads*, she is depicted as *Uma* or *Haimavati*. *Uma* stands for the creator of the world; *Haimavati* stands for the protector of wealth. In

Bhagabata, Durga is also known as *Ekansha*. Durga is also mentioned in Vakshaka of Rig Vedas as well. In Markandeya Purana, she is mentioned as *Devi Mahatmya* (Sahoo & Malla 2007) which means 'the glories of the goddess'. Here, Durga is also declared as devi *Sakambari* which means the goddess of herb bearing (Sahoo & Malla 2007). Durga in different other feminine sculptures is worshipped as the war goddess as well. In Brahmanda Purana, Durga is the epitome of fierceness. She is identified by different names representing power- *Mahishasuramardini*, *Matrika* and *Chamunda*. Again, digging back to the initial stages of civilisation, there has been a mention of this deity as well. Durga in Harappan civilisation was given an *ardhanariswar* (the presence of three spirits within one body- half woman, half man and *ishwar*, the God) depiction. She is sculpted there as an equivalent half of lord Shiva and is given the name of *Parvati* which means the 'daughter of the mountains'. Again tracing back to the primitive time of Stone era, Durga was worshipped as a representation of *kumari* (youthfulness). She was believed to be a virgin deity who is directly associated with the cult of fertility.

The Depiction of Durga in Bengal

The Durga image that is most popular in Bengal festivity is more of a family iconography. This incarnation of Durga is followed by the mythical representation of Durga depicted in the most popular Hindu epic, *Ramayana* written by Kritibash Onjha. The Durga image worshipped in Bengal is an iconic amalgamation of various depictions of Durga in different Shastras. This image is the same as that of Durga in Aihole and Mahabalipuram. The crucial difference between the familiar forms in which the Goddess is worshipped in Bengal and the Durga of the Prepuranic traditions is that the former is worshiped *en famille*. The customised image of Durga vanquishes the buffalo demon while her two sons Karthikeya and Ganesha, and two daughters, Lakshmi and Saraswati stand by supportively (Bhattacharya 2007). The tableau of Durga in Bengal consists of her offspring and the evil spirit of the *mahishabura* (the buffalo demon). Her four accompanying children are-

Ganesha (Ganapati, Vinayak)

Ganesha is the youngest son of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati. He is the significant elephant headed God who is mostly worshipped in the Hindu Pantheon as the God of auspicious beginnings and demolisher of all obstacles in life. The mighty mouse is his *vahan* (pet animal) (Chakrabarty 2016).

Karthika (Subhramany, Sanmukha)

Karthika is the elder brother of lord Ganesha, the God of War and Protector in Hindu tradition and is the decapitator of the demon Taraka (Chakrabarty 2016). His *vahan* is the mighty peacock.

Lakshmi (Kamala, Padmamukhi)

Lakshmi is one of the daughters of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati. She is worshipped as the popular Hindu Goddess of Fortune, Wealth and Prosperity of both spiritual as well as material world. The wise owl is the pet of Goddess Lakshmi.

Saraswati (Sarada, Vaakdevi)

Saraswati is the other daughter of Goddess Parvati who is also the consort of Lord Brahma. She is worshipped as the Goddess of Knowledge, Poignancy and Music.

Mahishashura

Mahishasura is an irreplaceable part of the wholesome depiction of Durga. The Buffalo Demon is the most powerful depiction of the destruction force who has achieved an exclusive blessing of turning himself into a buffalo. His invincibility was the sole reason for the creation of Maa Durga with a constellation of powers and might of all the Gods of heaven. Mahishashura is always credited for the birth of the creator and the protector of the world, Maa Durga (Chakrabarty 2016).



Figure 1: An idol of Durga with her four children and Mahishashura (Picture credit and copyright: Sukanya Saha)

The image of Durga as a domestic woman in a mundane household who is all protective of her family is what is reflected through the tableau of Durga in Bengal. But even within this divine image of benevolence, the spirit of fighting against and defeating the unholy is very much prominent. Durga originated from the eternal flames of lord Vishnu, Brahma and Maheswar, to demolish everything evil on earth and to restore the wheel of Dharma for the living.

A Brief Historical Backdrop of the Grand Occasion of Durga Puja

The Bengali domestic style of Durga Puja has the similarity with today's public or *sarbojonin* pujas. However, the origin of Durga Puja in Bengal is a little contradictory. The kind of Durga worshipping that Ray has explained dates back to 1411 C.E. But the image of the idol differed from the recent ones. The form of idol worshipped back then was the form of *Chandi*, where *Maa* Durga was also seen to be destroying the Demon king *Mahishashura* with her powerful trident, mounting on a lion. But the idol was not seen accompanying any of her children. Also, the early depiction of Durga Puja rituals, same as today, was that of the 'zamindari' tradition, similar to the *Akalbodhon* (untimely awakening of Devi Durga). This rendition of Durga Puja was also depicted in our popular epic, the Ramayana. Durga Puja in Bengal promotes both the Hindu religion as well as the culture (Majumdar 2018). However, tracing back the history and the time of the initiation of Durga Puja in Bengal, it is not sure whether it was to sustain the Hindu solidarity against the upsurge of Muslim sentiments and influences or some other reason.

Here is a brief chronology of Durga Puja in Bengal-

1. 1606- The first and foremost recorded puja in West Bengal that was celebrated by Bhabananda, the ancestor of Maharaja Krishna Chandra of Nadia.
2. 1610- The oldest puja in Kolkata was to be arranged by the family of Sabarna Choudhury from Barisha.
3. 1761- First recorded *baroyari* (public) puja in Gutpipara, Hoogly.
4. 1829- Lord Bentinck was present in a Durga Puja in the house of Gopimohan Dev in North Kolkata.
5. 1924- Though *baroyari* puja started from the 1760s, the name first changed into *sarbojanin* this year.
6. 1939- Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose had unveiled a twenty one feet Durga Idol at Simla Bayam Samiti Club.
7. Late 1960s- Durga Puja started in overseas countries as well.

8. From the 1980s- Awards for the best idol, best decoration, and best representation were started by the corporate sectors.
9. Late 1990s- Large scale Durga Pujas like *Baghbazar Sarbojanin*, *Ahiritola Sarbojanin*, *Mudiali*, *Shibmandir*, *Jodhpur Park*, *Salt Lake BD Block* and more started from this time onwards.
10. Late 1990s- The concept of ‘Theme Puja’ was on rise from this point of time (Dutta & Ghosh 2021, pp. 66-67).

The Different Rituals and Terms Associated with Durga Puja

The first nine days of the Ashwin Lunar month when the worship of Durga takes place are known as *Navaratri* around India, but specifically in Bengal, the festival starts officially on the sixth day of the Navaratri. The celebration continues for about five days. The eighth and the ninth lunar days are the peak days of celebration and the ending of the ceremony takes place on the following day after the ninth day. All the worshippers from the different cults of *Shiva*, *Vaishnava* and *Saktas* come together and celebrate this festival. *Saktas* especially are the worshippers of *Shakti* (power), the feminine power and the supreme divinity who is governing the creation of earth. Since the ancient form and rituals of practice, there are some inseparable people and things without which the significance of the puja rituals remains incomplete.

The Purahita (the Priest/ the Ritual Performer)

The entire ritual of the Durga Puja is performed by a person belonging to a specific family background. The *purahita* has been and is always expected to be of the Brahmin caste, a dignified male who has the knowledge and proficiency of the ritualistic performance. He, due to his proficiency of work, becomes the sole link between the divine and the mundane realms. With his ritualistic performances, he draws, heightens and directs the perception of the devotee to the deity. The *purahita* is the connector of the circumstances where the clay idol manifests into the material forms and with the purified and refined senses, the devotees meet each other in the intimacy of the perpetual act (Rodrigues 2012). However, there is a significant change noticed in the well practiced patriarchal custom of male supremacy in the ritualistic performance of Durga Puja. At a famous club in South Kolkata, *66 Pally*, from the year of 2021, four well educated female priestesses—Nandini Bhowmick, Ruma Roy, Semanti Banerjee and Paulomi Chakraborty set to break this century old tradition by becoming the ‘*purahita*’ for the club’s *Durgotsab*.

Nandini Bhowmick has been a path breaker for a very long period of time. She is a former student of Lady Brabourne College and has been an official guest faculty in the Sanskrit Department of Jadavpur University.

Also, at *Newtown Sarbojanin Durga Puja*, this year, a group of female priests conducted the whole ritual and practice of the '*deviaradhana*'. The group of four ladies was led by Dattatriya Ghoshal, who has been a priest since 2018 and has immense knowledge in Vedic *shastras*. Also, a dozen of *dhakis* (traditional drummers) and *dhunuchi nach* were performed by women. Another path breaking incidence happened in one highly politically influenced puja in Kolkata where the priest selected was from a non-Brahmin caste. Sulata Mandal, a delegate of guidance and counselling from Satyapriya Roy College of Education, is all set to perform the Durga Puja rituals this year. There are scattered incidents that hint that change is gradually coming in the society. However, there are certain clichés present as well. In the *66 Pally Durga Puja*, the motive behind the initiative of selection of four female priests has been overshadowed by the emergence of a stereotypical cause. The appointed priest of the club, Tarun Bhattacharya, died during the Durga Puja 2020. Since then the club was in search of new priests where they were influenced by a Bengali themed movie '*Brahma Janen Gopon Kommti*'. In the movie, the female protagonist was articulated as an official priestess of different Hindu ceremonies like Wedding and Saraswati Puja. Since then they have appointed these four women as their official priests for different rituals including Durga Puja.

The Pandal (Temporary Shrine)

The temporary shrine called a *Pandal* is erected for the puja celebrations. In community pujas or *baroyari pujas*, the idol is put in the *pandals* for the occasion. But in the *bonedi pujas* (household puja), the pandals remain obsolete since they already have permanent temples (Durga Mandir). In the earlier times, the *pandal* was a temporary abode where the idol was placed and worshipped for the 5 days of festivity (Singh 2018). However, in today's world, the *pandal* is the biggest attraction point for the visitors since it has gone way beyond just bamboo and draped clothes structures. Since the touch of commerciality is on rise, the materials of the *pandal* are no more simple, they are complicated and sometimes expensive as well (Singh 2018).

Exclusive Rituals of Durga Puja

One may reasonably infer that as a grand devotional ritual to the Great Goddess that takes place annually, the entire scale of the devotional services rendered should

be magnified (Rodrigues 2018). There are ample rituals that one has to follow to complete the worship of *Maa Durga*. Some of them are repetitive and are performed on each day. Here, I have mentioned in detail about some special rituals that are exclusive for each day of the Durga Puja.

Bodhon and Chakshudaan (SASHTI)

Bodhon is the rite to awaken the Goddess from her dormant state. The ritual of *bodhon* starts with the installation of a *ghat* (Jar) in the form of the Devi. Then the priest performs a special rite in front of the *bilva patra* (leaves or twigs of a wood-apple tree) by drawing a sacred *yantra* (sacred diagram) on the ground. The *yantra* symbolises a simple triangle, manifesting both as the source as well as her portal to the mundane world. On the *yantra*, a soil altar is created which is to symbolise the goddess as the earth, the carrier of the world and as *Aditi*, the supreme creator of all the mundane and cosmic creations. Then the priest sprinkles five different crops to symbolise mother Earth. On the soil altar, a jar full of holy water of Ganges is topped with a five-leaved Mango-tree twig. Each one of the leaflets is dotted with red vermilion. On top of it, a coconut is placed. The full jar symbolises the lady who is then topped with a red *chelli* (piece of red cloth). This symbolises the *vastradaan* (attire giving) to the goddess. The jar in the end is anointed by the sandalwood paste with the belief that it will be steadfast. Finally a sacred perimeter is demarcated around the *ghat* (Rodrigues 2012). *Chakshudaan* is another ceremony followed by the *Bodhon* where the eyes of the idol are given the vision. After awakening the spirit, the *purabita* performs this rendition of giving vision to the eyes to the idol. He dips the *bilva-patra* (wood apple leaf) in the *ghee* (concentrated butter) and holds it still on the *diya* (lamp) until the lower portion of the leaf turns black. Then he puts the black shoot with a tip of *kush* (dry grass) to the eyes of the idol. For the Goddess, the left eye is drawn first and for the God, the right eye is done first. The third eye is drawn at last for both the God and the Goddess (Chakrabarty 2016). However, there is another ceremony of *Chakshudaan* (drawing the eye) of the idol, that is mostly performed on the holy day of *Mahalaya* by the artisans or idol makers. But the *Chakshudaan*, done by the priest, represents giving live vision to the clay idol.

Nabapatrika Snan (SAPTAMI)

The early hours of Saptami are represented by the offering of *Nabapatrika*. *Nabapatrika* is a group of nine different plants entangled together by a yellow

thread. The nine plants also represent the nine incarnations of Durga living within the idol. The plants and the respective incarnation they represent are- *Kola* (banana; resembles Devi Brahmani), *Kochu* (Colecassa: resembles the Goddess Kalika), *Holud* (Turmeric; Maa Durga herself), *Jayanti* (Goddess Kartiki), *Bel* (wood apple; identifies lord Shiva), *Dalim* (Pomegranate; identified Goddess Raktadantika), *Man Kochu* (Arum; symbolises Chamunda), *Dhan* (Paddy; reflects goddess Lakshmi) and *Asoka* (Devi Sokrahita). All these above plant twigs are bundled up by a sacred yellow thread. Along with it, a twig of an *aparajita* (Asian Pigeonwings) is added for the sacred bathing ceremony. The common Bengali name of this *Nabapatrika* snan is popularly known as 'Kolabou Snan' (bathing of the banana plant decorated as a wife). There is another belief in Bengal that Kola bou is the wife of Lord Ganesh. However, as per the Puranic transcripts, there is no relation between the Kola Bou and Ganesh. Another ceremony followed by the *Nabapatrika snan* is the *Pran Pratishtha* (the enlivening). The ritual signifies the final awakening of Goddess Durga, the third eye opening of the warrior form of Durga since from this day onwards her relentless battle against the evil power *Mabishasura* begins.

Astra Puja and Kumari Puja (ASHTAMI)

Of the whole *Navaratri* festival, *Ashtami* is considered as the most auspicious day of all. 'Maha Ashtami' is also popular as the '*Vira Ashtami*' (Vir means Heroism) in different parts of India. Durga in Bengal is worshipped as the deity of *Shaktism* and she is considered as the divine power, but manifests within her ten more incarnations. These ten more incarnations are known as the '*Dasha Mahavidyas*'. On *Ashtami*, the priest devotes his offerings to and worships the '*astras*' (weapons) of Maa Durga. This ritual is called the '*Astra Puja*' (worship of the weapons). The Astras that Durga carries are- *trishul* (trident), *kuthar* (axe), *chakra* (disc), *tir* (arrow), *talwar* (sword), *gada* (mace), *vajra* (spike), *dhanush* (bow), *ghanta* (bell) and *sarpa* (snake) (Chakrabarty 2016). *Ashtami* is the third day of Durga Puja and the significant eighth day of the *Navaratri* festival. This day, significantly denotes Devi Durga's victory over *Mabishashura*. The eighth incarnation of Maa Durga, *MahaGouri* is worshipped on this day.

Kanya Puja/Kumari Puja/Kanjak (ASHTAMI)

Following the ancient Stone Age belief, the Durga was incarnated as a virgin lady. Representing the belief, the ritual of *Kumari Puja* is performed. In *Kumari puja*, one, nine, seventeen, hundred and eight or more prepubescent virgin girls are dressed

and worshipped as the living forms of Devi Durga (Simmons et al. 2018, pp. 205). Following the ritual, the priest washes the hands and feet of the girls and offers red *dupatta* and red bangles along with some gratitude token, seeking their blessings. In Bengali proverb, the clay idol is called the *Mrinmayi Maa* (mother made of clay); and this *Kumari* is called the *Chinmayi Maa* (the living mother).

Sandhi Puja (ASHTAMI and NABAMI)

This is one special worship ritual where the name of the ritual is decided over the time of the ritual. *Sandhi* means the ‘transition period’. This ritual is performed at the transition period of *Ashtami* and *Nabami*, hence it has such a name. The ritual starts at the last twenty fourth minute of the *Ashtami* and ends at the first twenty fourth minute of *Nabami*. The customary ritual or practices include the enlightening of 108 *diyas* (earthen lamps). Since Durga Puja in Bengal is the worship of a part of *Shakti* (power) of Durga, *balidan* (sacrifice) is an exemplary part of this occasion. At the end of *sandhi puja*, on the auspicious day of *Nabami*, the *balidaan* ritual is performed by the priest. Since people have become more nature conscious and pet friendly, the nature of *balidaan* has changed tremendously. Previously, livestock animals like goats and buffalo were sacrificed in a belief to satisfy the incarnation of *Chamunda* or *Kali*, another *avtar* of Devi Durga (Matteis 2018). But now, people abstain themselves from sacrificing animals and have made it just a symbolic practice by replacing the *balidaan* process with fruit sacrifices (banana, cucumber and /or pumpkin).

Kushundika/ Havan (NABAMI)

Worshipping fire has been one of the most significant forms of worship for humankind. Since the invention of fire, the progress wheel of civilisation started to roll. The fierce power of destruction as well as the inseparable/essential use in daily lives makes *Agni* (fire) a pious figure, the leading God of Hindu Pantheon. As believed from its nature, *Agni* is the symbolic demolisher of anything unholy and purifies it into the pious form (Chakravarty 2018). During this ritual, a *havan kund* /*yangya kund* (a metallic square base) is prepared by the priest with layers of sand spread on them. A *chakra* (symbolic diagram) is then created with thin sticks on the *havan kund* followed by the mounting of sticks in a pyramid pile. Inside a metal pot, *ghee* (concentrated butter) is then prepared and a pack of sticks is kept to dip inside the *ghee* and sprinkle into the *havan* as an offering. Also a *puṇapatra* (full offering pot) is prepared, filling it with one *kunke* (measuring pot) of rice, a *supari*

(betel nut) and a *kacha taka* (coin) on top of it (Chakrabarty 2018). Some rituals or practices are there for the priest and the devotees as well. Both the devotee and the priest's head must be covered during the practice of the ritual. They must draw *tilak* (symbolic mark on the forehead). Also, they must consume simple vegetarian food the night before performing the ritual. The priest must wear a *kush* (silver or paddy) ring while performing this ritual.

Dadhikarma and Darpovisharjan (DASHAMI)

On Dashami, the following day of *Navaratri*, the ceremonial celebration of the Durga Puja comes to an end with these two exclusive rituals.

Dadhikarma is a special sweet dish prepared from five significant ingredients—*chira* (flattened rice), *murki* (sweet puffed rice), *dahi/doi* (yogurt), *mishit* (sweet) and *kola* (banana). They all are mixed and put in a bigger bowl in front of the idol when the priest is performing the *Dashami* puja (Chakrabarty 2018). The end part of the *Dashami* puja is symbolised with *darpavisharjan* (the mirror immersion of the idol). During this ceremony, a *tarmakalash* (copper pitcher) filled with holy water of Ganges is placed. The outer side of the pitcher is covered with wet rice and a triangle made of sticks is put on top of the pitcher. A flower then is put inside the pitcher as offering and various *mantras* (hymns) are chanted by the priest. During the chanting, the base of the deity is slightly moved and a mirror placed at the base of the deity's feet is taken out. The mirror is inscribed with a Sanskrit hymn (*wring*) with liquefied vermilion. The mirror is immersed inside the sanctified water of the pitcher. Through chanting of different hymns, the priest moves the *ghat* as well to symbolise the ceremonial end of the puja. At last, the priest utters the *shanti mantra* (peace chant) and sprinkles the *shantir jol* (the holy water from the immersion pitcher) on the heads of the devotees. At the end, the *dadhi karma* is distributed amongst the devotees as the *Prasad* (grace from the deity).

Tradition and Modernity

In the history of Durga Puja in Bengal, the operation of power, capital and status building has always been on foreplay (Simmons et al. 2018). Bengal in the mid-eighteenth century was a flourishing cultural hub in India. The first Durga Puja celebrations were started back then by Maharaja Krishna Chandra (Hussain 2022). The pujas back then depicted the power and sovereignty of the kings. Back in the colonial times, Durga Puja was celebrated in royal families like the Zamindars and Brahmin families since it was too expensive to be possible for any other class to

afford. Also, there was a concern of rivalry and prestige, garneted by attracting the British officers (Simmons 2018, pp. 106). Later, the owners of the puja became instrumental in changing the term 'Baroyari'(a community of twelve people) as by association to 'Sarbajanin' (for all people). This transformation from the family worship to community participation through 'Sarbajanin' made a collective impact and change in aspect of Durga Puja as a ritualistic celebration. The adoration of God and Goddess, including the temples built for them, and the proliferation of devotional practices in South Asia, is deeply rooted in its political regimes.



Figure 2: Sovabazar Rajbari Durga Puja (Picture credit and copyright: Sukanya Saha)

Durga Puja in recent times however, has become more of an exhibition over a mere celebration of occasion. Now, the Goddess with all the ceremonial festivity surrounding her gets to meet the metropolis on a larger scale where the entire city becomes an ongoing exemplary exhibition. The city turns out to be a 'complex of spectrality' where the transportation or the transverse along with the transference becomes the sole key that makes this puja much of a public rather than global art. And this transformation comes through the paradigm shift of themes. Coming out of the *Bonediana* (familiar aspect of household), the Durga Puja today has gained

more popularity as it has become a platform of reflecting new thoughts and talents. From the last two decades, the Kolkata Durga Puja has taken a lime light spot in every national-international social platform. The greater grandeur of puja has brought out different decorative themes for both the *pandals* as well as the idols. Sometimes the *pandals* turn out to be the exact replica of the universal famous monuments like the twin towers of Kuala Lumpur of Malaysia, the Burj Khalifa of Dubai, Vatican City and many more. Even national representative monuments like Hawa Mahal from Jaipur, Hanseswari Temple in Hooghly, Senate house in Kolkata also become special and popular themes for different puja *pandals*. Idols are decorated in different religious aspects as well. Durga idol in Mongolian art form, idol through Buddhist artistry, tribal scripture of the idols attract tons of people around the world to visit this city during this festive season.

The reason why Kolkata during Durga Puja gains more popularity is the work of the artisans and their unmatched craftsmanship. The immense hard work and mind work that these artists do is what reflects in their art and people's global love and admiration for those artworks. Besides breaking territorial boundaries through imaginative themes, themes for Durga Puja also question humanity and instil human awareness by reflecting various social causes and issues. Themes like '*tantipara*' (the weaver's lane), '*briddhashram*' (old age home), '*methorer bari*' (inside the household of the scavenger), the '*mohila pachar o jouno chakra*' (the abduction of women and selling to prostitution) and their humiliation in society, '*muktijoddhar itihis*' (the history of the freedom fighters) are just a few to reflect on the narratives of the twenty first century theme puja concepts.



Figure 3: A *pandal* theme depicting the harassment of the women abducted and sold in red light area (Picture credit and copyright: Sukanya Saha)

The finest blending of the cultural rendition leaves no stone unturned to identify Durga Puja as the ‘Secular Mass Identity’ in this twenty first century. Turning the most insignificant things like pins, spoons, scrapes, matchsticks, gramophone discs, pencils, plastic bottles into the artefacts to articulate a theme and a repertoire to reflect on the innovation is where lie the magic of the human mind and the perfection of human hands. Durga Puja theme *pandals* always mesmerise the visitor by their beautiful transformation of such simple mundane materials into an intrinsic part of the metamorphic depiction. This is the reason why Durga Puja can very logically be put into the category of ‘*cultural capital*’ as explained by Pierre Bourdieu.

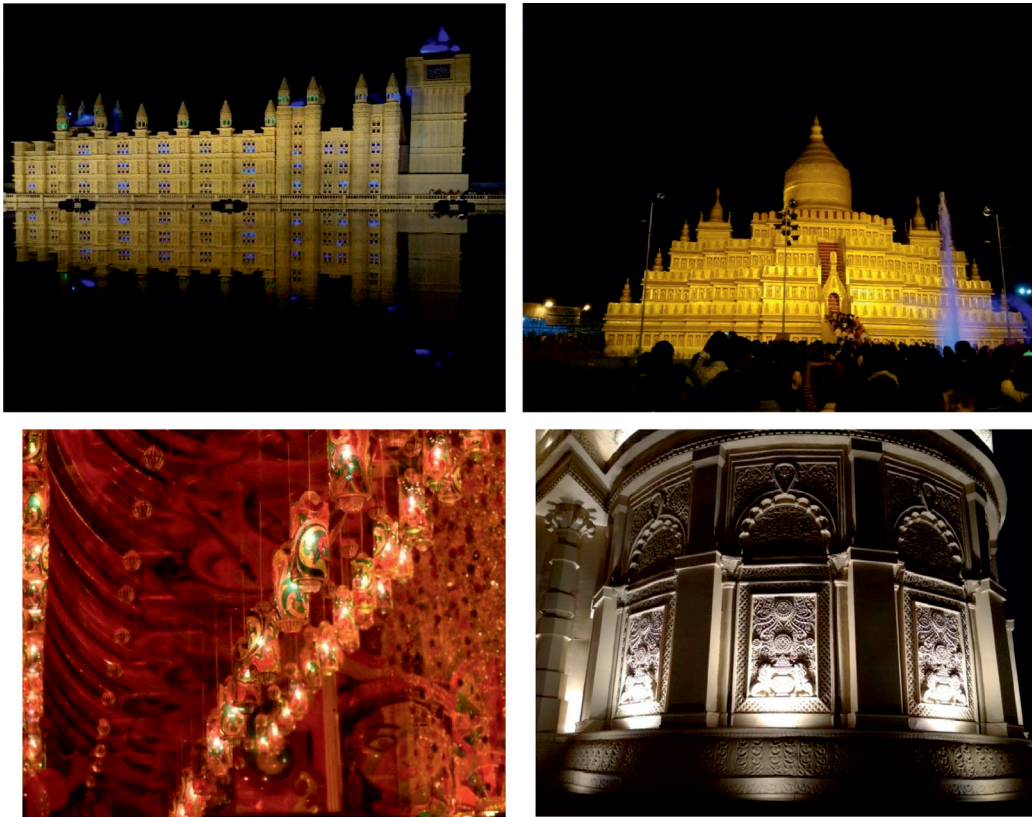


Figure 4: A, B, C, D: *Pandal* Decorations during Durga Puja in Kolkata (Picture credit and copyright: Sukanya Saha)

Referring to the popular Tapati Guha Thakurata’s book, *In the Name of the Goddess: The Durga Pujas of Contemporary Kolkata*, thousands out of the fourty five hundreds sample *pandals* followed the theme concept of the Durga Puja. And that number has risen higher in the recent times as well (Ray 2017).

The New Attraction - The Luminous Carnival on Durga Immersion



Figure 5: A, B: The invitation card for the Carnival 2022 in Kolkata (Picture credit and copyright: Sukanya Saha)

The term Carnival is very familiar with the culture of South Africa. Following the tradition and festivity of Brazilian/Rio Carnival, Kolkata also decks up since the last six years (except 2020 and 2021 due to pandemic) to see a luminescent cultural exhibition of magnanimous Durga idols as they proceed for immersion. The tradition of the Puja carnival started back in 2016 and ceased for the last two years because of pandemic conditions. In the carnival, popular and attractive Durga Pujas pass with magnificent decorations, cultural performances and decorative processions towards the immersion Ghats. The place selected for the carnival is the Red Road. This year, 95 popular community pujas have participated in the carnival procession held on October 8, 2022, from 4.30 pm in the afternoon. This can be considered a provision for many people who are not able to go for pandal hopping during the puja days. Some of the renowned pujas that have joined in this year's Carnival are- Kashi Bose Lane, Shreebhoomi Sporting Club, Ahiritola Yubakbrinda, Barisha Club, Shibmandir, Chorebagan and many more.

The Creator of the Gods- The *Kumors* (Idol Makers)

The conceptualisation of Durga Puja, the global significance of this festive season, the prestigious titles and their discussions, the magnanimity of the celebration-

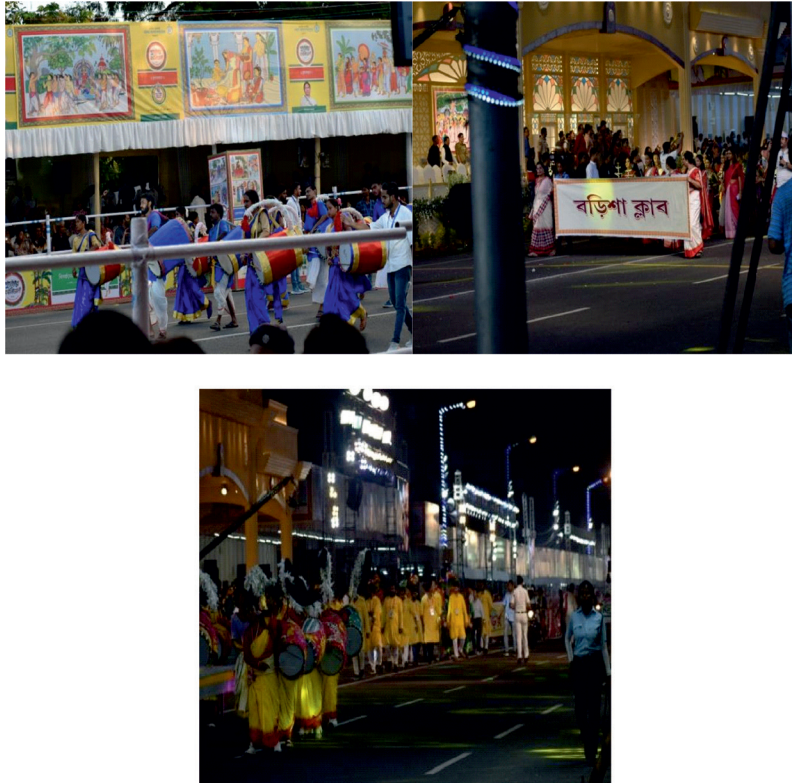


Figure 6: A, B, C: Exclusive pictures of Carnival 2022 (Picture credit and copyright: Sukanya Saha)

everything remains just incomplete without mentioning about the people who are behind the every mould of clay and the every stroke of brush of these idols- the artisans, the idol makers, the *Kumors*. The place where they create the idols are known as *kumortuli* or *potua-para*.

Specifically, Kumortuli is a place at the heart of North Kolkata where most of the artisans or the *kumors* live. This is an ancestral occupation that they have continued to carry on generations after generations. One of the easiest ways to identify these people is their surname- Pal. However, there are people with other surnames as well who are also very proficient craftsmen and live within Kumortuli only.

Local artisans like Sanatan Dinda and Bhabatosh Sutar have come into limelight several times by virtue of their exclusive designing and composing artistic themes during Durga Puja (Ray 2017). However, the flawless craftsmanship, their relentless dedication to their artwork are only valued when it is needed. The harsh and horrible reality they live in every day, the unhealthy conditions of their



Figure 7: Some of the brilliant artworks of the *Kumors*



Figure 8: A *Kumor* in the process of making an idol (Picture credit and copyright: Sukanya Saha)

households, the insecurity of their future- every mundane thing gets overshadowed by the price tags of their artwork, the economic evaluation of their brainchild. Even after knowing their days, months' hard work would be thrown away in the water; they never compromise with their passion. Every idol they make is exclusive and unique. Every stroke of paint brush they draw is what we certify as perfection. The love for their art is unfathomable. But even after being divinely talented and dedicated, they still constitute a major section of the economically backward class people of our country.



Figure 9: An idol maker in Kumortuli (Picture credit and copyright: Sukanya Saha)

This year, in tribute to their hard work, dedication, generational and traditional practice, the Kumortuli Sarbojanin Puja Committee had decided their puja theme in names and identification of these artisans. On the *pandal* walls, they had carved all the names of the president *potuas* (idol makers) and some of their ancestors' names on wooden plates and white clothes with red decorative borders.

Conclusion

Durga Puja had been a nexus of festivity for the Bengali community people for a very long period of time. With the shifts in the affordability of the divine five day



Figure 10: A, B: Pandal theme in Kumortuli Sarbojanin (2022) tributing the idol makers of Kumortuli (Picture credit and copyright: Sukanya Saha)

long ritual practice, Durga Puja went beyond the emotions of a single community. The place itself, Kolkata started to become globally identified for the celebration of this festival. And the recent invocation of the artistic puja patterns or themes has curved the path of global Diaspora to slide in. Diaspora in the sense of territorial ground, for four decades in the United States, Bengali Indians have organised annual Durga Puja festivities. Every fall, a not-for-profit Bengali Association of Southern California (BASC) organises an autumnal festival of Durga Puja- as communal worship ceremonies and the most diasporic religious observances (Banerjee 2019). Diaspora can also be referred through the choice of decoration themes for the festivity as well. Since Guha Thakurata has focused more on the theme pujas since 2000s, it invokes relevant questions about the interplay and the negotiation between the traditional and the modern, rituals of worship and spectatorship, the vernacular and the cosmopolitan and Durga as a devotional icon as well as a brand image (Bhattacharya 2017). Through the reflection or replica of territorial monuments to the symbolisation of different art-forms in the idols, Kolkata's Durga Puja has become even more a point of transverse. Even within the touch of modernity, behind the bright sponsor hoardings, the rituals of conducting the puja have retained their originality. Durga Puja makes Kolkata a cultural confluence point during this time whereas one can peep in the most cosmopolitan posh community puja in the city

to find the ritualistic practice representing the culture remains the same. However, one can fairly say that Durga being the most glamorous amongst the Gods and Goddesses of Hindu Pantheon has kept the grandeurs of rituals symbolic within the practices. But the outer celebration, the pomp and glamour of celebrating the festival has reached beyond the importance and supremacy of worshipping the idol. One positive side of this paradigm shift is that it has successfully crossed the boundary of being an elite class festival. Today, people belonging to every strata of society, from different racial and cultural backgrounds voluntarily join in the celebrations. The practice of ritualistic worship might have remained stuck within the hands of a few, but it has successfully contributed to be all inclusive becoming the reason of happiness and joy for all people irrespective of their specific cultural identity. Hence, it is justifiable to acknowledge the Durga Puja in Kolkata as an 'intangible cultural heritage for the community' as declared by UNESCO.

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