

DURGA PUJAS AS EXPRESSIONS OF 'URBAN FOLK CULTURE'

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Times of India, 23rd October 2011

To an outsider visiting Calcutta, or Kolkata as she is now called, during its 'annual autumnal madness', the city conjures unforgettable visions — whether pleasant or otherwise is, of course, an independent and subjective matter. A metropolis, which, even during a normal day (not that there are too many such days), strains every muscle to prevent itself from bursting at its seams, now witnesses over ten million people on its streets. Hordes of viewers keep pushing incessantly and jostling in suffocating queues, to snatch fleeting glimpses of as many of the one and a half thousand '*Durga*' images as they plan to, or possibly can. It is part of the 'game' to tally the 'scores' and to narrate to each other the 'novelties' observed at specific temporary sites — '*pandals*' as they are called — and to relate other 'finer points' to those who are yet to visit these spots. '*Pandal-hopping*' is a skill that requires considerable energy and practice — and the common citizen of Kolkata possesses an unusual expertise in this sphere. To him, it is not the 'same set of gods' over and over again — almost every site has a different 'theme': for craftsmen have toiled and sweated, so that millions may see, appreciate and tell the world about their 'creations'.

Where sheer numbers are concerned, one may compare the size of the '*puja* crowds' of Kolkata with other massive congregations, to get the picture in its perspective. The West would find the figures of Kolkata's 'festival crowds' mind-boggling, for their largest gatherings hardly ever cross thousands — or at the most, a few tens of thousands. Even the gathering at the much-hyped 'happenings' like the 'world cup soccers', 'open-air music concerts' or even 'peace rallies' rarely cross over to hundreds of thousands. Besides, most of these events are not regular annual recurrences. The '*Ganapati*' worship of Mumbai presents some features that are similar to Kolkata's autumn festival, but there are equally sharp differences — especially where the incessant movement of lakhs and lakhs across the entire metropolis of Kolkata (continuously for four days and nights) is concerned. Okay, the intermittent '*Kumbh Melas*'

also attract even larger multitudes, but they are not at the same place, year after year. The only other comparable assembly of millions is, perhaps the annual '*Haj*' at Mecca—but while it remains primarily (and secondarily) a deeply -religious occasion, the *Durga pujas* have a secular side as well. True, 'piety' does constitute a part of the driving force for such a huge turnout in Kolkata, but the other motivating factors are also worth analysing.

To begin, a quick 'flash-back' may be helpful. Though Kolkata was founded in 1690, it acquired its recognition as the 'second city of the Empire' much later. In fact had it not been for the battles of Plassey and Buxar and the grant of fiscal rule to the victorious English Company — all in quick succession in the 1750s and '60s, the group of trading villages that later formed Kolkata would have remained as just one more colonial toe-hold, like Chandanagore or Bandel. By the time Kolkata scored its first 'century', it had started getting its act together and the 'sahibs', led by the formidable Governor General, were already gracing the ostentatious *Durga pujas* celebrated at the palaces of the Company's nouveau riche Indian intermediaries, the *munshis* and *banians*. For the next one hundred and twenty years or so, this would be the standard and the fashion and no holds were barred, as the rich and the infamous of the growing metropolis vied with each other to procure the most sensuous dancing girls for their *nautches* in their palaces, to entertain the white rulers. Durga must have looked away from their crass and vulgar displays of wealth and 'tastes'.! *Durga pujas*, thus, became enormously expensive and exclusive pageants, organised only by the prosperous Bengali *babu* at his own residence — and the masses could have very limited access to their goddess, that too, mainly to gape at the splendour all around. There are, of course, a few reports and claims of a few isolated attempts by 'commoners' to establish their own *Durga pujas*, financed through voluntary collections far away from Kolkata. There is, for instance, a record mentioning one at Guptipara village in Hooghly from the 1790s, but in eighteenth and nineteenth century Kolkata, the *Durga pujas* were synonymous with wealth and elitism.

For the masses, there were other avenues of entertainment and expression, especially during the festive season: the '*kabi-gans*' and '*tarjas*' (the extempore poetic contests), the '*panchall* songs, the '*jatras*' or open theatrical performances, the '*jhumur*' and '*khemta*' street

dances, — as well as the lampoons of the high and mighty through the '*shong*' pantomimes by witty subalterns. These assertions of Kolkata's urban folk culture, also required patronage — for though the merry claps of the downtrodden could gladden the performer's heart, he needed something more substantial to fill his pocket and his stomach. The richer *babus* stepped in, with support for the *tarja* and the *jatra* — either for the sake of entertainment or for enhancing their own popularity — though it were their own foppish tastes and pretentious lifestyles, that, in turn, formed the subject of many a folk song, popular jingle or comic street-show. But, despite such patronage, these forms continued to retain their 'folk' character: Kolkata's new distinctive 'urban folk culture' as we come across in later books, like Sumanta Banerji's "The Parlour and the Streets", that re-live this phase so vividly.

These outpourings of the urban subaltern did not remain confined to the performing arts only. With the migration of the '*patua*' scroll-painters from the rural areas to Kolkata (as most of the folk performers had done earlier) and their subsequent settlement near the popular Kalighat temple, there evolved another urban folk art-form in the city — the oft-mentioned 'Kalighat pat' paintings. The researches of the Archers, William and Mildred, as well as of others like Hana Knizkova, have helped focus the attention of international art-lovers to these humble sketches of old Kolkata's folk painters, time and again. Close on the heels of the '*patuas*' followed the '*Bat-tala*' woodcut engravers of north Kolkata — imitating the former's style, improving the presentation, lowering their price and competing for the same client-base: the rustic visitor, the poor pilgrim and the struggling city-dweller. The descriptions of Nikhil Sarkar, Radha Prosad Gupta and Pranabranjan Ray brought to light this fascinating art-form: the later artistic produce of the city's folk. The lithograph, the chromo-lithographs, the oleographs and their prints, like the colourful 'Chorebagan' prints, have evoked continuing admiration for their fidelity, imagination and simplicity — as well as sadness at the 'demise' of such pulsating folk arts in twentieth century Kolkata.

Except the clay-modellers of the city's Kumartali and Patuapara localities, who are still in demand (thanks to the ongoing popularity of *Durga* and other *pujas*), it is often remarked that folk art is 'dead' in Kolkata. The factory and its cheap, mass-produced goods have finally managed to kill the artisans' creations in every conceivable sphere — the

textile mills destroyed the weavers; aluminium and steel wrecked the brass and bell-metal craftsmen; shoddy glass bangles have almost driven out the intricately-designed 'conch-shell' jewellery and the ubiquitous and villainous plastics have delivered the decisive 'coup de grace' on any trace of creativity. Considerably correct, but perhaps not wholly true. Every object produced by the artisan can hardly be called a work of art, or even of folk art, though the scope for expression of individual genius is obviously higher, than that available on the 'assembly line'. The more relevant point here (after our brief visit down memory lane) is: where does one find the folk arts in Kolkata now? Among the possible answers, one is so obvious that it bewilders and that is : in the *Durga puja* celebrations, if one chooses to look at them from this angle.

That is why we ventured into this topic, in the first place, and we shall get to it once we have completed a rapid tour of its past. To get back to where we left the goddess — in the custody of the rich and the powerful — it may now be appropriate to skip the details of the styles of their brand of 'worship'. Not a single year has passed in recent decades when repetitive descriptions of the *Durga pujas* of Kolkata's bygone 'babu period' have not flooded the media, more so during the 'puja season'. Scenes of the pomp and grandeur; the tantalising 'nautches' of dusky dancers before hookah-smoking 'Sahibs'; the traditional delicate, pith-work décor that adorn the images (called 'daker-saaj') and the din and bustle of such 'pujas' are already so well etched in the minds of the Bengali. It may be of more interest to locate when and how this elitist *puja* came down to the people and what they did with it — or, to it. Though several claims are made about the 'first' community ('barowari' or 'saarvajanin') *Durga puja* in north Kolkata, we may safely date the earliest efforts in this direction in Kolkata to somewhere in the first decade of the twentieth century. Politics had an important role in this regard: the 'extremist' and revolutionary leaders had stirred the imagination of the people of Bengal as never before, while the abortive British attempt to partition this province had brought the common man out into the streets. Tilak's 'Ganapati pujas' in Bombay (as it was called then) had already shown the way: politics and religion could combine, with resounding success, in activating the otherwise-indifferent masses. The Kolkata session of the Congress in 1910 and the 'barowari' *Durga puja* of Balaram Basu Ghat Road of the same year were connected — in a common nationalist sentiment and fervour.

The decades that followed witnessed the steady growth of community *pujas* and the uninterrupted decline of its 'aristocratic' counterpart. The increasing economic prospects available in the metropolis led to the rise and proliferation of the middle class and to the expansion of the city. At the same time, there was a visible growth of a 'national sentiment', especially after the imperial power retreated from this city's politics of terror to Delhi and the national liberation movement fired the imagination of many a Bengali youth — all of these combined to add to the number of community *pujas* each year. The turbulent years that gripped the politics and economics of this state from the nineteen thirties to the nineteen seventies: the devastating Bengal famine, the Quit India movement, the communal riots, the partition of the country, the endless streams of refugees, the left-wing labour and mass struggles, the bloody uprising of ultra-left Naxalites, the flight of capital and the economic insecurity — do not appear to have diminished the unabated fervour of the people of this state during the festive season, as is evident from the increasing number and ostentation of the community *pujas* in each locality.

The *Durga puja* and the Bengali identity (at least of the middle class Hindu) were, from certain angles, almost indistinguishable. Independence, and its consequential massive population transfers, flooded the city and its suburbs with new citizens — and the cosmopolitan kaleidoscope of 'British' Kolkata steadily gave way to a more 'Bengali' character. The *Durga puja* not only started symbolising this, it soon ensconced itself as Kolkata's motif. Gone were the syncretic approaches of the past — a popular festival had finally emerged where the entire '*para*' (neighbourhood) could participate — and try, for once, to match the community spirit and the fraternal cohesion so common in the Semitic religions in. One did not require to or join (as many had done till the nineteen forties) a '*tazia*' procession of the Muslims or to gape at the '*Sahib-para* Christmas' revelry, or to even visit an aristocrat's mansion for snatching a bit of the spirit of the festive season.

In spatial terms, the city underwent a rigorous re-organisation, mainly after Independence — the old, caste-dominated *paras* of old Kolkata, like the Darji-*para* of the tailors, the Sankhari-*tola* of the conch-artisans, the Muchi-*para* of the cobblers (along with the Ahiri-*tolas*, the Colu-*tolas* and the rest) were effectively superseded by the new 'urban

districts' dominated by other distinguishable criteria, such as class, language, origins and the like. The process of universalization that had commenced about a decade or so ago was hastened with the latest arrivals. The *para* in Kolkata had all along been much more than just a geographical entity — it was a 'village' within the city, where social interaction, 'statuses' and 'roles' between non-related inhabitants were structured at levels, very akin to 'kinship' or 'blood-ties'. Each tier of elders was accorded due respect by those younger, irrespective of other factors, like profession, income, education or even caste. This set-up found its symbolic unity in the joint organisation of the *para Durga puja* — with each active member of the community being assigned a specific role and function in the celebration. The persistence of such non-urban values are traceable even now, in varying degrees — more so in traditional localities. No effort was to be spared by each member — within the overall budget, of course—as the prestige of the entire *para* was involved. This is where innovations came in, to compete with and outshine the next *para* and these would lead to the growth and nurturing of a unique form of urban folk culture.

The craftsmanship that was developed to cater to the *pujas* related mainly to the designing and execution of the massive, temporary temples of bamboo, tarpaulin and cloth called *pandals*; their exquisite interior frills and decoration; the imaginative sculpting of the goddess and her retinue and the special lighting as well as the many 'special effects' that mesmerized crowds at each major site. But this is hardly all, for along with these crafts came a whole repertoire of the other arts, like the 'seasonal' songs and music that were created each year; the new literature that was churned for the numerous '*puja* magazines' and post-*puja* celebrations that included musical soirees and dramatic performances. But there was bonhomie in the air as the neighbourhood children got together to perform skits and dances while the young men and women dabbed a brush of makeup and got into costumes for their much-rehearsed plays. The traditional pre-*puja Aagamoni* songs, the *dhunochi-naach* dances with handheld urns of burning incense, while the *dhakis* drummers beat furiously on their drums appear to be getting far lesser importance at present.

Hence, we may focus our attention more on the more vibrant 'living cultural traditions' of Kolkata. Image-making is surely the oldest of

these and the life-like idols speak of superb craftsmanship, that is the culmination of generations of hereditary skills. A foreign artist who visited us during the *pujas* was in raptures and felt that most of the clay icons could do honour to any museum. He was crestfallen when it dawned on him that, far from preserving them, the local ritual was to obliterate their existence by sinking them in the river, after just a few days! Stylistically, this area has developed its own iconographical genre and the 'standard' images, consisting of five separate 'chalas' (platforms/panels) that have broken free from the original, single-platform (*ek-chala*) tradition — though the latter style is still maintained by some of the older *barowari pujas* and by all the ancient 'family' worships. Under this later 'standard' pattern, the main platform accommodates *Durga*, astride her ferocious lion, slaying the demon *Mahishasur* — portrayed either as half-demon and half-buffalo or as an anthropomorphic demon emerging out of a lacerated buffalo. Despite the visible anger writ on the face of *Durga* (who pierces her trident right through the demon's chest), the clay sculptor manages to retain the feminine grace of the mother goddess. This *Mahishamardini* is a well-known motif in Hindu iconography, but the skill of the local *patua* lies in combining, through *Durga*'s facial expressions and other 'mudras', a pulsating sense of a controlled fury with a clearly visible womanly elegance. The transient nature of such creations may have deterred serious documentation and detailed study of the exquisite artistic specimens, but already too many have been consigned to the waters to brook any further delay.

More interesting to art lovers may be the innumerable numbers and styles of imagery, that vary sharply from the 'standard', not only in artistic representation but also in the use of media. From film stars to national heroes, from the politician to the profiteer — the folk clay-modellers have used all possible 'models', as *Durga*, *Mahishasura*, *Kartik*, *Saraswati*, et al. Even the iconographic and religious mandates relating to the 'Dasabhuja' goddess's ten arms (each with its assigned weapon or instrument) have been subjected to the artisan's imagination or caprice — which would amount to 'sacrilege' elsewhere. In Kolkata, however, such acts have only drawn larger crowds and, in most cases, the desired admiration. The clothes that the idols adorn range from the usual silk or cotton to velvet, crepes of different fabrics, jute, paper, matchsticks, broken glass — in fact, any substance that could give the impression of

novelty. Gone are the days when idols wore only the uniform ` *daker-saaj*, consisting of pith, with bits of foil glistening on them. Experimentation was (or is) not confined to styles, poses, gestures, designs, apparels or schematic juxtapositions — it spreads to every sector where there is opportunity for any outburst of originality.

But it is actually in the range of the artist's medium, that one comes across examples of human imagination running riot. Though the good old gangetic clay remains the favourite of the *patuas*, everything from `papier mache' and bamboo splints to seeds and razor blades are reported to have been tried out each year. So much so, that it is not an uncommon practice to arrange for a small regular image for devotional purposes, while simultaneously displaying the much-larger `art idols' for public display. The adroit flexibility of scriptures joins hands with downright ingenuity, so that the catholicity of Kolkata's citizens can be fully utilised for the most imaginative or outrageous expressions of artistic fancy. The *Durga pujas* of Kolkata are, thus, not just an annual festival or the carnival of the city; nor even the most vivid symbols of Bengali culture — they are, in fact, the best exhibitions of the creativity of popular arts and crafts. They are also the most appropriate occasion to be in the city of joy and freedom, to soar high on the wings of the human spirit, that knows no bounds for four blessed days.

Kolkata, , during the *puja* season is, therefore, transformed from a city that struggles each day for its very existence to one of the largest open-air and never-ending emporium of folk arts and popular creativity, that one can see anywhere in the world. After all, folk culture is genetically programmed to survive in changing habitats and different social eco-systems: to adapt, to improvise, to thrive and to better itself — never to say die !