

FESTIVITY, POPULISM AND POWER

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(Unabridged version)

Those who fret that community pujas in Calcutta are “getting highly politicised” must remember that they had been started in 1910 to support a political ideology. The first community Durga puja at Balaram Basu Ghat Road in the Baghbazar area coincided with the Calcutta session of the Indian National Congress. Bal Gangadhar Tilak had led the way much earlier by organising large scale Ganapati pujas in Maharashtra: to attract the masses to the new creed of nationalism. Calcutta adopted this model of utilising community festivities for political purposes.

The whole exercise has undergone a paradigm shift. The phenomenon of organising public celebrations has been extended to many more deities. Ganesh and even Hanuman have come in from outside to jostle with subaltern deities like Sitala, Shasthi, Manasa and even Dharmaraj and Boro Thakur for attention. These pujas are more than just occasions for re-affirming piety or for indulging in carnivals. An academic examination reveals that such a puja phenomenon actually represent pulsating expressions of political power, which is strengthened by interlinked cultural participation. Religion offers legitimacy to the ruling parties in Kolkata as in Delhi but Bengal’s social festivals known as Pujas facilitate the penetration and domination of all the ‘spaces’ — physical, visual, aural and celebratory — that communities cherish.

Community pujas are thus essential for the sustenance of the new political party that seized power from an apparently invincible apparatus which ruled Bengal for 34 years. This became possible because the ruling party has come up with an answer to the ‘cadre’ base that was patronised by the Left. The communist parties had left a big gap by staying away from Bengal’s emotional Durga pujas, the current ruling party filled that void. This has helped it create an army of supporters, with local clubs serving as the hubs of such support. My study of a slum in south Kolkata shows that many more gods and goddesses have been inducted into the annual schedule of para pujas. The newer additions were essential to maintain the fluid balance of power within the structure: the much sought-after tasks of collecting revenue and deciding on how to spend it has been apportioned among rival groups within the ‘republic of the locality’. They, in turn, bonded with voters by providing them much desired entertainment. The class war that Marxists had thrived on had actually been inverted by the Trinamool Congress, by providing the vast lower middle strata with better or similar fare that the upper classes pay to enjoy, totally free of cost.

Several evenings of many pujas are thus dedicated to public performances by notable singers or actors. In fact, entertainment is spread over days in such a manner that people from other localities can attend them and partake of the glitz. The riding decibel levels during evenings or even during the rest of the day need to be accepted as the vigorous assertion of subaltern power over the less-numerous gentry residing in the same area or in adjacent localities. The fact that every municipal ward has its own slums ensures the success of this political model, though it would be an oversimplification to equate political bases totally with income-based 'urban spaces'. The greater frequency of festivals is also essential to ensure the regular nourishment of the cadre as well as the operations that are carried out by the local councillors or other elected representatives and their cohorts. The presence of senior political leaders seals the bond and some VIPs are known to 'inaugurate' innumerable puja venues over several days: to reinforce the power nodes within the structure. Tapati Guha Thakurta's *In the Name of the Goddess: Durga Pujas of Contemporary Kolkata* has done a commendable study of the chief festival. She also discusses its political takeover, but as explained, pujas have to be viewed as integral to the power apparatus that ousted the Left Front through this mass-based more subaltern model of politics.

But care is also taken by the powers in Bengal to ensure that this is not viewed as the celebration of one religion only. The festivals of other communities are given considerable encouragement: to balance secular credentials. This is indeed refreshing to the minorities, because even though the previous regime had sworn by the same secularism it had stayed away from religious festivals, Hindu or Muslim. Incidentally, this regular participation in all Muslim celebrations has led to the present regime being criticised by an opposing party for 'pandering to particular vote banks'.

A vital component of the larger exercise of the present regime is the 'joy factor': emphasising continuously on celebration, colour, games, carnival and merriment. For instance, the bright strings of tiny coloured lights that brought cheer during the Pujas only, have been given permanent residence, so that the city bears the stamp of never ending festivities. This is then substantiated by public-oriented events, from the Indian Premier League and U-17 World Cup football to musical jamborees and film festivals. All stops are pulled out to ensure that there is some extravaganza on, round the year. The frequent pujas we discussed are critical constituents of this overarching master-plan of happiness, especially for the more populous bottom half of the pyramid. This also provides perfectly valid reasons for the vast machinery of governmental publicity to splurge on the leader to such a point that none else is visible, even remotely.

But then, who pays for the festivities that are not part of the government's events? Models differ, from self-financing through a daily toll collected from street markets, shopkeepers and hawkers to undisguised extortions. The rehearsals for the latter began long ago during the previous regime when trucks and cars were stopped on highways for 'contributions' to local pujas. The police looked the other way and

this trait is now stronger as pujas and power are so intertwined. 'Syndicates' determine how much money is to be paid by each builder or enterprise.

The mass appeal of large congregations during Durga pujas, of course, attract companies and advertisers as well, but our focus is on politics not economics. An interesting form of redistributive justice is worthy of note as the regular community feasts organised by the clubs, which incidentally are among the greatest attractions of many of these pujas, is that several leaders or syndicates have to share a part of what they acquired with their core groups or communities. The phenomenon brooks further detailed study as the links have been institutionalised by the government through a scheme under which local clubs are cash benefits of several lakhs of rupees each: to encourage sports and games. The last estimate is that more than 600 crore rupees have already been doled out to 12,000 clubs, and more keeps flowing while officials tear their hair. After all, audit objections are mounting each year as most of these clubs hardly submit proper 'utilisation certificates'. But then, it is high time that we realised the character of populism and post democracies in India: especially the construction and the dynamics of their power structures. Mass leaders, from unapproachable goddesses like Ammas and the lady with the big handbag to 56 inch demagogues and the lady in hawaii slippers, it is a virtual free for all of ingenious innovation of techniques to hold their flocks together. Nothing stands in the way: whether it be intimidation in the name of a historically tolerant religion or it is cash grants to loyalists who convert socio-religious pujas to strengthen their grassroots support.

After all, politics is as much the art of seizing power as the craft of retaining it.