

DURGA PUJAS AS BENGAL'S CULTURAL MAGNA CARTA

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The Durga Pujas in autumn is when the Bengalis become more crazy than usual. Their indomitable spirit and irrepressible energies — neither of which are so evident at their work-places for the rest of the year — literally burst forth during the pujas and hold normal life to ransom. The spirit of festivity is just everywhere, as hundreds and thousands of gaily-decorated pandals, those magnificent creations made of bamboo, cloth, plywood and imagination, come up on every where. They house the mammoth but exquisitely sculpted figures of Durga and her family and the whole neighbourhood is transformed into a wonderland of lights, animation and music that the organisers conjure. This is, incidentally, when the rest of India observes Navaratri, the nine holy nights and days of piety, restraint, fasts and strict vegetarianism. Bengalis, on the other hand, led by their Brahmanical class, revel in strict non-vegetarianism, gorging voraciously on mutton, chicken and their favourite fish in enormous quantities. Restraint is, however, foreign to the Bengali and Durga's long-awaited visit for just four measly days is simply not enough — for all the fun and frolic they had planned for the remaining 361 days.

But why, for god's sake, did the Bengalis splurge on Durga when they had 33 crore of deities to choose from? Here is the story most people miss out on. We need to view broad-spectrum 'state deities' like Bengal's Durga or Odisha's Jagannath not so much as gods but as platforms that offered recognition to aspirational classes for having 'arrived'. While the basic character of the deity remains apparently unchanged over centuries, its innate flexibility permits contending socio-political groups to take turns in sharing power, without painful breaks. Since the deity itself is the fountainhead of 'legitimacy', the very association with its worship confers on the 'new class' that celebrates it, social or political 'legitimacy'. Above all, it ensures a smooth linkage with the rest of the populace. In other words, the deity is itself a 'grand treaty' or a 'Magna Carta' of that state or region that everyone respects.

Where Bengal's Durga is concerned, we need to go back in time, but not too much, as nothing that is truly 'Bengali' can boast of history beyond six and a half centuries or so. The Bengali language got its act together in the 15th century, with most of its present alphabets and its grammar and syntax in position. Its very signature accent must also have come up by then. The first batch of literature produced by Brahmans and the comprador Vaidyas and Kayasthas were actually verses on Krishna, not on Durga or Kali. We get the first 'net practice' played by three 'upper castes' during this phase and this trio of castes were the ones that emerged a couple of centuries later, as the powerful Bhadrakalok or Hindu gentry. What is more significant in the history of literature is that the first major genre, the Mangal Kavyas, were downright anti-Puranic. These balladic poems were composed mainly by impoverished rural Brahmans, who must surely have

panicked as large numbers of common people preferred the Sufi variety of Islam. These Mangal Kavyas were sung by professional kavis to goggle-eyed villagers over several evenings (18, 24 or 36 of them) about how their local non-Aryan, non-Brahmanic gods and goddesses like Dharma (a Sanskritised Austric name), Manasa and Chandi defeated, yes defeated, the mighty Puranic deities like Durga and Shiva. The Hindu elite must have squirmed as Durga 1.0 lost out, but it worked, as large numbers of subaltern castes moved to this new user-friendly brand of Hinduism. Chaitanya's casteless Vaishnava faith also appealed to the masses but soon after his death in 1533, the six Goswamis of Vrindavan who took over the movement, practically 're-introduced' casteism in medieval Bengal. Incidentally, the present position is that of the 25 to 27 crore Bengali-speaking people who live in Bangladesh and India, two-thirds are Muslims — fact that is hardly mentioned

It is in this background that we need to understand the installation of Durga version 2.0 — which blipped on the screen during Jehangir's rule from 1605. It is he, more than Akbar, who really succeeded in occupying the Eastern core of Bangladesh, and it is he who employed local Hindu Brahmins for the first time since Muslim rule in Bengal began in 1202. This empowered a few Hindu zamindars in economic terms and it was one of them, Raja Kansa Narayan of Taherpur who is reported to have celebrated Durga pujas in 1610 — as a public token of gratitude and a show of his power and pomp. Bhabananda Majumdar of Nadia followed, as did other Brahman zamindars who had enough earnings to make their presence felt. What was critical to the first Hindu 'nobility' was the patronage of Jehangir and Shah Jahan, who were a bit fed up with deadly intra-Muslim rivalries in their courts and in Bangla subah as well. After all, the first four centuries under the Muslim sultans of Bengal had 'dried' up wealth and power from Hindu landlords and hence, we get not a single temple of consequence being built in Bengal in this period of 400 years.

Aurangzeb was, however, made of different stuff but he relied heavily on his Muslim Dewan of Bangla, Murshid Quli Khan, to provide him with endless funds to finance his perennial wars in the Deccan. As soon as he died in 1707, Murshid Quli declared his independence, from Murshidabad. What is interesting, is that he encouraged Hindu zamindars like Lakshmi Kanta Majumdar, leading to a new wave of Durga Pujas in Bengal. The first two phases of pujas in the 17th and 18th century were definitely expressions of elitism — with a lot of imaginative social engineering built into it. The Bengali Durga accommodated the pressure from the folk that insisted on visualising her as a good 'mother' with a happy 'family'. Kartik and Ganesh had been created as Durga's sons much earlier by the Shiva Purana and the Skanda Purana, and had already made their 'guest appearance' in Bengal. This is evident in the 11th-12th century icons found at Nao-Gaon in Rajshahi and Comilla's Dakshin Muhhamadpur, where they stand next to Durga. But Lakshmi and Saraswati were a bit problematic as Lakshmi is actually 'older' than Durga in the troubled linear history of Brahmanism. And, Saraswati was already Brahma's daughter, but the Bengalis made her Durga's without the formality of an adoption certificate. They got away with it, as there were neither the 'Succession Act' nor hassles like Aadhar cards.

But even when conceding to mass demands, the zamindars would still insist on their warrior goddess — as her power is what they prayed for — and she had to be in full battle regalia. And then came the next very-Bengali variation, which is in pursuance of the genetically-induced principle of ‘differing with Hindustan’. Surprising as it sounds, up-country Indians of the Ganga-Yamuna belt were always referred to by Bengalis as ‘Hindustanis’, just as all who are from the south are surely ‘Madrasis’. Bengalis take their urge to be different very seriously and for the last 51 years, they have invariably voted governments to power that were opposed vehemently to whoever ruled the centre. The only exception was in the 1970s, when Siddhartha Sankar Ray ruled, with healthy musclemen and trigger-happy policemen. Differ they must — thus when India celebrates Diwali as the Festival of Lights, Bengalis pray to the black goddess of darkness, Kali. There are many more, but let us get back to the odd situation thus created by Durga’s ‘family’, affectionately called the Saptarivaray Durga — that is not seen anywhere else in India.

The oddities have, mercifully, not been noticed by the loudly argumentative people, but many often wonder why Kartik the warrior-god looks away while his mother fights her life and death battle. The other children are also blissfully detached in their mother’s battle with that terrible Mahishasura, aren’t they? The reason is that these four were very ‘local’ extrapolations that have not been assigned any role by the Puranas, but had to be there or else Durga 2.0 may also have flopped. The patriarchy of the Brahmans and zamindars also needed to introduce their own anomaly, to display their ‘Bengali genius’ and we land into another mess. A belligerent goddess is all right for zamindars to draw their strength and social legitimacy from — but she may give wrong ideas of ‘supremacy’ of even ‘autonomy’ to womankind. Durga’s ‘family paradigm’ suited Bengal’s patriarchy, that ‘permitted’ images of Bengal’s Durga to be crafted with her indifferent children by her side — because children were constant reminders that ‘motherhood’ is more important to women than the beastly and dangerous business of war.

Then came the Battle of Plassey where Muslim rule ended for all practical purposes and many ‘far-sighted’ upper caste Bengalis switched to Lord Clive. The next hundred and fifty years from 1757 were a dream run for the ‘loyal’ Bengali babus and Durga became their mascot. Ambitious bhadraloks like Nabakrishna Deb and Krishna Chandra Ray made their fabulous fortunes and this post-Plassey Durga 3.0 ensured that several of the Regulations that the new British rulers made went in their favour. All the way to the Permanent Settlement of 1793 and well beyond. Families rose and fell but the institution of zamindari was at its peak and their pomp and splendour was reflected through ostentatious Durga Puja celebrations. ‘Nautch girls’ from Delhi-Agra-Lucknow were brought in to entertain their British guests who graced the palaces of the fawning, nouveau riche babus, where wines flowed freely with the dance ‘numbers’ and mountains of food were heaped on the tables. Commoners gaped in sheer awe at all the splendour.

The choice of the imperial lion for Durga was problematic in Bengal as no sculptor or artist had even seen one. A sherawali mata or a vyaghra-vahini devi would have been easier as this Durga rides a tiger — and Bengalis knew how this beast looked like. The result was that the ‘lion’ beneath the classic Bengali Durga actually turned out to be an animal that was a caricature between a horse and other quadrupeds, but certainly not a lion. It was only when the first lion arrived in the Calcutta zoo in 1886 that the lion-looking lion first appeared. Aristocratic families who have worshipped Durga on the strange horse-like character, however, insist that tradition is more important and still refuse to bring in a lion-like creature. A word about the buffalo as well. These swarthy creatures occupied the lowest swampy regions and it became essential to drive them away and, where required, kill them, so that wet paddy could grow better — and give more rent to the zamindars. This explains why of all gods, it was Mahishasura-Mardini Durga, she who killed the buffalo-demon, who was invoked.

Let us return to the post-Plassey Durga-worshipping Bengali elite that kept strengthening its new hegemony, both economic and political. This class practically drove away the previously-powerful indigenous gods and goddess, but on reviewing their own Durga 3.0, they felt it needed to be more feminine and more Sanskritic. This is when more Sanskritic themes like vatsalya or love and affection (for one’s children and juniors) entered the scene. The mighty Durga was then visualised as the ‘daughter’ of Menaka and Giri-raj and the last four days of Navratri became the annual homecoming of daughter Durga. This clicked at the box office of faith as nothing before or after and to the Bengalis, she is still their daughter, so full of madhurya (tenderness). It is in her honour that the best of food is ‘served’ and eaten, as Durga’s children frolic to their Nana-Nani. But Shiva is no where in sight, which is nothing to worry about —these happen with many an India son in law. The irony of how Durga dragged the carcass of the buffalo-demon to her mother’s home is, however, not missed out by a 19th century poet like Dasharathi Ray, whose Menaka screams:

“Oh, Giri! Where is my daughter, Uma?
Who have you brought into my courtyard?
Who is this ferocious female warrior?”

Rashikchandra Ray also echoes Menaka’s sentiment:

“Giri, who is this woman in my house?
She cannot be my darling Uma,
This terrifying ten-armed woman!

But, by then, Hegelian anti-theses were also in action as a new bourgeoisie had quietly grown under the patronage of the British. It was a quirk of fate that British traders had to install a nouveau feudalism in Bengal even after the French Revolution had spelt the end of the ancien regime in Europe. From the 1830s, we get reports from contemporary newspapers like the Samachar Darpan and the ‘Calcutta Courier’ that several traders’s associations and groups of commoners had also started organising their own brand of Durga Pujas, through public collections. Here, piety mattered more

than pomp, but then politics could hardly miss this chance. The success of Bal Gangadhar Tilak's public celebration of Ganesh Chaturthi —converting a private puja into an event that drew masses closer to his politics of nationalism was not missed out by Bengalis. Thus, when the Congress session was held in Kolkata in 1910, a full-fledged public or sarvojanin celebration of Durga Puja was also organised. Durga 4.0 had arrived. This is when the Tagore-inspired rite of kola-kuli (hugging friends, relations and even strangers) was introduced, and the colourful ritual of sindoor-khela (married women smearing each other's faces with red vermillion) came in. The new middle class built its own model and never looked back — as soon community worship and feasts brought in more solidarity among them.

Since then, thousands of such sarvojanin pujas cropped up all over the state in the 20th century —overshadowing the zamindari pujas that were limping as fates changed. For a hundred years, these celebrations encouraged the flowering of numerous cultural activities, from the best of modern literature that was made available through many highly-affordable 'puja magazines' to scintillating music that was specially produced for the season, with many others in between. As competition for attention and honour drove the the organisers, novelty and experimentation reached a new frenzy. Images of Durga were crafted in every medium possible — from betel-nuts and glass bangles to nuts and bolts — in fact, anything. Kolkatans have thus seen every wonder of the world as huge pandals were skilfully designed to look like the Taj Mahal or the Statue of Liberty or the Eiffel Tower. Even The Titanic have featured as puja pandals, as have the Twin Towers and this year.

At the turn of the century, however, a new battle gripped Bengal. Mamata Banerjee was desperately looking for 'fighting power' at the grassroots or trinamool level, to take on the mighty Marxists. The latter's grip was visible everywhere for three long decades and more and this was most felt at the 'locality level' where powerful LCs (Local Committees) ruled quite unchallenged. She fraternised intensely with local clubs that slowly gravitated to her, as she spoke their language in their accent. The Left's binary 'Haves versus Have-Nots' soon became the new desperate subaltern's 'Haves versus Must-Haves' — with no holds barred. This Durga 5.0 helped bring the 'lowest denominators' to power in 2011— demonstrating convincingly to the Left Front that their 'working class' was actually very middle class, limited to the better-off organised factory workers and government clerks. This phase also brought in unabashed commercialisation into the celebrations, along with unheard-of money power and political patronage. Local Councillors of urban bodies and panchayat functionaries in the rural areas strengthened their 'rule' by patronising almost every Durga Puja in their 'raj' and by 'inaugurating' every pandal possible. The Chief Minister personally holds the Guinness Book record for inaugurating the largest number of puja venues, spread over several days. Even a 5-minute halt at a venue can surely send the 'right signals' to local policemen and officials 'to cooperate'. It is no wonder that advertising companies have 'bought' up everything that is visible, except garbage. Billboards as high as two to three storeys are erected along every prominent road and lane, blocking out light and air for weeks, and the countless ad-filled gates,

banners, festoons and standees only enhance Kolkata's claustrophobia. In the face of this politically-backed Durga 5.0, the Durga 4.0 of the better educated middle class has quietly vacated the arena and moved to apartment buildings and 'housing estates'. Here, warmth and social bonding are still valued over ostentation and display of political might.

The state government of 'Bangla' has stepped in with 'legitimacy' in the form of 'assistance' to local clubs and some 700 crore rupees have reportedly been spent from its coffers. This year, another 28 cores are being doled out to some 28,000 puja clubs at a flat rate of 10,00 rupees per club. This is rather interesting, as the puja budget of some of these wealthy clubs run into dozens of crores of rupees. One pandal has displayed a silver chariot made of 20 tons of silver, that is 60 feet high and 40 meet wide. It is, perhaps, this chariot that Mamata Banejee hopes may finally take her to Delhi next year, in her true grand theatrical style.