

REDEFINING BENGAL'S DURGA PUJAS AS URBAN FOLK CULTURE

Jawhar Sircar

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Do you want to walk through Bahubali's overawing Mahishmati palace in north Kolkata, that is over five stories high? It has been done so wonderfully at over ten crore rupees that the super-hits film's creator SS Chandramouli is truly bowled over. Or are you keen to shake hands with Mowgli and his Jungle Book friends Babloo, Baghera and others in an honest to goodness 'forest' within the metropolis of Kolkata, where one can see that hissing snake Kaa and the killer Sher Khan from a safe distance? Or, maybe, enter Ajanta Caves or even pose before the Eiffel Tower and Buckingham Palace? This is neither a con game nor a walk through some film studio with these look-alike props: they are as real as possible. Lakhs of humans have literally started crowding dozens of such sites all over the city, admiring and touching the life size statues that adorn Bahubali's prized palace. Oh, we forgot to mention that it also houses Kolkata's Sreebhumi Sporting Club's Durga image, ready for worship. The Machua Bazaar Durga Puja Committee is similarly busy with their Jungle Book forest, where thousands of kids have started pouring in for fun and of course to see the Durga Puja there. As is evident, Kolkata has gone crazy again, which it does each year during Bengal's Durga Puja season that celebrates the last four days of Navaratri. The entire mega-city of Kolkata metamorphoses into something that is a cross between an indigenous 'Disneyland' and a spirited Latin American fiesta, as billions of tiny multi-coloured lights transform a struggling city into a dreamland.

It is great fun for those who pine to walk for several hours of puja-hopping, in very high spirits, and actually be a part of one of the largest congregations of humanity. They do not mind the occasional pushing and shoving, as goggle-eyed visitors break into raptures at each 'pandal'. This is what the temporary architecture of cloth, plywood and improvised materials that stand on wooden poles and bamboo rods are called. They are far removed from the humble and unimaginative shamianas that the rest of India puts up during their celebrations or big events. One may, of course, traverse short distances by cars, buses, trams or metro rail service, but then one has still to walk a bit to get close enough to savour the magnificence and innovations of each pandal and the ambience of the surroundings. For those who are short on

the fitness quotient or are not fully equipped with the crazy bug that converts itself into a special enthusiasm that is essential for the millions who trudge from venue to venue, the television is the best option. One can see it all, in the cool comfort of one's own home, though frankly it is not like being in Eden Gardens or at Lords, because one does get a bit of a second hand view of what is nothing short of the most spontaneous explosion of popular art that grips this huge metropolis.

'Art installations' on such a scale by so many untrained artists are difficult to match anywhere else in this country or abroad. The Bengalis, who are not usually rated as the most energetic of people, seem to draw large doses of vigour from some hidden reservoir of zeal, to give shape to their fertile and unbound creativity. In the bargain, we get to see a mind-boggling array of 'theme' pandals and uniquely-crafted images that are created from every conceivable material. Thus while a handful of obscurantists and the progressively increasing number of Hindutva-vadis lump it, one group creates the goddess with coconut shells, the other from matchsticks, the third from broken glass bangles and yet another from betel nuts: each of them in perfect shape and proportion. Good old gangetic clay remains the favourite of the highly skilled idol makers of Kamartali, almost everything else is also tried out: papier mache, bamboo splints, nuts, seeds, beads, fabrics of all types, jute, flax, hemp, hay, paper, cardboard, wood, plastics, glass, ceramics, fibre-glass, shells, beads, razor blades, screws nuts, bolts — in fact, any substance that can be given shape to and can wow the viewers with its novelty or chutzpah of imagination. Many an outrageous modern artist would appear to be just dull in comparison and it is another matter altogether that these indigenous creators do not rank as creative artists outside Kolkata. Experimentation is not confined to styles, poses, gestures. Even the dress of the idols 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 traditional dress caulleddaker-saaj that consists of pith, with bits of gold and silver foils and sequins glistening on them. It is free for all in each sector, whether it be the images, dresses, pandals, lighting, theme parks or sounds — it spreads to every area where there is opportunity for any outburst of originality.

The mammoth crowds as well as art lovers are given a treat each year as imagination and innovation are let loose with a sense of marketing and competition. If only a part of this zeal was put in to attract industries the state could have done wonders, but the creative Bengali visualiser would loathe the

very thought of fattening the purses of capitalists that he is genetically programmed to hate. The imagery of the goddess attacking the demon that the scriptures enjoin is also subjected radical experimentation and thus Durga and her family could very well appear in stylishly tattered jeans while the demon just rocks on. From film stars to national heroes, from the politician to the ugly profiteer — the folk artists and clay-modellers have used all possible ‘models’, as Durga, Mahishasura, Kartik, Saraswati, et al. Even the iconographic and religious mandate that this goddess must have ten arms as she is the dashabhujā, and that each of these arms must bear its assigned weapon or instrument has 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. So much so, that it is not an uncommon practice to arrange for a small regular image placed before the larger artistic creation which is the one to whom all prayers are to be directed and devotion showered upon, while the much-larger ‘art idols’ are only 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.

Almost all the three thousand pujas are jealously different from each other and if one tries to see only the short list of eighty puja-pandals that the Kolkata Police has, with time and experience, marked as the top of the grade, one would need much more than the allotted four days. These are the days of Shasti, Sapatami, Ashtami and Navami of Navaratri, and the pujas officially end on Dusshera or Vijaya Dashami, when the shastras enjoin that the images must all be consigned to the holy Ganga, without any thought of what it does to the mother river’s health. But thanks to organisers who try every trick to hold back Durga for as many days as possible now getting mixed up with vote bank politicians, overburdened policemen and the courts, the pujas are unofficially extended beyond Dashami. The images are taken for immersion from the mega puja in easy instalments, for almost a week after the religiously sanctioned date, so that more and more people get to behold their magnificence, splendour or innovation, for which the organisers and artists spent at least six to nine months to prepare. Apart from Bahubali and Jungle Book, this year’s pujas have also conjured a mammoth White Thai Temple as well as several walks through serious themes like urbanisation, environmental hazards, cycle of life, time in human life and so on. Record crowds visit these ‘theme pandals’ as their presentations are farthest from the pedantic: they are just stunning in the use of visual imagery, digital projection, holograms, lights,

sounds, materials used and the lot. And, all of this is done in the name of Ma Durga who presides over all her crazy children. A theme pandal that focuses on global warming has a simulated tornado that whooshes around so eerily and the setting has 8000 kilograms of glass crafted by the artisans who are camping there all the way from the 'glass town' of Firozabad in UP. The water display alone has some 2400 kilograms of glass. One can appreciate the stimulus to the economy that it gives and its model of job-oriented growth could easily be studied by PM's new advisory council led by Bibek Debroy. Needless to mention, big and small lights play a unique role in enhancing themes, with wondrous animation that tell so many tales: from demonetisation to lesser demons.

But, when did Kolkata begin this prolonged and emotional engagement with Durga that brings out so much creativity, completion and spirit? To be historically precise, the first community Durga puja of consequence was held in the autumn of 1910, at Balaram Basu Ghat Road in Baghbazar area of north Kolkata, which was in the heart of the old, aristocratic part of the city. It coincided with the 1910 session of the Indian National Congress in Kolkata, which explains how nationalist sentiment and fervour played such a critical role in getting common people together. Tilak's model of using Ganapati for galvanising masses in service of the nation was the role model for Kolkata's community pujas but Bengalis have bouts of amnesia when it comes to giving credit to others. The township of Kolkata was set up by the East India Company some 220 years earlier, in 1690 and before it completed its first century it was declared to be the chief seat of British governance. After vanquishing the ruling powers of India in battles of Plassey and Buxar, by means fair or foul, the Company acquired revenue rights and to rule it all, the Governor of Bengal was declared as the Governor General of India. The wily collaborators of the British in Kolkata like Raja Nabakrishna Deb and Raja Krishna Chandra were the first to celebrate the goddess of victory, Durga, in their palatial homes in 1758, immediately after the Battle of Plassey. To 'enhance' their social status, they invited the firangis over to their house for evenings of splendour during the Durga pujas, where dancing girls performed ostensibly before the goddess and wine flowed freely. The logic was that the devi was not averse to liquor as she herself took a few swigs before battling so many demons. There are, of course, a few precedents before these post-Plassey pujas, as we find that almost a century and a half earlier, Raja Kansa Narayan of Taherpur in eastern Bengal and some other Hindu chieftains had also organised grand celebrations during Durga pujas. They were thanking the

goddess for their providential break when the Mughals employed Hindu zemindars and finally ended the four centuries of Muslim monopoly in the revenue administration Bengal. But we have no historical records of continued observance since then as celebrations required a lot of money that only largely-profitable zemindaris could afford. Some of the first lot of Hindu land-holders could not continue large-scale worship later because of fickle fortune.

After Plassey, however, we have an unbroken history of ostentatious Durga pujacelebrations at the palaces of the Company's nouveau riche Indian intermediaries, the munshis and banians. The practice of the laal (lord) sahibs gracing these events where nautch girls entertained the white man continued for the next one hundred and fifty years. The rich and the famous of the growing metropolis vied with each other to entertain the British, while Durga appeared to look away from crass and vulgar displays of wealth and 'tastes'. Durga pujas soon became very expensive and exclusive pageants that the prosperous Bengali babu held at his residence to which the masses had only limited access to their goddess. In all fairness, a new culture of poetry, song, dance and theatre also flourished thanks to this patronage, as did the visual and plastic arts. 'Commoners' also tried to pool their resources together to worship Durga pujas in their own style and we have a record of one such attempt at Guptipara in Hooghly in the 1790s. But, realistically, one would have to wait for English education to spread and spawn new secular professions for the new bourgeois class to start gathering economic and social strength to carve an alternate lifestyle. This class bloomed in the latter half of the nineteenth century, when they also started displaying the first signs of nationalism as well.

During the heydays of zamindars too, the masses discovered their own avenues of entertainment that involved creative expression, especially during the festive season. They enjoyed their own extempore poetic contests kabi-gans and tarjaas that called for sharp wit and repartee and they had their 'panchali' songs, in praise of divinities, performed with a bit of pantomime. They organised fascinating open air theatrical performances called 'jattras', with colourful costumes and an indigenous concert with violins that matched the melodramatic moments with high notes. Climaxes were greeted by the beats of drums and the clang of huge cymbals. Most interesting were the subaltern mock songs and dances the 'jhumur' and 'khemta' and the salty and salacious lampoons of the high and mighty through 'shong' performances, where they ripped apart the inequitable social order, with sheer rancid wit. 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. Like other urban centres, Kolkata developed its own subaltern culture through songs, jingles, artistic designs, street-shows and so on. This new distinctive ‘urban folk culture’ has been highlighted in Sumanta Banerji’s *The Parlour and the Streets*, that re-lives this phase so vividly.

These outpourings of the urban subaltern did not remain confined only to the performing arts. 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. 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, who was the rustic visitor, the poor pilgrim and the struggling city-dweller. 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 and twenty-first centuries. The clay-modellers of the city are still in demand but many scholars bemoan that folk art is ‘dead’ in Kolkata as cheap, mass-produced goods have killed the artisans’ creations in every conceivable sphere. While this is considerably correct, it is perhaps not wholly true, as it is my submission that the Durga puja celebrations are indeed living and pulsating expression of urban folk culture. All the craftsmanship that enrich the pujas like the designing and execution of the massive, theme pandals with their exquisite interior frills and decoration are new avenues of folk art. The imaginative sculpting of the goddess and her retinue and the special lighting are all products of a refined urban folk culture. Even the songs, that include the traditional pre-puja Aagamoni songs and the prolific literature that are created are also cultural outpourings, though not necessarily of the folk variety. The dhunochi-naach dances that are done before the image, by balancing lighted urns of smoking and burning incense on one’s palms or between the teeth to the furious beat of the drums are surely a part of folk culture.

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 creative spirit that manifests itself through

the popular arts and They are also the most appropriate occasion to be in the city of joy and freedom, to soar high on the wings of human spirit, that knows no bounds for four blessed days.