

THE POLITICS OF PUJAS IN BENGAL

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It was quite interesting to hear the chief minister recently rattle out a never ending list of gods and goddesses who are worshipped in Bengal at present. Equally interesting was to see her ministers and party leaders celebrate *Khunti-puja* or the first stake on the ground for the next Durga Pujas on day of the holy period of *Ratha Yatra*. But then, there are so many other gods and goddesses to be worshipped before Durga arrives three months later — Manasa, Krishna Janmashtami, Ganesh, Vishwakarma and of course, Jhulan Utsav, Rakhi Purnima and what not. We hardly remember when we see Shitala puja celebrated on a grand scale that small pox has been eradicated some twenty years. In olden days, when many children died at childbirth or soon thereafter, we prayed to Ma Shasti — and we continue to do so even when radical improvements have taken place and no one can really bring up more than one child or two children. Even Raksha-Kali, Dharma Thakur, Boro Thakur and others who have started migrating from rural Bengal to our cities — like Satyajit Ray's Apu. Not only that — many of the images are now almost as big as Durga and their festivities also continue for several days.

Besides, gods are now imported gods from other states as well. It began with Santoshi Ma and then moved on to Ganesh and his pujas are increasing in number and pomp so fast that in a few years, Kolkata may catch up with Mumbai. In the last three years, Ram and Hanuman have also entered Bengal with a bang, literally. Of late, they are not guests of just one political party — their worship has spread so much that their bitter political rival party is giving stiff competition. And this is precisely the point — politics — and we need to come to terms with this most visible instruments of power in post-Left Bengal. No more are community pujas fixated only on Durga and Kali — with others like Saraswati or Vishwakarma coming up very poor seconds. In fact, Lakshmi's public worship in one corner of lonely, deserted Durga puja pandals have always look quite pathetic. In the past, Kartik puja was quite rare and confined to small pockets — especially the prohibited areas, but not any more. Oh, we forgot to mention Shiv. His *Shiva Ratri* is not the quiet vow of some determined women — it is now a grand affair with music, lights and a lot of decoration. Even *Sravan* is becoming as much of a headache in Bengal as it is in north India — where boisterous *bhaktas*, the dreaded *Kanwariyas*, are a veritable threat to normal life — in trains, buses and a traffic hazard as well. Even Chandannagar's Jagadhatri has started making a mark in Kolkata. The point is that these festivals are hardly too far behind Durga and Kali pujas.

Tapati Guha Thakurta has proven through her detailed research that Durga Pujas in Kolkata have become inextricably linked to political patronage. I agree, but my

arguments are a bit wider — politics is not confined only to Durga pujas and, more importantly, that it is because these locality pujas and clubs became political, Mamata Banerjee could defeat the entrenched Left Front. It were not only her ceaseless agitations and emotionally-charged issues, but her success in crafting a unique Bengal-specific strategy that won her the crown. Mamata Banerjee realised in the 1990s that a seasonal party like her ‘parent Congress’ could never tackle the 24 X 7 grassroots organisation of the Marxists. She needed a grassroots or *trinamool* response and organisation. Since the Left had penetrated every organisation and had monopolised every occasion, except religion, she got in through the only gap in the Chinese wall that the atheist Left parties had ignored, namely, — pujas. During the Left regime, locality clubs also looked around desperately for political patronage, especially to negotiate with the local police and municipal authorities. Even as an opposition party, the Trinamool Congress was capable of creating major disturbances any where, any time, and wiser local level officials cooperated with their leaders. The Left government never bothered as it viewed these as petty religious issues — not an anti-government agitations. This base-level relationship is now legitimised and the local Councillor is undoubtedly the kingpin. He enjoys more power than what the erstwhile Local Committee Secretary of the CPI(M) did.

My other contention is that the more the number, variety and frequency of pujas in the locality, the more does it help in democratising power — within the localities and the party. Multiple pujas offer rival local leaders the opportunity to showcase their organisational skills. More pujas also help frequent connection with voters at the ‘non-political’ socio-religious level, where everyone is invited. It is needless to say that finances flow in, as links with promoters and business enterprises are fairly well established at the local level — as are relations with police and civic officials. Incidentally, accounts till last year show that the State government has given well over ₹600 crores to local clubs — for sports, of course.

But what makes these pujas so popular is the free entertainment that they offer to the broadest base of the socio-economic pyramid in our cities and numerous urban centres. The clubs that organise these pujas compete very seriously to ensure as many evenings as they can, to dish out popular musical and other performances. The latest attractions are the prized ‘DJ nights’. As folk pujas are not bound by tight, fixed dates like Durga Pujas, organisers can book well known singers or actors on their available days. This staggered-dates system also means that people from different areas get a chance to enjoy the entertainment dished out by different clubs in other localities during the puja-evenings. This is a critical business as the prestige of the club is involved along with the reputation of the whole locality. Naturally, organisers go to great lengths to make it succeed. And, then there is the ‘*bhog*’ or the common feast that local leaders offer to their core supporters or to the entire locality — which, again, is an exercise in redistribution of economic gains.

The upper layers of society that complain about roads being occupied for pujas or the loud nature of these ‘subaltern celebrations’, need to realise the gradual takeover of both the spatial and aural worlds by a confident and assertive new class. It also indicates the shrinking domain of the erstwhile higher-educated ‘intellectual’ or better off strata in the politics of the state. Those who feel disheartened with open political patronage of pujas may do well to recall that community pujas were invented primarily for a political purpose — to mobilise mass support for the Congress. In 1893, it was Tilak who first experimented with the public celebrations of Ganesh Chaturthi in Maharashtra. Then in 1910, the first collective Durga Puja was also organised in Kolkata to coincide with the Congress Session— with politics in mind. Why grudge an old tradition of combining politics with religion — even if the beneficiaries are ‘secular’?