



Visual Spectacle and Urban Heterotopia: Calcutta's Durga Puja as Cultural Carnival

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explore the artistic and sociological significance of Durga Puja as celebrated across Calcutta and Bengal moving beyond the fundamental binaries of religion and faith to talk about aspects of creativity, innovation and a unique amalgamation of modern ideas and Indian sensibility. From the Vatican City to the fictional Mahishmati Empire, the sacred Kedarnath Temple to the secular Red Fort, from Agra's Taj Mahal to the Malaysian Twin Towers, one can find the replicas of almost every significant structure in the city alone making one ponder over the artistic genius and versatility of those engaged in making these hallowed structures. Every pandal thus has its own narrative to tell and its own potential message to convey to the revellers embracing within itself a saga of diversity and difference. This paper also intends to highlight how Durga Puja emerges as a powerful expression of a unique urban 'spatiality' by influencing the way we as subjects experience urban spaces, as a cultural testimony of soft power based on the aesthetics of shared values and ritualistic practices, a blend of the esoteric and the mundane, the timeless and the temporal.

Keywords: Carnival, Cosmopolitanism, Spatial Transfiguration, Art Festival, Mass Exhibition

Every state of India has its own distinctive culture and rituals, some of which have attracted widespread critical acclaim and public recognition by the sheer magnitude and intensity with which they are celebrated. Calcutta's Durga Puja comes as an unparalleled aesthetic experience in itself with the entire city transformed into an art gallery and even the narrowest alleys lit up in the most opulent way involving

ten days of fast, feast and worship of all that is 'inexplicable a moment' to define. Walking through the lanes of Calcutta during the Durga Puja festival is a magical experience in itself characterised by a mystifying ambience that eludes our senses making us marvel at the sheer magnanimity and colossal grandeur of the city all decked up like a bride beaming in the effulgence of its own beauty transformed into a cultural hotspot for millions of its residents as well as those innumerable visitors and expatriate group of people who return back to the city to witness the exuberance and be a part of the exquisite regalia and festive fervour that the festival accompanies with it.

One of the most publicised and extravagant events in the city's calendar Durga Puja is celebrated in the months of Ashwin (September-October) and commemorates the homecoming of Goddess Durga with her cohort of deities Kartik, Ganesh, Lakshmi, Saraswati and the vanquishing of the demon Mahishasura. To trace the mythological genesis of this festival one has to look through the pages of Markanda Puran which states that it was King Surath who is believed to have performed the first ever Durga Puja in spring after getting instructions from Sage Medha. The legend in Markanda Puran states that King Surath had lost his kingdom and was wandering through the forest where he met Samadhi Vaishya who too had lost his kingdom. In the jungle they met Medha Muni who in response to their fervent supplications to help them regain their kingdoms suggested them to perform Basanti Durga Puja. Both of them thus performed the festival and got back their kingdoms. This initiated the ritual of performing Basanti Durga Puja in Basant season or Chaitra month of the Hindu calendar. However, the present form of the festival known as Sharodiya Durga Puja owes its origin to Lord Rama's invocation of the Goddess before going to war with the demon Ravana in the month of Sharad or the autumn season. It is from there that Durga Puja became a widely popular celebration and thus became a household ritual in Bengal.

Folklores say that the first grand worship of Goddess Durga in recorded history is said to have been performed in the late 1500s by the zamindars of Dinajpur and Malda. From then onwards it was mostly the privileged elite Hindu Bengali class which used to

celebrate Durga Puja and it was only attended by high caste and affluent people believed to have a refined taste and inclination towards grand religious ceremonies. It was only in the beginning of the 20th century that the festival of Durga Puja truly became a community affair involving large numbers of people, financial contribution and mass participation. Initiating its journey from there, this festival had no looking back as it grew bigger and bigger in size attracting huge attention and community level participation with the passage of time and the professional engagement of a host of artisans, including potters, drummers, priests, florists as well as people engaged in art, decoration, pandal making and lightning. In the late 1980s and early 90s started the trend of 'theme pujas' that completely transformed the festive tradition opening up new vistas of artistic creation and paved way for the emergence of a new urban culture of celebrating Durga Puja as a grand large scale communitarian event, a mega consumerist carnival defining the modern contours of a so called art festival transcending barriers of class, creed and religion. As the city evolved, so did the Pujas striving to keep in tune with the modern times while at the same time trying to sustain the cultural expressions and actions of the Hindu Bengali community.

For Calcutta, Durga Puja is not a mere annual festival commemorating the nine forms of Maa Durga but a cultural ensemble, a unique amalgamation of western ideas and Indian ethos, a kind of auterial enterprise which thrives with the involvement of established artists, corporate sponsors, mega advertising and an open acceptance and experimentation with new artistic forms and techniques that renders an intangible experience through the tangible aspects of human expressions in art, architecture and interior designing. The huge temporary canopies held by a framework of bamboo poles and draped with a collage of colourful fabric and structural protrusions called the pandals thus manifest a spatial configuration, an 'optical manifestation' of social infrastructure, a concept elaborated by famous city space historian Swati Chattopadhyay. If one visits the city a few weeks before the official commencement of the festival one can see the gradual changes taking place on the city roads and public places, Durga idols taking shape

under the expert hands of the idol makers at Kumartuli famously known as the 'potter locality' of northern Calcutta. The entire process of creation of the idols from the collection of clay to the final ornamentation is a holy process, supervised by rites and rituals. On the pious day of Akshaya Tritiya when the Rath Yatra is held, clay for the idols is collected from the banks of the Hooghly River that runs through the city and with acute finesse and careful craftsmanship the idols are given their final shape before being loaded on trucks with great pomp and thrill to be installed in their respective pandals. The Durga Puja festival therefore does not remain confined within the sacrosanct precincts of a religious observance, a kind of annual ritual of the Hindu community but emerges as a distinct interplay of artistic creation, mutual cooperation and healthy competition between each pandal and its artwork challenging social hierarchy and cultural fixities ingrained in our consciousness by presenting us with alternative forms of popular art and modes of perceiving the world in general. The active involvement of multiple players beginning from the organizers, producers, owners, artists, structural engineers, event managers and even media professionals thus imparts a sense of collective endeavour and shared responsibilities to pull off such a grand mega carnival keeping in mind the high expectations of the crowd. Durga Puja is thus all about being a 'public exhibition' marked by devotion and ostentatious display which forms the twin aspects of the festivities with Maa Durga being at the epicentre of all the vivid magniloquence and festive extravaganza. This is where the Goddess with the festivity and merriment that surrounds her meets the metropolis adding a texture of sociality along with a metaphysical enunciation of the sacred. Officially it is from the day of Mahalaya itself that one can perceive the infectious vibe and energetic aura of the city and its incredible populace all set to welcome and relish one of the most awaited events of the year. For Bengalis, Mahalaya is not just an ordinary day, but cherished tradition and oodles of nostalgia gushing with a fabulous blend of devotion, culture and the sight of happy faces all around.

In most Bengali households waking up to tune in to the plangent rendition of Birendra Krishna Bhadra's eulogising the triumph of

Goddess Durga over the evil forces of Mahishasura, being live broadcasted on All India Radio is like a soothing initiation into that spirit of festivity and religious reverence that dawns as a form of natural routine of almost every Bengali family ready to welcome their daughter with open hearts and folded arms. Everywhere the air is thick with the beating of drums, the chanting of the Vedic verses and hymns, the misty vapours of the incense as it rises upwards in the air bequeathing a tranquil aroma and the uplifting serenade of Rabindra-Sangeet that signifies how Tagore remains an intrinsic part of the refined Bengali sensibility impacting almost every facet of their social and cultural life. Tapati Guha Thakurta, professor at Centre for Social Sciences, Calcutta in her book *In the Name of the Goddess: The Durga Pujas of Contemporary Kolkata* observes that what gives a distinct status to the Calcutta puja is its cosmopolitanism and inclusive nature, as people belonging to different castes, classes, linguistic affiliations come together to participate in the fun and gaiety that the festival is all about.

This year is more special as UNESCO has included Calcutta's Durga Puja in its list of intangible cultural heritage of humanity acknowledging the profound artistic excellence and the potential message of inclusivity and goodwill that it fosters among fellow individuals. UNESCO defines Intangible Cultural Heritage as 'unique oral traditions, performing arts and rituals that hold immense relevance for communities to the point where they become part of a nation's collective heritage'. The UNESCO inscription reads that 'During the event the divides of class, religion and ethnicities collapse as crowds of spectators walk around to admire the installations'. From matchsticks to chalk pencils, metal mesh to ice cream sticks, scrap products to coins, dried leaves to cigarette packets and from ply blocks to foam rubber the dexterous bricolage of the puja artists is sure to stupefy the normative architectural sensibilities of any viewer when confronted with such a fine display of original art and craftsmanship with each idol and pandal emerging as semblances of stellar autorial enterprise. The unique blending of tradition, folk art and crafts with fine art in modernist forms began around the late 90s and early 2000s bringing in a series of

paradigmatic shifts in the way the festival is perceived by the common masses. What followed is an explicit metamorphosis of the festival from a low to a high culture community extravaganza with new experiments in ethnic preferences and artistic identities coming into being of a taste culture richly augmented by the participation of electronic and print media and a steady infusion of corporate capital and tremendous branding. Tapati Guha Thakurta explains this interplay between the material and the metaphoric by referring to city space historian Swati Chattopadhyay's concept of 'fungibility' meaning both the principle of how an everyday space or structure can become interchangeable with some fabricated site from some distant past or remote corner of the globe and in the process indicate how one single site can trigger multiple transfigurations and interpretive possibilities. The familiar city spaces thus become a kind of 'magical heterotopia' with every street and locality adorned with bright illuminated panels made by the artists of Chandanagore, an erstwhile French colony famous for its lightning industry. From multi-coloured LED bulbs to serially arranged twinkling wire clusters the city resembles a visual spectrum with moving images of animals, flowers, people, vehicles and even fire spitting dragons rendering the quotidian city spaces to something of an idealised demonstration and trenchant conceptualisation of the sacred and the social. These are however not unreal, imagined spaces but real places of a special kind, a site where the real is at once represented, inverted and challenged, a concept which Foucault called 'heterotopia'. The city thus becomes a liminal space in which the edifice created, arouses a sense of awe at the intricacies of the construction especially with ordinary objects.

With catchy themes and concepts often imbibing within itself profound socio-political overtones Kolkata pandals are magnificent relics of a meticulous blending of art and faith. The first in that order is the Sreebhumii Sporting Club which is highly popular for its exquisite pandals and magnificent decoration. In fact, Sreebhumii Sporting Club entered the Guinness Book of World Records in 2018 for being the biggest crowd puller among all the Pujas held in Calcutta with more than 1000 people visiting the pandal every five minutes. From building the replica of Jagannath Temple of Orissa in

2016 to the fictional Mahismati fort as shown in the Bahubali film, recreating the Kedarnath Temple in 2020 to this year's (2022) majestic St Peter's Basilica Church, Sreebhumi puja organizers are well known for conceptualizing stunning marvels in art imparting ideas of peace, goodwill and harmony. The popularity of the club lies not only in its praiseworthy Durga Puja organising capacity but also in its participation and commitments in its social orbit. The Club takes utmost care to provide for the needy and under-privileged, takes part in charity cricket matches and spends money on a lot of welfare projects. The frenzy of the pandal hoppers who swarm the roads in their attempt to have a glimpse of the divine pratima of Maa Durga resemble nothing less than a grand public spectacle in motion circumscribing aspects of vernacular modernity with such a huge multitude of visitors enthused to witness the 'fabular utopias' of popular craftsmanship and artistic pedagogy. The Sree Bhumi pandal this year also seemed to evoke ideas of collective amity and an open acceptance of religious diversity when the most revered deity of the Hindu pantheon was installed in a giant structure that was designed on the most auspicious space of the Christian community, that of Vatican City's St Peter's Basilica Church. Taking cue from Tapati Guha's observations we can infer that more than a religious ritual the festival has become a site of creative and cultural appropriation of the sacred and thus in its bid creating an alternative dimension of popular iconography and expressive art defying the epistemological categorisations of the sacramental. The role of the artist thus acquires a critical distinction because they need to continually reinvent themselves and seek new distinctions from their other professional counterparts. What follows as a result is an incredible variation with new forms and patterns of public taste making it an essential aspect of research and thorough engagement with new techniques and unconventional approaches churning up an array of overwhelming sensations in the minds of the viewers.

In Kumartuli locality of old Kolkata, the potters, sculptors, painters and craftsmen have truly outclassed their own brilliant and incredible inheritance when it comes to the making of the Goddess this year. Amit Sengupta, a correspondent for the Federal states,

‘There is no pandal here. It is like a gigantic art installation ... Surprisingly there is no Mahishasur with the Goddess here, nor is there a lion out to ravage the asura, accompanying her. She is looking beyond the horizon almost detached from the world’. Just like Sreebhumi, Kumartuli Sarbojan in Durga Puja Committee too boasts of a rich legacy of creating iconographic pandals using them as forceful motifs to espouse pertinent ideas and lofty themes. It was Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, who, in the 1930s took an important role in the evolution of this puja. One of the oldest Pujas of North Calcutta, Kumartuli organizers this year chose to pay a heartfelt tribute to their artisans and workers without whom Durga Puja cannot be even thought of. To attribute a mark of respect, the pandal had a collage of names of artisans written in Bengali on its walls. Debashish Bhattacharya, executive committee member of Kumartuli Durgotsav Committee states, “Durga Puja would be incomplete without idol makers and this year we have decided to salute these unsung heroes...Names of popular artists of the present day and the past will all find mention. We are going to experiment with colors, fonts and styles, all over the pandal. (*The Telegraph*, 21.09.22)

Santosh Mitra Square Puja pandal is considered to be another remarkable crowd puller in the city with their amazing craftsmanship and erudite panel of organizers known for their innovative puja themes and opulent decorations. However, the committee unlike its usual artistic tradition of coming up with impressive themes chose to do something different this year keeping in mind the 75th year of the country’s independence. This year puja committee members chose ‘*Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav*’ as their pandal theme where the visitors would be able to get glimpses of India Gate, Red Fort as well as the Parliament House within the sacrosanct premises of the pandal itself. Accompanied by laser light and sound show the pandal was one of the most enthralling experiences the city public witnessed in recent memory.

Chetla Agrani and Hindustan Club of South Kolkata are two other significant Durgotsav committees who come up with refreshingly new and distinctive Durga Puja pandals every year mesmerizing the crowds with their exotic decor and lightning. With

a unique theme titled '*Sholo Kolay Purno*' the Chetla Agrani pandal this year was dedicated to spread awareness and revive the endangered art of working on banana tea fiber. The entire pandal was decked with adornments made out of banana fiber and the process of extracting fiber from the stems and sculpting them into installations. Hindustan Park chose as its puja theme this year '*Jonaki Theke Agnisikha*' celebrating the skills and craftsmanship of the countless local tailors and karigars who transform our sartorial dreams into reality. Acknowledging a profession and a section of workers that remains largely invisible and quintessentially peripheral, the club organizers gave a befitting tribute to the sons of the soil. Designed with boards that resemble signage's of neighborhood tailoring shops, the pandal was innovatively decorated with hangers, scraps of discarded clothes and similar other tool kits that can be usually seen in a tailors shop. The voice over of dialogues playing in the background echoed their hard work and ordeals they undertake to work incessantly in miserable conditions.

Not only delineating abstract social causes and architectural symbolism, but a few puja committees and their organizers were also attracted by paintings and themes as lofty as microcosmic representations of life on earth in the form of a planetarium. The ones that need to be mentioned in this regard are the Bakulbagan Sarbojon in Puja Pandal and the famed Suruchi Sangha pandal of New Alipore, one of the major crowd pullers this year. Bakulbagan pandal was modelled along the Dutch painter Vincent Van Gogh's world class painting *Starry Night's* as its theme using it as a background to decorate the interiors. The organizers also seemed to highlight the possibility of Gogh's painting ever assuming a concrete shape in the form of a grand architectural edifice rather than just being confined to a fine piece of visual imagination. On a strikingly different note, Suruchi Sangha in New Alipore churned out a unique theme depicting a world free from the effects of Covid through its theme "*Prithbi Abar Santo Hobe*" (Peace will again prevail in the world). The pandal was designed in the form of a planetarium and with technological effects, imageries of a Covid free world was displayed inside the pandal. The pandal hoppers were enamored with a surreal

feeling upon entering the pandal as moving images signifying day and night, chirping birds, sunrise and sunset, the murmuring waves of the sea, moving clouds and changing seasons reflected humanity's gradual return to a state of normalcy after being battered by the morbid spell of the pandemic.

Other prominent city pandals like Tridhara Sammilani, Jodhpur Park, 25 Pally, Mudiali Club etc. too did not leave any stone unturned in bringing up splendid architectural creations imparting powerful ideas and messages to the city revellers. From reflecting upon themes based on human life and quest for survival to creating awareness about the use of solar power and sustainable development each pandal emerged as a compelling vista of human imagination and felicity. Thus, from sensitizing the masses about the hazardous impact of pollution to human trafficking and child labour, highlighting the plight of migrant labourers in the wake of Covid-19, rising inflation, farmers protests, citizenship amendment act, uses and abuses of technology, domestic abuse and women empowerment, population explosion and energy crisis, or heralding the virtue of social cohesion and religious harmony, nothing can come closer to the efficacious appeal of the city pandals when it comes to disseminating substantial ideas that resonates well with the contemporary reality and common temperament of the masses. In fact, the artistry of the pandals is not only restricted to conveying socially relevant ideas and themes but also involves picturesque and strikingly synonymous architectural imitations of famous monuments and renowned artworks and paintings ranging from Vincent Van Gogh to Raja Ravi Verma, Abanindranath Tagore to Leonardo Da Vinci and many more. The city thus becomes an art museum where one can see artificial yet vivifying structural replicas starting from Delhi's India Gate and Red Fort to Dubai's Burj Khalifa and Vatican City's St Peter's Basilica Church, Uttarakhand's Kedarnath Temple to London's Clock Tower enthralling the pandal hoppers to such a delightful show of animated things rarely attempted anywhere in such a grand manner. Timothy Mitchell considered this play of the real and replica as cardinal to modernity, referring to it as the world as exhibition creating an

exclusive phenomenon of celebrating, experiencing and exploring life in its myriad manifestations.

Apart from the festive aspect of the Durga Puja we also need to look into the religious part of it and understand how Goddess Durga epitomises those much-needed values and principles that modern humanity is in desperate need of. Goddess Durga stands for both primal strength and intimate domestic bliss and thus her symbolic relevance needs to be viewed from two different perspectives with all her nine forms representing different shades of her divine personage both as a nurturer and protective mother looking after the goodwill and well-being of all her children while at the same time she also stands for raw energy and brute power annihilating all the evil forces which lures mankind on the path of avarice and guile. Maa Durga thus becomes an interesting dichotomy that the society approves and ascribes to-celebrating both femininity and womanhood while at the same time resisting all that is unjust, exploitative and evil in nature, a metaphor for the modern woman who is not dependent on the shallow validations from the society but capable and competent enough to distinguish herself in all spheres of life. In a society that perennially puts mother's through unequal parenting burdens, deprives them agency in family spaces, invisibilises their unpaid care work, devalues their reproductive freedom, conditions them to deprioritise professional commitments and guilt trips them for not making sacrifices enough, Maa Durga emerges as a solemn figure hinting at the possibility of revisiting and reconsidering our latent biases against the feminine gender. Maa Durga shatters these cultural binaries and has a significant influence in changing the way women are perceived in society, as strong and self-reliant individuals who are no less in merit than the menfolk.

As the destroyer of demon Mahishasura, Durga through all her nine forms encompasses the essence of salvation, sacrifice and righteous conduct. She is the mother of bounty and wealth, knowledge and enlightenment as well as the source of supreme consciousness and dynamic energy. Worship of Goddess Durga signifies the process by which the divine potential within every being removes its layers of ignorance and achieves a state of self-

realisation. She is thus the guardian of dharma or cosmic order pervading the Universe in both its forms - as material and thought, the ultimate representation of infinite power, purity and strength of purpose which resides within the divine essence of every being, restoring calm and order to the chaos. Maa Durga also typifies the cultural sobriety of the Bengali community at large and the love and warmth, respect and regard that they exhibit towards the feminine gender. Such is the narratological virtue of the Goddess that she easily becomes a part of the ordinary Bengali life and also a metaphor for home and loss, roots and exile. Thakurta in her book observes that Calcutta's image has become synonymous with this grand autumnal festival of the Goddess with the city becoming a giant factory of secular mass identity. It's an event that shatters the narrow boundaries of dogma and religious differences, culture and class with the entire city dressed up in new attire spending these ten days in socialising, amusement, friendly and familial reunions and sumptuous feasting. In fact the city never sleeps during the last five days of the festivities with the roads jam packed with huge crowds who are out to bask in the splendour and dazzling resplendence of the city, something which cannot be experienced at other times of the year.

Durga Puja apart from being a much-awaited annual ritual in Bengalis also an economic enterprise in itself which provides for and sustains the livelihoods of a large number of people who are directly involved in the festive celebrations ranging from small and marginal workers, hawkers, stall owners, shopkeepers, dhakis, priests, idol makers, craftsmen, electricians and civic volunteers. As per the latest newspaper reports 2022, Durga Puja in West Bengal is a grand economic affair involving a budget of almost 40 thousand crores creating employment opportunities for lakhs of people across the state. With the advent of corporate sponsorships organisers are no longer dependent on contributions from local residents. If the budget of small Puja committees is around 15 lac, that for the big ones can touch an estimated figure of one crore rupees depending on the location, theme and corporate funding which goes into it. In an article published in The Business Insider (Oct 3, 2022), FFD President

(Forum for Durgotsab) Kajal Sarkar states that not only the core Durga Puja activities but also fashion, textiles, footwear, cosmetics and retail sectors get a massive boost by the buying spree of people while literature and publishing, tour and travel, hotel and restaurants, bars and cafes, film and entertainment businesses enjoy a sudden bump in sales during the five day festival. Durga Puja committees were also awarded a grant of 60,000 each by the incumbent dispensation to support them, so that they keep up with their good work with renewed hope and motivation. Despite the setback brought by Covid-19 pandemic West Bengal's Durga puja this year witnessed a sharp upswing with an estimated value of the festive transactions exceeding rupees 45 thousand crore mark. All stakeholders ranging from retailers to hoteliers and big brand owners reported sales "more than expectations" while puja organisers were ecstatic with the festive spirit among people. WB GST Commissioner Khalid Anwar said "The state's Goods and Services Tax revenue has been steadily increasing and we expect that the festive months will provide even more momentum. The cumulative growth in the current fiscal year is expected to be over 20 percent" (*Economic Times*, 10 Oct)

E-commerce platforms like Amazon, Flipkart, Myntra, Snapdeal etc. too see a huge spurt in online sales and as part of their brand endorsements leave no stone unturned to attract their customers by employing various tactics in the form of Flash Deals, Great Indian Festival sales, Big Billion Day sales with lucrative offers and huge discounts ranging from electronic appliances to household items, apparel to jewellery with low EMIs and enticing cashbacks. Exclusive branding has become the U.S.P of the city pujas these days with even big celebrities, sports stars and politicians being invited by the organisers to promote their high profile puja pandals. Durga Puja has thus become an important forum for different political parties to propagate their ideologies to reach out to the crowds and rope in new supporters. With big political leaders inaugurating the pandals to arranging their book stalls, Durga puja pandals serve as a cultural and religious pretext to dispense their agenda of tokenism and identity politics by presenting themselves as true emissaries and ambassadors of Bengali pride and culture, as the legitimate successors of the

legacy of Tagore and Bankim, Aurobindo and Vidyasagar etc. Be it the incumbent ruling party led by Mamata Banerjee or the BJP which has slowly started to make political inroads in the state post the 2021 legislative assembly elections, the parties leave no stone unturned to use these hallowed platforms to share their views and woo the crowds in their favour presenting themselves as messengers of cultural inclusivity and social harmony. In a way Durga Puja becomes the perfect time and space for political parties to exercise a kind of soft power by appealing to the collective cultural conscience of the crowds and channelize mass consensus into a vote bank politics.

Thakurta, the academic and historian who paved the way for the inclusion of Kolkata's Durga Puja on UNESCO list of Intangible Heritage Tags in her 2015 book which contains her personal experiences and extensive research over the past 20 years states that what excited and prompted her to undertake this study was the gradual evolution of the puja as it entered the urban space opening up a vast spectrum of tantalizing experiments in art and cultural aesthetics and started gaining a concrete foundation in the city. This geographical shift from the rural to the urban city space paved way for a demographic change as well with the Pujas becoming more dynamic and vibrant underlined by a kind of syncretic cultural bonding, reconstituting neighbourhoods and community involvement.

Ananya Borgohra in in her article *Durga Puja: Iconic or Consumerist* published in *The Pioneer* (18th Oct, 2015) observes how Durga Puja with the passage of time has metamorphosed into a template for all other festivals encapsulating the vivid traditions and cultural practices, merging ritual with religion almost defining the pulse of the city as a glorious carnival.. Guha Thakurta studies the shift in Durga Puja from an emotional, mythical and ritualistic refinement to a more materialistically illustrative montage. She writes- 'To bring modern stylistic idioms to work within a clay model image of the goddess meant an inevitable recourse to a vernacular aesthetic. The vernacular becomes the all-important term to think within this new genre of 'modern art Durgas' with the Bakulbagan artists' puja setting the trail for the present. We see how the

vernacular would set the parameters of the modern within this field of work but could never be modernist'. Thus in the wake of urbanisation, Durga Puja became a glocal phenomenon representing an arcadia of vivid art forms and stylistic genres, performing arts and latest technological evolutions, a platform to engage people with specialised skills and sensibilities both from India and abroad, providing an interface for cross cultural linkages and collaboration while at the same time, keeping its own legacy and heritage intact. In one of her tweets before taking part in a colourful rally as a gesture of gratitude towards UNESCO for the precious Intangible tag C.M. Mamata Banerjee writes that Durga Puja is an emotion that rises over parochial barriers and brings people together. It unites the magnificence of art with spirituality. We thank UNESCO for recognising Durga Puja as an intangible cultural heritage and honouring the labour of love of everyone involved.

Durga Puja emerges as a powerful token of religious liberty and creative endeavour that defies any singular and monotheistic worldview creating an interface where one both unlearns and re-engages with its reality. The city thus emerges as an 'urban text' with its splendid cultural cartography that expands its metaphysical boundaries beyond its spatial realms creating an 'affective space' for its readers/ residents to experience its multicultural and multifarious dimensions as they happen to encounter its ever-changing nature and appeal divided in its myriad manifestations all equally compelling and vivacious in their appeal. Unlike other cultural practices and art forms which have been attributed an intangible heritage tag by UNESCO because of their classical value and gradual extinction from the avenues of social life, Calcutta's Durga Puja is a different case altogether. Let alone being endangered or losing its cultural currency over the passage of time, Durga Puja is a perennially thriving and ever expanding phenomena and with the UNESCO tag this year it has officially entered into the category of a public art gallery, making it an arts festival as much as a religious one. The air is thumping with energy - there is music and bustle, people dressed up in new outfits, bright lights on the city's skyline and everyone determined to make the most of one week of celebrations. Kolkata is

a city known for its plurality and secularism. These values shine brighter during Durga Puja festivities. While the rituals and prayers are Hindu it is not uncommon to see people of other faiths visiting pandals, relishing *bhog*, or participating in the devotional *dhunuchi naach*.

The notion that the spaces we inhabit affect us in their own abstract ways, has now been accepted across disciplines paving way to understand the subtle dialectical relationship that the subject shares with his immediate surroundings and vice-versa. In fact, the geographical spaces we are a part of plays a very intrinsic role in the way we look at the world based on the development of our creative and cognitive faculties. One who has never been a part of the Durga Puja celebrations or witnessed its glory in person can never imagine the enigmatic appeal and phantasmagoria that it conjures in its myriad physical manifestations. Given the expansive sway of the festival it would not be an exaggeration to admit that the city becomes a kind of 'cultural pilgrimage' where the self converges with the divine in its infinite halo. With an overabundance of artistic creativity at display the city casts an intangible spell on its residents who forget their anxieties and troubles for those ten days of the year and try to make the most of it by basking in little joys with their children and family. The Puja thus comes as an embalming experience for everyone, an opportunity for self enhancement and rejuvenation, a sort of soothing break from the humdrum and mechanical aspects of life, work and office, a kind of mental de-conditioning, spending some quality time with their near and dear ones and living life to the full. Even those who profess no religion take great interest in pandal hopping and observing the sacred rituals with unflinching devotion and gusto. The city in its myriad hues thus resembles a site of holistic interplay of science and religion, a bridge between the timeless and the temporal, reality and illusion for its subjects, stirring the heartstrings of their consciousness and celebrating the cult of humanism and collective strength.

To sum up, Calcutta's Durga Puja is an invaluable cultural repository, a colourful blend of the folk and the modern, a powerful expression of artistic genius and versatility, a cultural testimony of

soft power based on the aesthetics of shared values and ritualistic practices, a juxtaposition of the esoteric and the mundane, an exotic tapestry of art forms and an occasion for unrestrained merriment, conviviality and pageantry bestowing a new meaning and cultural context regarding the way in which we comprehend reality and folk art in the spate of massive technological changes and the evolving dynamics of religious ceremonies. It is a quest for beauty, symmetry and everything that is positive, uplifting and sophisticated. It is a celebration of diversity and difference, embracing both the centre and the periphery, a harmonious confluence of the spiritual and the material. At the same time, the affective space that the puja creates becomes a fundamental part of Kolkata's collective memory making it difficult for anyone to convey those ennobling sensations in words. Given its vast canvas, uncontrolled frenzy and aural appeal it would thus not be an overemphasis to term it as an 'Oriental extravaganza' carrying within itself an ardour of mysticism and exotic charm about it. To quote the prominent television journalist Vir Sanghvi – "The essence of Durga Puja is that all passions of Bengal converge: emotion, culture, the love of life, the warmth of being together, the joy of celebration, the pride in artistic expression and yes, the cult of the Goddess. It may be about religion. But is about much more than just worship."

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