



Jaya Chaliha and Bunny Gupta, 'Durga Puja in Calcutta'

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Durga Puja in Bengal, Dussehra and Navaratri in other parts of India, celebrate the universal resurgence of the power of creation over destruction. The story goes that Mahishasur, the Buffalo Demon, ravaged the earth and was invincible. The gods, in dismay, combined their powers to create a beautiful sixteen-year-old maiden, and each placed his or her most potent weapon in one of her ten hands. Her return each year in the Bengali month of Ashwin (September–October) commemorates Rama's invocation of the goddess Durga before he went into battle with Ravana.

The traditional image of the Bengali Durga follows the iconographic injunctions of the Shastras. It is similar to the Durga of Aihole and of Mahabalipuram (seventh century). The tableau of Durga with her four children – Kartik, Ganesh, Saraswati and Lakshmi, representing respectively the Protector, the Initiator of the puja, Knowledge and the Provider – signifies the complete manifestation of the goddess. A later iconographic development, this tableau has turned Durga Puja into a family affair.

Preparations begin a month in advance. Processions and posters press the demand for Puja bonus, as the bread-winner has to meet many demands for new clothes and furbishings for the home. Pre-Puja bargain sales and exhibitions introduce the sartorial style for the coming year. Bengali newspapers and magazines publish voluminous 'numbers' or annuals – the springboard for many a budding author, besides their quantum of works by well-known writers.

Durga Puja is ushered in on Mahalaya, the first phase of the waxing moon in Ashwin. Thousands offer prayers to their ancestors at the city's river ghats. A special pre-dawn programme of readings from the Chandi and *Agamani* songs welcoming the goddess are relayed by All-India Radio. This traditional programme, conceived by Birendrakrishna Bhadra, has become an institution: a chorus of protests led to its restoration after a change was attempted one year.

The joyous atmosphere builds up as *dhakis* or drummers from the countryside collect at the stations and at important street corners. They beat their feathered drums to attract the community-puja organizers who come to engage the best performers they can find.

The first recorded Durga Puja seems to have been celebrated by Bhabananda, the ancestor of Maharaja Krishnachandra of Nadia, in or about 1606. In Krishnachandra's day, the Puja was a grand but private affair in the elegant *thakur dalan* (hall of the deity) of the palace built by his ancestor Rudra Ray. The family Puja of the Sabarna Choudhuris of Barisha dates back to 1610 – the oldest in Calcutta, and conducted even today in a highly traditional style.

Durga Puja broke free from the pillared cortiles at Guptipara in Hugli District when twelve angry young men were stopped from taking part in a household puja. They formed a twelve-man committee, which held the first public or community Durga Puja by subscription. Hence such puja

came to be called *baroari* (*baro*, twelve: *yar*, friend). A plaque at Bindeshwaritala shrine dates the event in 1168 Saka (1761AD). But records are scant and the date controversial. The *Friend of India*, the monthly once published from Shrirampur, mentions 1790.

The word *sarbajanin* (for all men) came to be substituted for *baroari* at the time of the Indian National Congress held in Calcutta in 1910. The first community puja in Calcutta was held at Balam Basu Ghat Road the same year. The celebration was used as a nationalist forum in religious guise. A pledge of solidarity was taken, and the country was identified with the goddess.

The fun and excitement of the old *baroari* puja took a serious turn in the early *sarbajanin*. Fencing with staves (*lathi khela*), yoga and drill display, provided moving demonstrations of a people preparing to fight for freedom. Swadeshi goods were sold in the stalls around the pandals (the awnings or temporary structures where the pujas are held). After Independence, martial arts of an international flavour have made their entry – jujitsu, karate etc. – but variety shows of song, dance and recitation are more popular. Many types of books, Marxist literature no less than popular fiction and children's fare, are prominently displayed.

Going back to earlier times, Durga Puja became the practice among the compradors, the new urban mercantile aristocracy in Calcutta. The accent changed. Nabakrishna Deb, patriarch of the Shobhabazar Raj, founded the family Puja and further used it to enhance his business interests. Thus began the tradition of business entertainment.

After his victory at Palashi (Plassey, in 1757) Clive [English soldier and colonial administrator] wanted a grand thanksgiving service; but the only church in town had been razed to the ground by Nawab Siraj-ud-Daula the year before. Clive consulted his *munshi*, 'Offer your thanks at the Devi's feet at my Durga Puja,' the latter advised, 'But I am a Christian,' protested Clive, 'That can be managed,' smiled the wily 'Nubkissen'.

And so Clive came to Shobhabazar in the Black Town. A golden sofa was placed for him in the open quadrangle. The Durga Puja at 36 Raja Nabakrishna Street is still referred to as the Company Puja. 'Nubkissen' set a pattern for the Puja which became a fashion and a status symbol among the parvenu merchants. The number of sahibs attending the family puja became an index of prestige. Religious scruples fell by the wayside. The nautch girls were mostly from Muslim *gharanas*; and while they danced, the English guests dined on beef and ham from Wilson's Hotel, washed down with wine.

In those colonial-style merchant mansions, the northern side of the quadrangle – sometimes covered but often open – was the *thakur dalan*, where religious and social activities took place. Even today, on an auspicious day in August, clay modellers arrive at these houses to mould the images as their ancestors have done for generations. Their work complete, the dressers take over. In the Pathuriaghata Mallik family, the ladies of the house themselves dye the sarees and decorate them with *zari* (gold brocade). In other homes, the *malakar* cuts intricate designs on *shola*, white cork or pith. Coloured foil is also used: it is known as *daker saj*, as the foil used for decoration (*saj*) was at first imported through the *dak* or post.

On Shashthi, the sixth day of the moon, the clay image of Durga is brought to life by the recitation of *mantras*. Married women renew their vows to Shiva at the foot of a *bel* or wood-apple tree and fast for the welfare of their children. Come Mahasaptami, the seventh day, and hundreds of *nabapatikas* or nine chosen plants, bound in the shape of a female form and embodying nine powers of the mother goddess, are carried to the river for ablution: an offshoot of a pre-Aryan agricultural ritual. The adoptive branch of the Deb family reverted to vegetable sacrifice on this day after the sacrificial goat escaped its tether and ran for protection to the head of the house, Raja Radhakanta Deb. Many Vaishnav homes have similar stories to tell.

Sweets are distributed on Mahashtami, the most propitious day of the Puja. The Deb household distributes king-sized laddus. In the Mallik family, *khaja* and *gaja* are prepared.

The *lagna* (set time) of the most auspicious Sandhi Puja approaches, at the moment of conjunction (*sandhi*) when Mahashtami gives way to Mahanabami and the joy of victory. Drums beat, cymbals clash and conch shells blow. The air is thick with incense, obscuring even the Devi's face.

Bijaya Dashami, the tenth and last day, brings the pang of parting. Durga is drummed a grand but tearful farewell with repeated requests to return next year. From the 'great houses', Durga is carried in the procession to the river on the shoulders of liveried porters or the men of the family itself. The community pujas postpone the farewell as long as possible and give Durga a rousing send-off. Miniature pandals atop lorries, lit by portable generators and accompanied by floats – pageant follows pageant through the streets to the Strand. Some old families, like the Debs, release a *nilkantha* or roller bird, sacred to Shiva, towards Kailash to tell the god of his wife's imminent return to her husband's home.

At the river, the goddess and her children are rowed midstream between two boats lashed together; to cries of 'Jai Ma Durga', the boats separate and the Puja is over for the year. A second roller bird flies back to Shobhabazar to tell the family of the Devi's safe departure.

[...] the family spirit of Durga Puja has descended on the many households in the multi-storeyed buildings which are rapidly changing both the skyline and the life-style of the city. Many of these now hold their own Durga Puja, run by a committee of residents. Community lunch on the Puja days restores the spirit of the joint family without its problems, while variety shows in the evening bring out the hidden talents of the residents. Yet the rituals are followed meticulously: the same priest, drummer and decorator usually appear year after year, in the tradition of the old pujas. And the deepest sanctity of Durga Puja is preserved at the Ramkrishna Mission, Bharat Sevashram Sangha and other monasteries and religious societies.

Calcutta is transformed during this unique festival. Religious fervour and merry-making mingle remarkably. Durga Puja has now become an integrated celebration absorbing all castes and creeds. The whole city takes a holiday. From the colonnaded *thakur dalans* of Shobhabazar, Natan Bazar and Thanthania, Durga Puja has moved outdoors: first to small club-houses and later, as community affairs, to temporary pandals.

An important puja, which still survives, was first organized by the Simla Byayam Samiti, a nationalist group at Simla (Shimulia) Street in 1926. Here in 1939, Subhashchandra Basu unveiled a 21-foot Durga created by Nitai Pal. Since then the pandals have proliferated and now number over two thousand.

Many of the family pujas are still supported by *debottar* foundations or religious trusts. With the advent of the Sarbajanin Puja, the onus of funding came to rest with the immediate community. The local toughs or *mastans*, as the self-appointed protectors of their areas, took the task of collection upon themselves. In their enthusiasm, they often turned militant in demanding subscriptions. This phenomenon was specially prevalent just after World War II. It has not disappeared, but contributions are usually voluntary and feature as an item in the Puja budget of most homes.

Durga herself has kept up with changing times and fashions. She often bears a clear resemblance to some leading film star, and popular hits are played for her in the pandals. In the 1960s, the Devi often laid aside her clay form to be ingeniously recreated in sea shells, *shola* or pith, thermocole, matchsticks and nails. She and her family also broke out of the conventional *chalchitra* or single backdrop uniting the group. At Bagbazar one year, a diorama of icons floated in the clouds while Durga sat on Mount Kailas.

At Maddox Square, however, the goddess is still dressed in traditional *daker saj*. There are no short cuts in the rituals here, and many senior citizens have a personal relationship with this public puja.

The image is often a secondary feature of the Sarbajanin Puja, commanding a small part of the budget allocation. Instead, competitions sponsored by commercial houses encourage taller pandals and elaborate illuminations. Durga returns each year to a novel abode. The construction of the pandals is a skilful craft. Coloured cloth, pleated, stretched and frilled, rises over bamboo frames in the city's parks and streets. In the 1950s, the *hogla* or reed roof gave way to tarpaulin and galvanized iron sheets. In 1989, the theme for the pandals was places of worship – of all denominations. Durga sojourned in temples and mosques, gurdwaras and churches and Buddhist *stupas*. At Harish Mukherji Road, however, Durga comes every year to a permanent *pukka* building. On Tarachand Datta Street a decade ago, the residents of Rambagan Bustee created the celestial world of Omkar Dham in their hereditary craft of basketry work.

Calcutta's leading artists have taken it in turn to design the image of the Bakul Bagan Durgotsab. Among them are Nirad Majumdar, Rathin Maitra, Paritosh Sen, Shanu Lahiri and Meera Mukherji. Mostly, however, the *pratimas* are made in the 'celestial colony' at Kumartuli in the oldest part of Calcutta. Images are ordered in advance: there are only a few off-the-shelf sales. Today the clientele of Kumartuli extends to America, Europe and Africa, among the Indian communities living there. In 1989, images made out of *shola* pith by Amarnath Ghosh were flown to Sweden, Australia, Malaysia and Nigeria: weighing only some three kilograms, they were ideal as air freight.

Kumartuli's own Durga Puja dates back to 1933. The image-maker was Gopeshwar Pal. Whereas private pujas still depend on family connections in Bardhaman and Chandannagar for dressing and decorating the images, Sarbajanin Pujas get theirs fully attired and armed from Kumartuli. Hence Kumartuli is also a beehive of ancillary crafts.

Power cuts, a lasting complaint through the rest of the year, are banished during Durga's short stay. Cascades of multi-coloured bulbs tumble from buildings. The trees bear festoons of lights. The walkways leading to the pandals are adorned with sparkling animated displays in coloured lights.

The transport and police authorities gear themselves with amazing success to cope with the colossal crowds as the whole city pours out into the streets and thousands of visitors arrive by plane, train and bus. Trams, buses and the Metro operate round the clock, and vendors of all sorts do a roaring business. The daily newspapers publish street maps showing the most important pandals, and identity badges are issued to children in case they are lost.

Durga Puja grows in pomp and festivity – though in Calcutta, no longer in number – every year. The display has inevitably burgeoned faster than the devotion. But all told, the heritage of Calcutta's Greatest Show has been honourably preserved.

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