

# ARTISTIC EXPOSITION AND CULTURAL EXHIBITION IN DURGA PUJA OF KOLKATA

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**Abstract:** *Durga Puja is the best time for mass marketing and mega consumption with sufficient effort of publicizing commodities. All of the major companies are taking this prospect for creating their product sensation. Normally the budget of theme based Puja is higher than traditional Puja. Actually today Durga Puja becomes the ground of encounter of several brands to take corporate stepping. Brand brigade adds additional push to this orientation. Housing complexes are also considered as components of competition of sponsorship. Offering anjali through internet, keeping e-flowers, e-garlands and so on are efforts of today to combat with modernity. Durga Puja in Kolkata is now related with another gala event i.e. Durga Puja carnival. The carnival has put Bengal on the tourist map worldwide. Durga Puja has got festive strength on the basis of Bengali cultural heritage.*

**Key Words:** *religion, culture, puja, change, art.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Durga puja structurally as well as functionally implies a unified idea but simultaneously the event is linked with the exploration of the diversity of practices. Apart from religious relevance this ceremony occupies a memorable position in the socio-cultural sphere of Bengali lifestyle. Actually this festival has a strong association with socio-cultural aspirations of true Bengali essence. The focus can be given on practices involving numerous dimensions of artistic expositions like the participation of established artists, art college graduates, artisans and craftsmen. The concepts like artistic pedagogy and commercial art come in this context for the purpose of execution in particular. Sociological relevance of Durga Puja definitely concerns with the question of changing neighbourhoods and the emergence of a new middle-class culture.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

During the festivals, commercial advertising and brand positioning become chief venture in itself. Pujas are able to draw attention of large crowds to their pandals with the success of their motives. They actually become the beneficiaries of this publicity campaign. 'While most stuck to the beaten track in their search for all-round excellence, some of the companies focused on specific aspects of the Puja that could be identified with their brand'(Ghosh:2000). There emerges lots of award with different motives like a pandal safety award from an electric cable company and a trophy for the most regal among Durga's mounts, sponsored by an oil company with a lion as its logo. On the holistic level, Durga puja is all about being an exposition of artistic exhibition. This is where the goddess, with the festivity that surrounds her, meets the metropolis at large, for the entire city becomes one ongoing exhibition (Garai:2017). The city has changed into a wander land with loads of fantasy. There are extraordinary palaces, imaginary fortresses, amazing historical monuments, and impressive golden barge. Altogether kaleidoscopic wanderings and displaced cartographies become one huge 'spectatorial complex', with a point of view veering between that of the *flâneur* and that of the stalker.(Ray:2017)

Ray (2017) wrote that the equation of the 'art' puja, entirely auteur-driven as it is, with the idioms and vocabularies of modern art, is relatively uncomplicated. What is fuzzy in terms of 'art as such' is the location of the

theme puja which, somewhat uncharitably perhaps, I have described as a 'hold-all affair'. Guha Thakurta (2015) calls it a matter of 'epistemic ambivalence'. In a landmark, now translated essay, 'The Heterotopias of Puja's Calcutta', (Chaudhury:2008) the sociologist Pradip Bose has analysed this exhibitionary world of the city's Durga Pujas by drawing on Michel Foucault's notion of 'heterotopias'. How, he asks, do we designate these temporarily fabricated spaces in the city and the illusions they create? Utopias, as Foucault explains, are purely imaginary worlds: they are 'sites with no real place' or 'fundamentally unreal spaces' that have an inverted analogy with the real space of society (Foucault:1986).

Durga Puja now becomes a public art event with close association with the changing social profiles of neighbourhoods of Kolkata. There come the issues like the shifting hierarchies between elite and non-elite localities, and the transforming aspirations of local worlds of art practices. There can be immense opportunity to the new amalgamation of amateur and professional enterprise. The door is open for the entry of art college trained artists and designers from the media. Ghoshal (2006) laments the capitulation of the Durga Puja to a form of "cultural consumption" after the advent of the corporate sponsors. Smallness has become the hallmark of this acquired seriousness and respectability: 'smallness of budgets, of sizes of productions, of spaces out of which they grew, and of localities which sought a new social and cultural profile'. (Guha Thakurta :2015)

Rodrigues(2003) mentioned about four important functions of the Durga Puja. These are: (i) Cosmic rejuvenation; (ii) Empowerment at personal, sovereign, communal, political and economic levels; (iii) Fertility; and (iv) Religious functions. McDermott( 2011) identified a strong nexus between the religious and economic interests. She has presented the debatable perspectives in explaining the rise of the Durga Puja in Bengal. She noted that inherent biasness was there in the analysis. The principal aspect emerged from her thought is to be linked with instrumentality behind the rise of worship. The two directly associated points are the exercise of political control and expression social prestige . Its enlargement has also been accredited to the appearance of new sites of public sphere in neo-liberal economic conditions. In contemporary situation the clash between religion and popular culture takes place. This can be termed as "culture war" (Garai: 2017)

**Methodology:** The study is mainly based on a survey of 100 Puja committees of South and North Kolkata. For the purpose of analysis secondary data are used. Different books, journals are the source materials. The present researcher has two objectives. These are --- 1] to analyse the significance of art in Durga Puja and 2] to describe the associate cultural activities in relation to Durga Puja.

**Art:** Durga Puja is associated with an evolution in the art sector. A visible transformation can be marked with the entry of artists. Decorators are now replaced by the newly trained professional artists. Pandals of Durga Puja becomes very attractive now. Lots of planning and creativity are integral components of this kind of architecture. Elaborate arrangements of lighting and graphic designing are additional sectors of attention to the viewers. On the basis of planning and construction two kinds of pandals and images can be located in the Durga Puja festivals. One is based on traditional form and the other concept is theme based. Themes can be focused on ancient, contemporary as well as futuristic issues. After deciding a particular theme committees have to arrange related additions and alterations with references to the theme. Now the designing and decorating aspects are handled efficiently by the specialists on those fields. Normally the budget of theme based Puja is higher than traditional Puja. Some Puja committees are not in favour of organizing Pujas on the basis of theme. They prefer traditional forms holistically. It is also true that lots of experimentation is done in the sphere of theme pujas. Actually one fact is universally acceptable that apart from religious overtone, secularist component is inseparably related to Durga Puja. This gives ample scope to the designers for executing their creative ideas. Songs, stories and legend based articulation are potential enhancer of the plan. Theme based on folk related issues can easily go in competition with an urban ultra modern theme. A clear compartmentalization can be visualized within the viewers and pandal hoppers regarding traditional versus theme oriented Puja. Sometimes pandals are prepared on specific materials like bamboo, bangles and earthenware in accordance to artistic disposition. Issues like peace, ecology, social justice all deserve attention in this respect. Due to frequent experimentation with several themes, an alternative path begins to emerge which is entirely different from conventional path. Wide range of non-conventional materials is used in this context like unusual metals, plywood and so on. These are not real but they carry the sense of hyper real. To Baudrillard , contemporary cultural productions are itself hyper-real. The structures of the pandals are not the perfect depiction of reality. This often brings a world that is not a genuine replica of some real thing. This type of creations bear the features of simulation of which Baudrillard writes that 'it is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal'.

It is well known fact that today the world is driven by advertisement and publicity. Religion can't escape the over-reaching trap of commercialization. Corporate initiative took a remarkable stand with the phenomenon of award giving. This effort started with Asian Paints Sharad Samman in 1985. Thereafter many business organizations participate in this market with awards on several sectors. This decade also witnessed the culmination of a new cultural class. The process has started in the early 1990s. It debatably has a symbiotic relationship with the new styles of pandal and image-making. The Pujas here became a popular replacement for the urban crafts mela or emporium. It turns a prime forum for displaying the authenticity and affluence of the folk traditions of nation. It is associated with enacting for their retrieval and preservation. Large number of designers is there in this field today. Their specialization can include the genre of folk art installations.

Art with geographic specification is represented in Pandals. Thus terracotta panels, dokra figures, Madhubani paintings have got stylistic existence in Pandals and Puja related areas. Electrical representation includes themes like beauty pageant, terrorist attack, accidents and so on. For the entire idea the most admirable appreciation goes to the theme maker. The construction of idea, instruction and supervision of the total work as well as concept as a whole – all have done under the surveillance. Interestingly, people from creative bent of mind are taking interest in this field irrespective of their professional background. Artists have achieved eminence with precise appreciation of skill. Public taste is fashioned by award economy and media discourse. There is an attribution of a degree of seriousness and respectability in the matter of art. A distinction can be made between the 'art' of the theme and art of puja. Durga Puja of the Bengali people encompasses almost all areas of Bengali life. Through the festivity of Durga Puja people can have the platform for engagements of solidarity. During this Puja season there is manifestation of giving and receiving gifts and counter-gifts between relatives and friends. According to the artists a profound change has come in their life. Previously their professional life was restricted within a particular space. They were generally pass outs from the Government Art College with specialization in Lines like Textile, Sketching and Designing. This Change has given them recognition in the society as an artist. Thus they can get the courage of taking "Theme Making" as a major profession.

In the past there was nothing called "Concept" in the occasion of Durga Puja. It was a very casual affair. There was no professionalization in fixation of concept. Previously the artists used to charge a bare amount for their work, as of now they charge something around 30-35 lakhs as remuneration. But Pandal making as a component of art has made them popular. The artists feel satisfied to employ poor labourers from the rural areas. This kind of work gives them social recognition. People who were in the back stage now have a medium to explore their hidden talent. Also it gives them economic benefit and financial support. From the perspective of artistic preservation, art forms which were getting extinct from Bengal are coming back.

Associated activities: Actually today Durga Puja becomes the ground of encounter of several brands to take corporate stepping. Brand brigade adds additional push to this orientation. Housing complexes are also considered as components of competition of sponsorship. As a consequence of corporate involvement different intra and inter complex contests [dhunuchi dance, sit and draw, lamp lighting etc] take place now. Competition of Dhak playing is representation of simultaneous occurrence of tradition and commercialization. New entry of public relation companies is the extra bonanza especially for the publicity and media involvement. Today the worth of mouth publicity is absolutely gone. Flashy and theme based concepts are in fashion now. Massive crowd and additional glamour quotient are points of focus of high flying Puja committee. The big and small companies proclaim special puja offers keeping in view the buying spree of the people during this time.

Patronage and sponsorship are two pillars of modern day Durga Puja. New market forces overpower the traditional cheerfulness, dignity of the occasion, religious fervor and so on. Standard Chartered Bank took an initiative to help the police in managing traffic in the city with the help of volunteers. Multinational Standard Chartered Bank has joined hands with the police to support the volunteers who are roped in by the city police to help manage the traffic and the multitudes which throng the 2000-odd pujas in the city and around. The bank provides T-shirts to the volunteers. FMCG Group Emami adopted a unique approach of sponsoring the oil required for cooking the Bhog in some Puja committees and housing complexes. Medium of advertisement has changed today remarkably. Now Hot Air Balloon, back projections, visuals and led screens are popular agents of giving advertisements. A Puja committee used lasers on screens and 3D dynamics in which the names of the clients were shown in moving mode. Publicity is a longitudinal process in this connection. The commencement phase starts from the month of July. In famous newspapers the space of Editorial decreases with the increase of Puja related advertisements. The media houses too try to promote their brands. Their focus is on the pujas at the several housing complexes in the centre of city and its suburbs. There is never a

moment to spare as loads of competitive activities like conch-shell blowing, dancing with incense pots and quiz contests are sponsored through the day.

Traditional Puja has undergone a holistic make over with the new marketing strategy. Zee Bangla was the solo sponsor of Mahapuja indifferent places on the basis of availability. Publishing Annual brochures helps in collection of required money. To give Puja a more technical finish, sometimes professional management people are getting involved in this process. This is necessary for executing new management and marketing technique. Early disclosure of theme in advance is another point of interest of media. Channels have tried heart and soul to complete this task. Business Houses take the circumstance as win – win situation. From their perspective more money incorporates in anticipation of inclusion of larger population. Technology has done a wonderful transformation in the sphere of Durga Puja now a day. Technological solution is there especially for those who are unable to go to Pandals. Offering anjali through internet, keeping e- flowers, e - garlands and so on are efforts of today to combat with modernity. Recorded versions of dhak and mantras are available now to have true essence of Puja.

The Brahmin women are also co-opted to make the auspicious ceremonial food to be offered to the deity as a part of age old tradition . They do every kind of activities from back end; they provide support for the sacred act of worship. It is exciting to point out that though the power of the feminine principle is passionately worshipped, the women are only allowed to help the male priest and their male counterparts. A change can be noticed now with the initiation of women oriented Puja Committee.

There is a chance of water pollution after the emersion of image in the water body. Eco – friendly materials can be used for making the image to avoid water pollution. Rigorous realism, environmental plea and hybridity are closely linked with this festival of Bengal. Innovation in Durga Puja is principally related with decoration of pandals and art of lighting. Creativity of the connected artists reaches to the peak in the backdrop of overwhelming competitive ambience. In theme Pujas, marginal artists have got an entry to the world of mainstream art world. With their finest creations Kolkata turns into a place of architecture of regional, national as well as international master pieces. Huge participation of contemporary as well as professional artists is another reason of magnetic attraction for the touch of excellence. Some new faces of artists have got eminence with their mode of art during this season. This is highly applicable for folk artists of West Bengal and other states of India. Two different trends are prevalent among them. On the one hand, they can think the Puja related work as a medium to corroborate their income with respect to sheer publicity. Other group may view this as an artistic opportunity to express their originality as well as creativity in terms of art work. Critics of art can be vocal in judging the potential worth of art in this context, but this is needless to say that these kinds of artistic expression become the treasure of culture of Kolkata.

An innovative as well as creative aspect is the concept of ‘theme song’. The theme song is linked with the theme of the specific Puja. A bit regionalism is related with this composition. Sometimes popular artists are associated with the theme song as composer and even singer. The theme song is used constantly within the specific periphery of the neighbourhood. Specific award is allotted to the theme song as indicator of popularity.

Durga Puja in Kolkata is now related with another gala event i.e. Durga Puja carnival. Here a grand procession is arranged with some selected Image of Durga with the corresponding committees. The committees perform a short cultural Programme to demonstrate their distinctiveness of the perspective. This can be marked as fabulous immersion carnival on Red Road, Kolkata. It is the concluding ceremony of Durga Puja . The spectacular event is associated with a gathering of more than 30,000 viewers with the august presence of political dignitaries, foreign delegates, consular corps and officers. Lots of spectators virtually enjoy the event through the direct telecast in different channels. The programme has received a global recognition with the glorious presence of foreigners. The carnival has put Bengal on the tourist map worldwide.

It is nevertheless important to say that God becomes the central force of the market. Here the focus turns to be twisted because the profane merges into the sacred in the context of sharing more or less the same space of existence. Market, Free Choices and Religion as Commodity are three connected concepts in association to the festivity of the Durga Puja. In this era of cultural globalization, the age old local festival of Bengal ultimately turns into a global experience. Religious commodification comes in the reality with a complex historical and cultural construction. The process is shaped in definite cultural contexts of Durga Puja. It thus requires an understanding of cultural construction in order to reveal their symbolic and socio- economic implication.

On the theoretical perspective, it can be said that this is a celebration of Indigenous tradition and sentiments. Age old tradition was prevalent in Durga Puja outside Bengal. Varanasi had a glorious tradition of holding Durga Puja since 18th Century. Through the efforts of Ramkrishna Mission this festival has crossed the border. Now collective effort is highly associated with Durga Puja in England and America. Today the involvement of granger becomes very commonplace in Pujas abroad. In Durga Puja, diaspora community acts like a cohesive social unit with special kinds of relationships expressing Indian- ness. Cultural performances can be performed with sufficient focus of traditionality. Major concern of Guha-Thakurta(2015) is to situate the changing face of Durga pujas from the 1990 onwards within the broader spectrum of the public culture of Kolkata. This is linked with its diverse drive towards the refurbishing of civil society.

In this context, Durkheimian theory of religion with an emphasis on functionalism can be discussed. According to Durkheimian concept of 'collective consciousness', this can be said that religion acts as an integrative force from time immemorial. It is observed that cohesive power of religion is comparatively higher in comparison to any other institution. Religion can bind people with a strong belief system. This religious bonding serves integrative function. In today's world of maximal differentiation religion has the magic stick to hold a spiritually holistic impulse. Durga Puja splendidly does this function. The world of Bengali people turns upside down to extract each and every moment of this cultural journey. Weber argued that religion can create a cultural framework as well as environment. Thus Durga Puja has provided a colourful scenario with utter festivity and celebration of life of the city. On the basis of AGIL model of Parsons this can be said that the function of 'integration' [I of AGIL model] can be served by religion wonderfully. This is seen that in Durga Puja people of all spheres of life irrespective of caste, class and religion assemble together in one platform, though it is a Hindu festival.

Several critics opine that incorporation of commercial aspects brings some sort of negative elements in Durga Puja. With maximization of commercialization as a process, the main essence of Durga Puja is somewhat absent. Hence it should be kept in mind that religious authenticity must be properly maintained in this era of overwhelming rationality. As a consequence of globalization, liberalization and cultural assimilation, Durga Puja has got festive strength on the basis of Bengali cultural heritage.

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