

Women and Festival Spaces: An Analysis of Durga Puja

A thesis submitted during 2015 to the University of Hyderabad in partial fulfillment of the award of an **M.Phil.** degree in Centre for Women Studies

by

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the thesis entitled “Women and Festival Spaces: An Analysis of Durga Puja” submitted by Madhurima Majumder bearing Regd. No. 13CWHG06 in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of Master of Philosophy in Gender Studies is a bonafide work carried out by her under my supervision and guidance which is a plagiarism free thesis.

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DECLARATION

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1. Introduction

Durga puja is the festival that celebrates Durga's visit to her maternal home accompanied by her children Saraswati, Laxmi, Ganesh and Kartik. This autumnal festival transforms the city of Kolkata into a space that has a faint resemblance to what it looks like on other days. The billboards lining the streets, the changed course of the traffic, blaring speakers and drum beats announce the home-coming of the Goddess. Myriads of lights, pandals, food stalls, people and a traffic that thickens with the night, makes the city come alive. It is a time for the people to be a part of the collective euphoria that sweeps the city and brings regular life to a screeching halt. It is not just four days of festivity but also the culmination of a year's worth of anticipation and months of preparation. It is a busy time for Kolkata Traffic Police and for the organizers, it's a time of anxiety and appreciation. For corporates it's a time to bombard the throng of *darshanarthi* (*darsan*¹ seekers) that flock to the pandals with promotions. It is one of the most hectic days of the year for small to big businesses.

Women's engagement with this festival has been different from the other public spaces. Women, at least on the face of it hold more agency. Though at the production level Durga Puja is largely controlled by men, many women are involved in the organization. A significant number of women flock out onto the streets of Kolkata during these four days of Durga Puja. The everyday understanding of safe and unsafe hours for women changes significantly. Places of the city that one otherwise would not go to are made accessible during the festival. Initially, women were only

¹ *Darshanarthi* is one who seeks *darsan* or to see the Goddess.

responsible for preparing the ritual offerings. Over the years, the involvement of women has also spilled onto the organization, planning and logistics of the Puja. This gave women a great deal of visibility in public spaces. To understand how women have negotiated within the confines of patriarchal world, this thesis studies how they exercise their agency by participating in Durga Puja, in terms of gaining social capital, community building, and increased visibility of women.

Much that has been written and theorized on festivals and rituals, focuses on how it is all rooted in hegemonic structures and thus perpetuates patriarchal ideology. Hinduism in India, especially in the aftermath of nationalistic revivalist movement extolled the virtues of women, especially that of purity and sacrificial nature, only to bog them down with oppressive expectations and roles. Scholars like Uma Chakravarty, Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan, Tanika Sarkar, Partha Chatterjee, while tackling a varied range of issues, have commented on how both religion and the way it gets appropriated helps to perpetuate and maintain gender, among other kinds of inequality. However, there are also scholars who focus on women's agency from within the hegemonic frameworks.

Feminist theory as well as research has given much momentum to the feminist movement by focusing on and highlighting events, actions as well as the women who tried to defy conventional social norms and question, dismantle or repeal patriarchal control. This, woefully, has come at the cost of silencing, overlooking, and at times dismissing the voices, actions, and lives that do not pose any direct threat to patriarchal structures. This paper is motivated by the view that everyday negotiations, compromises, as well as subversions, are worthy of feminist study as they give us insights about everyday strategies. In my thesis I make a conscious shift from how rituals and festivals have propagated the dominant ideology to how women negotiate within the confines of patriarchy to express and even, at times, transgress the hegemonic order.

*Sarbojonin*² or Community Durga has seen a steady rise in its popularity, particularly in the 20th century. The number of Community Durga Pujas in Kolkata went from three hundred to nine hundred between the years 1954 and 1969.³ Rachel Fell McDermott, writing in the year 2011, informs that the number of permitted Durga Pujas has been the same since 2000. The number of Durga Puja recorded in 2008 was thirteen thousand.⁴ The expenditure on these Durga Pujas has also seen a steep rise. Sudeshna Banerjee tracks the expenses of Bagbazar Sarbojonin of North Kolkata. In 1931 it was Rs. 3, 203 which shot up to Rs. 8 lakhs by 2003.⁵ A puja in 1954 would cost around Rs. 4, 000 to a maximum of Rs. 14, 000.⁶ Along with the traditionally famous clubs like Eg daliya Evergreen, Paikpara, and Ahiritola that attract large crowds owing to their historical prominence, new clubs have risen in popularity with the emergence of “theme” pujas. With the proliferation of Pujas, there is high competition to attract as many visitors as possible. Organizers, especially of small or lesser known neighborhoods, like Haridevpur, Behala Notun Dol, Haltu etc resort to elaborate or novel ways of decorating the pandal and the iconography of the deity. ‘Theme’ Pujas, as the name suggests, usually has a central theme which can be anything from medieval forts, forests, backwaters of Kerala, Harry Potter, to more fantastical abstract themes like dream, modernity etc. Themes for Durga Pujas of last year were - Tibet (Tridhara Sammilani),

² *Sarbojonin* comes from the words *sarbo* and *jon* which means ‘every’ and ‘person’ respectively. Hence forth *sarbojonin* puja will be referred to as Community Durga Puja.

³ Anjan Ghosh, “Spaces of Recognition: Puja and Power in Contemporary Calcutta,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 26, no 2 (2000): 298, doi: 10.1080/03057070050010129.

⁴ Rachel Fell McDermott, “Durga on the *Titanic*: Politics and Religion in the Puja,” in *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal: The Fortunes of Hindu Festivals* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2011), 135.

⁵ Sudeshna Banerjee, “Modern Times,” in *Durga Puja: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (New Delhi: Rupa Publication, 2004), 79.

⁶ Joytirmoyee Sarma, “Puja Associations in West Bengal” in *The Journal of Asian Studies* 28, no 3 (1969): 579 doi: 10.2307/2943180.

tribal Orissa (Hatibagan Sarbojanin), evolution of Kathakali (Suruchi Sangha Alipore), music (Samaj Sebi Sangha) and abstract themes like time (Aheritola Sarbonin), *gotir poriborton*⁷ (Haridevpur Vivekananda Sporting Club), colours of creation (Dum Dum Park Bharat Chakra), rustic Bengal (Behala Notun Dol) and so on.

Themes for the Pujas have turned more and more spectacular and outrageous with time. The competition is centered on bringing in *abhinavattya* (novelty). Few of the simulations are so intricate that they can indeed pass off as art installations. These designer Pujas can no longer sustain on the subscription collected from the designated neighborhood alone. With each passing year, the amount of corporate sponsors as well as the number of prizes and awards increase exponentially. The primary focus of these Pujas is not to cater to the participation of the local residents, but to attract as many visitors, media attention and accolades as possible.

Not all neighborhoods however, organize elaborate ‘theme’ Pujas. There are innumerable Pujas that are more local in nature, i.e. they are meant primarily for local residents and do not particularly seek to pull huge crowds. They depend largely on the subscription raised from the residents of the neighborhood. Their driving impetus is to bring the entire neighborhood together and thus they are geared towards catering to the needs of ritual observances and generating sociability.

Durga Puja in Kolkata can be loosely classified into three groups. First, there are the neighborhoods that have been popular owing to their prominence and age, for example, Shimla Bayam Sangha, Aheritola, College Square and so on. Next, there are the relatively new Pujas that have rose to fame owing to their innovations and awards they receive. Many of these are from relatively lesser known areas, localities in the periphery of the city or places that have very little

⁷ Change of flow or pace.

space at their disposal. These Pujas have now come to find themselves a place of prominence owing to the different awards and prizes. Lastly, there are small Durga Pujas that run on local subscription. These can range between old neighborhoods to new gated communities and apartment blocks. The general rationale behind the big budget Pujas is very different from the small budget ones, and so is the nature of participation of the local residents. Though most often a group of people come forward to organize the Puja, in the cases of the big banner Pujas, the group of organizers is more structured and hierarchical, in the sense that people have fixed responsibilities. In the smaller pujas, though the organizers oversee the successful completion of the festivities, residents who are not a part of the core organizing group have greater role to play. Needless to say, the way people engage with this festival has changed considerably over time. The structure of the *para* (neighbourhood) is changing with time and so are the ways in which people celebrate the festival.

All its vibrancy and fervor, marks it as a huge event in the lives and memories of those who live and engage with it. Durga Puja is a complex marker of Bengali cultural identity. It duly gives expression to whatever catches the public attention and is reflective of the anxieties and concerns of people. This festival acts as an effective mirror to society. Hence, I think it is important to try and understand how gender norms and roles are performed during such festivals and see how women interpret, internalize, appropriate and challenge the same.

Using an interdisciplinary approach this study draws from different registers and broad conceptual categories of history, sociology and cultural studies. In my first chapter I review the different lines of analysis in the study of festivals and ritual spaces. In my next chapter I piece together the available literature on Durga Puja in Bengal. Finally, in my third chapter I discuss my field work. My attempt has been to align my thesis with the feminist qualitative methodology which

emphasizes on the importance and relevance of women's voices and their own narratives and interpretation of life experiences. I conducted informal and "conversational" interview with fifteen participants, out of which majority were women who identify themselves as being a part of the organizing Community Durga Puja in their neighbourhoods.

2. Understanding Festivals and Rituals

The festival is as much a physical reality as it is a collective state of mind. It is a time when people come together to celebrate. A maze of pandals, sounds from speakers and drums, a mesh of decorative lights and thousands of people celebrating the home-coming of Durga transforms the familiar cityscape during this autumnal festival. The festive mood sweeps across the entire city of Kolkata and the routine of regular life comes to a standstill. People celebrate and worship Durga during this festival as it is believed that this is the time when she leaves her divine abode in Mount Kailash to visit her children of the mortal world and bless them with prosperity and joy. In recent years, there has been a considerable shift in the nature of the celebrations. Though the worship of the benevolent goddess is central to the festival, Durga Puja has now turned into ‘*Durgotsav*’ (Durga Festival). The focus has shifted from the strict observation of rituals to revelry. It transformed from being a religious practice into a hybrid entity that has an ever strengthening presence of corporates and the media. In this chapter I review the literature on festivals and rituals, and discuss the major lines of analyses.

Several theorists have tried to understand festivals, their ritual nature and ties to religion in society; and how they create shared identities and a sense of community. I begin with literature that argues for the relevance of institutions like religion and more importantly festivals in forging social solidarity. Much of the literature on festivals is based on studies of traditional rituals and their significance in today’s world. I examine different kinds of contemporary festivals, their unique contexts and different social functions. I want to establish that we should not dismiss market driven festivals and predict erosion of culture and democracy in the hands of rampant commercialization. It would be wrong to assume that these modern forms of sociality are only alienating. They often

lend themselves to community building, opinion forming, and provide a space for contestation with regards to cultural debates and so on. Next, I review literature, especially feminist anthropological works that try to understand festivals and rituals in terms of agency. I discuss ritual practices and the relationship between these practices and the women involved. This has been understood especially through the works of Mary Hancock, Susan Sered, and Tracy Pintchman.

2.1 Analyses of Festivals

Festivals and carnivals have for a long time been the interest of social scientists. We have come to understand these events as important forms of social and cultural participation in a community. The anthropologist Sir James Frazer saw festivals as an activity that maintains the larger ideology and belief systems.⁸ Theorists like Georges Bataille and Roger Caillois saw festivals as a time when established rules are turned upside down and transgression of official order is made possible.⁹ The Bakhtinian notion of carnivalesque has, in cultural criticism, become influential in highlighting the critical inversion of the established hierarchies. Citing Victor Turner, according to some researchers of festivals, the distinguishable quality of festivals is their liminality, since it offers an “opportunity for experimentation with identity and the articulation of identity politics that may often be less feasible and acceptable.”¹⁰ In the current literature on festivals, significant emphasis is placed on the importance of the festival setting as a space for participation, performance and articulation of fragmented identities.

⁸ Jean Duvignaud, “The Festive Spirit,” *UNESCO Courier* 42, no. 4 (1989, December): 11.

⁹ Ibid, 13.

¹⁰ Andy Bennett and Woodward Ian, “Festival Spaces, Identity, Experience and Belonging,” in *The Festivalization of Culture*, ed. Andy Bennett, Jodie Taylor and Woodward Ian (Ashgate Publishing, 2014), accessed May 5, 2015, <http://books.google.co.in/books?id=7y7jBAAAQBAJ>.

A majority of anthropological as well as sociological works primarily look at traditional ritualistic festivals observed by primitive societies. So in this context, functional analysis of dominant rituals and festivals focus on their social requirement and how they perpetuate and maintain the sanctioned norms and ideals. In the early days of sociological inquiry, beginning with structural functionalist Emile Durkheim, festivals began to be recognized as instances of ‘collective effervescence’, and therefore as channels for expressing and consolidating a sense of community.¹¹ He saw festivals as a moment of solidarity of collective consciousness, a time when differences are reconciled, if only momentarily. Festivals and rituals were means for expressing collective representation in form of religious beliefs. Durkheim’s work proved instrumental in understanding how festivals work to reproduce and reinvent the larger ideologies regarding faith and values. Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown extending on Durkheim’s approach focused on the rituals and their social roles in securing and maintaining unity. However, his work led him to reject the Durkheimian notion that rituals are expressions of collective representations in forms of beliefs. He argued that religious faith is the effect and not the cause of rituals, as it is our actions that determine our beliefs.¹²

The driving impetus and need to celebrate festivals though common to all, cannot have a universal definition as it is strongly rooted within the matrix of its specific culture, time, and space. The meaning of a festival is also dependent on one’s positionality, as one who engages in the celebration perceives it differently from an outside observer. Thus, instead of trying to define a universal essence of festivals common to all societies, Jean Duvignaud finds it more useful to

¹¹ Liana Giorgi and Monica Sassatelli, “Introduction” in *Festivals and the Cultural Public Sphere*, ed. Liana Giorgi, Monica Sassatelli and Gerard Delanty (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2011), 1.

¹² Catherine Bell, “Rituals and Society: Questions of Social Function and Structures,” in *Rituals: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 27.

enumerate and catalogue different festivals and their different social functions. He lists out categories of festivals based on different contexts highlighting their variety and range. The first kind of festivals are those associated with rites of passage, that is, milestones of one's life (like marriage, birth, initiation, death etc.). "Such events are collective acts whereby a society responds to the insurmountable constraints of nature - sex, death - and tries to deliver men and women from their individual fears."¹³ He comments that these festivals, for example marriage ceremonies, resemble each other across cultures even if it be in a highly schematic form. Another important category of festivals discussed are based on rituals. The repetition of liturgy gives them a sacred dimension as well as dramatic and aesthetic grandeur.¹⁴ *Bihu* festival of Assam, *Kumbh Mela*, *Holi* are examples of festivals of this nature.

Next, he gives examples of festivals around death in Casamance (south of Sahara), Salvador suburbia in Brazil, Festival of the Dead of Mexico and argues that these are rituals that provide a way for the living to socialize death and try to negotiate the anguish caused by its inevitability.¹⁵ Festivals that are "restorative" in nature try to make a spectacle of a vanished past or culture. He gives the example of Bolivian festival called *Diablada*, where Indian miners and craftsmen dressed as people from the ancient Inca civilization confront St. Georges in a symbolic struggle. Another example he gives is that of a festival celebrated in the beaches of Yemanjá in northeastern Brazil, where they mime and dance to invoke images of distant Africa. These festivals serve as a reminder to the community of their shared history, much like the trauma in the case of the two festivals mentioned before. Many contemporary festivals are also centered on nostalgia. These events try

¹³ Jean Duvignaud, "The Festive Spirit," *UNESCO Courier* 42, no. 4 (1989, December): 11.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 12.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 12.

to draw audiences who collectively engage in the aesthetic of a bygone age and consider it as important enough to be remembered and celebrated. For example, Oak Street Po-Boy Festival of New Orleans is a culinary festival that along with celebrating ‘submarine sandwich’ or ‘po-boy’, attempt to re-create the warm feeling of a small-town. On the other hand, the Wintersun Festival of New South Wales, Australia, is a festival dedicated to celebrating the rock ‘n’ roll spirit and music.¹⁶ However, participation in these latter kinds of festivals is very often reserved for ticket holders only and thus is much less inclusive.

Urban festivals are more often than not highly orchestrated and are usually conceived with a specific didactic intent in mind. This includes celebrating anniversaries or commemorating a pact or agreements that stand in for the regime’s political legitimacy - for example, Indian Republic Day, Bastille Day or French National Day, International Labour Day and so on. He then remarks that this list of festivals will remain quite unfinished without the mention of personal, small-scale, intimate and often utopian celebrations, like gatherings for collectively enjoying dance and music, and communal feasts and so on. These festivals, are occasions of deeply felt common experiences. Festivals vary in forms, meanings as well as their immediate intent across cultures depending on their unique context as well as influences of economy, media, fashion, technology, etc. However, each festival, whatever its scale, has a potential to create new attitudes and desires, and hence “is the vehicle of a transcendent power to anticipate or to create.”¹⁷

The spontaneous element of festivals as well as the resultant brief suspension of normal order has occupied much of our imagination. In this context, Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque

¹⁶ Andy Bennett and Woodward Ian, “Festival Spaces, Identity, Experience and Belonging,” in *The Festivalization of Culture*, ed. Andy Bennett, Jodie Taylor and Woodward Ian (Ashgate Publishing, 2014), accessed May 5, 2015, <http://books.google.co.in/books?id=7y7jBAAQBAJ>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

has inspired many scholars. Festivals act like safety valves, i.e. they provide a momentary respite from hegemonic forces as everyday rules and regulations are turned, as it were, upside down and the routine order is suspended. Gatherings that pre-dated contemporary festivals have long since been spaces of refuge as well as resistance from the rules that govern everyday routine. Contemporary festivals owe a great deal of their popularity to these medieval carnivals that provided a particular kind of experience that were otherwise considered unacceptable, e.g., hedonistic behavior, excessive drinking, loud singing and so on. Citing the example of Nevada's Burning Man Festival, Bennett and Woodward point out that these festivals though have lost the spontaneity of pre-modern public gatherings, they retain many of the original qualities and continue to be spaces for performance and celebration. Bakhtin believed that it was the strong association of public festivals and articulation of alternative and liminal forms of identity that rendered the air of escapism and mirth to contemporary festivals.¹⁸

Traditional festivals have been of interest to anthropologists and sociologists as they are considered revealing and relevant for the study of society. Festivals, carnivals and feasts were important forms of social and cultural participation through which societies articulate and communicate shared values, ideologies and mythologies central to their world-view. Thus, the study of festivals have centered around ritualistic events in which members of a community participate on the basis of a shared religious, social, ethnic, linguistic or historical bond.¹⁹ It is, perhaps for this reason that we find a growing anxiety among people, as well as critical thinkers, around festivals losing their true

¹⁸ Andy Bennett and Woodward Ian, "Festival Spaces, Identity, Experience and Belonging," in *The Festivalization of Culture*, ed. Andy Bennett, Jodie Taylor and Woodward Ian (Ashgate Publishing, 2014), accessed May 5, 2015, <http://books.google.co.in/books?id=7y7jBAAAQBAJ>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

spirit in the face of rampant commercialization and urbanization.²⁰ Duvignaud counters this prediction of doom by highlighting the fact that “feasts and festivals with all their unexpected, transient, gratuitous and spontaneous aspect” will continue functioning as “motor of community life.”²¹

In today’s world, owing to the accretion of meanings and purposes, the role of festivals is no longer limited to their function of being an essential socio-cultural event in the life of a community. Festivals that evolve over time are in keeping with cultural processes like globalization, cultural pluralization, as well as increased influence of the media and market forces. They have become a popular mode through which citizens consume, experience, and sell culture. Hence it is important to study festivals as they hold interpretive tools for study of the contemporary world.²²

Many contemporary and post-traditional festivals have become popular owing to their promise of being counter culture festivals. A number of festivals that themselves identify, or are identified as a ‘transformational festival’ are conceived and conducted based on the ethics of community building, collective celebration of life, and a conscious effort to break away from the patterns of corporate entertainment. At TEDxVancouver 2010, Jeet-Kei Leung, director of documentary film series, *The Bloom: A Journey through Transformational Festivals* (2013) talked about how these transformational festivals are going “beyond being simply parties to (being) places where we're actually practicing and experiencing the world we wish to live in." Festivals are a means of collective representation and articulation of a common socio-cultural identity. Music festivals like

²⁰ Liana Giorgi and Monica Sassatelli, “Introduction” in *Festivals and the Cultural Public Sphere*, ed. Liana Giorgi, Monica Sassatelli and Gerard Delanty (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2011), 5.

²¹ Jean Duvignaud, “The Festive Spirit,” *UNESCO Courier* 42, no. 4 (1989, December): 15.

²² Monica Sassatelli, “Urban festivals and the cultural public sphere: Cosmopolitanism between ethics and aesthetics,” in *Festivals and the Cultural Public Sphere*, ed. Liana Giorgi, Monica Sassatelli and Gerard Delanty (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2011), 13.

Indie-rock festivals are constructed through collective involvement and contribute to the formation of a legitimate Indie identity. In fact, there is a strong link between music and articulation of anti-hegemonic identity as well as politics. Movements like blues, jazz, hippy etc. had evolved around definitive political expressions and ideologies.

Though festivals retain much of their carnivalesque attributes, they have now become increasingly complex as they are transforming into highly organized and commodified events with specific target groups. Discussing the Woodstock Music Festival, Bennett and Woodward admit that often festivals become “templates for commodification and aestheticization”. Unsurprisingly, there is a growing number of merchandises marketed for these counter-culture festivals. For example, one can buy hippie-styled clothing from a high-end fashion brands. Festivals have also turned into spaces for expression of lifestyle choices and taste, i.e. demonstration of wealth and status. Lifestyle choices and tastes are reflective of the ways in which “individuals creatively work and re-work the cultural resources at hand into their everyday lives as physical and symbolic markers of identity and taste.”²³ The examples given to elucidate this category are music, food, film and art festivals.

Extending on the theory of lifestyle, Bennett and Woodward focus on the diversification of channels of cultural consumption. They argue that participants of these contemporary festivals are “less bound to hierarchical and narrowly channeled consumption tract.”²⁴ Festivals in some cases at least act as grounds for expressing and representing what otherwise is socially and culturally the “other”. Another much debated feature of festivals in present times is the rise of cosmopolitanism.

²³ Andy Bennett and Woodward Ian, “Festival Spaces, Identity, Experience and Belonging,” in *The Festivalization of Culture*, ed. Andy Bennett, Jodie Taylor and Woodward Ian (Ashgate Publishing, 2014), accessed May 5, 2015, <http://books.google.co.in/books?id=7y7jBAAAQBAJ>.

²⁴ Ibid.

It is understood as being open to as well as engaging with different and newer experiences that are not part of the established experience. However, as the concept of openness cannot be measured and compared, it only makes sense, to instead focus on its “performance, effervescence and manifestation” in the specific context of different festivals. They introduce the concept of cosmoscape in understanding the festivals of the present world. Cosmoscape is a space with spatial and social characteristics which can afford and encourage cosmopolitan socialization. Festivals have the potential to be spaces for encountering different identities as well as cultures and new experiences in a way that is less threatening and challenging and hence have the scope to be cosmopolitan in nature. Bennett and Woodward brings in the example of the international WOMAD festival to further the argument that festivals can function as a cosmoscape. WOMAD is World Music, Art and Dance festival that intends to give the audience “a taste of the world” by sampling music, dance, art, and food from around the globe. Even festivals that are not organized specifically for this intent can, and many times do, function as a cultural bridge between the local and the global. “Contemporary festivals can be viewed as important nodal points within the matrix of lifestyle sites and strategies through which individuals create, manage and articulate their identities. In this sense, festivals can be seen to constitute a significant part of the cultural repertoires through which individuals engage in the critical boundary work by which commonality and collectivity as well as distinctiveness and differences are maintained.”²⁵

As the above review shows, there has been a shift away from a functional analyses of festivals as reproducing social solidarity to seeing them as spaces for contestation and creative performance.

²⁵ Andy Bennett and Woodward Ian, “Festival Spaces, Identity, Experience and Belonging,” in *The Festivalization of Culture*, ed. Andy Bennett, Jodie Taylor and Woodward Ian (Ashgate Publishing, 2014), accessed May 5, 2015, <http://books.google.co.in/books?id=7y7jBAAQBAJ>.

As we have seen through the literature, festivals can be of very varied nature and transform in keeping with the changing world. Though its attributes can be identified, it would be fruitless to try to have a universal definition of festivals. The influence of a functional analysis is still visible in the recurrent focus on aspects of nostalgia, commercialization, and power asymmetries.

2.2 Women and rituals

The ritual worship of Durga Puja is central to this festival and hence in this section, I discuss feminist literature on women's engagement in ritualistic and festival contexts. Study of rituals is of profound importance to feminist scholarship because it is very often through religious rituals and ideologies that women and men express their deepest concerns, their truest selves, their fears, hopes, and passions.²⁶ People make sense of their lives and experiences through rituals. Catherine Bell suggests that ritual can be read "as a strategy for applying metaphors to people's sense of their situation in such a way as to move them emotionally and therein provoke religious experiences of empowerment, energy and euphoria."²⁷ Religion frequently emphasizes such internal experiences as belief, faith, and mysticism. It is important to understand women in ritual practices to understand how they construct their social realities. It is through festivals and rituals that they express themselves, their wishes, anxieties, and consequently this engagement shapes their understanding of who they are and the world around them. Women engage with religion not primarily to reap social, psychological, economic, or political profit. Like men, they join religious groups and perform religious rituals fundamentally for religious reasons. However, since religion is always

²⁶ Susan Starr Sered, "Introduction" in *Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sisters: Religions Dominated by Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 4.

²⁷ Catherine Bell, "Ritual Symbols, Syntax, and Praxis: Questions of Cultural Meaning and Interpretation," in *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 73.

integrated with other aspects of the social structure, even the most transcendental and mystical matters of spirit are still governed by prosaic rules, codes of behavior, and organization. The factors that draw people to religion, and the advantages that they reap from the participation, are multifaceted and include both sacred and profane elements. This is to say that even though people participate in rituals essentially for religious reasons, this does not negate the "secular" results and functions of these religions.²⁸ Women's engagement with ritual cannot be understood without taking into account the social, cultural, domestic or larger religious roles or frames of meaning.

There are two approaches to study rituals, one which focuses on what the ritual does to people and the other looks at how people use ritual. The former successfully elucidates the ways in which ritual practices affirm and help to reproduce larger power structures, often without the conscious effort of the ritual actors. This approach helps us to see how religion and ritual practices propagate the dominant hegemonic ideology of the times.²⁹ Given that ritual practices claim to be timeless and unchanging it helps to propagate these hegemonic values. This also allows ideologies to be interpreted as being eternal and unchangeable. However, this approach sees the ritual actors as being without any agency. The second approach, on the other hand, emphasizes the ways in which people use ritual forms to pursue their own individual as well as collective interest, often appropriating and modifying rituals when convenient. This approach instead of taking the ritual actors as merely the receptors of the larger hegemonic and ideological structures, conceptualizes

²⁸ Susan Starr Sered, "Spiritual Gifts and Secular Benefits," in *Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sisters: Religions Dominated by Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 257.

²⁹ Tracy Pintchman, "Introduction" in *Women's Lives Women's Rituals in the Hindu Tradition*, ed. Tracy Pintchman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 13.

them as being agents who have the ability to creatively engage with ritual practices for their own ends.³⁰

Following the first approach, one can arrive at the conclusion that Durga Puja, like any other Hindu Brahmanical practice, is deeply rooted in patriarchy and that women by engaging with this festival are indeed affirming, imbibing, and reproducing the patriarchal order. Women's participation in Durga Puja, by itself, is not transgressive in nature. It doesn't challenge or break away from the dominant, hegemonic patriarchal structures. The intent of my research is, however, to find out the ways in which women construct and negotiate their womanhood within this hegemonic patriarchal structure and wield some agency through their participation in the festival. According to Pintchman, "when individuals engage in ritual performances as agents, their engagement may function to help produce, reproduce, transform, resist or even defy the larger norms".³¹ Hence, it is necessary to examine literature that focuses on how women have used their engagement with the religious as well as the ritual practices to express themselves, their anxieties, and have drawn strength from the same gender differentiation that patriarchy uses to explain their subservient status.

Several theories that study ritual as a performance gained currency in the 1970's. "Performance metaphors and analogies allow them (theorists of ritualized performance) to focus on what the ritual actually *does* rather than on what it is supposed to mean"³². Performance theory of rituals suggests that rituals can be read as what Milton Singer calls "cultural performances". This

³⁰ Tracy Pintchman, "Introduction" in *Women's Lives Women's Rituals in the Hindu Tradition*, ed. Tracy Pintchman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 13.

³¹ Ibid, 5.

³² Catherine Bell, "Ritual Symbols, Syntax, and Praxis: Questions of Cultural Meaning and Interpretation," in *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 73.

theoretical position sees ritual performers as active rather than passive. Cultural life is a dynamic process of generation and modification of symbolic systems created by the community. People are constantly, through their engagement, imitating, interpreting, and transforming rituals and their meanings. Even though it can be argued that rituals help to cultivate and reinstate the dominant norms, they are nonetheless a performative medium through which participants reinterpret and mold these value-laden symbols as they communicate.³³ The shift is from trying to understand what the symbols mean or signify in abstraction to understanding and analyzing their embeddedness in practice. The performance metaphor shifts the focus from the intellectual pursuits of ritual activities to the emotive, physical, and even sensual aspects of ritual participation.

Performance theories prove useful in understanding the significance of physical bodily expressiveness found in ritual, and its evocative attention to secular and new forms of ritual or ritual-like activities. Performance theory thus helps to overcome the “misleading boundaries that are drawn too often between rituals, festivals, healings, dance, music, drama and so on”.³⁴ In this sense the activities that have emerged and become staple in relation to celebrating Durga Puja e.g. *sindur khela*³⁵ (vermillion play), *dhunuchi naach*³⁶ (worship dance), the immersion procession, even the activity of visiting different pandals (popularly referred to as ‘pandal hopping’) can be understood as ritualized activities. Therefore, to understand how women use ritual practices in the

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid, 76.

³⁵ Married women apply vermillion on the goddess's feet and forehead and then playfully smearing it on each other.

³⁶ *Dhunuchi* means incense burner and *naach* means dance. *Dhunuchi-naach* refers to ritualized worship dance during evening worship i.e. *aarati* accompanied by *dhak* rolls.

context of Durga Puja we need to take into account routine activities that have become a ‘trend’, along with the rituals that are observed to worship the goddess.

The strength of performance theory of ritual lies in the fact that it places agency with the ritual actors. Elizabeth Collins notes that interpreting rituals as performance allows us to think of agency in a more nuanced way. “There is agency of the author of the text, but also the agency of the performer who chooses to perform a particular ritual or practice a variant of a ritual text and who may even revise the text or tradition in their performance. There is (also) the agency of those who participate as audience.”³⁷ Women function as the ritual performers, audience or any combination of the two in Durga Puja. Performance theory allows us to see the ritual agent as being capable of self-reflection and interpretation. I intend to address the questions of agency by interpreting their experiences and their own evaluation of their engagement. Feminist research methods have tried to attend to women’s narratives in their own voice and have consciously tried to steer away from ‘giving women a voice’. Hence, my endeavor has been to focus on women’s narratives of their experience as well as how they come to interpret their own participation. Both the feminist approach and performance theory strive towards placing the agency within the ritual actors. My research uses the framework of performance theory of rituals as a strategic tool because it implies an active participation of the involved actors rather than assigning them a passive role.

When women engage with this festival they may not be overtly transgressing gender roles or norms; however by being agents of ritual they can appropriate or reshape values and ideals that mold their social identities. However, often these “gender differences seem to be so obviously

³⁷ Elizabeth Fuller Collins, *Pierced by Murugan’s Lance: Ritual, Power, and Moral Redemption among Malaysian Hindus* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University, 1997), 183-184, quoted in Tracy Pintchman, “Introduction,” in *Women’s Lives Women’s Rituals in the Hindu Tradition*, ed. Tracy Pintchman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 4-5.

"true," that enhancing and reinterpreting those differences offers women an ideology that is both believable and somewhat empowering. In an imperfect world, it may well serve women's interests to own a clearly bounded portion of the cultural map."³⁸

In these male-dominated religious contexts, women "domesticate" religion by emphasizing rituals and symbols that give spiritual meaning to their everyday lives. Sered elucidates this claim by adding that in many cultures, food is one of the few resources controlled by women, and so food plays a central religious role for women across cultures. This may take the form of feeding the poor, choosing to give better or more food to certain categories of people, observing food taboos, abstaining from food, or preparing holiday, symbolic, or sacramental foods. Food rituals imbue holiness with the everyday domestic work, women find acceptable outlets for their frustration with subordination (e.g., through rituals of reversal), or opportunities to celebrate with other women (e.g., at life-cycle rituals).³⁹ This provides women avenues to express themselves especially given that women are often taught to stifle their individual drives and needs. What cannot be expressed otherwise, finds expression in the devotional, which in many complex ways feminize the concept of agency in the Brahmanical masculine domain.⁴⁰ In the case of Durga Puja, like in many other occasions, religion as well as ritual practices provided women with a legitimate space for socializing and interacting with others. The importance of this "hanging out" on the occasion of observing a ritual or before and after ritual performance is emphasized by Katheleen M. Erndl.

³⁸ Susan Starr Sered, "Gender Ideology," in *Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sisters: Religions Dominated by Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 210.

³⁹ Ibid, 6.

⁴⁰ Tithi Bhattacharya, "Tracing the Goddess: Religion, Community, and Identity in the Durga Puja Ceremonies of Nineteenth-Century Calcutta," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 66, no. 4 (2007, October): 932, doi: 10.1017/S0021911807001258.

Her work on women of Kangra Valley who gather to seek *mataji's* (holy women) counsel demonstrates how religious spaces turn into sites of community building for women. She describes these spaces as “cracks” in the patriarchal system. These spaces, exist, at least in part because of patriarchy but they provide sites for women’s creativity and interconnection, sites for thoughts and activities that can never be completely controlled by patriarchal norms and which furthermore have the potential to resist, transcend, or transgress patriarchy.⁴¹

Apart from providing women a space for community building and socializing, these ritual spaces provides women with a site for expression of concern, grief and anxiety as well as a venue for individual and spiritual pursuits. For many women, the road to formal power is very often either blocked or filled with pitfalls. Interpersonal relations hold tremendous significance to them. Thus, not surprisingly, women’s ritual pursuits more often than not concern their day to day lives, their relations and the well-being of their extended families. Instead of pursuit of larger spiritual needs, these rituals that center on everyday concerns. Sered, citing the example of Christian women of rural Spain, observes that women are more likely to fix on a personal patron (saint) in comparison to men.⁴²

Women’s ritual lives are not very separate from their day to day existence and to a large extent involves the kinds of skills and commitments that women encounter on a daily basis. Women appropriate religion in ways that tend to engage their gender-specific roles, experience, and

⁴¹ Katherleen M. Erndl, “The Play of the Mother: Possession and Power in Hindu Women’s Goddess Rituals,” in *Women's Lives Women's Rituals in the Hindu Tradition*, ed. Tracy Pintchman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 150.

⁴² Susan Starr Sered, “Introduction,” in *Priestess, Mother, Sacred Sisters: Religions Dominated by Women* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 6.

values.⁴³ Their primacy in ritual practices and religion is often explained by their skills in the domestic sphere. Ritual skills are very often equated to that of domestic skills as a lot of ritual practices mirror everyday domestic activities like feeding, bathing etc. We cannot, therefore understand women's participation in rituals in isolation from social, cultural, and domestic roles. Women are understood to be more 'adept' in religious activities given their skills in their domestic chores.

The first part of the literature deals with how we can understand festivals in relation to people's location and role in a social structure. The festival of Durga Puja being inclusive to people from all classes and religions, is true at least in promise if not in practice. Popularity of pandal hopping as an activity during this festival has brought a shift in the way people celebrate Durga Puja. Also, the anonymity that the crowd provides during Durga Puja goes a long way in enabling this festival as the ground for acting out a wide range of identities which may even come across as anti-hegemonic. The festival around the worship of Durga derives its sacredness and authenticity from the understanding that these rituals are timeless. Community Durga Puja especially in Kolkata have several attributes that are similar to non-traditional and urban festivals. Durga puja, on the face of it, could seem to be losing its authenticity in the age of rampant commercialization. However, the ways in which contemporary festivals like Durga Puja are evolving can be read as a response to our increasingly fragmenting identities. Women's participation in Durga Puja calls for a nuanced understanding in the tradition of liturgy as well as its rapid transformation into an urban festival. The next part of this chapter uses feminist scholarship to delve into the different ways in which women have used ritual spaces for themselves. As Sered points out, women may often

⁴³ Tracy Pintchman, introduction to *Women's Lives Women's Rituals in the Hindu Tradition*, ed. Tracy Pintchman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 4-5.

ascribe to the dominant ideals about gender differences while also using these differences creatively to sacralise their roles, exercise their agency and draw a certain amount of self-esteem and social capital. However, this literature thinks of women's engagement specifically in relation to their emancipatory agency. It is worth asking what the different components of women's agency are in this specific context. Do the women concerned understand their agency only in terms of overcoming gender biases or do they also see it in terms of building civic communities? How does their agency transform the communities and their contexts? These questions emerge from the literature and partly inform my analysis.

3. History and Evolution of Durga Puja

The worship of Durga in Bengal is significantly different from other parts of India. It is now an icon of Bengali culture and the biggest festival for all Bengali Hindus. This chapter provides the historical context which informs the evolution of Durga as a goddess and her *puja* (worship) specifically in Kolkata, in order to historically situate women and their involvement with this festival. The chapter is divided into two parts. The first half is review of the literature acquired on Durga Puja and the next half is an analysis of the evolution of that image⁴⁴ of Goddess Durga. I begin by giving a historical account of the evolution of this autumnal festival of Bengal. Next, I look at scholarship on Durga Puja across different academic disciplines to understand its evolution as well as its larger implications on people and their engagement with this festival. Much of the literature centers on how Bengali culture shaped itself to an extent through Durga Puja, specifically Community Durga Puja. This will help us understand how ‘womanhood’ was constructed and how women negotiated within this ritual space.

3.1 Origins

The image of Durga as well as the festival that celebrates her home-coming has, unsurprisingly, gone through enormous changes over the years. From being a religious festival observed by the rich and elite, it became a community affair. Community Durga Puja gained popularity in Bengal and became a space for public participation. For many, it is a much awaited opportunity to break away from the drudgery of routine and join in the shared euphoria of this festival. Durga Puja in eighteenth and nineteenth century was not very different in comparison to the extravagance we see

⁴⁴ By image I refer to the imaginative scape of the representations of Goddess Durga.

in today's Puja.⁴⁵ Durga Puja in its present form is thought to have been initiated by Raja Kansanarayan of Taherpur (now in Bangladesh) in 1508 to repent for his treachery and causing the fall of Nawabs of Bengal at the hands of the British.⁴⁶ A similar claimant was Lakshmikanta Ganguly⁴⁷ of Barisha who is said to have started celebrating Durga Puja in 1610 while English and Bengali newspaper reports from early 19th century, credit Raja Krishnachandra Ray of Nabadwip (1728- 1782) for the same.⁴⁸ Saugata Bhaduri expresses his doubt on how much resemblance this deity has with the Durga that we are familiar with today. Durga Puja, even in practice, must have been sporadic in nature. A more credible account emerges out of a painting by an anonymous British painter that identifies Raja Nobo Kissen Deb of Shovabazar to have started Durga Puja in Kolkata in 1757 to celebrate the victory of the British in the Battle of Plassey.⁴⁹ Before colonial forces established a stronghold over rural Bengal, Puja was an occasion through which village solidarity was maintained. This was the time when the landlords could display their status as well as benevolence and good will. Durga Puja was a grand private affair that was held within the confines of their households. It is this grandness and exclusivity of engaging in this festival that

⁴⁵ Rachel Fell McDermott, "Puja Origins and Elite Politics," in *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal: The Fortunes of Hindu Festivals* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2011), 11.

⁴⁶ Anjan Ghosh, "Spaces of Recognition: Puja and Power in Contemporary Calcutta," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 26, no 2 (2000): 295, doi: 10.1080/03057070050010129.

⁴⁷ He is the predecessor of Sabarna Ray Chaudhuri. It is popularly believed that Job Charnok bought three villages in 1690 that now comprise Kolkata.

⁴⁸ Saugata Bhaduri, "Of Public Sphere and Sacred Space: Origins of Community Durga Puja in Bengal," in *Folklore, Public Sphere, and Civil Society*, ed. M.D. Muthukumaraswamy and Molly Kaushal (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi Centre National Centre for the Arts, 2004), 81.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

made it popular among the notables of Bengal.⁵⁰ By the end of the eighteenth century, Durga Puja had become a fairly regular event at *zamindar* households.

Bhaduri suggests that a connection can be read between colonialism and increasing popularity of Durga Puja. Hindus no longer had to pay the festival taxes that were imposed by their former rulers. This must have served as an added impetus to celebrate Durga Puja. It is in fact, to mark Lord Clive's victory over Nawab Siraj-ud-dowlla that Raja Nabu Kissen Deb celebrated Durga Puja.⁵¹ Another factor that could have contributed to the increasing popularity of Durga Puja is that it had become an effective way of laundering money for the *zamindars*. The new rulers, though did not impose any taxes on religious affair, had a much stricter tax exaction system. The British had no interest in meddling with the affairs of religion and hence an annual extravagant affair like Durga Puja proved to be an effective route to get tax relief for many. Bhaduri gives an example of a letter written by Raja Baidyanath of Dinajpur to the British Government asking for relaxation in tax charges citing high expenses of Durga Puja. Similar strategy was adopted the same year by Raja of Jessore. After Lord Cornwallis's Permanent Settlement Act⁵² of 1793, a sizable section of *zamindars* had to get their accounts audited and Durga Puja became a popular strategy for tax evasion and money laundering.⁵³ By 1820, Durga Puja became so popular that it got added to the list of duties that were expected of *zamindars*.

⁵⁰ Anjan Ghosh, "Spaces of Recognition: Puja and Power in Contemporary Calcutta," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 26, no 2 (2000): 296, doi: 10.1080/03057070050010129.

⁵¹ Saugata Bhaduri, "Of Public Sphere and Sacred Space: Origins of Community Durga Puja in Bengal," in *Folklore, Public Sphere, and Civil Society*, ed. M.D. Muthukumaraswamy and Molly Kaushal (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi Centre National Centre for the Arts, 2004), 82.

⁵² According to this act taxes were to be determined by land holding of the *zamindars* and not their personal wealth.

⁵³ Saugata Bhaduri, "Of Public Sphere and Sacred Space: Origins of Community Durga Puja in Bengal," in *Folklore, Public Sphere, and Civil Society*, ed. M.D. Muthukumaraswamy and Molly Kaushal (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi Centre National Centre for the Arts, 2004), 82.

Durga Puja became a site for showing off one's affluence rather than devotion. For the Hindu nouveau riche this presented an occasion to exhibit and enhance their growing social status by displaying their wealth.⁵⁴ Anjan Ghosh makes a distinction between the Pujas of aristocratic households like Sabarna Choudhuri's – where worship was marked with an air of tradition, dignity and aristocracy; and the Pujas of the *gentoos* (nouveau riche) – which were characterized by glitter, gimmick and excess.⁵⁵ From these accounts, it is evident that Durga Puja was more than a custom that people observed for religious benefits. This festival became a time for indulgence and show of status.

The transition from household worship to *baroari*⁵⁶ (public) worship happened in the eighteenth century when twelve *brahmins* formed a committee and conducted their own Puja.⁵⁷ Instead of one aristocratic patron, the expenses of the Puja were to be shared among people. With time, *zamindari* patronage declined as their ability to sponsor extravagant pujas was severely hampered. The British had not taken away their estates but new tax laws pushed them into bankruptcy. The decline of *zamindari* patronage towards Durga Puja can be also seen as result of the decline in their fortunes owing to frequent squabbles leading to litigation over property matters.⁵⁸ Bhaduri speculates that this shift from private space to a more public arena was an important step towards

⁵⁴ Rachel Fell McDermott, "Puja Origins and Elite Politics," in *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal: The Fortunes of Hindu Festivals* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2011), 16.

⁵⁵ Anjan Ghosh, "Spaces of Recognition: Puja and Power in Contemporary Calcutta," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 26, no 2 (2000): 297, doi: 10.1080/03057070050010129.

⁵⁶ *Baroari* comes from the word *baro* and *yaar* which means 'twelve' and 'friends' respectively.

⁵⁷ Anjan Ghosh, "Spaces of Recognition: Puja and Power in Contemporary Calcutta," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 26, no 2 (2000): 297, doi: 10.1080/03057070050010129.

⁵⁸ Abhijit Dutta, "The Baroari and/or Community Durga Puja," in *Mother Durga: An Icon of Community and Culture* (Kolkata: Readers Service, 2003), 46.

‘secularizing’ the event and making it more conducive to constituting a public sphere.⁵⁹ As mentioned before, under aristocratic patronage, Durga Puja was embroiled in a sense of pride. When Durga Puja started to slip from the hands of *zamindars*, the communities sprang up to take charge of organizing this festival. The race to show wealth and power among the elites was replaced by the clamor amongst the Puja organizers to attract more crowd than their contenders.⁶⁰ *Baroari* Puja used to very often have different kinds of public entertainment like *swang* (critical mimicry), puppetry display, *jatra* (folk theatre) and *half akhari* (a form of bawdy singing), etc. Public entertainment was an important feature of such public worship and Durga Puja increasingly became a time for celebration. These Pujas being organized by communities as a collective effort would also at times turn into grounds for conflict.⁶¹

By the second decade of the twentieth century, *baroari* Puja gave way to Community Puja. With time, the number of private benefactors of Puja dwindled and Community Durga Pujas proliferated.⁶² The collective form of organizing a festival to worship Durga found popularity in the urban setting of Kolkata during the British rule. Given that religion was a powerful tool to mobilize the masses, very often nationalists had used Hindu myths and practices for similar purposes. In fact, it is in the inner spiritual space that the idea of nation was first conceived which then found its expression in such religious public spaces.⁶³ Thus the rhetoric of nationalism relied

⁵⁹ Saugata Bhaduri, “Of Public Sphere and Sacred Space: Origins of Community Durga Puja in Bengal,” in *Folklore, Public Sphere, and Civil Society*, ed. M.D. Muthukumaraswamy and Molly Kaushal (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi Centre National Centre for the Arts, 2004), 83.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Anjan Ghosh, “Spaces of Recognition: Puja and Power in Contemporary Calcutta,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 26, no 2 (2000): 296, doi: 10.1080/03057070050010129.

⁶² Ibid, 297.

⁶³ Partha Chatterjee, “Whose Imagined Community?” in *the Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 10.

on the spiritual sphere and cultural symbols to gain mileage. Predictably, this festival became a space for expressing popular nationalistic sentiments through innovative and creative use of the pandals and idols. This was the space where the colonial subject could express and transgress the hegemonic rule of the English master. In keeping with Gandhian politics, politicians in Kolkata coined the term ‘*sarbojonin*’ to bring attention to the universal inclusivity that they were aiming for, at least in principle. Community Puja, like that of Baghbazar and Simla Byam Samiti⁶⁴ became a site of nationalistic movements, so much so that the British Government banned a few Durga Pujas.⁶⁵ Nationalistic desires were juxtaposed on Durga and her ritual worship under the colonial regime. The duality in the nature of Durga, a loving mother as well as a fearless warrior, makes her fit to evoke an emotional response and inspire political agency. The nationalists found it particularly suitable for constructing her in the lines of *Bharatmata*. By the eighteenth and nineteenth century, she came to be understood as a symbol of resistance and victory of good over evil on the one hand and a vulnerable loving mother in need of protection from her valiant sons on the other. This image of a hapless mother and the call to her “sons” to “wake up”, marks the convergence of the overtly nationalistic and masculine rhetoric.⁶⁶

3.2 Emerging trends in Durga Puja

Community Durga Puja being a collective initiative became all the more a site of public participation, performance, display, and consumption. Public worship of Durga Puja saw a slow

⁶⁴ Baghbazar and Simla Byam Samiti are *sarbojonin* Durga Puja clubs of North Kolkata.

⁶⁵ Anjan Ghosh, “Spaces of Recognition: Puja and Power in Contemporary Calcutta,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 26, no 2 (2000): 297, doi: 10.1080/03057070050010129.

⁶⁶ Tithi Bhattacharya, “Tracking the Goddess: Religion, Community, and Identity in the Durga Puja Ceremonies of Nineteenth-Century Calcutta,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 66, no 4 (2007): 957, doi: 10.1017/S0021911807001258.

rise in popularity in Kolkata in the first half of twentieth century. Pujas were now sponsored by entire neighborhoods and the festival literally became a public festival as the goddess temporarily occupied makeshift pandals constructed in available (often contested) public spaces. These public festivals would often be accompanied by public entertainment. McDermott writes that other than reports on the new iconography of the goddess and street lighting, very little can be found on the aesthetics of the pandals. It is not until nineteen fifties that we find reports on the pandal structures. Since the nineteen sixties we can see new developments in this autumnal festival. The police department began to issue “road maps” and newspaper reports on the act of “pandal – hopping”.⁶⁷ The nineteen eighties witnessed further changes as it saw the rise of “big budget” pujas that relied more on sponsorships by corporates, rather than subscription collected from the neighborhood.⁶⁸ In the post-liberalization period there has been a steady increase in the number of pandals that try to use innovative, creative, and sometimes outright bizarre designs and iconography.

The pandals are no longer simple bamboo structures made to replicate prominent monuments but have turned into a space for artistic imagination. Traditionally, ‘decorators’ were in charge of building the conventional pandals but the rise of “theme Pujas” saw the involvement of art school graduates. The pandal structure, the iconography, the lighting display, ambient music; everything was carefully conceived to cohere to a particular theme and thus the nomenclature. Theme Pujas usually have a display board explaining the theme and the creators/organizers vision to the visitors. Anything can be made into a theme, as long as it is *abhinabo* (innovative). The sheer variety and range of themes taken up by different Puja clubs make this festival a cosmopolitan affair.

⁶⁷ Rachel Fell McDermott, “Durga on the *Titanic*: Politics and Religion in the Puja,” in *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal: The Fortunes of Hindu Festivals* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2011), 132.

⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 133.

Durga Puja has turned into a public art event. Tapati Guha Thakurta sees Durga Puja as a “vibrant space for tracking the changing face of an urban popular aesthetic, with its rapid shifts in consumer tastes and demands, (and) with its continuous layering and hierarchisation of the practices of popular art production and viewership.”⁶⁹ Much like a museum, exhibition or theme-park, during Durga Puja, Kolkata turns into a site for visiting and touring. With the Puja organizers constantly trying to dazzle the novelty hungry crowd, viewing and wonderment seem to have pushed religious devotion out of focus. It would not be very surprising to step from “an Assyrian palace of Mesopotamia to the Sanchi stupa in Garia, from the Dilwara temple of Mount Abu in Jodhpur Park to the Victorian Gothic structure of the Calcutta High Court, or to suddenly move away from all these imposing edifices into paddy fields, village huts and the famous “*Pather Panchali*” train scene. ... Neither for the viewers nor for the creators is there any great burden of authenticity.”⁷⁰

The Kolkata of Durga Puja is fantastical and transient and after this short life of grandeur, it returns to where it was. Pradip Bose borrows the Foucauldian concept of “heterotopia” to describe the Kolkata of Durga Puja. He writes, “These are the sites where certain kinds of utopias are enacted, where the real is at once represented, inverted and challenged, laying bare its interstices. These counter-sites lie outside of all places, and are constituted by an ‘otherness’, though it is possible to map their locations in real terms”. Unlike Utopia (a place that is no place), heterotopia is an ‘elsewhere’ place. It is real and unreal, truthful as well as false like the pandals that mimic various places, monuments as well as abstract themes. Surprise, novelty, and the unreal contribute to the

⁶⁹ Tapati Guha Thakurta, “The Transformend Aesthetics of a Public Festival: Durga Puja in Contemporary Calcutta,” *Mohile Parikh Center*, last modified 2004, <http://www.mohileparikcenter.org/site/?q=node/171>.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

creation of heterotopia. It is a world of gimmicks, grandeur and ornamentation. People willingly enter this world, what he calls a “hyper-reality”, in large numbers to escape the mundane.⁷¹

3.3 Pride and Recognition

Since the 1980s, the growing corporate funds and the trend of conferring prizes for the best, biggest, and most artistic Puja (beginning with the Asian Paints “Sharad Shamman” in 1985) has become commonplace. Durga Puja has become largely “award-centric” as these awards are important not just in bringing more prestige but also are pivotal in procuring funds and publicity.⁷² However, these awards have created a new map of “pandal-hopping”. Many small, little-known neighborhoods, started to make their pandals and tableaux more and more innovative and artistic to pull the crowds away from the centers as well as to catch the attention of the corporate sponsors. Organizing a theme Puja gave them the freedom to be creative with pandals even under spatial constraints. This has given Behala⁷³ (where most of my field work was done) its distinctive artistic niche in the festival map of the city. Obscure neighborhoods that came to prominence through Durga Puja are more often than not identified by the names of their Puja Clubs. With the presence of awards, corporate funding, continuous TV reportage, and a strong visibility on social media, Durga Puja has become an event that’s closely linked with *para*’s (neighbourhood’s) identity and prestige. It wielded the identity of a geographic locality (where the puja was to be held) and that of the inhabitants of the region, around the symbol of Durga.

⁷¹ Pradip Kumar Bose, “The Heterotopia of Puja’s Calcutta,” *Reflections*, May 16, 2008 (4:23 a.m.), <http://reflectionspradip.blogspot.in/2008/05/hetrotopia-of-pujas-calcutta.html>.

⁷² Tapati Guha Thakurta, “The Transformend Aesthetics of a Public Festival: Durga Puja in Contemporary Calcutta,” *Mohile Parikh Center*, last modified 2004, <http://www.mohileparikcenter.org/site/?q=node/171>.

⁷³ Behala is a largely residential locality in South west Kolkata.

Organizing Durga Puja today is no longer confined to the rich and the upper caste. Any group that has the organizing skills to raise the money and time to invest, can conduct Durga Puja.⁷⁴ This festival is not just going to a temple or worshipping her at one's house. Engaging or celebrating Durga Puja for many would mean going around the city to visit different pandals, i.e., "pandal hopping". Durga Puja has now turned into a new kind of ritual space, where the rituals include "merry making, relentless eating, walking around the city and pandal hopping. It is the knowledge that the spectacles will disappear in no time that brings out such frenetic forms of mass participation and spectatorship in the event."⁷⁵ It is a space for public participation and consumption. In Tithi Bhattacharya's words, in a place "lacking markers of social cohesion, Puja provided the new settlers a way to stamp their distinctiveness among their peers and also to mobilize the community around them."⁷⁶ It has helped to generate a notion of community and create a new urban sensibility among the newly settled population of this ever expanding city.

3.4 Public culture

The introduction of monetary subscriptions from the community created a whole new range of possibilities for moving the goddess from her ritual sphere into civil society. In theory, money could be demanded from anyone whom the organizers decided should be contributing to the

⁷⁴ Tithi Bhattacharya, "Tracking the Goddess: Religion, Community, and Identity in the Durga Puja Ceremonies of Nineteenth-Century Calcutta," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 66, no 4 (2007): 950, doi: 10.1017/S0021911807001258.

⁷⁵ Tapati Guha Thakurta, "The Transformend Aesthetics of a Public Festival: Durga Puja in Contemporary Calcutta," *Mohile Parikh Center*, last modified 2004, <http://www.mohileparikcenter.org/site/?q=node/171>.

⁷⁶ Tithi Bhattacharya, "Tracking the Goddess: Religion, Community, and Identity in the Durga Puja Ceremonies of Nineteenth-Century Calcutta," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 66, no 4 (2007): 946, doi: 10.1017/S0021911807001258.

common fund. Many scholars have tried to understand Durga Puja as a public sphere in itself. Bhaduri discusses the evolution of Community Durga Puja to show its transformation from being a private “sacred space” to “public sphere”. Durga Puja’s gaining popularity was a “response to the colonial state machinery and then (it) came to have quite a relative autonomy of its own, leading – through its generation of public opinion – not just to the consenting collaborator in Bengali *bhadrolok*, but often to resistance or at least subversive, strategies.”⁷⁷ Durga Puja’s success lay not in appeasing the British administrators but in hoodwinking them. Durga Puja as a public sphere has served the dual function of hegemonic consent generation in the favour of the state as well as provision of a space for subversion.⁷⁸

Anjan Ghosh traces the transformation of Durga Puja from being an elite and private affair to an urban secular festival. He analyses Durga Puja as a public sphere and shows how it is a space of power struggle and contestation. The implicit suggestion of inclusivity and wholeness in the term public sphere is not quite applicable in this context as we have a culture of stratifying by categories like class, caste, gender etc. Hence, Ghosh suggests that perhaps it is more rewarding to think of Durga Puja in terms of ‘public culture’, a concept proposed by Appadurai and Breckenridge that reveals the dialectics of a public by rejecting the Habermasian notion of homogeneity and equality in access of public sphere.⁷⁹ The notion of public culture is more useful than public sphere as the former focuses on the reception and the interpretive dimension.⁸⁰ Tithi Bhattacharya on the other

⁷⁷ Saugata Bhaduri, “Of Public Sphere and Sacred Space: Origins of Community Durga Puja in Bengal,” in *Folklore, Public Sphere, and Civil Society*, ed. M.D. Muthukumaraswamy and Molly Kaushal (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi Centre National Centre for the Arts, 2004), 80.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 89.

⁷⁹ Anjan Ghosh, “Spaces of Recognition: Puja and Power in Contemporary Calcutta,” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 26, no 2 (2000): 293, doi: 10.1080/03057070050010129.

⁸⁰ Liana Giorgi and Monica Sassatelli, “Introduction” in *Festivals and the Cultural Public Sphere*, ed. Liana Giorgi, Monica Sassatelli and Gerard Delanty (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2011), 2.

hand uses Sandra Freitag's concept of "public arena" in her discussions on Durga Puja. Freitag characterizes public arena as a world of ritual, theatre, and symbol that has the dual ability of reinforcing hierarchies as well as expressing dissent.⁸¹ The popular concerns, anxieties and issues of the day find prominence in the different themes organizers pick up each year. For example in 2013, in the aftermath of Delhi Rape Case of 2012, several Durga Pujas like FD Block of Salt Lake, Dum Dum Park Tarun Sangha, Kumartuli Park, 66 Pally near Rashbihari Avenue had women empowerment as their central theme. The lighting, decoration of the pandal, iconography was always used creatively to convey social message, political propaganda, depict narratives or stories from the current affairs or raise awareness for a cause or showcase indigenous cultural heritage.

3.5 Conspicuous Consumption

The present Community Durga Puja has displaced the elite imagination of the festivities with attributes of conspicuous consumption. Display of status by the elite has now been re-appropriated by the non-elite sections of society.⁸² The increase in popularity of Durga Puja resulted in the shifting of focus from its ritual features to the festive and celebratory aspects. The rhetoric that Durga Puja is a cultural rather than a religious event gained strength given that it has in some ways become a consumption festival, a time for collective euphoria and self- gratification as people save up to splurge during this festival.⁸³ Besides the traditional ritual observance; spending money on

⁸¹ Tithi Bhattacharya, "Tracking the Goddess: Religion, Community, and Identity in the Durga Puja Ceremonies of Nineteenth-Century Calcutta," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 66, no 4 (2007): 921, doi: 10.1017/S0021911807001258921.

⁸² Anjan Ghosh, "Spaces of Recognition: Puja and Power in Contemporary Calcutta," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 26, no 2 (2000): 294, doi: 10.1080/03057070050010129.

⁸³ Sudeshna Banerjee, "Modern Times," *Durga Puja: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (New Delhi: Rupa Publication, 2004), 72.

clothes, food, and travel have now become consistent ways to celebrate/observe this festival for people who can afford it. From pan/tobacco stalls to international brands, all businesses, small to large, get busy providing 'Puja special' products to the '*pujar bazar*'⁸⁴. After all, it makes perfect sense to push a commodity when the populace has money and given that consumption has become central to celebrating Durga puja, this festival looks secular on the face of it. Participating in Durga Puja does not necessarily mean engaging with the ritual performance. The spectrum of activities that fall under "celebrating" Durga Puja is large. It can be anything from shopping, dressing in good clothes, and going around the city to going on holiday tours.

3.6 Nostalgia

Corporatization and public competition have aroused mixed feelings both in the participants and analysts. There is a feeling of loss and nostalgia for bygone days when Durga was worshipped in its "true spirit". There is a deep felt anxiety over the festival orienting itself on self-gratification and consumption, rather than being a festival that brings the community together. Often one can hear reminiscences over how Durga Puja was "back in the days" and lamenting over the loss of religious purity, simplicity and homeliness attached to this festival. Indo Asian News Service reports Gautam Ghosh, a prominent film maker, lamenting that "Nowadays we are losing the essence of Durga Puja. Neither [is there] the soft carpet of 'shiuli' flowers (which bloom at this time of the year), nor the swaying white 'kaash' flowers across the green fields". "With the increasing number of theme Pujas taking place, the organizers are only concerned about media

⁸⁴ *Puja bazar* refers to the time of the year when people shop for this festival.

publicity, prizes offered by various media houses and other companies,” said dancer-cum-actor Mamata Shankar.⁸⁵

Chandikaprosad Ghosal focuses on how consumerism and modernity has shaped the contemporary Durga Puja. He argues that the corporate endorsements along with the advent of organizing committee saw the death of large scale participation of the community members in the Puja. Previously the people of a particular locality would actively get involved in the arrangements of the Puja. But the main activity during Durga Puja today is to visit different pandals across the city. Ghosal sees people as detached customers visiting pandals without any general relatedness to the occasion.⁸⁶ Durga Puja has been taken over by the self-styled ‘*parar dadas*’⁸⁷ of the area who in turn extort money from the ‘middle class’. With the local ‘*dadas*’ taking over, the competitive spirit shows up in the form of a carnivalesque degradation. A mad frenzy takes over the organizing committee to attract more and more crowd to the pandals and in turn this alienates the local residents (other than the organizers) who take no part in the Puja.⁸⁸ While successfully showing us how commercialization has changed the dynamics of Community Durga Puja, Ghosal completely omits considering Pujas of small neighborhoods, housing associations etc. whose priorities are often to not attract more crowd. In these Pujas, the primary focus is on community participation and not so much on attracting crowds, so much so that, there are awards like *Shera Ghoroa Puja* (best homely Puja), *Shera Abashon Puja* (best apartment Puja). This sense of loss of

⁸⁵ “Durga Puja Losing its Essence,” *Indo Asian News Service*, last modified October 7, 2008, <http://www.india-forums.com/news/religion/127620-durga-puja-losing-its-essence.htm>.

⁸⁶ Chandikaprosad Ghosal, “Kolkata's Changing Puja Ethos,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 41, no 46 (2006): 4728, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4418911>.

⁸⁷ *Parar* means ‘neighbourhood’s’ and *dada* means ‘elder brother’.

⁸⁸ Chandikaprosad Ghosal, “Kolkata's Changing Puja Ethos,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 41, no 46 (2006): 4728, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4418911>.

a past where the festival was true to its spirit, have also given rise to what one might call “ethnicization” of Durga Puja. Ironically, in last few years there has been a rise in the number of *shabeki* (old-fashioned) themed Pujas.

3.7 Durga, the deity

The present icon of Durga looks like an image of an aggressive warrior slaying a demon juxtaposed on the image of a loving mother visiting her *baper bari* (maternal home) with her children. The form in which she is worshiped and the associated myths and tales in Bengal is in fact, unique to this region. Hence, it is important to understand the construction of the image of Durga to understand what she has come to stand for and her relation with her worshippers, especially women. In this section, I discuss Durga’s origin, popular myths of her in songs and tales, and her ritual worship.

B.C. Mazumdar enumerates different features of this festival that is indicative of her syncretic origin. The first half of the article concentrates on how Durga, being completely absent in the Vedas, other epigraphic writings and scriptures until fifth century A.D, became the central festival for Hindus in Bengal. He puts forward several arguments to show how Durga is an assimilation of non-Aryan worship practices into the mainstream Brahmanical tradition. The first mention of a goddess by the name of Durga was in *Brhaddevata*, which in fact was a later interpolation. The first *Durga-stotra* that we come across is in *Virata Parwan*. She has been described as a dark, four-headed, and four-handed maiden of Vindhya hills who sways the world by remaining a maiden forever. She, like Kali is said to be fond of wine, flesh, and animals.⁸⁹ She in no way resembles

⁸⁹ B. C. Mazumdar, “Durga: Her Origin and History,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* (1906): 355-356, accessed October 30, 2013, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25210252>.

Parvati, wife of Mahadev. In *Gaudavaho Kavya*, in beginning of eighth century, the goddess Vindhyayavasini appears in double characters, i.e. she appears as the non-Aryan Kali at places, and as a form of Parvati herself at others. The incorporation of this goddess till that point had been rather inconsistent and fragmented in nature. He then compares few tribal customs of Sambalpur, like Kumari-Osa festival, Bhai Jiutiya that share striking commonalities with contemporary practices of worship in Bengal which would only stand to reason that both the practices have the same roots. The figure of *Vana Durga* or *Kola bou* too finds no reference in the Puranas. B.C. Mazumdar says that there is no ascertaining whether Durga had an independent existence as a tribal goddess and then later became the Aryan Vindhyavsini or whether the Aryan goddess in the process of evolution incorporated features of the tribal goddess and became our familiar goddess Durga. However, the fact that Kumari Durga did not originally belong to the household of Siva is undisputed.⁹⁰

Several tribal goddesses of Bengal were incorporated under the generic notion of Shakti by gradual incorporation in the Puranas. In eighth century, Durga was first mentioned as '*tapta-kanchanavarnabha*' (one whose skin glows like gold) and '*Gauri*' (fair) in the Puranas. Unlike the Durga of *Virata Parwan*, she was no longer fierce, dark, virgin warrior goddess. Durga of the Puranas is fair and has ten hands. Sixth century onwards, Hindu Puranas began to incorporate non-Vedic gods and goddess by suitably modifying them to become a part of a highly masculine Brahmanical order. Bhattacharya explains that the goddess was tamed from a non-Vedic virgin warrior through the "puranic process".⁹¹

⁹⁰ Ibid, 357-366.

⁹¹ Tithi Bhattacharya, "Tracking the Goddess: Religion, Community, and Identity in the Durga Puja Ceremonies of Nineteenth-Century Calcutta," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 66, no 4 (2007): 925-926, doi: 10.1017/S0021911807001258.

3.8 Feminizing of the Goddess

The crucial difference between the Durga of pre-puranic tradition and the Durga of Puranic tradition is that she appears with her children in the latter. The pre-puranic Goddess Durga had been domesticated and made more attuned to the patriarchal order. Durga in the later myths is understood as *Mahishasuramardini* (slayer of Mahishasura), as well as gentle Uma, Gauri or Parvati (wife of Shiva). According to Hindu mythology, Parvati and Shiva reside in the sacred Mt. Kailasa. In the Bengali regionalization of this divine couple, the festival is thought to be a celebration of Uma's visit to her natal home along with her children, Laxmi, Saraswati, Ganesh and Kartik. The goddess was further humanized when everyday issues of women were projected on to her through devotional literature.

Uma, especially her marital woes, are a strong theme in devotional literature. *Agamani* and *vijaya* songs are essentially shortened versions of stories narrated about Shiv and Gauri in the Bengal *Mangalakavyas* of fifteenth and eighteenth centuries. *Mangalakavyas* are narrative ballads composed to be chanted, recited, or sung and hence out of the strict confines of ritual worship. Moreover, these poems and ballads were composed in vernacular Bengali. *Mangalkavya* has uniquely feminized and familialized the goddess.⁹² It is also not surprising that the divine is portrayed in very human terms, juxtaposing human concerns, troubles, and joys on to them. In these songs Durga is addressed with extreme endearment. She is imagined as a benevolent mother as well as a loving daughter who, after a short visit to her *baper bari* (natal home) must leave for her husband's abode for a year. *Agamani* songs are sung to celebrate Durga's homecoming and *bijaya* songs lament her imminent departure. Women, especially before the Bengal renaissance,

⁹² Ibid.

had pitiful living conditions.⁹³ They, especially upper caste women, were most often married off to much older men at a very tender age. Many songs and tales surrounding Durga echo a deep trauma owing to the marital displacement. The four-to-five days of Durga Puja were seen as a short period of respite from Durga's marital woes as the festival was interpreted as her coming back to her maternal home. "No ceremony recognizes the brutal uprooting of a young woman from her mother's care into the strange, and possibly hostile, realm of strangers. No ritual concedes the agony of the mother who is forced to bear the separation from her beloved child."⁹⁴ In fact, not surprisingly, this came to signify a time when married women would pay visit to their natal homes.⁹⁵ For many, the martial *Mahishasuramardini* is completely overshadowed by her familial image. Durga was humanized even before the effect of colonialism and nationalist discourses tried to construct an image of feminine spiritual righteousness. Hence, it is not surprising that women's lives and experiences were central to these devotional traditions that escape the confines of ritualistic worship that can only be performed by the male *purohit*.⁹⁶ The goddess became the embodiment of the longings of millions of mothers and the joy of all daughters at their homecoming. Besides being a wife, she is also a mother who protects and nurtures her children. The present image of Durga as a protective and nurturing mother as well as a daughter visiting her natal home existed in the popular imagination from precolonial times. However, it is crucial to

⁹³ Rachel Fell McDermott, "Durga the Daughter: Folk and Familial Traditions," in *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal: The Fortunes of Hindu Festivals* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2011), 85.

⁹⁴ Tithi Bhattacharya, "Tracking the Goddess: Religion, Community, and Identity in the Durga Puja Ceremonies of Nineteenth-Century Calcutta," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 66, no 4 (2007): 931, doi: 10.1017/S0021911807001258921.

⁹⁵ Rachel Fell McDermott, "Durga the Daughter: Folk and Familial Traditions," in *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal: The Fortunes of Hindu Festivals* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2011), 86.

⁹⁶ Tithi Bhattacharya, "Tracking the Goddess: Religion, Community, and Identity in the Durga Puja Ceremonies of Nineteenth-Century Calcutta," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 66, no 4 (2007): 930, doi: 10.1017/S0021911807001258921.

keep in mind that although there seems to be a continuation in the imagination of Durga, the imagery as well as the purpose it served was very different in different eras.

3.9 Iconography of Durga

In Community Durga Puja, worship of the goddess is directed (most often) at clay idols, models made in the image of the goddess. The iconography of the goddess, needless to say, has undergone modifications with the changing nature of the goddess and her festival. McDermott gives an account of how goddess's iconography has changed across the centuries, to discuss the shift in the way she is perceived by her worshippers. This also throws some light on changing ideas of womanhood, femininity and aesthetics. She gives a short description of the traditional iconography of the goddess, a fashion that has been followed from eighteenth century to early twentieth century. This style of idols is referred to as *shabeki* meaning old fashioned or traditional. In this image, she drives a spear into the demon with two hands and holds arms in the other eight. Her face is shaped like a betel leaf (*pan-pana mukh*), her eyes are stretched till her ears (*tanatana akarna bistrta*). She has a tiny mouth, square chin, beak shaped nose and has a heavily built body (*bhari deha*). She has long arms and large hands (*mota hat*). Her gaze is not fixed, but blank (*shunyadrishti*), enabling her to return the glance of the devotee from any angle.⁹⁷

The image of the Goddess went through a significant change in the nineteen twenties, from the *shabeki ekchala*⁹⁸ tradition towards the version that is popular now. The most common form in which she is worshipped now is more life-like and sexualized. The emergence of such an

⁹⁷ Rachel Fell McDermott, "The Artistry of Durga and Jagaddhatri," in *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal: The Fortunes of Hindu Festivals* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2011), 106-107.

⁹⁸ *Ek* means one and *chala* refers to the basic bamboo structure/frame that supports the idol. In *Ekchala* idols, Durga along with all her children are constructed in the same frame.

iconography can be traced back to the early 20th century, when Indian art styles were greatly influenced by the naturalistic style of European painting. Some artists were even sent to the fairs in the western world as representatives of their art. McDermott gives the account of the artist Gopesvar Pal (1894-1944) who broke away from the *ekchala* tradition to make more realistic idols poised in ways that conveys her movements.⁹⁹ It is said that Pal would go to observe real lions in the zoo to make the clay model of the lion that accompanies the goddess. He asked his sister to model for him to make his idols as realistic in depiction of the feminine form as possible. Since the nineteen sixties, innovation and creative iconography of the goddess has been a trend as the organizers compete to make their own Pujas more spectacular in order to attract more *darshanarthi* (*darsan* seekers). McDermott mentions Bimal Chandra Dutta, a scholar-commentator writings on Durga's changing iconography – “Durga used to be *ranarangini* (delighting in war), but now she has become *rangarangini* (delighted in dramatic flirtation)! She gets younger every day - more like a child. She looks at the demon, no longer with wrath or sternness, - but with a smile.”¹⁰⁰ The goddess having entered the public domain and also having served as the space for symbolic expression made it easy to experiment with her form and the pandal. The apparent secular tone of the festival meant that the idol of the deity was no longer sacrosanct and unchangeable. It could be experimented with for the sake of artistic appeal. Moreover, now, idol making is no longer restricted to the *kumartoli* (potter's quarter) but has reached art studios. With more and more organizers approaching students from accredited art colleges, idols of the goddess and her entourage have become more of an artistic expression rather

⁹⁹ Rachel Fell McDermott, “The Artistry of Durga and Jagaddhatri,” in *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal: The Fortunes of Hindu Festivals* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2011), 110.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 115.

than being embodiment of the divine. In few cases, the idol is completely unused for the ritual worship and just serves the purpose of an artistic display. In such cases all the rituals are performed on the *ghot* (a holy pot of water placed before the goddess). This has resulted in many voicing their wish to bring back the traditional image of the goddess. The lamentation of senior artisan Mohanbasi Rudra Pal over the changes in the image of the deity indeed sums up the difference between the image of the past and that of present. He says that previously, Durga was depicted true to her textual *Mahishasuramardini* form. Her image used to inspire awe, veneration, and not familiarity. However, Pujas that deviate from the tradition to raise awareness or depict social issues have been applauded. McDermott concludes by suggesting that the aesthetics and the features of Durga and Bengali women have influenced and come to resemble each other.¹⁰¹

The puranic process tamed the fierce, wine-loving, virgin goddess into the fair and mighty goddess-wife of Shiva. Revivalist nationalism further appropriated her as a wronged and imprisoned mother whose deplorable condition acts as a catalyst to rouse her devoted sons. The power doesn't lie in her but in her capacity to move her sons into action. Durga in the present Bengali imagination is an amalgamation of all these images. Now she has become the center of what Guha Thakurta call a "public art festival". Her image is no longer seen as sacrosanct and is being constantly modified to cater to her novelty hungry *darshanarthis*.

As we have seen in this chapter, much work has been done on Durga Puja, especially on the Community Durga Puja. However there is sparse literature on women's engagement with this festival, especially in the present context. Writing in 1969 on Community Durga Puja, Jyotirmoyee Sarma writes that Community Durga Pujas were organized by young men who "after talking about

¹⁰¹ Rachel Fell McDermott, "The Artistry of Durga and Jagaddhatri," in *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal: The Fortunes of Hindu Festivals* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2011), 115.

it with their friends and kinsmen, if they feel sufficiently assured of adequate financial help from the residents of the locality, they regard themselves to be members of a puja club, give it a name, and decide on the positions of office bearers among themselves.”¹⁰² The only mention of women found, is in connection with preparation of the ritual offerings.¹⁰³ Much has changed since then with regard to women’s participation in this festival. The next chapter is an attempt to bring out the narratives of few women who are involved in the organization of Durga Puja in various capacities.

¹⁰² Joytirmoyee Sarma, “Puja Associations in West Bengal”, *The Journal Of Asian Studies* 28, no 3 (1969): 579 doi: 10.2307/2943180.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 585.

4. Women's Agency in Durga Puja: Negotiating Patriarchal Biases

Feminism has been wary of religion, especially given that most of the religions are in fact male dominated and hence propagate ideas that are conflicting with women's freedom and equality. However, religion as prescribed and religion as an everyday lived reality can be very different. Using the theoretical understanding of festivals and rituals as performance, this chapter intends to analyze how the ritual actors, i.e. women who participate in the Community Durga Puja, wield negotiating power within the confines of the patriarchal structure. For many women, faith and religion are spaces for self-expression and community building. These are not just sites of oppression. Women creatively feminize the festival space owing to their primacy in ritual spaces as well as the unique history of this festival's evolution. This research has tried to critically understand the participation of women in Durga Puja.

Feminist research methods have tried to give primacy to women's narratives and their own voice and have consciously tried to steer away from 'giving voice' to women. In keeping with feminist methodology, I have tried to see how women explain and interpret their own engagement with Durga Puja. Both the feminist approach and performance theory strive towards placing the agency within the ritual actors. My research uses the framework of performance theory of rituals as a strategic tool because it implies an active participation of the involved actors rather than assigning them a passive role.

4.1 Field Work

This field work was conducted over a period of three months between 2013 and 2014. When I went to visit my field to study women's participation for the first time, I had framed specific questions but was quite unsure about how I was to do my field work. The initial pilot study was done during Durga Puja, 2013. I conducted around nineteen interviews and focus group discussions with a diverse group to gain some insight on women's agency through qualitative research methods. As the sample choice was too diverse and limited to draw any generalized picture, the study taken up is exploratory in nature.

It is during this initial field work that I had contacted Vina¹⁰⁴, who I knew was involved in the Durga Puja of an apartment building near Ranikuthi, Kolkata for an interview. It is she who had suggested that I conduct a focused group interview as it would allow women to be at ease and talk freely. This suggestion I found particularly helpful, as more often than not, the most interesting observations and anecdotes came from my respondents during these conversations, and not as a response to the questions that I had initially started my field work with. Along with one on one interviews, I have tried to conduct focus group interviews where feasible. Throughout my field work, I have tried to keep the interviews as conversational as possible. Most of these interviews were about an hour long. The interviews were loosely structured. I had decided on broad areas to keep the discussions from meandering too far from the topic at hand. Many of the respondents felt a sense of excitement in narrating their personal experiences. Some of the women in fact expressed surprise and some even felt awkward at narrating their "trivial" and "ordinary" experiences and on

¹⁰⁴ Except for two, all my respondents, wished their names be put in my thesis. I have used their real names respecting their wishes.

certain occasions I had to assure them that their narratives were indeed of my interest and pertinent to my study.

For a large part of my field work I talked to women who were, either themselves or by acquaintance, identified as being “actively” involved in their neighborhood Durga Puja. However, the word “actively” covers varying degrees of involvement and responsibilities as we will find out in the following narratives. For some, it meant being given the responsibility of arranging for the ingredients required in puja or being in charge of preparing the *prasad* (devotional offering), for others it meant being a part of the organizing committee. Some perceived their engagement with the neighborhood Durga Puja as significant given that they had played a role in initiating the Durga Puja in their neighborhood. Some women saw their participation in *dhunuchi naach*¹⁰⁵ or *bhashan*¹⁰⁶ as being proof enough of active participation. On the other hand, many women I encountered during my field visits said that they were not involved with the organization but were ‘simply lending a helping hand in the chores’.

4.2 Respondents and their neighborhoods

I will chiefly focus on three group discussions and three interviews that I had audio-recorded in the course of my field work with women who identified themselves as being ‘actively’ involved in Durga Puja. In this chapter, I have also used the narratives of women who were not a part of any Durga Puja or had contradictory opinions to the general narratives that I collected from the field. Out of these six particular cases that I am going to discuss, Durga Puja of Regent Towers and Nabaliya Para, were initiated and is still organized by women from the neighborhood. In the

¹⁰⁵ *Dhunuchi* is an incense burner. *Dhunuchi-naach* refers to ritualized worship dance during evening worship i.e. *aarati* accompanied by *dhak* rolls.

¹⁰⁶ A spontaneous dance that accompanies the immersion procession.

other four cases, Joyshree Park, Shitolatola, Paikpara and Barisha Club, women said that they organized or assisted in the organization of Durga Puja in their respective neighborhoods. Some of them held organizational positions like Cultural Secretary, Chairman, and Treasurer etc. in their respective Puja organizing committees. However, all of them unfailingly said that they were involved in taking care of the chores that are required for performing the rituals and preparing the *prasad* that gets distributed at the end of the ritual. All the respondents self-identified themselves as belonging to the middle class. They were all married and most of them had children. Few of them were working as professionals while most of them were home-makers. All of my respondents had been residing in their neighbourhood for more than two years. Some of them were relatively new residents, though a majority were old residents of the neighbourhood.

Most of my respondents can be said to be privileged in terms caste and social position and comfortably fall well within the spectrum of the middle class. In all these pujas, including the ones started by women (Regent Towers and Nabaliya Para), the organizing of the Durga Puja was a collaborative work that required the support of men. The different roles and responsibilities shared by men and women and the rationale cited behind dividing the work thus, are discussed later in this chapter.

One of the two pujas that were started by women, is in an apartment building called Regent Towers in Ranikuthi of South Kolkata. It was started sixteen years ago by few women, three of whom were in the group discussion. The other two women present in the discussion have been a part of this Durga Puja for more than five years. All of them were homemakers in their sixties, with most of their children residing elsewhere. The Puja was a very small affair attended mostly by the residents of Regent Towers who are not more than two hundred in number. The other Puja that was started by women was in a small neighborhood, Nabaliya Para of South Kolkata. I had the opportunity to

interview Nomita, a retired school teacher, who along with few other women in her area, started the Durga Puja seven years back. Nabaliya Para is a smaller residential area with not more than seventy houses. This Durga Puja too is visited mostly by the residents of Nabaliya Para.

Beside Regent Towers, the other two group discussions were in Joyshree Park of South Kolkata and Shitolatola of North Kolkata. In Joyshree Park, five members of the present Puja Committee, which has been organizing Durga Puja for last two years were present for the group discussion. The present Puja committee largely consists of women. All of these women reported to be somewhere between ages 50 – 70. Out of the women present for the group discussion, three of them were home-makers, one retired school head mistress, and a bank employee. I was also joined by Debashish, a member of the previous Puja committee who had been of great assistance to the new committee. Joyshree Park has about two hundred houses, many of which are now apartment buildings. Joyshree Park is a fairly big Puja that draws the crowd in and around Behala of South Kolkata owing to their norm of hosting cultural programs where popular music artists perform. Shitolatola is a small neighborhood that has roughly about a hundred houses. I got an opportunity to talk to two of the women in the Puja Committee, Anima the treasurer, and Sandita. Both of them are in their forties and are home makers. The Puja, I was told, is almost forty years old and is mostly frequented by the residents of Shitolatola and nearby areas.

The other two interviews I took were in Paikpara and Barisha Club. Paikpara of North Kolkata is a fairly big and old neighborhood with more than three hundred houses. I interviewed Gargi from Paikpara who has been a part of the puja for a long time and was the cultural secretary in Puja Committee the previous year. She is in her early fifties and oversees the management of a small MBA Institute. The pandal is a big and simple structure but attracts a fair number of

*darshanarathi*¹⁰⁷ (*darsan* seekers). *Darshan* literally translates to ‘seeing’. In Hindu ritual context it refers to the instance when the *bhakt* (devotee) beholds the divine. As Hindu tradition is centered on the understanding that the divine resides in the image, this vision is not passive but reciprocal. The *bhakt* sees and is seen by the deity.¹⁰⁸ However, much of the crowd that throng the pandals with the motive to consume the artistic display are also referred to as *darshanarathi*. Barisha Club has a fairly big neighborhood; but the main source of the capital required for this puja comes from corporate sponsors and so it relies very little on the subscription collected in the neighborhood. Barisha Club is one of the most recognizable pujas in Kolkata that became popular with the rise of theme pujas and have been selected for many popular awards like Asian Paints Sharad Shamman, Annondobazar Shera Pujo, etc. I interviewed Hashi, a home-maker in her fifties, who was a part of the Mahila Assosiation of Barisha that plays a supportive role in organizing the Puja.

4.3 Reasons for initial involvement

I choose to start this section with the Durga Puja of Regent Towers. The discussants were all women, presumably in their sixties. Some of them had stayed in the apartment for more than twenty years and have been responsible for initiating and organizing the Puja for the last sixteen years. Before they started their own Puja, they had to go a neighboring colony if they wanted to observe any of the rituals. The residents of that locality, I was told, didn’t appreciate this and so they decided to organize a Durga Puja of their own. Even though Durga Puja is imagined as a time for forgetting differences and celebrating with everyone, it is often the case that there is a very strong sense of ‘us’ and ‘them’ among the neighborhoods. The sense of competition and rivalry

¹⁰⁷ *Darsanarathi* is one who seeks to *darsan*.

¹⁰⁸ Diana L Eck, “Seeing the Sacred,” in *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (New Delhi, Mohitlal Banarsidas Publishers, 2007), 3.

that Rachel Fell McDermott refers to is at the least present, if it has not increased over the years¹⁰⁹. The growing list of categories for prizes and awards given for Durga Puja only confirms this. After some initial apprehension, everybody decided that it was a good idea to start a Puja of their own as it would give all of them an occasion to gather and celebrate. Bitika said, “It was a very important thing as we would rarely meet each other save few chance meetings in elevators and morning walks. Moreover since people come from different places in these apartments, we needed an occasion that cultivates a sense of community. Before these occasions, we just knew each other by our last names but now I know each of their ailments and worries”. Everyone seemed to agree on the point that the Durga Puja was started to provide a space for residents of the apartments to celebrate the festival which in turn would bring them together as a community. In fact, each of them said that though it requires a lot of their energy, the amount of fun and joy they get out organizing this festival is beyond comparison, the latter being more precious.

Like in the case of Regent Towers, Nomita of Nabaliya Para had similar reasons for feeling the need to start a Durga Puja in her neighborhood. Nomita too had felt the absence of a social occasion that would bring everyone in the neighborhood closer. She had then approached few women of her locality who also expressed their interests in it. None of them had any idea about the processes involved in organizing a Durga Puja. Moreover, she was working at that time and so it got very hectic for all of them. However, it gave them sense of satisfaction and confidence at having been able to do so without a glitch and hence they continue to organize it.

In Joyshree Park, a member of a former committee (that had only men in it), said that they could no longer take the responsibility of Durga Puja as they had increasingly become more and more

¹⁰⁹ Rachel Fell McDermott, “Durga on the *Titanic*: Politics and Religion in the Puja,” in *Revelry, Rivalry, and Longing for the Goddesses of Bengal: The Fortunes of Hindu Festivals* (New York: Colombia University Press, 2011), 136-137.

involved with the Kali Puja which takes place a fortnight from Durga Puja. One of the women from the group that is an organizing committee member, also added that there was growing resentment among the residents of Joyshree Park towards the high handedness of the previous organizers regarding the subscription collection. Reasons cited by Anima and Sandita for having to take up the responsibility of Durga Puja in Shitolatola of North Kolkata were quite similar. They explained that the previous group of men who did the Puja were not able to conduct the puja as there were several complaints of mismanagement. Women have been organizing Durga Puja for last three years. Sandita adds that even before they started organizing the entire puja, they were a part of the process as they were in charge of the chores involved in it. Both in Shitolatola and Joyshree Park, the reason why women took up the responsibility hinged on the fact that they came across as being more responsible and less susceptible to corruption. On the other hand, Gargi from Paikpara, said that her being a part of the organizing committee was a natural and gradual process as she has stayed in this *para* all her life. She said, “I took part in the puja one way or the other since my childhood. I am one of the most recognizable and known faces here and so everyone has faith in me”. Hashi of Barisha Club said that they did not organize the Puja, but were given the responsibility to oversee the ritual observations as well as the cultural program that happens after the immersion of the idol. Her involvement with the Durga Puja started after she was asked to assist with the cultural program.

4.4 Motivations

When asked what motivated them to invest so much of their time and energy in their respective neighbourhoods, I got a wide range of replies and most of them had intersecting points. Hashi speculated that, “I think what makes this work more enjoyable is that this is not like other familial or professional duty that I have to carry out, instead I have chosen this work *voluntarily* (emphasis

mine) and hence find it more pleasurable”. The respondents in Joyshree Park said that the happiness and satisfaction that they get out of this voluntary engagement is very personal, it gives them a space outside the matrix of familial duties and responsibilities. This emphasis on voluntary choice is the most explicit assertion of agency by these women.

One of the common responses that I got was that Durga Puja held more significance in their lives because of their cultural affiliation rather than a religious one. Hashi said, “I never observe any daily ritual at home, but make sure I visit the neighborhood pandal at least once every day. More than watching Ma’s (referring to Goddess Durga) *aarati*¹¹⁰, I like meeting people from my neighborhood in the pandal”. The rhetoric that Durga Puja is more of a cultural and social event and less of a religious festival and hence is inclusive to people from different race, caste, culture is far from true and yet has great persuasive power. Many of the women I interacted with, took pride in making this event more inclusive, as the true spirit of Durga Puja lies in generating community feeling/togetherness and enjoying with everyone. The reasons Babita and Tutu cited for organizing Durga Puja in their respective *para* is that they saw this festival as a community building occasion. The relation between Durga Puja and developing a sense of community can be historically traced back to the context in which it rose to popularity. Saugata Bhaduri has shown how Durga Puja rose to popularity more as a festival for “garnering public participation” rather than a solipsistic religion.¹¹¹ Gargi of Paikpara said, “I keep waiting for these four days all year as this occasion gives me a lot of satisfaction and happiness at seeing everyone around me smiling in their brand new clothes”. Tutu from Joyshree said, “I judge our Puja’s success not by the number

¹¹⁰ Ceremonious worship of the goddess, often accompanied with oil lamps and drum rolls.

¹¹¹ Saugata Bhaduri, “Of Public Sphere and Sacred Space: Origins of Community Durga Puja in Bengal,” in *Folklore, Public Sphere, and Civil Society*, ed. M.D. Muthukumaraswamy and Molly Kaushal (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi Centre National Centre for the Arts, 2004), 80.

of visitors who come, but by the participation among the residents of Joyshree Park. We (referring to the present group of organizers) felt proud at being able to bring every one of our neighborhood together”. A few of the respondents had similar views on what counts as being a successful Durga Puja. They consciously made an effort to encourage people to participate in the celebrations. Debashish too added that, “Like *barir boro bou* (eldest wife/woman of the house), Tutu di has brought all of us (residents of Joyshree Park) together as a whole family. It’s for all of their patience that we did not have any disputes regarding subscription collection this year”. In Regent Towers, few of the respondents referred to Durga Puja as being the time when they try to keep aside all their differences and have fun.

Gargi expressed that she enjoyed participating and celebrating Durga’s visit to her maternal home more after she got married. “It’s only when you get married do you truly understand the trauma of marital displacement. Once the daughter is married off, she in many ways becomes redundant to her maternal family. And so after my marriage, I felt a greater urge to celebrate the home-coming of the Goddess.” When asked about why this festival holds a special significance to them, many of them sighted their relation to Durga as a driving factor. All respondents reported to identify with the goddess at some level. According to few respondents like Sandita as well as two other respondent from Regent tower, the main drive behind their participation is the Goddess’s divine will and not so much their individual drive. According to Anima, it is the length of the festival that makes it different for other occasions like Kali Puja, Saraswati Puja etc. Bitika of Regent Towers also mirrored similar opinions. Durga Puja is an elaborate affair and stretches across four days, and thus the relations formed during this occasion are stronger.

Simultaneously, many were also of the opinion that organizing Durga Puja provided them with a much needed space to spend time and bond with people around them. Durga Puja for many of

them became a ground for establishing friendly relations with the neighbors. This festival has turned into a space to meet and get close to each other. For many, this was a place where they formed friendships that function as their support system. Some of them also reflected on how being a part of Durga Puja gave them a chance to build a rapport with people in their neighborhood as well as gave them visibility. This occasion provides a break from the drudgery of everyday house work to many women. In fact, in our conversations, few of my respondents pointed out the significance of the space that is made available for them to gather and perform their tasks. Women of Joyshree Park talked about how getting involved in the Durga Puja gave them access to the local club office (a small concrete room) which till then was only frequented by men. At present, the members of women's group come to the club once every week to meet. Gargi of Shitolatola also mentioned how she thought positively (as opposed to her family) of her spending time socializing with other members of the neighbourhood. She also adds, *"Though men socializing and having fun in public is seen as natural and common place, often a woman is reproached for doing so and is seen as insincere and lazy."* This is why the puja adda (chat) is so important to me. Even though my in-laws don't approve of it, I did not give in" (emphasis mine). For few respondents, organizing Durga Puja gives a sense of purpose. It gives them immense satisfaction and confidence at being able to conduct the Puja in an orderly fashion. Rapport building with other women is another component of agency.

Women of Regent Tower and Nomita of Nabaliya Para said that they assist in the organization of Durga Puja because if they do not, probably no one would come forward to take up the responsibility though everyone enjoys taking part in the celebrations. One of the oldest respondents, Vina said, "Though age has made it very difficult for me to be physically active, I make sure to find time for Durga Puja. The entire year I keep waiting for these four days when

everyone gathers and celebrates this festival together”. Most of my respondents said that coming together to plan and organize the whole affair, though exhausting, is a lot of fun. Respondents from Joyshree Park made reference to the discourse of urban housing and its failure to generate community feeling and social interaction. The women see themselves as forging a civic community through their participation and this aspect has received little critical analysis.

4.5 Roles and Responsibilities

Women’s confidence in forging community came through their discussions on roles and responsibilities. In this section I address the roles and responsibilities that women are entrusted with during Durga Puja. Through my interviews, I have tried to understand the rationale behind why certain tasks are seen as more apt for women and others, not. In all the six cases discussed here, women take care of the chores that are related to the Durga Puja. Few of the rituals like *bodhon*¹¹², *boron*¹¹³, *sindur khela* etc require the presence of *aao* (married women) as they are considered auspicious and hence essential for performing certain rituals. Durga Pujas that were entirely done by men, readying the ingredients for the puja, cutting the fruits and arranging the flowers etc. are unfailingly done by women. In Barisha Club, women were responsible for assisting with the ritual performance and cultural programs. While describing their share of work, Hashi of Barisha said, “Even if men are in charge of the whole affair, they need our help when it comes to the ritual part. We need to go and prepare for the puja. They cannot do it the way we would.” Gargi too expressed similar views. She said, “Say if men are preparing the *bhoog* (food offerings) they will get ten kilos of rice if that’s the required amount. But if we (women) are preparing it, we will

¹¹² A ritual worship perform to invoke the Goddess.

¹¹³ A ritual that includes feeding the Goddess with sweets and caressing her face with betel leaves to bid the Goddess adieu.

try to see how much rice is left from the previous day and buy the remaining. We run the house as well as the kitchen and so are naturally better at planning and executing these tasks.” In fact, in most of the places that is how women initially got involved in Durga Puja.

When asked how the work gets divided between men and women, Gargi said, “We (women) do the planning, but we need their (men) assistance for the running around and heavy- lifting. We neither have their strength nor their mobility. There are certain things that we can’t do, e.g. overseeing the construction of the pandal, getting sponsors, helping in the immersion of the idol, etc. We need men to help us with these”. Men were seen as being more suited to jobs that demand strength and mobility. It is also quite interesting to see how women differentiate between the strengths of men and women. The general assumption among my respondents was that men, unlike women, were not skilled at certain tasks. Women were seen as, and they themselves were of the opinion that, being women, they had better managerial skills and were more adept in domestic chores like cooking, arranging, cleaning, decorating etc. The responsibilities that they were given were based on the assumption that they were, by the virtue of their femininity, more proficient at performing these tasks. For example, the women who were in charge of the afternoon feast talked about it using metaphors of feeding one’s family. Bidisha of Joyshree, while talking about the previous year’s feast said, “Whenever we women are in charge of the feast we make sure everyone has eaten to their full and only after that do we sit down to eat.” Some of the other respondents drew parallels between their being in charge of looking after their family and their responsibility to oversee the feast and distribution of *prasad* after the puja.

Both in Regent Towers and Nabaliya Para, Durga Pujas are entirely organized by women. However, in both the cases the women insisted that had there been no support from others, all their efforts would have gone in vain. In Regent Towers, I was told, that all decisions regarding

planning, budgeting, collecting the subscription, readying the *pandal* and idol, arranging for the feast, organizing a cultural program, printing a brochure on the Puja, getting hold of the priest; in short, everything is undertaken by them. The women get a lot of assistance from the ‘men’ and ‘boys’ of the apartment. They help them by running errands and assisting with the cultural program, especially given that their health has deteriorated significantly owing to their age. In Nabaliya Para when I asked Nomita, about the responsibilities that women have in her neighbourhood, she said that, “You see that it is not any body’s personal puja; it’s a festival for all of us and so everybody pitches in.” In Joyshree Park, and Shitolatola, women were in charge of subscription collection, accounts, overseeing the cultural program, the feast along with the chores and so on. In Joyshree Park women were given the responsibility of collecting subscription. Tutu from Joyshree said, “As far as I can remember, women have been in charge of the chores and the cultural program. *However, in the last five years we have taken up more and more responsibilities. People find us less threatening and so it is easier for us to collect subscription from everyone*” (emphasis mine).

Women in four out of six cases were in charge of the cultural program. These cultural programs usually involve singing, dancing, recitation, theatre performance etc. Hanshi of Barisha Club said, like many other women, these rehearsals became a place where she met other women from her neighborhood who got involved in Durga Puja. Many of my other respondents mentioned training neighborhood children and also performing in these cultural programs. Aparna Rayaprol in her work on women in diaspora noticed that Indian women in the Pittsburgh, USA, take more active roles in inculcating traditional culture and values by organizing festivals, ethnic food and dress,

religious and language classes, etc.¹¹⁴ Women are traditionally expected to be the bearers of culture. Rayaprol, in her work observes that this understanding has to lead to greater participation of women in the affairs of the temple, unlike their Indian counterpart. When my respondents were asked why they were invested in organizing these events, the most common answer was that it provides them a space for interacting with one another. Such cultural programs are organized to ensure greater participation of the local residents and not so much for their aesthetic value. Majority of them reported that they felt a sense of achievement in carrying forward the “true spirit” of Durga Puja. Few of them, however said that these performances were dedications to the goddess.

Another noticeable point was that many of them in their narratives put greater emphasis on “*non-traditional tasks*”(emphasis mine) like collecting the subscription, keeping accounts, making decisions on the budget, taking care of the construction of pandal and idol, getting permits from the required authority and so on. Women, other than in Barisha Club, performed these tasks. Though the act of going from one house to another collecting subscription still seems to unsettle the middle class norm of what is befitting of a *barir bou*,¹¹⁵ during Durga Puja an exception is made and it is the women of these clubs, barring Barisha, that collect the subscriptions. The most commonly sighted reason behind women collecting subscriptions instead of men is that women are more tolerant and so are better at maintaining peaceful and cordial relations. They are also seen as being less threatening and thus more adept at the task. They were also seen as more sincere and thrifty.

¹¹⁴ Aparna Rayaprol, “Cultural Reproduction and Reconstruction of Identities”, in *Negotiating Identities: Women in the Indian Diaspora* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 64.

¹¹⁵ *Barir* means ‘house’ and *bou* mean ‘wife’.

4.6 Analysis

Rituals wield a lot of power over the memory and imagination of a community. Symbolic practices in forms of songs, tales, poems, legends give expression to the anxieties of the people. The fact that the figure of the violent goddess was recalibrated as a daughter coming to her maternal home from her uncaring, poor husband bears testimony to that. What could not be expressed otherwise found expression in the devotional, which in many complex ways, feminizes concepts of agency in the domain of Brahmanical masculinity.¹¹⁶ Given that women have in some ways been closer to ritual spaces, as has been discussed in the first chapter, Durga Puja became a space of expression for women. Many women reported that what draws them to put in their energy and time in organizing Durga Puja is that this engagement is a ‘personal choice’ and not motivated by any sense of duty or familial compulsion. Durga Puja provided them with a space that gives them a break from domestic drudgery. Putting effort in this festival seemed enjoyable to them as it was out of their own choice. Few of them also went on to add that given women are mostly confined by the familial ties and obligations, it is necessary for them to form social ties outside the family.

Many of the ritual practices are centered on women and their lives, especially the rites of Durga’s homecoming and her farewell. Though the puja is conducted by *purohit* (priest), women are an integral part of rituals like *bodhon* (invocation of Durga), *Kola bou protishthan*,¹¹⁷ *boron* (farewell rites), *sindur khela*, etc. In the morning of *shashti*,¹¹⁸ mothers worship goddess Shitala, wishing a healthy life for their children. Married women or *aao* are integral to *bodhon* as well as the ritualistic

¹¹⁶ Tithi Bhattacharya, “Tracking the Goddess: Religion, Community, and Identity in the Durga Puja Ceremonies of Nineteenth-Century Calcutta,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 66, no 4 (2007): 932, doi: 10.1017/S0021911807001258.

¹¹⁷ Refers to the ritual of summoning the Devi to reside in the plaintain tree.

¹¹⁸ Sasthi is the sixth day of *Devi Pakhsha* or ‘fortnight of the Goddess’. It marks the formal beginning of Durga Puja.

transformation of *Kola bou* or *nabapatrika* (nine plants) from a plantain banana tree to the goddess, who is worshipped alongside with Ganesha. Women also observe the farewell rituals – *bodhon* and *sindur khela*. Women feed the goddess with betel nut and sweets and caress her face with betel leaves before she leaves her natal home for her husband's abode. Married women put *sindur* (vermilion) on each other's as well as the goddess' forehead. *Bijaya* brings with it an air of loss and a sense of longing for Durga's homecoming the next year. This sense of loss and longing mirrors the pangs of separation that a family experiences when parting with their daughter after marriage. These ritual practices and literary traditions are all centered on women's marital status and motherhood. In popular literature and media we find innumerable examples where the icon of Durga or reference to this festival is used as reminder of *nari-shakti* (power of women). Nonetheless, as evident from the rituals and representations, only a certain kind of womanhood is exalted. The myths and rituals revolve around marriage and motherhood. In certain places (like Ramkrishna Math) pre-pubescent virgin girls are worshipped as the goddess herself. Certain rituals require the presence of married women as they are considered auspicious. The moral value of domesticity, wifeness, motherhood, fecundity are extolled. Thus by extension, unmarried menstruating girls, widows, women without children are seen as an aberration from the normal or inauspicious. Even when asked as how they identify with the goddess, the most common response was as a wife or as a mother.

Mary Hancock while conducting field work amongst upper-caste Hindu women in Chennai noticed how women including those who held jobs, defined their lives through their domestic activities and relations that are firmly rooted in the notions of Hindu propriety and code of duty.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ Mary Hancock, "The Moral Etiquette of Everyday Hinduism," in *Womanhood In The Making: Domestic Ritual And Public Culture In Urban South India* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1999), 75.

It is interesting to note at this point that the term *barir bou* is not synonymous to house wife but is used to refer to any married woman, professional or otherwise. Even though some of my respondents held jobs, they defined themselves predominantly through familial connections. A Hindu woman's life is bound by "*dhamma*" or the duty to serve ones family and kin. In fact, many of the women said that one of the motivations for participation in Durga Puja is to organize a festival for everyone to come together like "one big family" and bond as a community. Many of them echoed the sentiment that they take part in this festival as they see this festival as contributing to bringing the community or neighbourhood together. Going through the responses given by the women, it is evident that they feel a sense of duty towards maintaining peace and harmony in the family as well as in the community. Being able to conduct the Puja successfully gives them a sense of achievement. This engagement for them is not just a frivolous activity but dictated by their sense of civic responsibility.

The nature of Durga Puja and women's participation in it has changed considerably over the years in keeping with the changing lives of people, especially the middle class. The effects of modernization and capitalism are quite evident. Moreover, the ideas of devotion and being religious has altered considerably over the years. Many of my interviewees said that they were not very religious (meaning they do not rigorously follow the rituals) but definitely are believers and pray to the goddess. Predictably, roles that women take up at Community Durga Puja as well as the way they engage and celebrate the festival has also changed over the years. As can be seen from the interviews and group discussions, women have taken up responsibilities other than what was traditionally thought to be feminine chores. Women themselves interpreted their femininity as a positive attribute and saw it as enabling. Some of these tasks are now seen as being more suited for a women's job. This understanding rests on the assumption that all women are naturally

more feminine and hence adept at domestic tasks. Nevertheless, this understanding of feminine and masculine can be very limiting. Often, women are given only those responsibilities that are seen as feminine. A woman respondent¹²⁰ complained that everyone's insistence that she assist in feminine chore only, made her lose interest in participating in her neighborhood Durga Puja.

Women who participate in Durga Puja draw a certain kind of social capital from it. During an interview with a school teacher, who also is a single mother, said that though she prays and reveres the goddess and likes to spend time in the *pandal*, she would never be a part of any organizing committee. She said, "All these women who take active part in organizing the Puja are not very different from their male counterparts. They are all power mongers". Then, to lighten the response, she added that after all in a certain sense we are all striving to achieve some sort of recognition and power in our family, at work, in the neighborhood etc. What is evident from her account is that Durga Puja, for women who participate, becomes a space for gaining social capital. This also gives them an opportunity for bonding with other women. The social ties and friendships in some cases became their support structure.

From the different responses I got, the women also seem to get a sense achievement at being given, and at successful completion of, tasks that were seen as men's jobs or incongruous to women. Examples of jobs that usually don't fall in the category of feminine roles like overseeing the *pandal* construction, subscription collection, getting sponsors etc. found mention in the discussions as an anecdote about their efficiency and experience. Activities like chatting for long hours, 'hanging-out' in the local tea stall, dancing in the immersion procession, etc. were often highlighted to demonstrate how much fun they had.

¹²⁰ She did not consent to her name being used.

Women are getting more and more involved in the organization and celebration of Durga Puja. This can be seen as a result of the changing social, cultural, and economic matrix; especially with respect to middle class women. When asked about the generational shift in the nature of women's participation in Durga Puja, all of them were of the opinion that women now have a greater scope in it. Previously, the feminine chores were done by the women who were part of the families of the organizing members. However, few of my interviewees said that they grew up in neighborhoods where women were enthusiastic and actively involved in Durga Puja.

This brings me to another interesting pattern that emerged during my field work. One of my initial research questions was what women think of their participation in this public festival. However, what struck me instead was how in some places, especially the small pujas, women did not see this so much as being a public event. Instead, for most of them, it is an occasion where everyone bonds as a community and relations get a semblance of familial ties. Very often during the interviews they described this festival and their engagement with it through familial metaphors. Many of them insisted that theirs is a *ghoroya* (homely) puja.

The nature of women's involvement with Durga Puja is dependent on many factors like geographical location, class, caste, number of years of residence in the para, pre-existing social ties, etc. Women from lower-caste and unprivileged backgrounds will have very different narratives of their engagement with this festival. It is undeniable that there were women in the neighbourhoods where I interviewed, who did not participate in all these activities. They may have excluded themselves or may have felt excluded for various reasons. Women replicate, reproduce as well as transgress gender roles and ideologies through their participation in this festival. Limited as my sample was to women who actually participated, it is difficult to generalize about women's

agency per say and yet these narratives are noteworthy as they help us understand the complex nature of everyday negotiations that women make.

5. Conclusion

The objective of this project has been to study how women negotiate from within the patriarchal structure. In the first chapter, I argued that festivals and rituals shape us and in turn we, as individuals and as societies transform them. As we see from these discussions, Durga Puja has characteristics of both ritualistic as well as urban festivals. An event as big in proportion and importance as Durga Puja, is a highly socially affective phenomenon and hence it holds valuable insights into the dynamics of our society. The second chapter, I worked towards understanding the Goddess and her festival, as well as its iconography in a specific historical context. I have engaged with the extensive feminist scholarship on festival and ritual to see the different ways in which women have used these spaces for self-expression, social interaction and community building. This has informed my study on the ways women interpret their gender differences as a positive and exercise their agency in reiterating, altering, and subverting the patriarchal discourse of what it means to be a woman.

It would be unwarranted to assume that Durga Puja is completely free of patriarchal and other biases. My research of relatively economically privileged, mostly upper-caste women celebrating a Hindu festival in a metropolitan city is a modest attempt to show that women exercise their agency and contribute as active agents in their own lives and the communities they are a part of. The gendered nature of their participation was not interpreted as solely repressive. As seen in the existing literature along with my field work, many of my respondents saw their womanhood as enabling. However, most of my respondents did not just articulate their engagement as a voluntary participation and an expression of their individual freedom, they also saw their participation as being contributive in stitching the community together. They assert their freedom without denying

the feminine sense of responsibility. For this reason, they participate in routine festival activities like preparation of *prasad*, organization of cultural programs, oversight of the community feast, etc. In contrast to the context of the household, they see themselves as not being passively burdened by these responsibilities. Instead they emphasize on their individual choice in participating in this festival. Moreover, they express their unique talents in using these “feminine tasks” to forge community ties. In the process of performing the assigned feminine chores, it is clear that women have moved over into the traditionally masculine tasks such as collecting subscription, arranging community feasts, etc. My respondents as well as other members of the neighbourhood see them as more adept in these tasks as they are thought to be more sincere, responsible, thrifty, and less susceptible to vices. While it is true that the married women and home-makers made up the bulk of my respondents and thus the narratives tend to have many overlaps, nonetheless the narratives are lived realities of these women and hence worthy of academic attention. Gender is not a universal construct but rather embedded in historical and political contexts and hence it would be counter-intuitive and reductionist to dismiss the life-choices and experiences of some women as ‘false-consciousness’.¹²¹ In fact, more than contributing to the feminist scholarship, my study has been a learning process for me to see how these women carve out a space for themselves. Their vocabulary of expressing self and resistance is not in keeping with the *-isms* and *-ists* of the academic discourse but most definitely has the potential to creatively resist and alter the trope of feminine passivity.

¹²¹ Aparna Rayaprol, “Conclusion: Gender in the Making of an Immigrant Community”, in *Negotiating Identities: Women in the Indian Diaspora* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 64.

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