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11 Contested Spaces
Puja and its Publics in Calcutta[*]

Every year in the autumn month of Aswin (September–October), the city of Kolkata undergoes a spectacular transformation for five days during the Durga Puja festival. For the Bengali Hindus, Durga Puja (henceforth Puja) is the biggest and most popular festival. The days of the Puja evoke a festive spirit and a holiday mood that engulfs the city and its different communities. During those days, large numbers of people both from the city and its vicinity descend upon the city's streets, visiting the *pandals* (temporary designed shelters in which idols of the goddess Durga and her children are housed), dressed in their new clothes and finery, and partaking of the public

festivities during the day and might. Even as the distinction between night and day gets blurred with the bright illuminations of the pandals dotting the city's fields, parks, and streets, the festival enables people who do not generally inhabit the public realm as such to make their presence felt. Hence women, children, and the elderly mingle with the crowds at all hours of the day and night to constitute a festival of mass participation and joy.

In this essay, I address the question of multiple publics and their conflicting interests in terms of the spatial effects of the Puja celebrations in the city. Information for this study was collected through a survey of selected Pujas, conducted over three years (2002–4), during which I tried to discern how far the ideas of the public converged with that of the 'public sphere' or 'publics' proposed by Euro-American social theorists.[1] What are the implications of a plural public for the celebration of the Puja? How is the space of the locality produced during the festival?

In an essay, Partha Chatterjee asks, 'Is the Indian City Becoming Bourgeois at Last?'[2] The import of this question does not lie in marking the insignia of industrial advancement on the body of the city. For capitalism and its attributes—such as industrial organizations, commercial enterprises, and manufacturing—were never absent from the colonial metropolises in India. Many of them were the seedbeds of industrialization and the industrial way of life. Instead, what Chatterjee was referring to was a more incipient shift in policies and attitudes among the government and public. Distinguishing between citizens and populace among the latter, he suggests that while citizens belonged to the realm of civil society, the 'population' was constituted by the field of governance. As Chatterjee puts it,

Civil society, for instance, will appear as the closed association of modern elite groups sequestered from the wider popular life of the communities, walled up within enclaves of civil freedom and rational law. Citizenship will take on two different shapes—the formal and the real. And unlike the old way ... of talking about the rulers and the ruled, I will invite you to think of those who govern and those who are governed. Governance, that new buzzword in policy studies, is, I will suggest, the body of knowledge and set of techniques used by or on behalf of those who govern. Democracy today ... should be seen as the politics of the governed.[3]

The shift that Chatterjee marks is a reversal of the inclusiveness of the civic community. In contrast to the state, the civil society in Europe

was to expand in an inclusive manner. Yet, in postcolonial societies, the formal signs of inclusion, such as in the Constitution, remained fraught and unrealized. The promise of formal equality remained constrained and not expansive. In his essay, Chatterjee traces the bourgeoisness of Indian cities to the increasing withdrawal of the state from its redistributive functions in favour of the market and its institutions. This signals a shift in the mindset of the urban middle class, keen to protect and expand its autonomy in regard to the state but having scant regard for the survival of the populace. Hence urban renewal has meant the demolition and displacement of squatter settlements, the loss of livelihood of the urban poor, homogenization of urban neighbourhoods,[4] and the dispelling of claims on community resources such as parks and open spaces, waterbodies and pavements. The embourgeoisement of a city like Kolkata has cultural consequences and is transforming the life of the community in its *paras* (neighbourhoods). This leads to a clash of publics, increasingly evident in the contest over city space during the Pujas.

A MATTER OF PUBLICS

On the eve of Durga Puja in October 2002, Kolkata's mayor Subrata Mukherjee,[5] as president of the Ekdalia Evergreen Club, was asked by *The Telegraph*, a leading city newspaper published in English whether by blocking the road to set up its pandal for the Puja, his club was not violating civic rules. In his reply, Mukherjee said, 'I do not think blocking roads is in any way a transgression of the law. During the Puja everything is shut, so people should be out only to visit the pandals. In the course of that if they get caught in traffic jams, they should take it in the Puja spirit.'[6] The city's first citizen's remarks underline an outlook that transcends both his and his party's inclination. The conceptualizer and designer of the Bosepukur Sitala Mandir Puja, Bandan Raha echoed similar sentiments a year later when besieged by police-imposed civic restrictions on the Puja.[7] The same city daily asked similar questions to politicians from different political parties associated with leading city Pujas in 2002. They received similar responses across party lines. The exchange of views reveals a dual notion of the public and a pattern of crosstalk evident across the developing world.

As the biggest and the most popular festival, Durga Puja is a mammoth public event in the city. It is a time of conviviality and revelry as

well as of devotion, generating a welter of activities and attracting a variety of performances. This has now rubbed off on the organization of the Puja, as the numerous local clubs and associations vie with one another to put on the most spectacular and exotic display to attract the crowds. Corporate sponsorship and an array of awards have, since the mid-1980s, provided a competitive edge to these displays. The spectacle of Durga Puja has become 'the society of the spectacle' of Guy Debord. Debord had argued prior to 1968,

The spectacular character of modern industrial society has nothing fortuitous or superficial about it; on the contrary, this society is based on the spectacle in the most fundamental way. For the spectacle, as the perfect image of the ruling economic order, ends are nothing and development is all—although the only thing into which the spectacle plans to develop is itself. As the indispensable packaging for things produced as they are now produced, as a general gloss on the rationality of the system, and as the advanced economic sector directly responsible for the manufacture of an ever-growing number of image-objects, the spectacle is the chief product of present-day society.[8]

The Puja is the time when prominent public events are represented in a decorative form for the populace. Events that capture the public imagination—from train accidents to celebrity deaths like Princess Diana's, to Hollywood blockbusters such as *Titanic* or *Harry Potter*, to terrorist attacks on public institutions such as the Parliament or Akshardham temple—become grist to the mill of re-presentation as spectacle. For it is the spectacle that informs the popular imagination. But the embedding of reality and experience in the media is available in an attenuated form to the homegrown public. Instead, the media, especially newspapers and television channels, by launching their pre-views of the Puja before the actual commencement of the rituals, help to disembed the local (para) Puja into a spectacle. Often the theme of the Puja decoration serves as a surrogate experience of distant places for the city's lower middle and underclasses. As one of the organizers at Barisha's Tapobon Club remarked, 'We try to depict a significant landmark or temple which may be inaccessible to some of our poorer neighbours.'[9] Others advertised their Puja as replicating a tourist destination. For instance, Suruchi Sangha of New Alipore advertised their 2003 Puja as a depiction of a dancers' village of Kerala and their 2004 Puja as bringing a bit of Rajasthan to Kolkata. Banners at prominent road crossings promised the deserts of Rajasthan in exchange for the bus fare to New Alipore! As the principal organizer of Suruchi

Sangha said, 'Bengalis like to travel to far off tourist destinations during the Puja holidays. We try to depict some of these destinations through our Puja, so that those who are unable to travel to these places, can at least get a taste of these place'.[10] It is in this atmosphere of the carnivalesque that I examine the kinds of transgression of public space and local community that occurs in the city.

Let us here consider how the public sphere is constituted. Habermas defines the public sphere as, '[F]irst of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens ... Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion ... about matters of general interest.'[11] Implicit in this is the idea of 'rational–critical argumentation and collective will-formation regarding the paths, along which the state, economy and civil society itself are to develop'.[12] Such formations consider citizens as participating individuals, in terms of contributing to the discursive body of public opinion. The public is constituted by rights-bearing citizens and there is no distinction between the citizen and populace. Formation of public opinion requires not only linguistic competence but also the ability of rational judgement and articulation that permeates individuals heavily inveighed with cultural capital. Collectivities of this kind are difficult to ascertain in any historical circumstances, including India.

In the above vein, Cohen and Arato describe publicity as the 'moment of open communication and popular participation through which alternative directions for social life are collectively reflected upon and adjudicated'.[13] Here the citizen-subjects can be seen to emerge through their collective articulations in the public domain. In an effort to valorize the processual and interstitial nature of 'publics', Emirbayer and Sheller remark:

We define publics as open-ended flows of communication that enable socially distant interlocutors to bridge social-network positions, formulate collective orientation, and generate psychical 'working alliances', in pursuit of influence over issues of common concern. Publics are not simply 'spaces' or 'worlds' where politics is discussed, as the popular 'public sphere' idea suggests, but rather interstitial networks of individuals and groups acting as citizens.[14]

The idea that socially distant individuals speak the same language to communicate and seek to bridge their positions for common concerns as citizens remains an anathema in the Indian context. Segmentation is the key ordering principle that prevails and the groups that find

recognition from the state constitute their own publics. Meanwhile, even within publics, the distinction between citizen and denizen persists. Hence the language of communities is set by the former for the others to resonate. Common concerns are scarcely collectively ascertained and more often than not foisted by some on others, thereby lacking the investiture of trust.

To account for the communitarian presence in the public domain, Sandra Freitag characterized the space between state and society in early twentieth-century India as 'public arena'.[15] Identified as the space for performative action, the will of the public was manifested in mimicry and simulation. Hence, Freitag defines her notion of public arena as, '[a] world of ritual, theatre and symbol. It is a universe that sometimes reinforces hierarchy ... and at other times expresses conflict among unequals, it may even do both simultaneously. Most important, it is a world tied closely to the social and political contexts of its locale and hence accommodates and reflects change.'[16] In her idea of political arenas, there is no assumption of universal subjects or autonomous action among equals. Action is encoded in performativity and occurs to reinforce hierarchical relations. Even shifts are incorporated in reconstituted hierarchies. So articulations are contextual and often reactionary.

In tracing the genealogy of the *andar–bahir* (private–public) distinction in a city like Kolkata, Sudipta Kaviraj notes how, in India, 'traditional cities did not have a conception of the *civic* in the European sense, since the cities performed very different historic functions'.[17] The 'outside' or public spaces were considered sites of lawlessness and unruly practices by the colonial authorities and appear to have been sustained by the ruling elites in the postcolonial era. The unregulated movement of the masses on the streets of Kolkata during the Puja is considered an infringement of the civic responsibility of private citizens. Kaviraj notes the distinction between the corporate presence of the civic in European cities and the urban populace in India,

In the modern European conceptualization of the public, there is an unmistakable strand of control, of order and discipline, which is altogether absent in the indigenous Indian one. Instead, there is a sense that the 'outside' is not amenable to control—not by the individual or the restricted resources of a small family, not by any organized authority. The exterior is abandoned to an intrinsic disorderliness. No order, rules, restraints can be expected there.[18]

Kaviraj transposes the public–private distinction into the divide between an elite public and a plebeian public. The latter is referred to as *public*. While the former value their privacy and want public spaces to be regulated for the smooth functioning of their corporate routines even during festive times, the latter prefer to take a holiday and engage in activities that are different from their quotidian existence. The local community or neighbourhood within whose precincts the Puja is held also find their space transgressed upon, as Puja organizers draw in non-local audiences for their installations. But before turning to the dislocations and displacements, a few words about the Puja.

FROM HOUSEHOLD RITUAL TO PUBLIC EVENT

The ritual cycle of Durga Puja occurs during the first ten days of the bright moon cycle (*shuklapaksha* leading to the full moon *purnima*) in the Bengali month of Aswin (September–October). This period is known as *Debipaksha* (the days of the goddess) and is inaugurated by Mahalaya, when the spirits of the ancestors are propitiated in preparation for the worship of goddess Durga. The actual installation of the image of the goddess—along with her children Ganesh, Lakshmi, Saraswati, and Kartick, and that of the vanquished demon Mahisasur—in the pandal takes place on the sixth day. For the next four days, the idols are worshipped daily, morning and evening, by Brahmin priests, till on the tenth day in the afternoon, the images are taken out in procession to be immersed in the Ganges. The Puja can be organized at different venues, such as in a temple, within a family home, or in public as a community Puja. Here we are concerned only with the latter as *sarbajanin* Puja (public worship). Such worship takes place in a para and represents the people of the locality. Pandals for the Pujas are usually constructed of bamboo, cloth, and tarpaulin and put up on any available open space in the neighbourhood, such as a park or vacant plot of land. Paucity of such open spaces in many of the city's neighbourhoods leads to pandals being constructed on the road itself, blocking or impeding traffic flow.

Without recounting a history of the Durga Puja celebration in Kolkata,[19] suffice it to say that popular attention has shifted from the celebration of the Puja in prominent households, as most prevalent in the nineteenth century, to *baroari* worship (literally, by an association of 12) worship, which was engaged in concurrently, to the emergence

of the sarbajanin Puja (open to everyone in the community). It is the sarbajanin or *parar* Puja (neighbourhood Puja) which commenced from the second decade of the twentieth century in Baghbazar, a locality in north Kolkata, that has now become the principal form of the Puja.

Today over two thousand such Pujas are organized in the city itself. With the proliferation in numbers, competition among the Pujas to attract visitors has increased. This has been accorded a further edge through the institution of prizes and awards by corporate houses and private companies keen to capitalize on the publicity. Elaborate decoration of the pandal, lighting and illumination, as well as novelty in the iconography of the image all serve to engage and attract the crowds. However, designer Pujas often require substantial funds to lavish adornment on the pandal, lighting, decoration, and the idols. Budgets for such major Pujas used to range from Rs 5,00,000 to Rs 20,00,000. According to a newspaper survey in 2002, just the top- and middle-rung Pujas in Kolkata spent on an average Rs 25 crore every year for their basic requirements.[20] This figure has of course escalated more recently. Clearly this kind of money is not available through neighbourhood collection of subscriptions or donations. Sponsors and advertisers underwrite a bulk of the cost, prompted sometimes by political personages from different political parties who generally patronize the Puja of their locality, but also for the publicity their products receive. The Puja is a time of extravagant consumption, hence highly appropriate for advertising and promotion of consumables. Moreover, advertising during this time acquires high visibility and reach, as large numbers of people come out on to the streets during the festive season and visit different pandals.

As noted earlier, over the last two decades, competition among the community Puja organizers has been recognized and institutionalized. Led by companies such as Asian Paints and Patton, many other companies have now instituted awards and prizes for different aspects of the Puja, such as the best image of the goddess; the best decoration, pandal, and lighting; the best performance of rituals; the best *purohit* (Brahmin priest); the best *dhaki* (ceremonial drummer); the best environmental and public amenities; the best family Puja, the best Puja in high-rise housing and in housing complexes; and other such categories. But to be eligible for such competitions, until 2004, the Pujas needed to restrict their expenditure to a maximum of Rs 4 lakh. Pujas exceeding this amount of expenditure were not

eligible to compete.[21] The organizers of Puja, especially of those located on the periphery of the city in rapidly developing areas, are under pressure to innovate to attract public attention. Some of these Pujas have become prominent crowd-pullers after winning awards, while others have attracted attention by using novel substances such as small clay pots, bagasse, discarded gramophone records, or buttons for their decoration. Prizes have not only drawn media attention but also universalized the para. Instead of the Puja being conducted for the people of the neighbourhood, the latter has become known to people from across the city and other places by its Puja. The Puja has universalized the locality in the imagination of the pandal hoppers, thereby identifying a para with its Puja.

Theme-based Pujas are a recent innovation and were not widely prevalent before the end of the millennium. Here, the idol, decoration, lighting, and general ambience speak to a theme and are conceptualized and choreographed by a designer. The Puja arena becomes a transformed space, either recounting other times through the reconstruction of historical events or monuments or other spaces in terms of different cultures. Thus, in recent years, we have seen the reconstruction of the 'Bansher Kella' (bamboo fortress) of Titu Meer (a nineteenth-century Muslim peasant rebel in rural south Bengal) in the Dhakuria locality in 2002, the Trevi Fountain of Rome being put up in Kidderpore in 2003, and a depiction of Mesopotamian ziggurat in the same locality in the wake of the Iraq War in 2002. The Puja of Suruchi Sangha, New Alipore, depicted a Kerala dancers' village with its myriad dance forms being inscribed on separate panels, with a brief description surrounding the pandal. Shrishti Club in Behala put up a Madhubani village at its Puja site in 2002, while their neighbours Sahajatri Club reconstructed a village of Ghana in 2004.[22] The sheer diversity of themes make Durga Puja in the city a cosmopolitan affair.

Such theme-based Pujas scarcely cater to the local residents need for ritual observances and social conviviality. They seek to attract a wider audience from other localities as well as the upmarket crowds to enhance corporate sponsorships. Institutionalization of designer Pujas has meant that the public is keen to view the non-conventional Pujas that are publicized through the media and become the talk of the town, rather than only the traditional or the neighbourhood ones. The print and electronic media, such as local newspapers and television channels, are a major source of previews and often set the trend for

viewing. This prompts the local organizers to advertise their Pujas as a brand, packaging their wares as depictions of exotic locations, historic monuments, or the nostalgic past. In 2002–3, the rural scene became a widely prevalent theme. Rural motifs were introduced through the use of *patua* (scroll) paintings, or setting up a crafts mela with the craftspeople plying their trade in market stalls at the site of the Puja, as in Bakul Bagan, or through the use of straw mats and bamboo weaves for decoration. The theme of tribes and the depiction of tribal culture as a return to nature became popular the next year.

Swelling crowds and enhanced media attention, along with the announcement of awards, attract sponsorships and advertising revenue for the future. They also provide much-needed recognition and accolades for designers, artists, craftsmen, and organizers. While this has promoted a set of artists and designers such as Amar Sarkar, Subodh Ray, Bhabatosh Sutar, and several others into the big league, it has also made space for young artists and designers fresh out of art college to display their talent in choreographing the various Pujas. Increasingly, the Puja has become a display of the artistic imagination around the ritual event. Local artists are afforded a unique opportunity to foreground their productions in one of the largest 'public "art" event(s)' in the city and perhaps the world.[23] Durga Puja's transient efflorescence of cultural and artistic creativity holds up a mirror to the city's embedded talents.

TRANSGRESSING THE SPACE OF THE COMMUNITY

Over the last two decades, certain major structural changes have become evident in Kolkata. The decline of traditional manufacturing industries such as jute, engineering, textiles, iron and steel, and paper in the larger metropolitan area has meant that employment in manufacturing has dwindled. This has sharply reduced the opportunities for a traditionally skilled workforce in the other sectors. Even the small-scale industries have suffered, as they were often vertically integrated with the larger industries. Whatever expansion has occurred has been largely in the service sectors, including hospitality, trade and retail, health, real estate, media and communication, education, and IT. This has meant that the nature of the labour force has undergone a sea change, requiring very different skill sets, which are unavailable to the manufacturing labour force. In the new corporate culture, which is far more global in its outlook, the place of English as a

medium of communication has been highly valorized. A proliferation of English daily newspapers has largely catered to this audience. Among them *The Telegraph* was an early starter, specifically targeting young English-educated professionals in contrast to the larger group of middle-class elite. This has meant a certain self-deprecating stance towards local Bengali obduracy to change and the sustenance of arcane practices. It has been impatient of the attributes and cultural traits of the langourous Bengali, impeding corporate expansion in the state. For this corporate public, a mega-event such as the Durga Puja, with its consumption, festive spirit, enforced indolence, and conviviality, is a growing paradox. On the one hand, mass consumption provides significant marketing opportunities; yet, on the other hand, the festival holidays diminish corporate working hours and keep people away from productive activities. Has this prompted the newspaper to be critical of the city's overindulgence over the last few years?

In 1999, *The Telegraph* commented critically on the absence of a secular work-culture in the city as the Puja holidays brought all other work to a halt. The extended Puja holidays that year, owing to the vagaries of the almanac, drew sharp criticism from the newspaper. It remarked,

Every year during this time of the year everything except what has to do with the festival of Durga Puja, becomes motionless. All offices and even banks are shut for four days … ; this year…the closure extends to five days. Nowhere else in India is this procedure followed … , such a situation would have been acceptable … if West Bengal worked on full steam for the rest of the year. This as everybody knows is not the case … Bengalis love not having to work for reasons religious and secular. Work in West Bengal is not sacred.[24]

Though the newspaper found evidence of 'detailed organisation' of Pujas, it had no qualms in dismissing it as 'unproductive activity'. Even as entertainment, the Pujas were deplored as 'cheap and vulgar', 'bizarre' and 'tasteless'. Clearly the newspaper, averse to the excesses of the Puja, could hardly find any redeeming feature in such a mammoth enterprise. Yet, paradoxically, from 2003, *The Telegraph* itself began to institute awards for the 'True Spirit Puja' to reward the Pujas that were most environmentally sensitive and provided the best civic amenities for the visitors.

In 2002, the issue was not the absence of work-culture, but infringement of civic rules. Through a series of interviews with some leading political personalities associated with well-known Pujas, the

newspaper pointed out that by constructing pandals on public thoroughfares, the organizers were transgressing against the law and infringing on basic civic amenities. While most of the politicians-cum-Puja organizers acknowledged that roadside Puja pandals flouted the law or 'bent it a bit', as some maintained,[25] they argued that this was done not out of choice but compulsion. It was the absence of open spaces in some localities that led to the blocking of roads. As a BJP leader from Burrabazar said, 'When people object to roads being blocked, I politely ask them to provide us with an alternative site and we shall shift the *pandal* there. Till then nobody should object.'[26] The upholding of popular sentiment in building the pandals on the road was unanimously echoed, if with varying vehemence. Mukherjee, as the mayor of the city, said, 'Pujas are a mass movement and that no leader, no matter what his standing, wants to become unpopular by disrupting it in any way.'[27] Political leaders could hardly go against overwhelming public opinion. They were unwilling to rob the populace of their brief period of joy. Sanjay Bakshi of the Trinamool, from north Kolkata, said, 'I know very well that blocking roads is illegal. Despite this I do not mind flouting rules time and again, as it brings a smile to the faces of children.'[28] Thus the inconvenience to a minority was sought to be mitigated by the joy and pleasure that the Pujas brought brought to many. Popular enthusiasm for the Puja as secular festivity overrode concerns of transgression of public space. As a trade-off between the preference of the masses and the grouse of the classes, the choice was tipped in favour of the former.

A prominent Communist Party of India (Marxist)—henceforth CPI(M)—Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) from Ballygunge, Rabin Deb spoke in a similar vein about the Puja at Bosepukur: 'Some residents of the area have objected to the roadblock. We asked them with folded hands to bear with us for the cause of the millions who come here.'[29] On the other side of town, a Trinamool leader from Lake Town, Sujit Bose of Sribhumi Club, maintained, 'The Pujas are enjoyed by an overwhelming majority of Calcuttans and those coming to the city from other parts of the state. Those who find it inconvenient should respect the sentiments of the majority and bear it.'[30] While the politicians pandered to the populace to secure their space, *The Telegraph* remained a stern critic of the infringement of civic space. It expressed its disappointment with Kolkata's civic consciousness, noting that the city had seemed to be growing towards a basic civic awareness in recent times.[31] But the apprehension

of the corporate public was more to do with the lurking prospect of chaos and lawlessness, 'And where crowds are large, it can also be dangerous. The law is not conditional or partial either, it is not made to be broken … A civilized consideration for everyone's convenience, a lawful approach to organization, environment-friendly arrangements are all essential for a successful festive season.'[32] Evidently the irony escaped the author. For in the name of 'everyone', a small minority was asserting its civic rights, which were inconvenienced but not jeopardized. It was apprehension of disorder that made the transgression of public space marked.

Yet the civic authorities, along with the police, engaged in an elaborate planned exercise every year to not only maintain law and order in public spaces but also to keep civic life relatively stable. The Puja called for unprecedented crowd and traffic management and this was successfully carried out year after year by the public authorities. Crime and untoward incidents were kept under strict surveillance and check to ensure that the population could engage in their festivities without fear. Amidst the apparent chaos of popular participation, a secure sense of order persisted. For the corporate public, this order was, however, inherently fragile.

PRODUCING THE LOCALITY

The public worship of the mother goddess Durga used to be largely a community affair in the city. It was the local community which was involved, demarcated in local parlance as the para. Inhabitants of the para recognized themselves through their daily interactions and through the local clubs set up to provide community services such as games and reading rooms, TV viewing spaces, and generally a meeting place for the local people. Young and old men would gather at the para club to play indoor games, read newspapers, watch TV, or engage in plain gossip. Sometimes there were also attached gymnasiums for the fostering of physical culture among the youth. In other words, the daily interaction of people in a locality acquired an aggregative form in the notion of the para, with definite boundaries and identities. The para was constituted by the affective life-worlds in the locality. As Appadurai has noted: 'Localities are life-worlds constituted by relatively stable associations, relatively known and shared histories, and collectively traversed and legible spaces and places.'[33] As a dimension of social life, the locality comprises both a 'structure of

feeling and ... its material expression in lived "co-presence".[34] Yet is the para a collective expression of a holistic sensibility?

There used to be several activities associated with the Puja that involved the people in the para and invoked their solidarity: for instance, collecting subscriptions from the local households for the Puja; overseeing the arrangements for the pandal; getting the idols from Kumartuli, the traditional neighbourhood of the image makers; shopping for necessities for the rituals of the Puja; organizing the distribution of the *bhog* and *prasad*, the consecrated food and fruits after worship; managing the crowds at the pandal; as well as making announcements over the public address system to inform the para residents about the sequence of rituals. However, while para identity is still manifested in the theme of the Puja, the awards that it wins, or the crowd that it draws, many of the activities have now been corporatized. Subscriptions from local inhabitants are no longer the mainstay of the local Pujas. Corporate sponsorships and advertisements have to be obtained to sustain the growing budgets of themed Pujas. These can only be obtained either through para residents associated with the corporate sector or through politician-patrons. Para Puja committees often reflect this divide. There are the patrons and honorary members who are local business people, eminent professionals, or corporate executives and obtain sponsorship or advertisements for the Puja. Others contribute their organizational skill and effort towards the conduct of the Puja itself.

Another way of attracting advertisements and sponsorships is by enhancing the brand value of the para through greater public visibility, enabled by the winning of well-known prizes and awards. Prizes attract publicity in the media and thereby footfalls at the pandal. Advertising and sponsorships follow the footfalls. This was articulated by a member of Barisha's Shrishti Club:

Without winning prizes one cannot attract viewers in the outlying areas. Unless large number of people visit our Puja pandal we cannot increase advertising rates. At Ekdalia Evergreen Club more than one million people visit their pandal during the Puja. This enables them to charge high rates for display advertisements. If we are able to pull large crowds we can also increase our sponsorship and advertisement rates. For new Pujas like us this would allow us to continue with our innovative trend.[35]

Older neighbourhood Pujas such as the Simla Byayam Samiti Puja in north Kolkata still remain locality-based para Pujas, however.

The Simla Byayam Samiti is entirely dependent on its members to collect subscriptions and advertisements for the Puja, but most of their active members are middle-aged or elderly. There is a paucity of younger members who can shoulder the responsibility of organization. This historic Puja, well-known for its association with the nationalist movement, has not departed from its tradition. It has neither adopted the style of theme productions nor opted for corporate sponsorship to sustain their efforts. There are other north and central Kolkata Pujas too that have their traditional brand value and draw viewers without adopting themes or designs.

Theme Pujas, which became a success in the peripheral areas of the city's municipality and thus proliferated, have now become major draws in the city itself. What had been the means to attract the attention of the crowds has now become central to establishing the distinctiveness of the club or para engaged in the Puja. But these Pujas are no longer contained within the locality. Community Pujas, earlier the site of local congregation, conviviality, and socialization, with neighbours engaging in the ritual and social activities of the festival, have now become an arena of display and spectatorship. Take, for instance, the case of the Bosepukur Sitala Mandir Puja.

Thirty years ago, Bosepukur was not a well-connected suburb; it was largely inhabited by the poorer classes of East Bengali refugees. As better roads developed to connect the market hub of south Kolkata, Gariahat, with the newly built Eastern Metropolitan Bypass, the third north–south corridor on the eastern fringe of the city, the Bosepukur area was embourgeoised. While the Puja there (which began in 1949) was over five decades old, it began to attract public attention at the turn of the millennium through the adoption of unusual modes of decoration. In 2001, they constructed their pandal with the small clay pots typically used for serving tea. The next year, they used discarded gramophone records, and the following year, it was bagasse from the pressing of sugar cane that was utilized for the pandal. The conceptualizer for all these three years was artist Bandan Raha. He succeeded in drawing huge crowds to the Bosepukur Puja through the use of unconventional decorative substances. The Puja received many coveted prizes, including the Asian Paints award. The brand value of the Puja skyrocketed and it became a regular destination for visitors coming to south Kolkata.[36] Every year, to date, this Bosepukur Puja continues to draw huge crowds from all over the city, and has become one of the most prominent Pujas in south Kolkata.

Meanwhile, another hugely popular south Kolkata Puja, Ekdalia Evergreen Club's, patronized by the erstwhile mayor of the city, continues to transgress the precincts of the para in the crowds to draw to its precincts. Through its spectacular displays, its audience far outstrips the locality. It attracts viewers from far and wide, including some expatriate residents who return to the locality during the Pujas to participate and partake of the fun and frolic. The large crowds that it draws as well as its powerful patrons ensure for it lucrative corporate sponsorships, which sustain the scale of the Puja. Unlike the Bosepukur Puja, here the involvement of the para residents is minimal, as even the organizing secretary of the club is from another neighbourhood. The initiative rests with the erstwhile mayor's party functionaries and some local assistants.[37]

And so the para is changing in the city. Old residential homes are being dismantled, especially in the southern parts of the city, and new high-rises are being built to accommodate the pressure of population. With the Hooghly river in the west and the marshy land and waterbodies in the east, Kolkata has in recent times developed along an elongated stretch. The post-1980s spurt in high-rise housing complexes has occurred mostly in the east and northeastern peripheries of the city, along the Eastern Metropolitan Bypass and in New Town at Rajarhat. Older residents from the southern wards of the municipality are being displaced into the fringes of the city or its *mofussil*. As the Bengali-speaking middle class vacate the core city areas, the non-Bengali ethnic groups are able to disperse from their ethnic concentrations and create more mixed neighbourhoods. The impact is evident in the Mudiali Club Puja. The construction of high-rise apartments in this south Kolkata locality has changed the complexion of the para but not the spirit of the local Puja. Even with the influx of non-Bengali speakers into the neighbourhood, the spirit of a large 'joint family' is sought to be maintained during the festival. The non-Bengali residents are now as much a part of the celebrations as the older Bengali residents. They work together closely to make the local Puja a success.[38]

Increasingly, neighbourhood Pujas are also looking beyond the para for viewers. Many among the new wave of theme Pujas scarcely depend on their neighbourhood for resources or audience. The way the local community is transgressed emerges from an instance of the Jodhpur Park Puja in 2002. That year, the Jodhpur Park pandal was constructed as a replica of the Dilwara Temple at Mount Abu,

Rajasthan. The stone carvings of the original were recreated in thermocol and plaster of Paris. Word of the exquisite designs had spread rapidly, fuelled by coverage in the electronic and print media. This led to a huge rush of viewers. The onrush was further aggravated because the organizers had ruled that, as at the original temple, the gates of the pandal would be closed at 5 pm. On *ashtami* (the eighth day of Debipaksha), it is the practice for Bengali households to offer *pushpanjali* (floral offerings to the goddess) in their neighbourhood Puja before visiting other pandals. At Jodhpur Park that day, a long queue of visitors had formed. In the crowd were many people from the locality, including children and elderly people, who had come to offer pushpanjali. However, even before they could enter the pandal, a melee ensued and the police on duty commenced a *lathi* (cane) charge to disperse the crowd and restore order. In the process, many elderly local residents who had come to offer pushpanjali lost their places in the queue and some were even assaulted. The complaints of the local residents went unheeded as the spectacular display gained supremacy over the devotion of neighbours. The Puja had become a performative act for the benefit of the wider audience, which enhanced the brand value of the para Puja, conferred awards, and made the para a popular destination during the Puja, transgressing the customary claims of the locals. This happened while an outsider (that is, someone not a resident of the para) was heading the organizing body, the Saradiya Utsab Committee, and had completely commercialized the Puja. The local residents had lost control over their neighbourhood Puja and were on the receiving end. Subsequently the local residents filed a lawsuit against the committee chairman for misappropriation of funds and wrested back control of the Puja. In recent years, the commercialization of the Puja has been toned down to facilitate neighbourhood participation.[39]

Meanwhile, the institution of awards and prizes by a number of corporate houses since the mid-1980s has promoted artistic innovation along with competition. While competition has caused heartburn and disappointments, it has also set high standards of design and artistry in the choreography of the Puja. Attention has shifted from spectacular displays to artistic decoration and curating, providing a boost to homegrown creativity.[40] Elaborate theme-based Pujas have become the normative exhibition ground for universal crowds, but do they fulfil the ritual and social expectations of the neighbourhood? Now a neighbourhood is recognized by the work of particular

artists or designers who have become well known for their innovative conceptualization and design of the Puja. Prize-winning themed Pujas are well publicized in the media and draw large crowds. Large queues and the constant crush of people mark out the significant Pujas for the viewing public, even as the neighbourhood socializing is impaired. The same localities—such as Barisha, Bosepukur, Selimpur, and Kidderpore—have been identified as sites of innovative designs. The swelling audience attracts advertisers and sponsors who help to support such Pujas, transforming Durga Puja today into the city's largest open-air art and sculpture festival.[41] Even as the para becomes the exhibition ground of the global, the proliferation of the theme Puja is a tribute to the city's embedded local artistic talents and local cosmopolitan viewing public.

However, as the para gets transformed into a brand name, the distance between the corporate members and the others increases. As the non-local sponsorships and advertisements become crucial for sustaining the brand image, the para foot soldiers are increasingly subject to the governing imagination of the corporates. While this may have opened out greater spaces of participation and creativity, it has loosened the bonds of the pre-existing community. The para presently is a reconstituted community, surveilled and subject to the new norms of neo-liberal governance.

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