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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

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festivities during the day and night. 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 bourgeoisie 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 previews 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

