

**Changing Character of Religious Festivals: A
Sociological Enquiry with Special Reference to
Durga Puja in Kolkata**

*Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the award of the degree of*

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

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Dedicated to Maa and Baba.....



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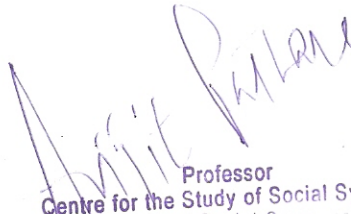
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This is to certify that the Dissertation entitled '*Changing Character of Religious Festivals: A Sociological Enquiry with Special Reference to Durga Puja in Kolkata*' is submitted by Sudipta Garai to the Centre for the Study of Social Systems in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy (M.Phil). This is an original work and has not been submitted in part or full, for the award of any other degree or diploma of this or any other university.

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DECLARATION

Certified that the dissertation entitled '*Changing Character of Religious Festivals: A Sociological Enquiry with Special Reference to Durga Puja in Kolkata*', submitted by me is in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy has not been submitted for the award of this or any other degree in this university or any other University and is my original work.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading 'Sudipta Garai', is written above the printed name.
Sudipta Garai

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Sudipta (24th July, 2012)

INTRODUCTION: CONTEXT AND LOCATION

Religion has been an integral part of the lives of the people from time immemorial. It's difficult to define religion in exact words or definitions. It is generally perceived as the belief in a supernatural power or some divine power which cannot be described through science and rationality, but continues to bind the society together with its ideas and beliefs. Tylor (1958: 8) argued that a minimum definition of religion was "the belief in spiritual beings". It is an attempt by human beings to make sense of their experiences and of the world in which they live in. Clifford Geertz (1973:4) focuses on what religion represents and thus sees religion as a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. The exact definition of religion has always been difficult and thus there are multiple perspectives in understanding the same. In chapter one, through the approaches of the classical and neo-classical thinkers the idea of religion has been tried to be discussed. But if we see religion from a functionalist point of view, it could be said that the traditional roles of religion have been supplanted or overwhelmed by other forms of religious beliefs and system of values in the present scenario. Religion being one of the most important aspects of culture also interacts with other cultural and social spheres of our society. It is reflected on our material culture, human behavior and most importantly in value systems, morals and ethics. It also interacts with family organizations, marriage, economies, science and technology and also enters into the realms of medicine, science and technology. Religion as culture consists of systematic patterns of beliefs, values and behavior practiced by the members of the society. Though the patterns of religion are systematic and their manifestations are regular in occurrence, but still it should not be taken as a "homogenous" category, because in different cultures, it conveys different meanings through different interpretations. There are also various kinds of religious festivities which are associated with the beliefs in the mythological story and the structure of the society. Festivals are symbolically quite significant in grasping the change and conflict of the shifting priorities of the social order. The large crowds, the involvement of the people at various levels, performances of the rituals and the mythological dimensions of the

festivity make the process of festival a complex one. The rituals performed reflect and reinforce the social systems and significant values of the host communities. These rituals stand as the potential arena of changes in the social and cultural grounds. The meanings of the rituals performed and practiced earlier may have changed over time and now also has altered their characteristics and institutions which also lead to total change in the nature of religion. As Yogendra Singh (1995) would say, culture is manifested in the technological, mental, moral, aesthetic and spiritual achievements of mankind. Thus culture enters in the process of change through diverse ways and through various forms and levels. And it thus remains an important qualitative criterion in judging social change. Cultural studies have a new paradigm of study, examining culture through the process of modernization and change which includes how culture is in relationship with the changing technological, economic, political and institutional developments in the society. There has been changes in lifestyle and leisure activities, the patterns of consumption, style of dress, use of materials, modes of transport, and weakening of many traditional habits has taken place throughout India. The intensity of media exposure with the massive entry of mass media and universalisation of communication, political intervention and competitive outlook towards social mobility has added to this process of transformation with the networking of markets of cultural industries such as tourism, intercultural meets and exchanges, institutionalised exchanges, institutionalised exchange of cultural objects, etc contribute in the process of globalization and commodification of culture. Sometimes it may be thought as a threat to the local cultures which may act as imposition in many cases. This mass culture is however supported and backed by the mass based market and commodity oriented power of technology of market capitalism. When the conflicts between the norms of culture and the demands of society increase, the traditional religious order fails in case it is not being able to adapt itself with the growing changes happening in other spheres of life. 'Today the most powerful alternative explanation of the world is science and the most attractive value system has become consumerism. The 'market' has become a vicious circle of ever-increasing production and consumption by pretending to offer a secular salvation'(Loy 1997). The notions of 'secularization', 'sacralization' with the intervention of the capitalist enterprises and corporate culture is quite interesting as well. As T.N Madan (Bhargava, 1998:297) would

project that modernity does not mean a complete break of tradition, but it means expansion of human freedom and open in the range of choices including the present and future lifestyles. The making of new religious pilgrimages, popularizing certain religious practices, religious newspaper, religious T.V channels, growing number of spiritual leaders actually lead us to question the nature of 'secularism' among us. The Marxist belief of religion as an ideology in the superstructure of the system which creates false consciousness among the workers reinforcing their position in the system and thus exploiting, may be said to have changed its nature. Now religion is not just some ideological belief rather has become a lucrative sphere of business for the capitalist forces as well which in a way also dominate the religious consciousness.

Religion, being a part of culture could hardly stay away from the profit motive of the 'culture industry'. The cultural entities for the cultural industry are actually treated as commodities. The expression 'industry' is not to be taken in literal sense. It refers to the standardization of the things and the rationalization of production and distribution processes. The cultural products are defined as the 'nonmaterial' goods directed at a public of consumers, for whom they generally serve an esthetic or expressive, rather than a clearly utilitarian function (Hirsch, 1972:641). The cultural products are located, sponsored, promoted, and retailed, which however lead to a mass production of new culture. The customer in this case is ideally taken as an object rather than a subject. The idea of cultural industry also remains quite relevant while we discuss the mass culture around us. A society which is run by commercial transactions, religion has become just another product of sale in the consumer market place. The competition is not only among different religious faiths rather also among growing leisure activities. There is totally a 'repackaging' of the whole religious culture, where religious products are no less than any commercial commodities. Advertising, sale promotions, publicity are some things which have become also an integral part of our religious activity. While religious practices are very much privatized, religious presentations and promotions has become widely acceptable within different cultures, be it western or in Indian culture. Forms of religion are being advertised and publicized through bill boards and print or television media. There are many new religious channels coming up with different new forms of spirituality programmes and religious solutions. The complex life process of the people

however reinforces the space of religion and their belief system which in many cases also seem as dogmatic. Even in popular culture like movies, songs, videos there are intervention of religious songs, showcasing of religious festivity etc. Through different websites, and pages in the social networking sites religion has grasped our lives quite well even after the idea that science and technology would keep aside the religious values. However, one cannot avoid the fact that the freedom of free choice of religious forms has led to the creation of open market in religion. Along with it the increasing number of mass media, internet and television channels has also increased the propaganda of religion as well because increase in media in a way also means increase in religious media. Through internet it is easier to reach the religious sites, and there are even numerous choices which remain just a click away. Religion is no longer performed in accordance to time and space, rather it is practiced in any time of the day and night, even through media without visiting to the traditionally accepted sacred places physically. Religion is now presented in a total new form. It's also interesting to note that there are some daily soaps which is based on the themes of religious affairs. The religious institutions now have to compete with the professional marketing strategies. People are free to choose whatever one wishes to believe rather than being confined to a single religious institution. Now there are more choices than our needs. For a single product there are countless brands. Consumerism is something that one cannot really avoid in the present scenario. 'Within this environment of being able to select your religion, or religions, combined with unfettered access to information, religion must present itself as a valuable commodity, an activity that is worthwhile in an era of overcrowded schedules. To do this, religion needs to be packaged and promoted. It needs to be new and relevant. It needs to break through the clutter, and for that to happen, it needs to establish a brand identity' (Einstein, 2008:12). Branding of religion is also quite related in this discussion of marketization and privatization of religion. Brands create new identities, and branding faiths remains important as religion is a consumer product now. Though packaged differently, they are the same products and there is no difference in buying religion and a piece of cloth from brand A or B. The competition seems unending because with each passing day new forms of different commodities are being created, where religion is obviously not supposed to be left behind. In this same book Einstein (2008) would also

note that Peter Berger suggested during the starting of 1960's that religious choice is like a supermarket. It is like a 'consumer item' that can be purchased in a place where we have multiple options and can choose any one from the many optionals. (Einstein, 2008:25)

The market in many instances has proved to be the world's new religion which binds all parts of the globe with certain worldview and set of values, that is, certain belief system and value system. 'Capital had ceased to be a servant and had become a master. Assuming a separate and independent vitality it claimed the right of a predominant partner to dictate economic organization in accordance with its own exacting requirements' (Tawney, 1926:86). Though the profit motive now seems extremely rational and universal, the anthropologists showed that it was not so traditional to traditional societies. Most of the pre-modern societies hardly had any distinction between the economic and the social sphere where the economic roles are subsumed into the social relationships of society. In capitalist societies, instead of economy being embedded in social relations, social relations are now embedded in the economic systems. (Polanyi 1957). The unrestrained market however generates a whole lot of greed and delusion, mostly when seen from a religious perspective. The 'greed' to gain and maximize profit and the reproduction of the endless 'desire' to consume, which consequently also lead to delusion. Thus here lies an interesting relation between religion and market. The nature of religion however was never supposed to be 'profit-maximizing' and consumption as per the market rules. But in present scenario religion enters into the field of commercialization and commodification of not only gods but also belief systems, festivities and other aspects of the same. Hereby comes my interest to deal with this particular topic "*Changing Character of Religious Festivals: A Sociological enquiry with special reference to Durga Puja in Kolkata*", to study how the phenomenon of market and consumption has also grasped the different spheres of our cultural system. The objectives of my study is to trace the historical and mythological rootedness of Durga puja which is the most important annual festivity among the Bengali Hindus, to understand how the forces of capitalistic market, free choice and profitization has impacted on the religion and religious life of the people, and to access the interplay

between the changing structures of the puja festival through the changes in social structures and social relations. Though this topic has been dealt by many academicians, the relevance of this study remains in the process of tracing and documentation of the transformation of this festivity with changes in the social structures and social phenomenon.

Before entering into the main discourse, it will be wise to introduce Goddess Durga in relationship to Bengal. Bengali Hindu belief system could be traced from the puranic mythological literature. Durga has emerged as the most common and enduring popular image among the Bengalees. The most popular tellings of the Durga tales originate from *Devimahatmaya* of the *Markendeyapuarana*, which has been talked about in details in the second chapter. This is beleieved to have been composed in the Bengali region less than a millennium ago. Bhavani Prasada Kara of Mymensingh first made Durga a Bengali goddess with his mid- 16th Century translation. Divinity has always been double sided: wrathful and benign, destructive and nurturing, remote and majestic yet intimate and loving. These polarities dominate the Bengali apprehension of divinity and its work in the world, not just in Durga's domain, but in every sectarian perspective (Jacobson, 2009: 25-26). Being a Bengali, the celebration of Durga Puja has always brought us enjoyment, happiness, celebration and festivity. Since childhood we would always wait eagerly for this puja. Studies would take a backseat as schools remained closed during the puja days in West Bengal. It was the time for new clothes, visits of relatives and our visit to our 'maternal' home. There, we have the '*thakur-dalan*' where puja is being performed and all the family members come together at this point of time, making this a great event. It is held in a village, where the tasks of the pujas are still being performed according to the caste roles making it look like a perfect *jajmani* system. The ritual performances are highly rigid and depend on the order of the head family Brahmin. It portrays a picture very different from that of the big pujas of Kolkata. This difference imbued in me an interest towards the topic though not as a student of Sociology but as an active participant in the both the kinds of the celebration. While in Kolkata, I always used to go out with my friends or family for pandal hopping which was quite an alienating process for me as I couldnot relate myself with the whole celebration. Moreover the long queues and huge crowd would always make me feel tired as a child

though excitement would keep me awake throughout the night to watch the wellknown 'puja' pandals from north to south Kolkata. Later on, when Sociology trained me to see things from different perspectives, this puja became an interest for me to pursue. The huge banners before the pujas, (be it of advertisements, of cloths, foods, television-shows or pandals), the newspapers, the news-channels, television programme, puja magazines, Cds during this festivity and moreover the competition for the best puja, best pandal, best lights etc. made me realize that this festivity is obviously not only religious in nature rather has many more aspects to deal with. Thus, I chose to look on this topic of marketization of religion in general with special reference to the process of corporatization, commercialization and commodification of Durga Puja in Kolkata. The question of 'value' will definitely come at this juncture where I have clearly mentioned my personal involvement with both the kinds of pujas and moreover the "bengali" identity could hardly differentiate its interplay with the most important religious-cultural festival of the place. But I have tried to keep away my own values as much as possible while working on this paper, and have also done a small fieldwork relating to my topic to understand the phenomenon more closely with a critical eye. Till date I had visited the pujas as a layman but this time, I was more of a researcher trying to look at the common and simple things which usually appears to be mundane in such a social setting from a sociological perspective. I have used the method of observation, content of different newspaper articles, TV programmes, hoardings and different puja magazines to carry out the study. Though M.Phil study is majorly a secondary research work, the field-work adds a different dimension in it. I have visited ten pujas that extend from south to north Kolkata where I interacted with the committee members of the sarbojonin pujas, as well as people who came to visit the pandals and also some of the stall-owners in and around the pandal premises. However, due to the limitation of time and the busy schedule of the members involved in the Puja preparations, it was difficult to carry out the study only in a month's time. Yet this is a modest attempt in understanding this grand phenomenon from a sociological perspective. Structured interview schedule was being used, though many other discussions came up in the contextual conversation. Otherwise, Secondary materials from different books, articles, journals, magazines and pictures are being used as review of literature to facilitate the following discussion. Vernacular sources have been of great

help like magazines, especially the '*saradiya sankhas*'¹, newspapers and literatures related to the puja. Observation was the main method of the study where I, as a researcher walked through different pandals in order to grasp the feel of the whole festivity scrutinizing the theme, concept, presentation, etc. I took photographs to add to the descriptive details of the whole scenario. However, the use of photographs is not new in the study of sociology. Visual methods have been used as a common tool in ethnographic description quite often. It also helps to track the processes of development and change in the social process. When we talk about visual sociology, we not only refer to photographs, rather also point to portraits, tourist pictures, family-albums, posters, tattoos and many other forms of art which can be used in various ways in the study of society. It's a good resource of studying contemporary qualitative sociology which has gained its importance with increasing number of electronic aid, visual gadgets, etc.

Durga puja was never an only religious festival among the Bengalees of Bengal. It has always been related with the other social, cultural, economic and political conditions of the state. But the nature of the puja stands at an interesting position in the present scenario where the questions of changing 'spaces' of performance from rural gentry to the premise of the houses of '*babus*' to the '*baroari*' pujas to '*sarbojonin*' competitive trend has been an interesting field of study for journalists, authors, sociologists and people from different other professional backgrounds as well. The focus here is to look at the process from a sociological perspective. I have started the first chapter with a theoretical discussion on religion and commodification of religion in the age of market and commerce. The theories of the classical thinkers Marx, Weber and Durkheim on religion are being studied in reference to the modernity. The debate of secularization and also counter secularization comes in fore-front when we discuss modernity and religious processes in the present scenario. When we talk of commodification and commercialization the domains of market, free choices and the act of consumption can no way be avoided. Thus I have tried to discuss the changing scenario of the social processes of religion through the intervention of globalization, neo-liberalism, new middle-class as

¹ Puja editions of the magazines concerned.

the upcoming consumerist section and media spectacle as the new emerging forces of development.

The second chapter mostly talks about the mythological stories related to the Goddess Durga in *Skanda Purana*, *Vamana Puranas*, *Markendeya Purana*. Sudhir Kakar's interpretation on the mythological explanation of the goddess in "Intimate Relations" through Hindu myths, folk lore, folk beliefs, proverbs, symptoms and ritual of the goddess remains quite interesting to study in reference to these discussions. The second part of this chapter centres on the ritualistic practices of this puja. And ultimately this chapter ends with the discussion on the origin and evolution of Durga Puja in West Bengal and specifically in Kolkata. This festivity talks a lot about the culture, society and political scenario of its time which is evident from the way the idol was made keeping in mind the image of 'Bharat-mata' in the pre-independent era, later in times of famine and also in other social occasion. In the present context, the forces of modernity, market, capitalist enterprises has changed the nature of Durga Puja but has the same influence on other cultural and religious practices in India as well. The challenge of hegemonic homogenization thrown up by globalization—the local, regional and national cultures have responded by motivated articulation or reinvention of their respective identities. This is evident from the trend of assertive celebrations of religious festivals, regional fairs and ceremonial festivals, be it Durga Puja in West Bengal or Ganesh Utsava in Maharashtra or Guru Parva Processions in Punjab (Sharma:1990). Such celebrations serve as measures of identity re-affirmation by local and regional cultures. In organizing such celebrations, the local cultural groups enthusiastically use all the new means and resources of globalization to reiterate their respective cultural identity. The third chapter deals with the detailed discussion on marketization of Durga puja in present day scenario focusing on this religious affair from different sociological lenses.

Religion has become highly privatized, in individualistic level and as well as capitalistic interventions, with the freedom to choose religious faiths. The switching of faith and the combination of faith has become quite a common process and interestingly there has also been a rise of new forms of spirituality that has given a new 'art of living'. As religion becomes optional, when it is chosen by an individual it becomes a personal

construction. The religious system now seems more new and improved in nature. The influence of market on religion reforms its nature as well. I hope the following study adds up to the existing literature on the study of religion in the age of market and capitalism and potray a picture of the process of commercialization and corporatization of Durga Puja in Kolkata.

Chapter- I

RETHINKING SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION IN THE AGE OF MARKET/ COMMERCE

When we start engaging with the classical sociological theories, the dominant idea that comes to the fore-front is that, 'religion' was in the centre of human social life in primitive or early days of human existence, which was thought to either wither away or diminish its importance when we proceed towards the "positivist" stage of social existence as marked by Comte. But contrary to this presumption, religion has proved its presence everywhere with more dominance and significance. Thus the domain of religion in sociology and anthropology remains quite vibrantly alive and socially significant. The so-called expected rationality of science and irrationality of religion and the existence of both in our life calls for debate in every sphere of religious existence, beliefs and traditions. Secularization was informed by the understanding that when societies become modern, the significance of religion and religious institutions would decline. Religious explanations of events would give way to scientific and rational explanations. However, in reality, religion is very much present in our society, though in a very changed and adaptable form. The importance of religion is not diminishing at all because people are still subject to their apocalyptic fears and thus hold religion as a resort to peace and comfort. The process of globalization also enhances the popularity of religion exposing more knowledge about different beliefs and practices and thus individuals also find greater choices regarding what they shall believe and do not remain constraint to certain ideological beliefs only. It provides space to 'mix or match' certain religious beliefs and ideas according to one's own will and choice. On the other hand, it can also make people believe strongly and follow certain traditional beliefs which may even lead to fundamentalism at times. When the sole belief was that with modernity religion will decline; with the growth of individualism, modernity itself transformed all religions and the questions of boundaries are being redefined and remodeled. Religion holds the potential to wage wars and also form the base for peace and tolerance. Religion now is not only centered around scriptures, rituals, practices and beliefs, rather has broadened its sphere through the interference of 'spirituality' into its domain. Meera Nanda (2009)

rightly points out that the process of globalization is making the whole world more religious and more political. There has been an explosion of religion all over. Thus, the dynamicity of religion in the present world attracts more and more scholars to study the same from different perspectives and angles of social life.

Quite interestingly, the emergence of sociology can also be traced from the religious controversy during French revolution in 1789, where reason and rationality with all its force acted upon religion to displace it. The supreme authority of the orthodox Church and the ‘king’ was being questioned with logical and ‘enlightened’ thoughts which commanded the intellectuals during the 17th and 18th centuries. The rational and scientific temper started to critically assess all aspects of social life which brought about certain changes in the earlier prevailing uncritical social thought. The industrial revolution during the 1830s brought about tremendous changes in all aspects of human life, from family to social to economic, political and religious sphere. At this juncture, the classical thinkers started analyzing human social lives and social structure when the society was changing from the feudal to industrial forms of economic structures and was passing through a disruptive stage. Marx accounted the stages of social development using his idea of historical and dialectical materialism, and discussed at length on capitalism, alienation etc. Durkheim, being a functionalist, tries to understand the primitive life and modern-industrial life through mechanical and organic solidarity which he discusses in his study on the division of labour (1893). However his work on “*The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*” (1912) is also worth mentioning. Weber seemed more interested to find “meaning” through social actions and thus related Protestant ethics with the spirit of Capitalism. Apart from this, his work on ‘*Economy and Society*’, (1978) the idea of ‘ideal types’ are also quite interesting to note. However, these three most important classical theorists were engaged with the question of religion in the changing scenario of social reality--the modernization brought about by Enlightenment thoughts, French revolution and Industrial revolution. To locate religious questions in the present context of 21st Century, it is relevant to take into account the classical theories.

Religion from the Classical Perspective

Religion is one such social institution which has been present throughout human existence in different forms or nature. From primitive society to agrarian, industrial and also in this age of globalization it has been present in one form or the other. It is interesting to note that in spite of all secular developments and modernization, the notions of 'sacred' still make their presence felt in our lives. Durkheim (1912) commented that so long as there are men who live together, there will be common faith. Belief in god is only one way of many other belief systems. He uses the term religion in a very broad sense. Religion everywhere involves the sensation of being in relationship to 'an infinitely more intense and vast consciousness' than that possessed by the individual. The transcendence is also described as something sacred which we feel more or less confusedly outside and above us. These forces dominate us, and they are regarded as something superhuman and at the same time they bind us to objects which are outside of our temporal life. Thus, the very soul of the religious response is the sentiment of respect for a force superior to the individual for a power in some way transcendent. The collective spirit is only a compound of which individual spirits are the elements. However, it is also interesting to note that the form of religious unity changes with the changes in structural system of the society.

In "*The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*", (Durkheim 1912) just like a physicist studying his elements of research, Durkheim also tries to start from the study of the elements of religious life of the people in order to get a bigger view of the same. This book is based upon close scrutiny of what Durkheim calls the simplest and most primitive religion known today. According to him, 'totemism' is the most primitive kind of religious practice, which had no personalized spirits or gods. It is integrally connected with the clan system of the organization. The name of the totemic clan denotes the identity of the group which is supposed to have certain special properties of its own. The sacred character of the totem is manifest in the ritual observances which separate it from ordinary objects which may be used to utilitarian ends. Various prescriptions and prohibitions are attached to this totemic emblem, which is nothing but the representation of the totem through certain objects. Every man bears a name of his totem, which

signifies that he shares in the religiosity of the totem itself, and it is believed that there are genealogical connections between the individual and his totem. Totemism thus has three most important objects as sacred ie, the totem, the totemic emblem, and the members of the clan themselves. All objects are thus classified in a given clan or phratry and are regarded as sharing qualities in common, and such objects are believed by the members of the clan to be affiliated to themselves – men call them their friends and think that they are made out of the same flesh as themselves. The idea of ‘totem’ is still relevant in the present scenario which is reflected through the ‘flag’ which is actually a modern version of the totem. It represents a group of people and is held on high and honor. It is no less sacred than a so called ‘totem’.

Durkheim from his functionalist perspective has referred to religion as a factor which contributed to social solidarity in pre-literate societies and social integration in more complex ones. However, the idea of religion came into being primarily with the sense of mystery and the idea of supernatural. Religion, in his views, upholds a consensual and integrative framework of the society. The secular and technological developments donot eliminate the need for religion but obviously does change the nature of performance of the religious rituals. The presence of religious ritual and practices gives a tremendous solace to people, which is not always possible for wealth or privilege to offer to us. Most importantly what Durkheim emphasized while talking about religion is its ‘collective conscience’- the effervescence that is created with the presence of a collectivity of a community. It is more than just a ritual or a practice, an essence which cannot be just captured in calling it as ‘worship’. It signifies something much more than the idea of Gods or Spirits, and consequently cannot be defined exclusively in relation to them; rather it is a collective morality, which diminishes in the modern society which has different collective agglomeration rather than only religion (1912:50). His ideas and articulated explanations on religion are mostly found in his book “*The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*”, where it is clearly mentioned that any society, simple or complex have distinctive spaces of “sacred” and “profane”. By sacred “one must not understand simply those personal beings which are called Gods or Spirits; a rock, a tree, a spring, a pebble, a piece of wood, a house, in a word, anything can be sacred” (1912:52). The sphere of sacred objects cannot be determined once for all. It varies indefinitely

according to different religions. There is a hierarchy between sacred and profane where sacred is considered superior in dignity and power to profane things. Sacred is set apart and deemed forbidden. Profane is something that is found commonplace, that which is not sacred. In this sense the everyday and mundane aspects are profane. Beliefs are the representations which express the nature of sacred things and the relation which they sustain, either with each other or with profane things (1912:56). Rules of rites are also needed that include code of prescribed rules which should be maintained in the presence of these sacred objects. A moral community is needed which can make the people feel united. “A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them”. (1912:62) “Religious force is nothing other than the collective and anonymous force of the clan.” (1912:253) The collective effervescence remains the centrality of Durkheim’s religious ideas. It is in the midst of these effervescent social environments and out of this effervescence itself that the religious idea seems to be born (1912:250). Talcott Parsons, another noted functionalist thinker views society as evolving in two main dimensions—space and time. In this process, religion also starts emerging. It develops, takes shape, perform functions and finally emerges into a realm of its own in which a set of beliefs and values transcend the society. The gods become less constant, the sacred becomes less eventful, history more teleological and the cosmos providential. Parsons while talking about “sacred” does not necessarily distinguish from the secular or the everyday life. The sacred thus was quite accessible for the individuals (Robertson 1982).

Karl Marx, was however totally against this kind of an interpretation of religion. For him, religion is one of the most important ideologies of the society which may be defined as a set of beliefs, ideas, conceptions and attitudes that function to conceal class distinctions by making existing social relations appear legitimate primarily in industrial society. In such a social reality, ‘commodities’ are not recognized as human imagination rather is referred merely as an object of exchange with money. Commodities thus in this situation of developed capitalism surpass the power of the human beings who conceived them and thus leads to ‘commodity-fetishism’. In this situation religion becomes a soothing space for the individuals to find solace amidst a tiresome existence even if through false consciousness. Marx looked on religion as a consequence of a basic evil of

the society in which man has not yet found himself or has already lost himself again. Religion is the symptom of the basic discrepancy present in the social scenario. Any direct struggle against religion therefore seemed basically useless to Marx because religion simply cannot be abolished as long as the world is not put straight where the real enemy is the perverted social order. Religion is only the 'spiritual aroma' of the perverted social system. God doesn't exist and all religion is simply non-sense to him. Man believes that he has no perfection of his own and that is why he invents religion in order to compensate for and to sublimate his real wretchedness.

The well-known definition of religion given by Marx states that 'religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people' (Marx, 1957:41). He points out that the abolition of religion as an illusory happiness of the people is the only way to reach their real happiness. It creates a false consciousness in the mind of the people as a form of escapism, as misguided attempt to ease an uneasy life. Religion is a symptom of a disease than a disease itself. Religion as an ideology distorts and masks the socio-economic reality of the world. The abolition of religion as an illusory happiness is needed in order to realize the real happiness. 'The criticism of religion ends with the teaching that man is the highest essence for man, hence with the categorical imperative to overthrow all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, abandoned, despicable essence...' (Marx, 1957:50). It is also to be noted that morals, religion, metaphysics and other forms of ideology and the forms of consciousness are all dependent on the base of the social structure because these things don't have development other than man who is continuously striving for material production and development of the same. '...the religious world is but the reflex of the real world' (1957:134). Marx, basically views religion from a conflictual perspective and unlike Durkheim talks about abolition of religion for the real happiness of the masses. According to Marx, the secular world has to be changed in order to cease producing this pathological secretion of religious beliefs. Different social structure generates different religions. All religion however is nothing but the fantastic reflection of the exterior powers which dominate man's everyday life. Marx and Engels both believe that religion will disappear sooner or later because religion

is only a fantastic reflection of those powers of nature and society which man do not understand and thus unable to master and hence religion will disappear with the progress of science.

Engels drafts in *Anti-Duhring* that, 'to primitive man, the forces of nature were something alien, mysterious, superior. At a definite stage through which all civilizations pass he assimilates such forces by personifying them. This inclination to personify produced gods everywhere-- and the 'consensus gentium' which is used to prove god's existence proves nothing more than the universality of this inclination and thus also of religion, as a necessary, but transitory stage of civilization. It is not till the forces of nature are really understood that the gods and god are expelled from their positions one by one. At present, this development has reached a point which permits one to say that it is virtually completed' (Lobkowitz 1964).

Man now exist in a state of economic alienation where religion is actually providing him nothing but illusory happiness and ideological fallacy which hopefully will be replaced by the "real" happiness. The state will also wither away with religion in future. The state will die losing its legitimate functions, whereas religion will wither away by losing its entire illegitimate functions. Religions to Marx, hardly have any real meaning in its existence, rather is just a mere reflection of one's false consciousness and perverted social structure of domination. Max Weber's idea on religion is very different from that of Marx, because he wishes to find meaning out of the religious practices of people.

Parsons credits Max Weber for his idea on "this worldly asceticism" as a disciplined and a rational approach to be achieved in everyday life and in the larger society with the implementation of values derived from the religious tradition. Weber gives us a socio-historical perspective with subjective explanation/ meanings of practices/ existence. He was one of the important classical sociologists who talks about religious roots in market Capitalism. Weber with his friends Ernst Troeltsch and Werner Sombart, actually created the discipline of the sociology of religion. He also coined the term 'Religionssoziologie' for the social analysis approach to Christian and non-Christian religion. Weber's rich empirical studies of the world's great historical religions were

controlled by his focal interest in the religious influences upon modern capitalism and religious influences upon the evolution of occidental rationalism. In the *Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber “raised a set of theoretical problems in the field of human social action of the very first order of importance. The central problem was whether men’s conceptions of the cosmic universe, including those of Divinity and men’s religious interests within such a conceptual framework could influence or shape their concrete actions and social relationships particularly in the very mundane field of economic action” (Weber, 1922:xxi). Weber also studies religion from an evolutionary perspective like Durkheim. He notes that there was no known human society without something which in the modern scenario is known as religion. Religion is as much a human universal as language or an incest taboo. He also believes that rationalization (intellectual clarification, specification and systematization of ideas) is the master conception through which cultures define their religious situation and through which the sociology of religion must understand such cultural definition of the situation. When Weber talks about the Brahmanic intellectualism in India, he make an important generalization saying that the religious intellectualism of “elite” groups become a dynamic force working in the direction of the immanent conception of divine order, pantheism which even seeks salvation through mystical, contemplative channels. The need for breaking with the established order, the need for ‘salvation’ in the individual case, arises for these groups from ‘inner’ tensions rather than the pressures of the external social situation.

Weber not only locates origins of capitalism in ‘this worldly asceticism’ but notes how it depends on religiosity also in its psychological structures. He looks at the role of religion in moulding social and historical aspects. In his study of the Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, he emphasized on the internalization of Protestant norms such as hardwork, simple living, and commitment towards religious goal with the belief in ‘calling’ as the basic stimulation for the capitalist growth. Hardwork and enterprise were supposed to be helping in earning ‘the grace of god’. Weber also developed his views doing a comparative study on religions like Catholic Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Confucianism and Taoism. He gives the impression that eastern religions were

'other-worldly' in the sense that they lacked a commitment to the world, whereas Protestant affirmed the reality of this world enhancing the development of society through capitalism. The non-western societies like India, China and other Islamic countries, inspite of high cultural attainments lack the instrumental rationality due to which capitalism did not grow in these societies. Hinduism has been a kind of Indian Catholicism. Through Weber's discussion, it is also interesting to note that the everyday mundane life could become potentially sacred as the sacred religion life could become mundane in nature where God can be attained through impersonal, rational and purposeful organization of everyday life. Thus the idea of 'secularism' also comes in this context of religious life. Weber identified three types of relations between secular and ecclesiastical power: hierocratic, where secular power is dominant but cloaked in a religious legitimacy; theocratic, where ecclesiastical authority is pre-eminent over secular power and caesaro-papist where secular power holds sway over religion itself (Weber, 1978:1159-1160). The term secularization was used by Weber in 1930s, when the methods of rational calculation come to dominate virtually the entirety of modern life. He referred to this as 'the spirit of capitalism'. The flip side of rationalization, as Weber termed, is '*entzauberung*' which is usually translated as 'disenchantment'. Disenchantment didnot simply mean that people didnot believe in the old mysteries of religion, but rather that the concept of mystery or the 'mysterious' itself was devalued. Mystery was seen as something to be conquered by human reason and technological development. Weber gave the name secularization to this double-sided rationalization-disenchantment process in religion. Secularization was both the process and the result of the process. Weber however considers that secularization should be a specific domain of sociology of religion. The appeal of divine authority as provider of sure knowledge for social action would lose its credibility in relation to the past. The religious point of view will be treated as one among many competing claims to authority. In such a social order, priests, rabbis, mullahs would be less sought for solving world problems than economists, physicists and political scientists, while psychologists, social workers and medical doctors would be regarded as the societally recognized experts at the individual or micro-social level (Swatos 1999).

Religion from the Post-Classical Perspective

In the context of secularization, Berger (1990:11) notes that secularization may lead to 'an immense shrinkage in the scope of the sacred in reality.' It is an idea that is derived from Max Weber's notion on 'disenchantment' and the way in which Protestantism eliminated 'mystery, miracle, and magic' from the Western Culture and from the psychology of the individual. Religion somehow loses control over the sacred. As religion becomes increasingly secularized, the sacred may take new forms and vitality in a wide range of social contexts as well, outside the scope of religion itself. The religion becomes part of a society rather than the overarching 'sacred canopy'—the sacred thrives outside the auspices of the traditional religion. Berger (1999) says that a shift in the institutional location of religion, rather than secularization, would be more accurate description of the European situation. The sacred takes the life of a different nature. He argues that the transcendentalization of God and the concomitant 'disenchantment' of the world opened up a 'space' for the history as the arena of both divine and human actions. (Berger 1990). The secularity of modern world thus transcends the arena of religion and its activities. According to him, by secularization, we mean the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols. When we speak of culture and symbols, we imply that secularization is more than a social-structural process which affects the totality of cultural life and ideation and may be observed in the decline of religious contents in the arts, in philosophy, in literature and the rise of science as an autonomous discipline which would give a thorough secular outlook of the world (Berger, 1990: 107). With the secularization in society and culture, there is also secularization of consciousness. According to Thomas Luckman, it is inadequate to view secularization only in terms of the decline of religious institutions. He talks about privatization of religion that reflects that it has become more and more the affair of individuals or voluntary associations and less and less a matter of overarching institutional authority. Religion is necessarily not to be viewed only in terms of institutional structures rather individual's engagement with religion is also highly significant. Thus he mentions the term "bricolage" to refer to the idea of client cult. Religion may be perceived by an individual with a view of fulfillment of certain

requirements. And also the religious institutions enter into interactions with other social institutions which are necessarily secular. This kind of idea is seen as an individualized or small social network religion by Peter Beyer. The other forms of religious presence in a global society are collective cultural type religion where cultural dimensions of the society are not much differentiated from religious ones. Organized religion is more of an institutionalized religious practice with certain rules and regulations to be observed particularly and the other is politicized which involves enforced power of the state in order to practice the religious affairs. There has been a new packaging in the old religious customs and practices.

Bryan Wilson in *'Religion in Secular Society'* (1966), notes that secularization is a process where religious institutions, actions and consciousness lose their social significance. This Oxford University Sociologist defines the concept as,--“in essence, it relates to a process of transfer of property, power, activities and both manifest and latent functions from institutions with a supernaturalistic frame of reference to often new institutions operating according to empirical, rational, pragmatic criteria. As a result, religion has lost its prevailing importance over the other institutions. Habermas argues that modernization had resulted in an independent sphere of secular knowledge and the limitation of religion in different spheres. The life-world is threatened by reification due to the overwhelming power by the non-communicative media of money and power. Religion is bound to lose its relevance in modern, differentiated society where “the authority of holy is gradually replaced by the authority of achieved consensus.” (Habermas 1981). Bourdieu's discussions on religion is found mostly in *'Outline of a Theory of Practice'* (1977), where he seems to view religion in the same direction as the classical thinkers like Marx and Weber. He viewed religion as a strategy of the dominant class to sustain their power and prestige. Urbanization and division of labour led to the constitution of a relatively autonomous 'religious field' characterized by the structures of relations among different categories of laypersons and religious agents such as prophets or priests. Secularization thus is more than a social structural process including the totality of cultural life. Secularization refers to a process of religious change rather than a complete decline of religious notions and ideologies. It doesnot sweep everything sacred

rather undergo certain changes of sacred beliefs, rituals, etc. This is the point when “sacralization” comes into relation with secularization. Sacralization is a process through which the secular become sacred or other new forms of the sacred emerge, whether in matters of personal faith, institutional practice or political power. As secularization marks a decline of the sacred, so does sacralization denote an increase in the sacred in one form or another and at one level or other. The rise of religious marketplace shows both the evidence of secularization and sacralization. For Berger, such a marketplace involved an increase in competition that was staged in increasingly secular terms and reflected the crumbling of religion’s prior structural monopolies and cultural hegemonies. Now the believers are more like consumers who are given a lot of options to choose from. Secularization also happens through cultural innovations and transmissions that become hegemonic in new locales, and in process serves to displace old practices, rituals and beliefs whether formally or informally sacred. This also refers to religious rationality that resonates with the modernization and secularization tradition. After the discussion of these views on secularization, it could be said that the commodification of religion is also a result of the secularization process to some extent, though obviously it must not be misunderstood as the process of secularization. Secularization describes both the declining relevance of religion in society as well as how religion itself becomes more secular. To accommodate in the changing cultural forms, the organized religions had no other way but to change its nature in the fear of being marginalized by the growing religious forms. It’s a both way process which includes the becoming of sacred to more secular and the secular more sacred. The spaces of sacred and secular have started to blur interfering in each other’s sphere.

Secularization refers to a process of religious change rather than a complete decline of religious notions and ideologies. Rodney Stark (1999) in his writing “*Secularization RIP*” argued that the space of “sacred” is being changing rather than fading away. The importance of church may have gone down in numbers but the emergence of new sects and cults cannot be avoided. Secularization marks a decline of the sacred, so does but it also denotes an increase in the sacred in one form or another and at one level or the other. However, Jose Casanova points out that in order to understand

secularization we must distinguish three different connotations - the decline of religious beliefs and practices, privatization of religion and differentiation of the secular spheres. These three connotations must be analyzed independent to each other in order to make the patterns of secularization more evident according to the social conditions. He would say that a proper rethinking of secularization would require a more critical understanding of the diverse patterns of differentiation and fusion of the religious and the secular and their mutual constitution across all world religions. The contextualization of the religiosity of places seems important to him while talking about multiple forms of secularization and multiple modernities. The process of secularization thus cannot be generalized; rather it has to be contextualized. As T.N Madan would say while referring to India, that there is no church to wall off, but only the notion of neutrality or equidistance between the state and the religious identity of the people (Bhargava 1998). But it is being seen, as Ashis Nandy (Bhargava 1998) would project, that in India, with the modernity, religious violence is also increasing whereas traditionally there were life with tolerance and compassion.

Most sociologists looking at the phenomenon of secularization have shared the view that secularization is the direct result to modernization. This interpretation was eloquently expressed in Weber's phrase of 'the disenchantment of the world'. It is seen as the time when religion diminishes its importance both in society and in the consciousness of individuals (Berger 2001). But what we see in reality in our society is the rise of different modes of spirituality, religious forms and unfortunately the most threatening is the idea of fundamentalism. However, Berger contradicts the idea that modernization and secularization are cognate phenomena. Counter secularization is as important a phenomenon in the contemporary world as secularization. He argues that many contemporary religious trends appear to oppose secularization and is being reversed by resurgence in religion. Religion creates new kind of political, nationalistic and cultural meanings in the globalized world. Religion under the impact of secularization can also be called a "dependent variable"² (1990:128). Vineeta Sinha (2010) in her book *"Religion and Commodification : 'Merchandizing' Diasporic Hinduism"*, presents religion as a

² Dependent variable in relation to the independent market forces.

spiritual enterprise that has been enveloped into a material and materialistic world. She carries this assumption that religion is a 'sui-generis' phenomenon and the idea that consumption leads to debasement of religion cannot be sustained. Secularization and religious re-enchantment may be intertwined processes and also a dynamic space for socio-cultural change. Religion in modern scenario of India is both a product of modernity and also a process in producing modernity. The meanings of religious identities, practices and rituals become significantly intelligible when read in relation to the parts of political agenda of the state. However, when the "market" is being treated as God, it automatically makes us think that the religiosity must have altered in relation to it. But it would be wrong to assume that religiosity or religions are declining thoroughly; rather they are rising up in different forms and structures which are quite new and interestingly relevant in the present scenario.

Market, Free Choices and Religion as Commodity

Technological growth and capitalism had brought about a phenomenal change throughout the globe which also marked the advent of modernization. It has not only influenced all the aspects of our life, be it economic, social, cultural or political but also brought about a change in human consciousness, fundamentally uprooting beliefs, values and emotional texture of our lives. Though modernization gives us a secular orientation and an intense hope of emancipation from exploitation and domination, it remains quiet unsuccessful in fulfilling our dreams. 'At a deeper level, we see the violence in the growing technologization of the life-world. We see the objectification of human spirit. It is actually the celebration of the victory of the world capitalist system—a system which only breeds competition, reduces everything into the rationale of the market which consequently leads to economic inequality. Market forces are becoming overwhelmingly powerful in all aspects of our life and modernity is often seen as the 'market capitalism' in the contemporary post Nehruvian era in Indian scenario' (Pathak 1998). Marion Levy has defined modernization as 'the ratio of inanimate to animate sources of power'. (Berger 1977). Berger interestingly points out 'abstraction' as one of the most relevant dilemmas of modernity which is rooted in the underlying institutional processes on which modernity rests—the Capitalist market, the bureaucratized state, the technologized

economy, the large city with heterogeneous agglomeration of people and the media of mass communications. Arjun Appadurai, (1997) talks about the global interaction in terms of tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization. Cultural homogenization is being done primarily through the powerful mass media where the external globalizational forces tend to indigenize the local cultural elements. It thus creates a scenario when “one man’s imagined community is another man’s political prison” (Appadurai,1997: 32). He gives five factors while discussing the framework of the global cultural flows which are *ethnoscapes*, *mediascapes*, *technoscapes*, *financescapes* and *ideoscapes*. “Scape” indicate that these are not objectively given relations that look the same from every angle of vision, rather are deeply perspectival constructs situating on the contexts and situations of the concerned. The role of the media through cinema, television and video technology has transformed the social imagination of the people to a great extent. The market of different societies appropriates the materials of modernity differently. Karl Polanyi in his “*The Great Transformation*”(1944) notes that its only in the past two centuries that market has been cut loose from the social and ethical restraints and is allowed to become the culturally determinative institution that it is today. That actually shows that with the capitalistic intervention and also neo-liberal economic policies the nature of market changed thoroughly from its traditional terms. Not only commodities but even sacred elements are transformed into saleable products. The whole organization of the society is now being controlled by the rules of the market. Instead of the economy being embedded in social-relations, it is the other way round where the social relations are being embedded in economic system. The invention of ‘money’ however transformed the whole societal relations and organizational patterns. Every product now becomes a commercial commodity which calls for profits in capitalistic terms. Every creation thus is reduced to a commodity and human beings internalize this cultural ethos and look at the world, nature, each other and even at themselves in terms of monetary exchanges. Habermas’s view on colonialization of the life world is also very interesting and relevant in this discussion. In the model of systems of life world, Habermas gives an account of the ‘social pathologies’ of modern, particularly advanced capitalistic societies. Indeed, the central intention of Habermas’s “*Theorie des Kommunikativen Handelns*” is to use this

system or the life world model of society to reformulate the theory of reification. The theory of reification, on Habermas's analysis becomes a theory of the 'colonization' of the communicatively structured life world by the economic and administrative system: reification "conceived as progressive monetization and bureaucratization of the societies". In modern contemporary capitalist societies there are three sub-systems, (i.e. economic, the administrative, and life world) which fulfils the functional requirements of the society. The 'life world' is theoretically reinterpreted as the sub system that engages 'processes of cultural reproduction, social integration and socialization'. Economy and administration are steered by the media for money and power. In this context we can relate with his view that the economic aspects become the most important dominating force on our lives through money, power and capitalism. This in a way affects our cultural tradition and renews them in modern economic terms (Sitton 1998). The capitalistic mass production through mass-communicative media, in turn, produces new needs with each passing day creating a consumerist culture in order to have a secure 'market' for its existence.

Consumption for leisure and lifestyle was only restricted to a few groups within the dominant class until the advent of mass consumption. In the present era, people from all strata take part in it and those who do not take part are simply excluded as non-consumers. Z. Bauman (1998) notes that a 'normal life' in a consumer society is the life of consumerism which involves making choices among all displayed opportunities. A "happy life" is then defined as one that can consume as many opportunities as possible. The poor in a consumerist society is not necessarily the one who does not have shelter but is the one who has no access to normal life as well as to a so called 'happy life'. Consumer culture is the outcome of the massive expansion of the production of capitalist commodity. This outburst of the capitalist system has created a vast reservoir of consumer goods and sites for purchase and consumption to be 'enjoyed' by the various classes of our society. It cannot be denied that leisure has been commercialized. Consumer culture means much more than simple consumption. The items consumed takes on different meanings and symbolic value other than just the material value. A kind of "material sovereignty" is being created by capitalist powers that encourage their consumers to be more and more addicted to the product. Thus it becomes symbolically

mediated and the consumer culture has certain preferences when situated according to certain social and geographical locations. It no longer remains a communal form of play but converts to a commercial form of entertainment. Baudrillard viewed pleasure as being constrained and institutionalized. It is no longer a wish or a desire to have fun; it is almost a citizen's duty to actively take part in consumer culture. The masses are being socialized into a force of consumption who then learn to live by the pleasures offered by the culture. In this perspective, there is an increase from production society to consumer society depending on the capacity of ideological manipulation by a type of corporate capitalism. Hassan (1999) claims that the culture within late capitalism has produced a culture which is bounded and predetermined by the immediate needs of the culture industries. By continuously rearranging, repackaging, reviving and reinventing culture, the culture industry produces an effect of 'difference', 'innovation' and 'creativity'. However, the appearance of actual innovation is really illusory and created by technological advances.

The growing Capitalist markets, one of the main forces of modernization, have also changed the nature of religiosity among people, where large number of people define and practice their religiosity in non-traditional individualized and institutionally loose ways. Hervieu-Leger used Claude Levi Strauss' term "bicolage" to describe this form of religiosity—where people put together a religion of their own like children tinkering with a lego-set, picking and choosing from the available religious 'materials' (Berger 2001). There arises a dynamics of pluralism, where many aspects other than religion comes into play and produces a new reality. The new forces of globalization with the ever expanding technologies of mass communication are creating 'an ethos of consumerism' which seeks to deny all cultural memories and reduces the richness of life into images of mass consumption. This depthlessness is denying all that is sublime and spiritual about our cultural tradition. Religion in this kind of situation loses its monopolistic control and leads to pluralism. In a typically market situation, religions are bought and sold as privatized commodity which actually questions the Durkheimian way of looking at religion in terms of social solidarity and coherence. In this chapter I would focus on how in a typical market situation, with free capitalistic interventions, the religious phenomena have changed the nature of its religiosity and practice with intense commodification and commercialization of the whole process. The religious festivities and rituals have also

been captured by this process of consumption and commercialization. This 'industrialization' of festivities even turns religiosity of people into an opportunity for 'conspicuous consumption', that is the competitive display of capacity to spend money on inessentials. Religion in these present times of postmodernism is definitely a part of consumer culture. Our world is now characterized by transformations in traditional habits and customs. In this culture, religion, science, philosophy and popular culture are all mixed together. The age old function of religion to provide ultimate certainty amid the exigencies of the human condition has been severely shaken by modernity. The nature of beliefs and practices has also changed to a great level. Modernity is getting into tradition. With the initiation of modernity, the spirit of domesticity that used to shine on the festive scene has gradually shaded into commercial arena. The traditional ethos has succumbed to the paradigm of global modernity. What is meant by religion today is no longer what it once was. Religion is metamorphosing into new, renewed and different forms at various levels (Lyon 2000). Though more and more people claim to have no religious affiliation, but they are not necessarily atheists. They believe without belonging and see themselves as more spiritual than religious. Sociologists suggest that 'spirituality' might have replaced 'religion', as this term seems more adequate to the current religious quest in consumer culture.

Dipankar Gupta in *'Mistaken Modernity'* (2000) points out that during the period of post modernity, there is a decline in the strength of tradition and an increase in the extent to which individuals select their own idiosyncratic versions of available religious traditions. This may in a way result to 'de-traditionalization', which has not only involved the de-coupling of religious beliefs from religious institutions but has also allowed the secular market to move into the space and exercise greater control over the form, content and dissemination of religious beliefs and practices. 'De-traditionalization' with market interventions consequently leads to the process of Commodification—religious practices and beliefs assume the character of commercial products with a monetary value and through the buying and selling of these items, new social bonds are created. This new age religious consumerism represents the reconstruction of religious identities to facilitate the formation of these new forms of social bonds. Although the

profit motive was never been absent from religion, the context of late modernity in which freedom of choice is celebrated, allows 'it' to flourish more being of different nature.

The secularization theorists view that 'commodifying the sacred', doesnot lead to a critical decline in religiosity. Rather it characterizes variable ways in which the relationship between religion and market are configured. Commodifying processes are highly inventive and specifically embedded in the local-global trajectories of the market economy and post-modern religious explosions. This Commodification is defined to turn religion into marketable goods, bringing them into various scales and modes of market transactions. The Commodification processes makes consumer religion, in which, the sacred is able to sustain itself outside of organized religion, within consumer culture. The market is becoming the first truly world religion, binding all corners of the global more and more tightly into a world view and set of values. When culture is seen as objective, it confronts man as assemblage of objects in the real world existing outside his own consciousness. The most profound problem with consumerism is not the consumption of consumer goods, but the ways in which it trains us to treat everything, including religion, as an object of consumerism.

In the book '*Consuming Religion*', (2003) Vincent J. Miller demonstrates how consumer capitalism has been able to commodify religious rituals, symbols and figures and developed a market for consumer seeking spirituality. This text extensively discusses the transformation of social relationship created by consumer capitalism. Consumer culture not only challenges the integrity of religious traditions and communities by promoting a parallel and often conflicting set of values, but it also redefines how people relate to values, beliefs, culture, and, ultimately, to religion. The rise of capitalism also enhances the development of consumer religion. As capitalism became the dominant logic system for social relations, religious beliefs, practices, and symbols first became commodities, and then later signs and abstract signifiers that modern consumers use to signal to others seemingly vital elements of their identity and status, but which have no actual ties to the religious practices, community, and its demands for social justice. In effect, the hegemony of commodification trains people to relate to all culture as cultural products; that is, commodities, which may be bought and sold on the free market.

Consumers choose their religion, enjoy it, and once it has served its purpose—usually to achieve self-fulfillment—they discard it. The commodification of religion also plays an important role in turning religious leaders into celebrities and their lives into spectacle. In some period of time they become cultural icons who could rally diverse populations to identify with their particular “brand” of religion, or at least what is perceived to be associated with that brand. The popular religious figures could pack stadiums, sway audiences with the simplest of gestures, and sell millions of books, video tapes, CDs, and magazines to boot. Miller recognizes that religions are never static social forms, but instead complex institutions that have both influenced and been influenced by larger socio-cultural phenomena. In consumer culture, though, misrepresentations actually add to the marketability of religion. In fact, dominant institutions in consumer society, specifically the commodity producers, actively encourage the misrepresentation. Commodified consumer religion discourages democratic participation by loosening people’s attachment to community and by encouraging passivity.

Religious commodifications are complex historical and cultural constructions. They are produced in specific cultural contexts, and thus, require an understanding of cultural framework in order to unlock their symbolic and socio-economic significance. Commodifying processes are highly inventive and specifically embedded in the local global trajectories of the market economy and postmodern religious explosions. Religious Commodification donot necessarily lead to religious malaise or produce new religious forms and movements that oppose the institutionalized beliefs and practices of religious organizations. Although all societies in Asia have experienced considerable socio-economic and cultural change in the modern period, the conspicuous convergences between religion and the market economy have not produced identically patterned impacts everywhere in the region. Diffusing religion via a commodity market, commanding media coverage, as well as redefining ritual procedures has affirmed the prosperity of the religious spaces in the everyday lives of Asian people. Religious Commodification was only in their embryonic state during 1960s-70s. Tensions of market economy and modern life-styles were not as immense as in contemporary decades. Commodification helps to redefine religions as market commodities as well as

exchange in the spiritual market place. It is further expanded by the transnational connections of religious organizations and market networks (Kitiarsa 2008).

India : Religion and Market

Before I start discussing the interplay of religion with the forces of modernity, globalization and social structures in India, a look towards the Indic civilization and religion would be important at this juncture just to get an overview of the Hindu religious order in India.

Understanding Hindu Religion:

The term 'religion' may be interpreted in very many ways and more when it is concerned with 'Hindus'. For them it is the whole way of life of people and thus no clear-cut distinctions have been made between beliefs and practices which are specifically religious. They have been more concerned with the questions of ultimate reality and people's relationship with it and other expressions of life-- social, economic, political, aesthetic and others. The term "Hinduism" is more of a name for the whole cultural tradition of the Hindus than for beliefs which are narrowly religious. This religion has grown out of a way of life and crystallized over a long period of history through the collective search of many men, never having been introduced into society by anyone in particular at any particular time. It is also interesting to note that this religion did not have a name of its own until it was done by the non-Hindu observers. In the Hindu literature, people refer to their religious tradition as '*sanatana dharma*' or eternal religion which was not really meant to be the name of any religion. 'Hindu' is thus a culture which is more than religion and it is perfectly possible for someone who belongs to this culture to discard all religious beliefs associated with it to call himself a Hindu. However, many Hindu writers have claimed that the Upanisads and Vedas are the sources from which the way of life of the Hindus, their beliefs and practices have been derived. The Upanishads talk about Brahman and its identity with Atman, but nowhere it has been mentioned that this understanding has come to the sages from some source other than

their experience. This experience of the identity of Atman with Brahman may not be ordinary experience, as it is also believed that man's self (atman) must reveal itself, and cannot be grasped by man's ordinary intelligence. 'Advaita Vedanta' (non-dualistic vedanta) as interpreted by Sankara talks about the doctrine that Brahman is all in all. It is that mysterious cosmic power which emanates from everything associated with the cult. 'Brahman' came to be the term of all-inclusive connotation which signifies the supreme reality. Religion has been sometimes defined as the realization of the divinity already in man. The goal of all is to strive to chasten the mind and to achieve an indissoluble union with Brahman. Brahman is only real and there is no material world but that what appears to us as phenomenal world is "maya" or illusion. If one could transcend the shackles of 'karma', 'maya' and 'samsara' and strive to attain 'moksha', only then the 'jivatma' of a person widens up being liberated to a illuminated self (atman). The four ends of life as Upanishad would suggest were 'dharma' (morality or righteousness), 'artha' (material gain), 'kama' (pleasure), and 'moksha' (freedom or liberation). These goals of life cannot be simultaneously achieved, as life was thought of as a journey divided up in ashramas or stages in which different goals can be achieved. Thus 'brahmacharya' was the time when one was expected to learn 'dharma' and prepare oneself for the life ahead with the strong understanding of morality. It was the time of chaste scholarship and 'upanaya'. 'Grhastha' was the professional life where 'artha' and 'kama' was supposed to be the main tasks. It was the time to fulfil the socio-religious duties of an individual and fulfilment of sexual desires. The next stage was 'vanaprastha', which was the period of forest dwelling with maintenance of the domestic fire. The final stage of man's life 'Sanyasa' was supposed to be free from all external greed and material comfort--- the period of renunciation in order to attain 'moksha'. The divine is beyond name and form and to cross the bondages of life remains the ultimate desires of one's life. The eternal self, 'atman' or 'paratatman', is the pure consciousness of man and this consciousness is caught in the 'jivatman' that is the psychological self which makes man consciously aware of his individuality. Thus 'atman' and 'jivatma' remains different because 'jivatma' is a temporal manifestation of the lower (apara) nature of Brahman and is subject to eventual destruction.

Among the seekers of religious reality, the Hindu tradition generally makes a distinction between the man of knowledge – ‘*jnana*’ and the man of devotion – “*bhakti*”. The man of knowledge seeks the undifferentiated and unchanging Supreme Reality as it is in itself, beyond all attributes -- ‘the Nirguna Brahman’, while the man of devotion seeks god, a personal being endowed with all attributes in their perfection ‘*saguna brahman*’. There always remain a contradiction between these two, the man of knowledge is inclined to believe that it is he who knows the truth in its purity whereas the man of devotion believes that the god being the source of everything must be possessed of infinite attributes and absolute perfection. However these two figures are “ideal types” and even a votary of knowledge such as Samkara claimed that the conception of ‘*ishvara*’ or God belonged to a lower plane of understanding indulged in devotion to gods such as Siva, Krishna and Devi or the goddess (Bowes 1978). The followers of Shiva are *Shaivites*, *Vaishnavites* are the followers of Vishnu and the worshippers of Shakti are *Shakta*.

The idea of mother Goddess in Hindu tradition has its origin in the non-aryan strand of the culture. There are however mention of ‘*devi-sukta*’ in Rig Veda X.125 as the energy (shakti) which moves the gods and the world. As for the Upanishads, a particular name of the goddess as ‘Uma’ occurs in the *Kena*, where she appears to reveal to the puzzled gods the real source of their power, Brahman. In the *Mundaka* three names of goddess, Kali, Karali and Dhumavati are mentioned among the seven flaming tongues of Agni (fire-god). The name *Durga* appears in the Taittiriya Aranyaka. All male divinities in the Hindu pantheon, at least of the puranic age, are endowed with a wife who is called the God’s Shakti (energy). As the father is powerless to bring forth life on his own and it is the mother’s activity to nurture the child, not only in the womb but afterwards too, thus it has been shown that the God is powerless without Shakti in the discharge of his divine functions. So it is through God’s Shakti, the female principle that divine activity in the world is manifested, ‘*prurusha*’-the male principle of divinity is being transcended.

The history of modern Hinduism could be marked from the 19th century which is known for the Hindu Renaissance when some of the thinkers sought to translate and also

reinterpret Hinduism in order to challenge certain ideas propagated by the then British rulers. Raja Rammohan Roy (1772-1833), Dayananda Saraswati (1824-83), Keshab Chandra Sen (1838-84), Vivekananda (1863-1902), Aurobindo (1872-1950) are some of the mentionable names who tried to portray Hinduism as a *sanatana dharma*. However, most of the thinkers focused on the Vedantic literatures as a source of their study. These explanations were mostly given as a counter argument when Hinduism was called an “orthodox” religion by the Westerners. Hinduism now is becoming a post-modern religion which is using its inherent flexibility to take on new guises and perform new roles for ever-choosier people. Under the conditions of secularization, open markets and cultural colonialization, contemporary Hinduism is developing in new surprising ways (Markham 2001). Responding to the pressures both internal and external, it is adapting in new forms with new ways maintaining some links with the historical values. Having said this, now we will discuss about how religion changes its nature when posed with certain societal, cultural and economic alterations in the society.

Religion and Market:

The forces of modernity, globalization of the Indian economy in both global and local levels with free market have dramatically influenced the lives of Indians to a very great extent economically as well as culturally. The expansion of the middle class is said to have occurred as a result of this process. Since, the mid 1980's, India has pursued a policy of economic liberalization, which was a dramatic reversal of earlier policies of protecting domestic industrial capital (Panini 1995). However, the hasty liberalization of the external economic relations has heavily damaged the domestic industry. It was quite obvious that the manufacturing sector which for decades developed in a closed economy wouldn't stand in competition to the West. A liberalized economy necessarily restricts the ability of the state to raise resources. Marx while discussing ‘commodity fetishism’ says that a person inhabiting or entering a capitalist economy may come to perceive the fruits of their labour, which in the capitalist mode of exchange Marx refers to as “commodities”, as the source of economic value rather than a mere product of the human imagination. Commodities, then, can come to possess a seeming vitality and power surpassing that of the human beings who conceived them, even assuming, in some ways,

the status of divinity—‘commodity fetishism’. A capitalist economy is the interrelationship between the commodity and the people. From the religious perspective, market capitalism has two main problems; i.e. greed and delusion. On the one hand the unrestrained ‘market’ emphasis greed, mainly in two ways, firstly the greed to earn profit by selling the items to the people and the greed or insatiable desire to consume even more. New needs are being created and thus the growing rates of markets. There then lies very small distinction between genuine needs and manufactured needs.

Tim Scrase (2006) in his article “The ‘New’ Middle Class in India : A Re-assessment” mentions that the middle classes of India are the main beneficiaries of the neo-liberal reforms of the Indian economy which was instigated in the early 1990s. Neo-liberalism is part and parcel of a broader hegemonic project of remaking the Indian economy, polity and society. It goes hand in hand with major cultural changes, especially in relation to consumption, mass-media, telecommunications and the like. The Non- elite sectors of our society also welcome the reign of free market though they are not directly profited by the unregulated capitalism. The middle class looks at neo- liberalism to ensure access to the material markers of class status. The rising popularity of the Multinational and Transnational Companies ensures that the process of consumption is glorified and celebrates the possibilities of entrepreneurship. It however celebrates the “purchasing power” of an individual where consumption has been intertwined with global markets and thus the market automatically is accepted without any coercive acts. Meera Nanda would say that the emerging neo-liberal economic policies have swelled ranks and bank balances of the middle class in different global service industries. However, it needs to be pointed out that in case of India, it is misleading to consider the consumerist class as ‘middle classes’ as they don’t represent the statistical middle of the total population. The middle class is generally said to be “pro” free market and privatization of different sectors of social life. Another cultural trait that she notes in Indian middle class is that, these class in spite of calling themselves modern and free from superstitious blind beliefs, the scientific correctness of this class turns out to be exact opposite of what the advocates of rationalism has in mind. Rather than having a critical thinking, this class shows a great inclination for pseudo scientism being taught by neo-

hindu philosophers, modern gurus and modern spiritual leaders. Andre Beteille (2007) would also point to the middle class as the leading group in the liberal democracies which is why they are also called the “bourgeois”. The number of the middle class during the independence era was quite small which later on increased with the expansion of private sectors of jobs. Thus “consumption” becomes an important characteristic of this emerging middle classes of India.

“Flexibility” has always been an important factor in the neo-liberal agenda which necessarily involves fluid movements and restructuring of labour, capital, and information. The process of globalization in the local and regional levels has influenced the economic, social and cultural structure of India in a great way. The expansion of middle-class is said to have occurred as a consequence of this process. Globalization however instigates the expansion of a neo-liberal market economy since market liberalization and trade liberalization have been the corner-stones of the globalising process in India (Ganguly Scrase 2003). With the policy of economic liberalization since mid 1980s, India has dramatically reversed the earlier policies of protecting domestic industrial capital. Globalization is helping capitalism to become hyper-capitalism that is more global, more entrenched, more exploitative and more unjust than ever before. Aided by globalization, our life has come to acquire capitalistic logic in more and more ways. It has been possible by restricting the nation states from carrying out their prime role as promoters of social welfare to enablers of markets. Thus the process of liberalization has also affected the domestic industry to a great extent as it calls for borderless economy, where the prime concern is to facilitate smooth running of the markets. The emerging global markets function without moral guideposts and restraints, becoming the most powerful institution of our age. The idea of “market” is becoming more and more relevant with our daily ways of life as ‘natural’ things happen. Global market culture to a great extent uproots traditional forms of work, family and community. It also undermines traditional belief systems and moral norms. The changes of this kind are often regarded as prerequisite to the development of a genuinely market-oriented culture. The power of wealth could actually be felt in all spheres of life, be it religious life, political, social and so on and so forth. The overwhelming power however makes the market seem as the

God. God was traditionally seen as omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient which has now been replaced by the power of free capitalistic markets. In the present scenario the market god actually shows all these divine characteristics though it is always not so blatantly evident.

Markets have always been present from the early stages of human history. But in the previous times markets were no 'gods' because there were other centers of value and other 'gods'. Markets generally used to function under certain norms and restrictions which guided it. However, every creation is now reduced to a commodity and human beings internalize this cultural ethos and look at the world, nature, each other and themselves also in terms of monetary exchanges. Money and income becomes the determinants of worth. It is quiet relevant that in this kind of market god dominated situation everything will be for sale and nothing will be sacred. The sacred is no more the sacred. Rather the profane merge with the sacred and share more or less the same space. The Gods were supposed to be the one who knows the heart of all His creations and from whom none of the secrets would be hidden. Similarly, the market God also wishes to see the "deepest secrets and darkest desires of our hearts" (Cox, 2002:130). Reaching to the hearts and desires of the people, it then starts to create certain needs relating to the human wants and offers commodity in order to satisfy the needs or desires. Through this principle, this god of market could actually reach and extent to all spheres of human life. Questioning the presence of this omniscience market would lead to certain uncomfortable reactions, thus the consumer consume things and commodities using 'sovereign consumer choice'. 'It is no longer God but the Market that -- by definition—knows all and knows best' (Cox, 2002:130-31). Market, has now come to exist in all spheres of our life which at one point of time was not the space to which market economies could be applied. One such space is obviously religion including marriage, child rearing, family life and all the so called personal life affairs. But now when everything in this world has started to be commercialized and most importantly commodified, we can say that market lies within us rather than outside. '...the inward, or spiritual, dimension of life was resistant to market values. But as the markets for material goods become increasingly glutted, such previously nonmarketable phenomena as adventure, serenity, personal

growth, and spirituality are appearing in the catalogs. Since buyers already have all the wardrobe, automotive, and audiovisual gear they can absorb, the externally creative Market offers personal growth, exotic experiences in unspoiled regions, ecstasy, and ‘spirituality’—now available in a convenient generic form’ (Cox, 2002:131). It is also quiet interesting to notice that the market power doesn’t really want much of difference but a homogenized and uniform world-culture which would help them to apply the market laws in all the situations in a similar way. Religion being a significant variable of culture is hence commodified in the dominant market-driven logic. It is the age of market imperialism and thus the dominance of market captures all spheres of our life. ‘In religious festivals we witness what can be seen in the market place: the power of money, the miracle of technology and the ethos of popular mass culture’ (Pathak 1998). Money with its tremendous power enters into the field of religious space and the festivity related to it are however reduced to mere consumption which is presented to us in packaged form of different kinds in the form of popular culture. The inherent worth of things and persons disappears as their sale value defines them. Money and income becomes the worth and the market becomes the actual God. With consumption becoming the worshipping of that God eventually (Cox 2002:128).

Yogendra Singh (2000), while discussing globalization and culture, would note that various communities in India have their own local and regional cultural markers depending on their myths, legends, rituals, practices and other factors. The nature of their culture also tends to change according to the techno-economic level of development of communities. Money and market are the overarching factors through which all other major elements gain momentum in a globalized world. The traditional fairs, festivals are increasingly being commercialized and the market is encroaching into the cultural domains with great speed. On the one hand, the scope of commercialization of culture happens but on the other, there remains a threat to the local culture. The rise of the middle class however has provided impetus in this process. With the consumption of food and things, the rituals and festivals are also presented with a new package, where the festivity of a specific ‘local’ move to the other parts of the state and globe as well.

Communication media are also used to expand the scope of covering these local cultures to a global extent.

P.Kitiarsa (2008) proposes that religious commodifications constituted crucial dimensions in contemporary Asia's religio-cultural forms. They have produced prosperity faiths that draw their support from conventionalized popular worship and piety, manifested through an intensive commercialization of symbolic or religious goods and services that are arguably not by nature commercial. In the quest of newer pastures, commercial houses have swooped down on an apparently alien area. With relation to the commercialization of religious cultural variables, the culture of sponsorships certainly becomes a significant area of discussion when we talk about the commodification of religion. In the modern times we are all welcomed in the wonderful world of corporate sponsorships. There remains an important role of the corporations in creation, promotion, and distribution of culture. Events, institutions, are all sponsored in present days. Corporate sponsorships are the most recent chapter in the long story of culture's relationship to power. Sponsoring has become a given, embedded in the socio-cultural fabric, and an integral part of our modern day culture. The nature of market economics always try to attempt the market principles in all the areas or spheres of our life which are not by nature commercial like personal spheres of courtship, marital relation, courtship, religiosity etc. Market no more lies around us rather remains inside us. Once the logic of the market is enthroned as omniscient, it demands our devotion in all realms of our life. It was thought previously that inward or spiritual dimensions of life were used to be free from such market principles but now certainly that is not the case. The powerful market really has not defined its limits. It however prefers individuality and mobility because then the profit could be maximized by infringing into personal affairs of life creating new needs with passing time. In the eyes of market, all places and all persons are interchangeable. Parodies of local custom are preserved to lend a pseudo authentic flavor to the places that have been transformed into commodities in the global market. It somehow leads to modernist disenchantment as well.

In an age of globalising media and markets, it turned out that there are emergences of new domains of 'public culture' (Appadurai 1995). The world after

globalization has made 'culture' as an issue everywhere. There has been a birth of a new generalized 'culturalism'. Culture has become a questionable and debatable term for everyone. The forces of globalization are changing both the conceptual and political framework of what actually is culture. Appadurai commented that the cultural problem in today's global interactions is the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization (Appadurai 1997). Neo-imperialist culture, pale and sickly despite its world-conquering thrust, was vampirically dependent on extracting the life blood—first the labour and raw materials, later the symbolic content—of thriving local communities. Thus 'authentic' culture was attenuated and depleted, alienated from its organic connection to the timeless authority of tradition, remaining only as vulnerable, deracinated husk in need of nurturance and protection. By the 1980s, scholars were roundly and rightly deconstructing the cultural imperialism model on several counts, its overemphasis on macro-level determinants of social change, its tendency to conflate economic power with social and cultural effects, its assumption of a passive and helpless audience, and its fetishization of endangered 'authentic' cultures.

Consumption is clearly a key site in debates over globalization with apparently limitless reach of brands. Appadurai argues that as rapidly as forces from various metropolises are brought into new societies, they tend to become indigenized in one way or the other. There is always an intense, continuous, comprehensive interplay between the indigenous and imported. No society can however claim to provide the 'authentic' source of meaning for any particular commodity or cultural form. Globalization requires companies to adopt a variety of localizing strategies in order to succeed commercially. An important role is being played by the media and advertising in order to eroticize commodities. This even leads to commodity enslavement that is created by too much dependence on consumer products. Miller notices that mass consumption was heralded as the dominant context through which people relate to the world of goods. It then produces 'objectification' which is a process of externalization and self alienation (Miller 1998). The sphere of religion however, couldnot restrain itself from this cultural transformation of global markets thus affecting the local livelihoods. Religious life which was supposed to be aloof from the commodification and commercialization also got greatly influenced

by the market forces, mostly because religion cannot stand independent to human social relations. The change of social and market consumption also changed the nature of religiosity and spirituality of the human beings. Gods or more specifically religious festivities are highly commercialized according to the popular culture of the local scenario and public demands.

In this backdrop stands this study, “Changing Character of Religious Festivals: with special enquiry to Durga Puja in Kolkata”. This religious festival is called as ‘*sharodotsab*’ by the Bengalees because it is much more than just a religious festivity for these people. It is the celebration of the autumn, the nature and the Goddess. Like all other religious celebrations, it has also conveniently altered itself in very many ways to accommodate itself in the changing scenario. This annual festivity is now an awaited celebration of not only the people but also the capitalistic and corporate firms who wait for this time of the year to maximize their profits. The Bengali community too has become a prey to the consumer culture. The ‘puja’ is a huge event and a phenomenon now not only in Kolkata but in other places as well where it is celebrated with great pomp and show. However, in my following chapters I would like to take a look at the changing nature of Durga Puja in Kolkata which in a way would serve as a specific case study of this whole discussion on the changing nature of religion with the changing forces- modernization, neo-liberal globalization and changing patterns of consumptions of specially the aspiring and emerging middle class in India. But before the vivid description of the commercialization and commodification of Durga Puja in Kolkata, I would like to discuss the mythological stories associated with Devi Durga and then trace the history of the puja and how it evolved through time and space till the modern version of the celebration.

Chapter- II

DURGA PUJA : AN UNDERSTANDING OF MYTHOLOGY, BELIEFS AND RITUALS

Myths consist of language and appear in the form of narrative with a plot. It has a style and beauty having a history and cross-cultural distribution. A myth can be a character of selective features of social reality, which should not lead to any conclusion that myth is an integrative force. But as Malinowski in his writing "*Myth in Primitive Psychology*" (1954) would say that myths are highly symbolic fulfilling an indispensable function in the primitive times. It expresses, enhances and also codifies belief. It codifies and safeguards morality and also enhances the practice of ritual practices. It is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic character of primitive faith and moral wisdom. Levi Strauss (1963) would say that the purpose of mythology is a form of outlet for repressed feelings. Myths depend on a belief system with certain cultural meanings imbibed in it. Robertson Smith (1956) describes myths as verbal explanations of ritual forming no essential part of religion. According to him, myths and rituals are dependent on each other because there are some dogmatic beliefs that make it believe in the mythologies and thus to the rituals. However, rituals are more directly instrumental than myths. It is generally performed with an idea to fulfill a desire. Both myths and rituals find its meaning through human action and human language. Hereby we would look at the detailed discussion on the myths and rituals related to Devi Durga.

Mythological understanding of Goddess Durga

Durga is the epitome of Shakti who represents the dynamic energy and creative principle of existence of feminine power which is considered not only as creative but also as continuously productive. But the irony lies in the fact that in our daily lives we hardly see this emancipation of women power in our society. Shakti however embodies the universal principle that enters, pervades and animates the creative and destructive processes of nature. Her mount in a tiger shows enormous power. According to the mythological stories she appears in different forms and is known by various names. In the incarnations of Uma and Parvati, she acted as an ordinary woman as the wife of Shiva.

But as Durga, she is the most powerful warrior who appeared on earth under many names for the destruction of demons who were obnoxious to both gods and men. Durga is worshipped twice a year, once in autumn and another during spring-- both are the periods of rejuvenation. It is also called 'navaratri'—new light for acquisition and preservation of power. The festival of Dussera which is predominantly enjoyed in the north and west of India is also a celebration of the victory of good over evil. Durga is one whose blessings come after ashtanga yoga sadhana and karma upasana—*dukhena ashtanga yoga karma upasana rupena kleshena gamyate prapyate ya sa durga*.

There are many names and different meanings attached to the term 'Shakti'. In the Vedas, Shastras, Upanishadas and Puranas, Shakti is called Devi, Parashakti, Ishwari, Moolpakriti, Nirguna Brahma and Sagun Brahman. She is omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient and omnivorous. However, Shakti lies everywhere and in everyone but with the inner difference in quality and intensity. Shakti or energy is inseparable from a being or object. It remains in every part and in every emotion in a very subtle form. The Eternal Religion or the Sanatan Dharma claims that the entire cosmos and the universe is the creation of Brahman through Adi Shakti which is Shiva Shakti/ Brahmamiya Shakti/ Vaishnavi Shakti or Ishwariya Shakti which is one Purush and Prakriti—the unity of Shiva and Shakti. However, the association of Siva and Devi rightly exhibits the duality and unity of the male-female (linga-yoni) principle in the world. Because of her association with Siva, the Devi comes to participate both in his fearsome and destructive and in his gracious and beneficial aspects when she is elevated to the rank of the supreme divinity on her own. Hereby, she transcends from the mere image of Sakti or the power of God to a Divine Power which is conceived as the Universal Mother which also focus on the love relationship between the mother and the child with the symbol of man's relation to the divine reality. As the wife of Siva, Shakti or Devi shows two faces, being Uma and Parvati, she is beautiful, gracious, gentle and devoted wife whereas Kali and Durga represents the image of destroyer of evil. Here comes the ambiguity of images of creation and destruction. She cannot be identified with mere destructiveness, which is only a part of the divine functions; rather she should be seen as the creator, destructor and also preserver. Devi is power, and although this power is conceived as feminine, it also signifies a fight between good and evil, life and death than only restricted to the heath –

showing itself in all its splendour and effectiveness (Bowes 1978:256). Some Hindu scriptures as *Devi Bhagavata Purana* (one of the important works in Shaktism, containing 12 chapters and 18000 verses by Veda Vyasa), *Saundaryalahari*³ supposedly written by Samkaracharya, the advaitist, and some Tantras, elevate Devi above Brahman, Vishnu and even Siva who is supposed to be her husband, and they are supposed to owe their existence and their function to her. She is even identified with 'Paramabrahman' (that is the unmanifest beyond the manifest) of the Upanishads. The *saundaryalahari* also suggests that she is both masculine (soul) and feminine (nature) and as the neuter 'Brahman' which is actually beyond masculinity and femininity. Devi thus becomes the absolute non-dual principle of the universe (Bowes 1978:257-58).

Throughout India, she is worshipped under various appellations and in different forms but generally alone. She is Amba or Ambika in Kashmir and the Deccan region, Hingala or Rudrani in Gujrat, Kalyani in Karnataka, Uma in Mithila, Bhavani in Rajasthan, Kanyakumari, Katyayani in Vrindavan, Haripriya in Hardwar, Bheemadevi in Himachal, Vaishnodevi in Jammu, Vindhyabashini in Vindhyachal, Vimala in Puri, Kamakhya in Kamrup, Jaidurga in Baidyanath and many more. The identity of Durga as mother or wife is typical to the eastern part of India, where other gods and goddesses have become part of her family. However, the identity of Durga as mother has not received much highlight. This image of the Goddess along with the other gods and goddesses constituting a family is however unique to the north of the Bay of Bengal.

In the *Skanda Purana*⁴ the illustration explains how Durga slew an asura named Durga, and thereafter being called so which is the feminine form of the demon's name. Karttikeya when asked by Agastya, the sage, about why his mother was called Durga, he replies, "a giant named Durga, the son of Ruru, having performed penance in favour of Brahma, obtained his blessing, and grew so mighty that he conquered the three worlds

³ 'Saundaryalahari' is a Sanskrit word meaning 'waves of beauty' containing the instruction of puja and offerings. It is a tantra-book having two parts, first 41 verses as 'ananda lahari' describing the mystical experience of the union of Shakti and Shiva and the other half is called 'saundarya lahari'

⁴Skanda Purana or the Kartika Purana is the largest among the eighteen "mahapuranas" containing the most number of verses. It is the thirteen purana which consists of doctrines and worship of Siva, as well as legends about Siva and his son Skanda.

Puranas are the 'tales of old' or 'ancient' which adheres to the idea that they are the sourcebooks of Hindu Mythology.

and dethroned Indra and other Gods. He compelled the wives of the *rsis* to sing his praise, and sent the gods from heaven to dwell in the forest, and by a mere nod summoned them to reverence him. He abolished religious ceremonies; brahmanas through fear of him gave up the reading of the Vedas; rivers changed their course; fire lost its energy, and the terrified stars retired from sight. He assumed the shape of the clouds, and gave rain whenever he pleased; the earth, through fear, yielded an abundant harvest, and the trees flowered and gave fruit out of the proper season” (Wilkins, 2003: 296-97).

The gods being in a disgraceful and distress situation, appeal to Shiva to save them from the situation. Shiva, on listening to their condition desired Parvati to go and destroy this giant. She, accepting this commission willingly, calmed the fear of the gods sending Kalaratri (a dark night) to order the demon to make things as they were. The *asura*, in full of fury sent his soldiers to lay hold of Kalaratri; but by the breath of her mouth they all turned into ashes. But at the sight of the giant, Kalaratri fled to Parvati followed by the demon Durga with 100,000,000 chariots, 120,000,000,000 elephants, 10,000,000 swift-footed horses, and innumerable soldiers to the Vindhya Mountain. As soon as he came near Parvati, she assumed 1000 arms and produced a number of weapons from her body. Durga took forms of giant like elephant, buffalo to fight with the goddess. But ultimately was defeated being pierced in the chest with an arrow, whereupon blood oozed out from his mouth in streams and he died. This made the other gods regain their former splendor.

There is another mythological story which accounts another origin of the Goddess Durga in the *Chandi*, a part of the *Markendeya Purana*. Mahisasur, the king of giants once overcame the Gods and dethroned them from their positions. He defeated the Gods repeatedly because he was blessed by Brahma that a man would not kill him. He even threatened to destroy the universe and gods. These gods then prayed to Brahma and then Shiva but could render no assistance, and finally went to Lord Vishnu. Vishnu, who was similarly, bothered about the wickedness of the *asura*, issued streams of glory from his face from whence came a female power called *Mahamaya*. The other gods were also commanded to put forth their energies or streams of glory which gave her immense

power. The gods then handed their weapons to this dreadful being and she proceeded to slay the monster with a frightful scream and gave redress to the Gods.

In *Vamana Purana*⁵, some differences in explanation are being found. When the Gods had sought Vishnu in their time of distress, he with Sankar and Brahma and other gods emitted flames of power from their eyes which formed a mountain of effulgence from which came *Katyayani*—“refulgent as thousand suns, having three eyes, black hair, and eighteen arms. Shiva gave her his trident, Vishnu a discus, Varuna a conch-shell, Agni a dart, Vayu a bow, Surya a quiver full of arrows, Indra a thunderbolt, Kubera a mace, Brahma a rosary and waterpot, Kala a shield and sword, Vishwakarma a battle-axe and other weapons” (Wilkins 2003:299). Canda and Munda were two spy of Mahisa who saw her in the Vindhya Mountain and being captivated by her beauty described that to their king Mahisa which made him anxious to obtain her. On asking for her hand she put forward her wish to be won in a fight. He came and fought in the form of a buffalo but the lion mount Durga killed the *asur* with her enormous power.

Durga in *Markendeya Purana*⁶ is being described in ten forms for the destruction of two *asurs* named *Sumbha* and *Nisumbha*. As Durga, she received the message of the giants; as Dasabhuja she slew part of their army; as Simhavahini, she fought with Raktabija; as Mahisamardini she slew Sumbha in the form of a buffalo; as Jagaddhatri, she overcame the army of the giants, as Kali she slew Raktabija, as Muktakeshi she overcame another of the armies of the giants, as Tara she slew Sumbha in his own proper shape; as Chinnamastaka she killed Nisumbha; as Jagatgauri she received the praise and thanks of Gods. The female principle here is represented as the embodiment of the concentrated essence of male power, which, when functioning as female, can accomplish what energy in its pure male form cannot, in maintenance and preservation of order in creation. The Goddess was in aid of re-establishment of order and peace that had been

⁵Vamana Purana is the puran which has been devoted to the vamana avatar of Lord Vishnu. It is one of the eighteen puranas written by sage vyasa. The name of the eighteen puranas are Brahma Puran, Padma Puran, Vishnu Puran, Shiva Puran, Vamana Puran, Markendeya Puran, Varaha Puran, Agni Purana, Kurma Purana, Bhagavad Maha Purana, Linga Purana, Narada Purana, Skanda Purana, Garuda Purana, Matsya Purana, Vayu Purana, Bhavishya Purana and Brahmanda Purana.

⁶Markendeya Puran is one of the very important mmahapuranas. It is written in the style of a dialogue between the ancient sage Markendeya and Jamini, as disciple of Vyasa. Durga saptashati or the Chandi Paath are the parts of this puranas. The text consists of 134 chapters, where thirteen chapters (chapter 78-90) are together known as Devi Mahatmya which mainly deals with the glorification of the great goddess.

disturbed by the typically male power of arrogance and wilfulness. The power that maintains the world is not just brute force, heedless and haughty rather is a force that is tempered by beauty, graciousness, charm, with which the Goddess was amply endowed through the combined gift of the gods (Bowes, 1978:257).

The physical form of Durga was created with the contribution of different Gods who gave her different limbs, organs and powers. The peerless light was issued from the bodies of all the Devas and the phenomenon was transfigured as a woman transcending the three worlds. With Shiva's power, her lotus-like face was created that was round in shape and whitish in color. With the power of Yamraja, long and black hair came on her head that looked like clouds. With the brilliance of Agni, her three big and bright eyes appeared. Her eyebrows were created brilliantly by Sandhya that were black and in the shape like that of the half bow of Kamadeva. With the power of Vayu, both her ears were created, in correct proportion—neither very long nor short. With the rich power of Kubera her very shapely and attractive nose was created. It was like the flower of lentil. Her ears came in shape by Anila. Prajapati contributed her grains of pomegranate. Her deep red lower lip was created with the power of Arun. Well-formed upperlip was created by the brilliant contribution of Kartika. With the bright, illuminating power of Vishnu her eighteen large hands appeared full of muscles and strength. The red fingers, all in shape appeared from the bright light of the Vasus. Her breasts were created by the *teja* of Chandrama. The middle portion was created with the power of Indra. Her thighs got form and shape with the power of Varun. The *teja* and power of the earth gave her the back portion which was large and strong. The brightness of other deities formed her body.

The practice of Durga Puja also happens to be related with the epic Ramayana written by Bengali poet, Krittivasa. Rama while going to the fight to free Sita from the grip of Ravana was advised by Brahma to perform the Puja of the Goddess because Ravana was a devotee of Maa Durga and thus in order to win over him, Rama was supposed to get the blessing of the same Goddess. After three days of worship, Rama suddenly noticed that one of the one hundred and eight blue lotuses which was essential for the worship was missing. He was so passionate about completion of his puja that he notched an arrow to his bow and aimed at one of his eyes. Maa Durga became impressed

about his passion and told him that she is the one who kept the last lotus hidden to see his reaction. And then she promises him of help. The Goddess awaked at the invocation of Brahma to save Rama, the earthly incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Thus she promised to empower Rama's bow on the seventh day of the full moon fortnight, so that Ravana could be killed at the conjunction of the eighteen and ninth day of the fortnight. After Ravana was defeated by Rama, Brahma along with all other gods and goddesses worshipped Maa Durga which has been derived now as Vijaya Dashami- the victorious tenth day of the celebration of the victory of the good powers over the evil. This time when Rama performed the Puja, it is said to be unseasonable and thus called 'akalbadhan'. It is believed that in a year six months happen to be the time of God while the other six are nights. Durga stays awake in spring whereas in autumn she is to be evoked separately to be worshipped.

Durga Puja could also be said as the worshipping of the unity of powers. Though Lakshmi and Saraswati are regarded as the daughters of Maa Durga, there are no specific myths connecting them in a relationship as they do for Kartika and Ganesha. The scriptures refer to them as the assimilation of Female Power. "Shree Shree Chandi" in Markendeya Puran talks about this power as Mahakali, MahaLakshmi, and Mahasaraswati. In Skanda Purana, Kartik is said to be the son of Shiva and Parvati who defeated Surapadma, demon king, in the battle and in the verge of death he wanted to be forgiven. Kartik did that and accepted him as his mount in the form of a peacock. According to Shiva Purana, Ganesha came into being as a result of a domestic squabble between Shiva and Parvati. And in Brahmabaibarta Purana, Shiva and Parvati were childless for a long time. Then after a long time a baby was born. All the gods assembled to meet the beautiful child where only Shani or Saturn was missing because he had a curse on him that his sight would destroy the thing he is seeing. But Parvati, ignorant of the curse of Shani, insisted him to take a look at Ganesha. And consequently the sight of Shani destroyed the face of Ganesha. Pravati was inconsolable and was overwhelmed with grief and pain. Shiva then ordered his followers to bring any of the faces which they set their eyes on in the northern direction. They came back with a head of one tusked elephant. It was attached to the beheaded boy and all was fine again. Shiva blessed him by saying that he will be the one who will be worshipped before all the gods and goddess

and no puja will be completed without it. And also gave him the name Ganesha, which means lord of the masses.

It is however quite interesting to note in “Intimate Relations” (1989:129) by Sudhir Kakar, one of the wellknown psychoanalyst, that through Hindu myths, folk lore, folk beliefs, proverbs, symptoms and ritual of the goddess in her fearful form, the Goddess is seen as a powerful and sexual mother. He narrates his interpretation through the iconic representation in sculptures and paintings. The demon Mahisasura conquered all the three worlds falling in love with the goddess. When he expressed his desire to have her, she reciprocated that if she defeats her in the war then she would make him her husband. Mahisasura came to the battlefield ready with a huge army and weapons. Devi came alone mounting on her lion riding naked to the combat. The gods became surprised to see her in that form. Coming down from her lion she started dancing and cutting off the heads of the millions and millions of demons. Mahisasura being scared, tried to flee from that place by taking the form of an elephant. Devi separated his trunk and suddenly the elephant became a buffalo and against its thick hide, Devi’s sword and spear were of no avail. The goddess, out of anger jumped on to the buffalo’s back and rode it till exhaustion. When the demonic power of the buffalo collapsed, Devi pierced her spear into its ear and Mahisasura fell dead. It however signifies the omnipotence and intense sexual energy of the goddess expressed in the imagery of dancing and riding naked. And Mahisasura resembles million of ‘bad boys’ with demonic desires who was finally killed by the powerful goddess, even though he was the most powerful male. In general belief, the appearance of Durga is suppression of devilish powers disordering the social arrangements. When devilish powers affect the mental arena, then Devi elements are awakened by Durga Sadhana.

There remains a confusion regarding the Hindu goddess whether she is a single or composite figure. The debate over the meaning of the goddess would have to take into account the range and diversity of her representation, the sheer numbers of goddesses, major and minor, mainstream and ‘local’, that are to be found in the pantheon. Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi (1986) rightly points that the worship of the mother goddess does not really constitute a matriarchy, but it does constitute a matriarchal culture, in the sense

that it preserves the value of women as life-givers and sources of activating energy, and it represents the acknowledgement of women's power by women and men in the culture. Gayatri Spivak (1985) has alerted us to the possibility that, in their resistance to the imperialist effacement of "the image of the luminous fighting Mother Durga", nationalist (male) elites were simultaneously perpetuating a "reverse ethnocentrism". Feminist historians in India have identified the development of the myth of the 'advanced' Aryan (upper caste) woman in nationalist historiography in the second half of the 19th century as belonging to the same ideological configuration. Present day Hindu 'nationalist' parties have produced aggressive women leaders and set up strong organizational structures for women volunteers for similar purposes and based on similar arguments, although in a quite different context of electoral politics and organized religious revivalism of the post-colonial nation-state. The actual modalities of the formation of women leaders in the organized hindutva movement centre on the Shakti or the goddess ideology. The arguments in support of the feminism of the goddess deploy both arguments, the former in the celebration of Prakriti, nature as feminine principle, and the latter of Shakti, the autonomous force of the destructive goddess principle. The goddess-figure, or in a more diffusive way the concepts of stri-shakti and the 'feminine principle', were resorted to in order to mobilise women around women's issues: thus the logo and name of India's first feminist press, *Kali for Women*. Madhu Kiswar and Ruth Vanita⁷ explore that our cultural traditions has to identify their points of strength and use them creatively to combat reactionary and anti-woman ideas. However, it is very interesting to note that Bengali Hindu men who worshiped the feminine were seen as effeminate, weak, miserable, vulnerable, passive, and lacking in martial skills and rationality. Such effeminate men, in the view of colonialists and missionaries, lacked a strength and toughness which only British masculinity could provide. While colonialists and missionaries saw little virtue in the worship of feminine deities, for Hindu men and women who were under colonial rule, the feminine force or Shakti was a source of empowerment.

⁷Kishwar, Madhu and Ruth Vanita (eds) (1984): *In Search of Answers: Indian Women's Voices* from Manushi, London. Zed Books.

Ritualistic practices of the Puja

Durga Shaptshati gives a complicated method of worshipping Durga with different rituals and rites. The things required for the ritualistic worship should be collected beforehand so that the ritual is performed smoothly and in time. Durga Saptshati is among the five most popular and universally accepted book of 'Sanatana Dharma' or 'Manava Dharma'. It is a part of Markendeya Purana and is divided into thirteen chapters. It is a collection of thirteen couplets, and includes 535 shloks, 108 semi shloks and 57 uwachs, which all amounts to 700 in numbers. With all its characters, incidents and understandings, it gives the power to achieve all the four common pursuits of human life—Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha. The festival is celebrated according to the text of three Puranas namely, Kalika Purana, the Devi Purana and the Vrhannandikesvara Purana.

Traditionally, it is on the day of the Ratha Yatra that preparation for creating the Durga idol begins. A piece of bamboo-slit of required length is cleaned and smoothed by the 'kumbhakara' (potter) and then taken to the room where the family idols are kept. The family priest after worshipping Vishnu anoints chandan (sandal-wood paste) and invokes Durga upon it. On the day of Janmashthami, the architect of the pratima brings it down and the framework is commenced. In families where Durgotsav is a traditional affair, the idols are constructed wholly either by men of the carpenter caste or by men of the potter caste. Ready-made idols are not usually preferred in such traditional families.

Durga Puja is said to start on the day of Mahalaya, the day before the divine fortnight, with the ritual of 'Pitritarpan'. In Kolkata it happens on the banks of the river Ganges, facing the sun and chanting matra with hands clasped. It is the ritual to offer water to the dead forefathers. This is the day of the new moon preceeding the divine fortnight. On this day the distance between the terrestrial and the netherland is said to be the least. Even Rama performed this ritual in the Ikshaku family before invoking the Durga.

Durga is awaken (bodhana) on the sasthi, in remembrance of Brahma's 'untimely awakening' (okal bodhana) of Durga on behalf of Rama. She is roused in the bel tree on

the evening of the sasthi. Also in the evening the combination of nine plants known as nabapatrika (*naba* meaning nine, *patrika* meaning leaves) is assembled around the stem of a small banana plant and tied together with an aparajita creeper (proper name clitoria). Each of the nine plants are said to correspond to one of the nine Durgas (Navadurga): *Kola* or the banana stem to Brahmani; *Kochu* to Kali; Tumeric or *Holud* to Durga; *Jayanti* to Karttiki; *Vilva/Bel* or wood apple fruits tied to resemble Shibani; *Dalim* or pomegranate to Raktadantika; *Asoka* to Sokarahita; *Mankochu* to Chamunda; and *Dhaan* or rice paddy to Lakshmi. The *navapatrika* as a whole is considered to be Durga but is usually referred to as *kalabau* and is dressed in white sari to represent a newly married bride and is placed next to the image of Ganesh throughout the ceremonies.

The ritual performed before the commencement of the Pooja and *Maha asan* are food offerings, water offerings, pooja items, cloth offerings, decorative items and other kinds of items. Food offerings consists of *Panchanna* that is, five types of grains like rice, mung or whole green gram, til or sesame, mashkalai or any type of whole black leguminous seed and java or millet. *Pancha gavya* is five items obtained from cow also is quiet important to carry out the puja. The items generally are milk, sour milk, ghee, curd, cow dung and gomutra. Curd, honey, sugar are also essentials. Three big naibeddyas and one small one is made. *Madhuparka* which is the mixture of honey, curd, ghee and sugar is also required in the puja. Bhoga drabbadi, arati drabbadi, an earthen bowl of *atap*, *til tela*, are offered in the procedural puja. Water offerings include *Ushnodak* that is, lukewarm water, coconut water, *sarba aushadhi*, *maha aushadhi*, water from oceans, rain water, spring water and water containing lotus pollen. The Pooja items includes *sindur* or vermilion powder, *panchabarna guri* that includes powders of five different colours—turmeric, rice, kusum flowers or red abira, rice chaff or coconut fibre burnt for the dark colour, *bilva patra* or powdered wood apple leaves. *Panchapallava* that is the leaves of five trees namely mango, pakur—a species of fig, banyan, betel and Jaggadumar or fig are needed with *Pancharatna* and *Panchakosha*. Pancharatna includes five gems as gold, diamond, sapphire, ruby and pearl. Panchakosha includes the bark of five trees—jamuna, shemal, berela, kool, bokul, powdered in equal portions and mixed with water. Other items needed are green coconut with stalk, three ashananguri—finger ring made of kusha. A Gamchha or a piece of cloth to cover the pot, a dhoti for Vishnu and three saris each

for Saraswati, Lakshmi and Chandi are the essential cloth offerings in the puja. Decorative items which are important in carrying out the ritual are *Ghat* or a pot, *kundahari*, a mirror, four arrows, *tekatha* or a triangular frame of wood, haritaki flowers, *chandmala*—a garland with circular decorations, *asan*—a mattress of jute or hay. The other items which remain important in carrying out the process are water camphor, perfumed sandal wood paste, *gangajaal*. Basically eighteen types of soil are needed. Soil extracted from elephant tusks, from the teeth of the pig, from the horns of the ox—which reflects the celebration of power from the river banks of Ganga and Saraswati, from a place where four roads intersect, from anthill and from mountain (Prasoon 2009). From temple door, a palace door, a prostitute’s door and many other. It is really interesting to see the inclusion of the soil from the prostitute’s door. Here, come the questionable notions of purity and pollution as Mary Douglas states. It is also said that the logic behind the choice is that the men leave their virtues behind at the door step of a prostitute’s chamber, making the spot a potent one. It could also be said that this also signifies that the diverse soil needed on the puja however seems to include all strata of the society in the celebration of the good on evil prayer. The water required is also of various types, hot, cold, rain water, from the sea, fountain, pond, dew collected on lotus pollens, from Ganga, from Saraswati as well as from various pilgrim sites. There are even directives of the music and instruments that are played during the Devi’s bath. For example, when rainwater is used for the bathing ritual, it has to be ‘Raga Lalit’ and the trumpet whereas during the spring water bath the Raga is to be ‘Baradi’ and the sound of the conch shells.

Food Offerings for Shashthi Puja of Maa Durga are a stem of wood apple with fruits, green coconut with stalk, an earthen bowl full of atap. Three bowls of madhuparka, sesame seeds, curd, honey, clarified butter, sugar, three big naibeddyas, one small naibeddyas, bhog drabbadi, arati drabbadi, grains, fruits, one dozen bananas with single stem and white mustard seeds. For pooja— a pot, four arrows, two ashanangurik, panchapallava, pancha ratna, panchashshya, panchagabbya, tekatha, dubba (grass), sindur, swastika pituli, conch shell, kajaal, gorochana, yellow thread, chamar that is yak’s tail used for fanning, earthen lamps, pancha-pradip for aarti are needed. Cloth Offerings includes Gamcha to cover the pot, a dhoti for the wood apple tree, a sari for bodhan and a

sari for amantran. Other than these, items like Myrobalan flowers, chandmala, a diva's oil, turmeric, soil from banks of Ganga, perfume, stone, gold, silver, copper, iron, mirror and alta are also kept nearby.

The beginning of ceremonies on sasthi is called kalparambha. A vow (samkalpa) is made by the head of the family to perform Durga puja in Asvina and to read the Devi Mahatmya. The priests are appointed and received with honour to perform the promised Durga puja. By the sasthi the image has been installed and the place of worship is decorated. The outside and the entrance of the place of worship are decorated with buntings and banana stems. Inside, the image is placed on a raised dias (the bedi). In traditional families, the bedi is made about two feet high and is sown with five grains: rice; wheat; barley; mas and sesamum. In three to four days these seeds sprout into seedlings. On top of the bedi is placed a wooden platform. All around the bedi and at the entrance to the place of worship *alpanas* or sacred designs are drawn by women using liquid rice paste or white paint. These *alpanas* are floral designs and are considered auspicious.

On the seventh day, i.e., saptami, the image is consecrated marking the beginning of Durga puja begins. At dawn the navapatrika is taken to the nearest river or stretch of water and bathed. After a brief puja it is brought back to the place of worship, clothed in a sari and placed beside Ganesh. The priest performs the great bathing (mahasnana) on the reflection of Durga in a mirror placed below the clay image using milk, curds, ghee, honey and various types of oil and water. This bathing is performed on the reflection of the head of Durga in the mirror (darpana) while the priest recites various mantras. Having done this the priest installs the ghat or sacred water pot in front of the image which is believed to contain the spirit of the deity in its waters. The ghat is usually positioned in a ring of clay to hold it in place and it contains water (preferably Ganges water), herbs and jewels. The lip of the ghat is covered first by mango or pan (betel) leaves and a green coconut (symbol of fertility) and then the ghat is dressed like the kalabau in a piece of cloth and then decorated with a garland. The bowl of the ghat is decorated with a bhumandal (universal symbol also known as swastika) in the shape of a man, drawn in vermillion. Durga is invoked (adhivasa) into the ghat and it is cordoned off with four

arrow-like sticks placed in the ground and encircled with string. This is called sutrabestan. The four sticks are topped with *tal* (palm) leaves and are known as *tir-kati*. The image is similarly cordoned off and after consecration only the priest is allowed to touch the image until the ceremonies have been completed. The consecration involves pranpratishta in which the priest recites the mul mantra, takes a few leaves of durva grass and a little sun dried rice and touches first the chest of Durga then the subordinate deities and places his hands by the cheeks of the images while reciting the pranprathisha mantra. Taking lamp-black (collyrium) on the tip of a leaf of kusa grass or a bel twig, the priest performs chaksurdana or chaku dan, going through the motions of painting in the eyes. On rare occasions the artist actually paints in the eyes of the figure of Durga while the priest holds the artist's elbow. This is the standard procedure for the pranpratishta of all deities.

Sesame seeds, myrobalan, flowers, two earthen bowls full of atap, green coconut with stalk, wood apple leaves, white mustard, madhuparka of forty of twenty two bowls, honey, sugar, naibedhya, fruits and items of bhoga are needed for the Puja on the day of Saptami as the food offerings. The pooja items of that day includes, jute ropes, red thread, alta, four finger rings, four yagyopaveet—sacred thread, a pot, a naibedhya, one big earthen lamp, panchapallava, pancha ratna, panchashashya, panchaguri, vermilion, items for aarti, items for aahuti, sand, wood, dry khorke grass, cow dung, kusha grass, ghee, 108 pieces of bilva patra(leaves) and a bowl. Cloth offerings include a piece of cloth for the Pandit, gamchaa for aarti, 40 or 22 kusha finger rings, sari for navapatrika, one sari for the main puja, saris for Durga, Lakshmi, Saraswati and Chandi, dhoti for Kartikeya, Ganesh, Shiva and Vishnu, clothes for nine plants, clothes for peacock, mouse, lion, demon, buffalo, ox and snake, chandmala, a nose ring, iron and conch shell. Flower garland, bilva-patra garland, banana plant, turmeric plant, cola cassia plant, wood apple stem, pomegranate stem, a stem of Jayanti plant, arum plant, rice plant, ashoka stem, twings of white aparajita plants, two banana stems are the needed flower and plant offerings for the Saptami Puja.

The priest meditates on Durga and worships her with the sixteen upacaras. Various food offerings are made including scented flowers, sun-dried rice, java flowers,

kusa grass, sesamum, mustard oil, durva grass, incense, cloth, jewels, perfume and so forth. The cloth is usually placed in front of the image but sometimes the image is decorated with real jewellery specially created for it. This can include nose rings, earrings and tiara. The image is also garlanded with flowers. Red flowers are considered appropriate for the worship of Durga, so hibiscus, china rose or marigolds are chosen as flower offerings to Durga. The image is also decorated with chand-mala or 'moon garlands' which are decorative circular shapes with the word Ma written in the centre that hang from the image. They are usually made of sola or daker shaj. It is said that the chand-mala represents the moon while the ghat represents the sun. The sun and moon probably represent the passage of time or they may have tantric significance. The sun represents Shiva and the moon Shakti, or else the sun represents a man and the moon a woman.

Kumari Puja or worshipping the Virgin remains important when we talk about Durga Puja. The proceedings on Ashtami start with the worship of all the gods and goddesses and her jewellery, weapons etc. This is followed by the puja of the Virgin girl who is supposedly between one to sixteen years of age, unmarried, non engaged in worldly affairs, not into her menstrual cycle, and not into the outburst of passion. Though the daughter of a Brahmin is generally seen as the one suitable of this puja, Devi Purana mentions that, even daughters of Kshatriyas are worshipped for puja seeking a boon of victory, Vaishya girl for profits and Sudra girl for the birth of a son and Antajas for deliverance from impending danger. The goddess has to be worshipped according to the ages, as for example the two year old is conceived as Saraswati, thirteen as Mahalakshmi, and sixteen as Ambika.

Sandhi Pooja is a special ritual which is done between the day of Ashtami and Navami. Flowers, gold ring, a bronze bowl for madhuparka, a small sari, main naibeddy, one small naibeddy, one nose ring, one pillow, a mat, a chandmala, 108 earthen lamps, items for bhoga and items for the aarti are needed to carry out the procedure. Other than the Sandhi Pooja, the Ashtami Pooja needs fruits, items for bhog, items for aarti, 40/22 bowls of madhuparka, honey, sugar, curd, ghee, 40/22 naibeddyas, four small naibeddyas. As Cloth offerings, one sari for Durga, new clothes for Lakshmi, Saraswati,

Chandi, Kartikeya, Ganesh, Shiva, Vishnu, nine planets, the peacock, mouse, lion, demon, buffalo, ox, snake, Jaya, Vijaya and Rama. One dantakashta, 40/22 finger rings made up of Kusha, one nose ring, two conch shells, a box of vermilion, flowers, garland, bilva-patra, one chandmala and a dhoti are the required pooja items. This ritual takes place in the conjunction of Astami and Nabami, which is the eighth and ninth day. The period of worship is the last twentyfour minutes of the Day Eighth and first twentyfour minutes of Day Nineth. During the Mahisasura fight with Maa Durga, Chanda and Munda came to attack the Devi with great reinforcements and at this moment Devi's face turned black with anger. From her third eye emerged a frightening female form with huge face and red eyes, blood dripping from her tongue. This figure let out a tremendous roar and beheaded them. The time of this encounter is every year worshipped as Chamunda during this Sandhi Puja. This hour is also crucial because during this time Rama killed Ravana with the kindness blessings of the Devi.

For the Navami and Dashami Pooja, the same items are more or less needed with betel leaves, pan masala, honey, sugar, curd, ghee and four small naibeddyas. Bilva patra garland, flower garland, a chandmala, items for aahuti, gifts for purohit are also needed. Especially for the Dashami Pooja, perfumes, flowers, tulasi dal, bilva leaves, incense sticks, earthen lamps, naibeddyas, curd, murki, sweets are the essentials.

Mahanavami, which is on the ninth day, is a repetition of basic puja of the previous days, except that a greater number of sacrifices are performed. The final day of Durga puja is known as vijaya dasami or victorious tenth. Having done the usual puja with upacharas and recited hymns to Devi, the priest performs the act of dismissal (visarjan) on the ghat and invokes Devi in the flowers of the offerings. It is the principle ritual on Dashami, the last day of the festivities. The visarjan outlined in the Purohit Darpan or manual for puja follows that of the tantric scholar Krishnananda Agamvagisha in his Tantrasara. This says that one should visualise all the avaran (covering) deities merging into the body of the main deity. A mantra is recited and with the samhara mudra one should bring the deity's energy into one's own heart with the scent from the leftover flowers. Then, making a triangular mandala (diagram) to the north east, one should place the remains of the offerings upon it. Puja is done to the five deities Vishu, Shiva, Surya,

Chandra and Ganesha and the *ghat* is removed with a mantra. After visarjan the priest takes the coconut off the top of the *ghat* and pours water from the *ghat* onto the mirror which at this time is angled to reflect the feet of the goddess. The priest sprinkles the remaining water on the heads of the congregation saying Om Shantih (peace). The mirror may be immersed in the water of the *ghat*. This immersion of the mirror in the *ghat* is considered to be the immersion proper rather than the later immersion of the image in a nearby river or pond. Unlike the initial bathing, the immersion is done on the reflected feet of Durga as if she was plunging headfirst into the waters. However, before the immersion of the image there are certain concluding ceremonies. The priest leads a circumambulation (*pradakshina*) of the image and women bring offerings of betel leaf (*pan*) and betel nut (*tambul*) and vermilion (*sindur*) and offer it to the images. *Sindur* taken from the feet of the images is kept by the women for use on their foreheads for *tilak* marks during the rest of the year. Jewellery and other mementos are removed from the image. *Sindur Khela* is one of the rituals which has been added to the Dashami ritual through social usage. It celebrates the vermilion powder which is actually the sign of a married woman. Applying vermilion on each other's forehead signifies and reinforces the significance of being married.

Animal sacrifice is done daily in some family pujas but not usually in the communal or sarvajanin pujas which carry out vegetarian sacrifice instead. For animal sacrifice, buffaloes or goats may be sacrificed and a sacrificial post is placed at some distance from the image. The animal is sacrificed with a single blow from the sacrificial sword and the head and some of the blood may be offered to Durga. Goats are most commonly used and may even have the connotations of being the 'scape-goat' of all the sins of the family who are patrons of the worship. Animal sacrifice is accompanied by the 'sacrifice' of a gourd and a bundle of red sugarcane. The gourd may represent the early practice of human sacrifice in which enemies captured in war were offered to Durga. The idea of human sacrifice remains in the human effigies made out of rice paste or thickened milk and flour which are ritually sacrificed in a rite called *satru bali* or the sacrifice of an enemy. Sugar cane may refer to alcohol as molasses from sugar cane forms its base.

In Kolkata, the images are taken to various mooring places along the Hooghly river and immersed. The number of images worshipped in Calcutta is so great that it is not possible to immerse the images at the correct time stipulated as auspicious by the religious almanacs and immersion is often delayed by several days. After the immersion, friends and family traditionally exchange vijaya dasami greetings and forgive each others' past offence, which is also called as vijaya milani. The details of the immersion are not mentioned in ritual texts so it is entirely up to the family how they conduct the immersion. However, after the immersion, the sprinkles of *Shantijaal*-- holy water by the priest chanting "Om Shanti, Om Shanti" remains a trend from traditional times till the modern times.

Origin and Evolution of Durga Puja in Bengal

This ritual of practicing Durga Puja annually is derived from the saga of King Surath, who as mentioned in the Markendeya Puran, is said to be the first one to carry out Durga Puja. The story narrated in Markendeya Puran says how after losing his kingdom and love of his closed ones, he left for the forest in great despair. There he met Samadhi, a man from lower caste who was also in a similar situation. They then together met a sage named Medha who advised them to worship the goddess. They moulded the goddess with the clay they got from the river banks and started praying. Devi became happy and appeared before them to offer boon. Samadhi wanted the deliverance from the cycles of life and death while Surath got back his lost kingdom. However, the worshipping of the Goddess by Surath happened in spring though now it has shifted its time frame from spring to autumn. To understand the shift, the epic Ramayana and the event of Rama performing the Puja of the Goddess Durga with the advice of Brahma to attain victory remains quite significant.

The first grand celebration of Goddess Durga could be tracked back to the late 1500s. Folklores say the landlords or *zamindar* of Dinajpur and Malda initiated the first Durga Puja in Bengal. According to another source, Raja Kangshanarayan of Taherpur or Bhabananda Mazumdar of Nadiya organized the first *Sharadiya* or Autumn Durga Puja in Bengal in C 1606. It was said that Kangshanarayan created a stir in his time by

organizing Durga Puja and spending around eight lakhs at Taherpur, in Rajshahi district of undivided Bengal. Bhabananda Mazumdar was an ancestor of Raja Krishna Chandra Roy. The first puja in Kolkata was organized in 1610 by Lakshmikanta Mazumdar, founder of Sabarna Roy Chowdhury family. This zamindar family is linked with the selling of the three villages to the East India Company which came to be known as Kolkata, decades later. With time, other Hindu kings also joined the practice of performing the puja in their household and the puja spread far and wide to Gaur, Rajmahal, Murshidabad and Krishnanagar. This is how Durga Puja became the most important annual festival of West Bengal and particularly of the Bengali Hindus in particular. Raja Krishna Chandra Roy, ruler of Nadia organized for a very lavish Durga Puja ritual. In his palace in Krishnanagar, the work on the clay idol started on the holy day of the *Utarath* festival, which is the day of the return of the Lord Jagannath from his Masi's place on his chariot in the month of Asharha (June-July). Durga was dressed as a warrior, clad in armour and masculine apparels. Her mount was not a lion but a mythical creature of half man and half lion. The number one hundred and eight played an important role in all the preceding rituals. The volume of clay used for creating the images was one hundred and eight maunds. The morning of Saptami would announce the start of the Puja to the flourish of the beat of one hundred and eight dhaks, one hundred and eight goats were being sacrificed and one hundred and eight lotuses were kept in order to carry out the puja successfully. Even during immersion, one hundred and eight carriers transported the Goddess from the palace to the Jalangi river. Krishna Chandra started many modern practices of this autumnal puja celebration and ordered the zamindars under him to organize the puja and also provided economical help to the ones who couldnot afford the expense, thus spreading the practice of this puja (Ghosh, 1986:191-92). The pujas of Gobindaram Mitra, Shib Krishna Dawn, Abhaycharan Mitra are some of the names of the hugely spent pujas of the intoxicated landlords.

The arrival and participation of the East India Company got deeply intertwined with the country's social fabric which also brought about a transformation in the character of the celebration. The new moneyed class in Kolkata came after the presence of the East India Company. In "Important Historical Events" 1766, J. Z. Holwell notes

that “Doorga Pujah.....is the grand general feast of the Gentoos, usually visited by Europeans (by invitation who are treated by the proprietor of the feast with fruits and flowers in season, and are entertained every evening while the feasts lasts, with bands of singers and dancers (Ghosh 1975). The high level British officials regularly attended Durga Pujas organized by influential Bengalis. The British soldiers actually participated in the pujas, had prasad, and even saluted the deity, but the most amazing act of worship was performed by the East India Company itself when in 1765 it offered a thanksgiving Puja, no doubt as a politic act to appease its Hindu subjects, on obtaining the Diwani of Bengal. (Sukanta Chaudhuri, ed. *Calcutta: the Living City, Vol. 1: The Past*) And it is reported that even the Company auditor-general John Chips organized Durga Puja at his Birbhum office. In fact, the full official participation of the British in the Durga Puja continued till 1840, when a law was promulgated by the government banning such participation. Nabakrishna Deb who was awarded the Raja title by the British started the Puja to celebrate the victory over Nawab Siraj-ul-Daulah in the Battle of Plassey in 1757. Lord Clive participated in the puja giving his offerings of fruits, money and even a goat for sacrifice. There were many more well-off babus of that time who started this festival in their home namely, Prankrishna Singha, Keshtochandra Mitra, Narayan Mitra, Ramhari Thakur, Baranashi Ghosh and Darpanarayan Thakur which was also attended by the British official and was even considered as a matter of prestige by them.

The above discussion clearly points out that the popularity regarding Durga Puja in and around Kolkata, got its pace with the coming of the British and the advent of “Babu” Culture in the city during that time. ‘Calcutta got initiated in the concept of “business entertainment” when the wily Nabakissen Munshi organized Durga Puja in 1757 at his newly constructed *thakurdalan* to allow Lord Robert Clive thanksgiving for the victory of Plassey since the only church in the city had been razed to the ground by the Nawab’s forces.’⁸ It was said that Lord Clive came and sat in a golden sofa in the *thakurdalan*, where Maa Durga was all decked up with jewellery and interestingly they all enjoyed watching *Bai Naachh*, performed by Muslim Nautch girls. *Bai Naachh* was quite a practice during the zamindari period till militant nationalism brought about the idea of

⁸ Ghosh, S. *Kolkata on Wheels*, Vol 3, Issue 12, September 2011 pp 8-9

displaying martial arts with *lathis*. While watching their performances the Europeans also used to have beef and ham with wine brought from Hotels. This sort of celebration were called “Nautch” by the then Europeans.

Kaliprasanna Sinha of Jorasanko, gives a good and vivid description of the Durga Puja in “Babu” culture. The decorations were nothing but imitations of the West. The idols were huge, there were embellishments all around comprising horse-riding Scot Highlanders, fairies, birds and flowers and lotuses made of pith and in the middle stood the image of Maa Durga. The lion was gilded with silver, the face of the idol was modeled on the Armenians or Jewish bibis. The silver foils used for decorations were imported from post. The image of the goddess at Shivkrishna Dawn’s residence was wellknown for its decoration. It was widely believed that Maa Durga after her arrival in the earthly world, dresses up and wears ornaments at the house of Shivkrishna Dawn, eats the lavish spread at Abhocharan Mitter of Kumortuli and keeps awake throughout the night watching *Bai Naach* at Sovabazar Rajbari. Kaliprasanna Sinha (Nag 2012) also talks about another saying that earlier only the kings and aristocrats use to held Durga Puja in their home but later even “*Punte Teli*”⁹ was bringing a idol and performing the Puja in their home referring specially to Khelat Chandra Ghosh of Pathuriaghata and Shibkrishna Dawn in particular. But there is also a caste aspect here which eventually is emerging when the mention of “teli” is done as a significant lower caste. So in a way it can be mentioned that the advent of British rule and the growing of ‘babu’ culture somehow lessened the organization of Puja only by the high caste zamidar families. The emerging economically affluent classes also started celebrating Puja which was a symbol of honour and prestige to some extent. At the end of the puja, on the day of *dashami* the images were all taken out for processions and public was given an opportunity to compare the embellishments and pomp and gaiety of the various families.

The trend of buying and gifting new clothes is not a new practice of the Bengalis during puja. It has been associated with the festivity and its age old customs and practices. The *mahajans* use to visit the families with *dhakai* and *santipuri* sarees and the

⁹ Teli is supposed to be a so called ‘lower caste’ of Bengal

female members used to do their shopping sitting inside their so called own space. It has also been a trend to visit relatives who have pujas held at their place.

In the Pujas conducted by the members of Young Bengal, it was the friends of the members rather than the Brahmins who were treated with meat and alcohol. At the thakurdalan they were liberal enough to enter wearing shoes and the *kalabou* is bathed in water warmed in a kettle instead of water from the Ganges. The water was then used to prepare the tea and coffee for breakfast of the householder.

The origin of the community puja can be credited to the twelve friends of Guptipara in Hoogly, about eighty kilometers from Kolkata, who collaborated and collected contributions from local residents to conduct the first community puja called the 'baro-yaari' puja or the 'twelve-pal' puja in 1790. A Journal named "The Friend of India", writes in May, 1820, "...a new species of Pooja has been introduced in Bengal within the last thirty years, called Barowaree...About thirty years ago, at Gooptipara, near Shantipoora...a number of Brahmins formed an association for the celebration of the Pooja independently...They elected twelve men as a Committee from which circumstance it takes its name, and solicited subscriptions in all surrounding villages" (Ghosh 1978:279-80). The *baro-yaari*¹⁰ puja was brought to Kolkata in 1832 by Raja Harinath of Cossimbazar, who performed the Durga Puja at his ancestral home in Murshidabad from 1824 to 1831, notes Somendra Chandra Nandy in 'Durga Puja: A Rational Approach' published in *The Statesman Festival*, 1991. It is also said that Shib Krishna Dawn took the initiative of collecting subscriptions from fellow traders and it was the trading communities who were generally involved in holding baroari pujas. Money lenders and shopkeepers would contribute round the years at a fixed rate proportionate to their volume of business. The collection was kept with respected and better-off traders who were named the committee secretary and it was their responsibility to arrange for subscriptions and entertainment (Nag, 2012:65).

¹⁰ Baroari is a word derived from "baro" meaning twelve and 'yaar' meaning friends. It derived its name because this type of the puja first happened with the initiation of twelve friends.

“The baro-yaari puja gave way to the *sarbojanin*¹¹ or community puja in 1910, when the Sanatan Dharmotsahini Sabha organized the first truly community puja in Baghbazar in Kolkata with full public contribution, public control and public participation. Now the dominant mode of Bengali Durga Puja is the ‘public’ version,” writes M. D. Muthukumaraswamy and Molly Kaushal (2004) in *Folklore, Public Sphere, and Civil Society*. In the same year, 1910, a puja in Bhawanipore Basu Ghat Road also took place which in some account is also said to be the first Sarbojonin Puja.¹² However, it is also said that this Puja was done by some young nationalists of those times in celebration of the National Conference supposed to be held next year. It is also interesting to note that ‘swadeshi’ things were kept for exhibition and also for sale in the pandals. Nebubagan Baroari of Bagbazar in North Kolkata started performing puja in the year 1919. The institution of the community Durga Puja in the 18th and the 19th century Bengal contributed vigorously to the development of Hindu Bengali culture. Shimla Byayam Samiti and its propounder Atindranath Basu have their own importance in spreading the culture of “sarbojonin’ puja throughout Bengal and particularly Kolkata. Bagbazar Sarbojonin started performing puja from year 1926/27. It is also said that Kumortuli Sarbojonin, started in 1933, deserves special mentions because it added many stylish changes in the modeling of the idols, as for example doing the art with the ek-chala model of the Durga pratima. Traditionally, the *pratima* was made of clay with all five gods and goddesses (Goddess Durga as the mother of Lakshmi, Saraswati, Kartikeya and Ganesha) under one structure called as ‘ek-chala’. It was mostly predominant in traditional pujas and household ones. However, the trend still continues. There are two kinds of embellishments that are used on clay – ‘*sholar-saaj*’ and ‘*daker-saaj*’. In the former, the *pratima* is traditionally decorated with the white core of the *shola* reed which grows in marshlands. As the devotees grew wealthier, beaten silver (*rangta*) was used. The silver used to be imported from Germany and was delivered by post (*dak*). Hence, the name ‘*daker-saaj*’. The huge temporary canopies - held by a framework of bamboo poles and draped with colorful fabric - that house where the icons are kept are called ‘*pandals*’. Modern pandals are innovative, artistic and decorative at the same time,

¹¹ Sarbojonin is similar like baroari, but it means a community puja “for all”.

¹² Debasish Basu, ‘Purono Sheei Pujor Kotha’, *Anandabazar Patrika*, 10 July, 2004

offering a visual spectacle for the numerous visitors who go ‘pandal-hopping’ during the four days of Durga Puja. The ‘*Chalchitra*’ also remains quiet noticeable in the household pujas. It is an intricately designed hemispherical backdrop to the goddess. Its base is usually blue; the colour of the sky and the border is densely painted with the sketches of variety of images and figures from the scriptures.

It’s also mentionable that Kolkata being one of the vibrant plots in the freedom struggle and partition, the most important and biggest community religious event was also used as images and reflection of the ongoing struggle. The religious site was also used for training purposes. The *birashtami* ritual that is performed on the day of Ashtami was the perfect occasion for such activities. On that day, from the morning, young men used to participate in contests of stick play, dragger wok, martial arts, wrestling and boxing in front of the British but under religious coats. The Simla Byayam Samiti Puja was started in 1926 with the front ranking freedom fighters of Bengal. The founder of the samiti was Atindranath Basu and other members included Sarat Chandra Basu, Bhupendranath Dutta, Upendranath Bandhyopadhyay, Kiron Mukherjee. The samiti held pageants showcasing key chapters of the freedom struggle like the Battle of Plassey and the uprising of 1857.¹³ The year 1926 marked the celebration of this puja in huge glamour. There are two reasons which are predicted for starting this Puja. Firstly, the non- cooperation movement of 1921 gave a new thrust to the nationalist movement of the country and thus this ‘byayam samiti’ basically provided an ‘akra’ where the youths were taught to fight with lathis and also certain fighting techniques in the shell of body-building. In 1932, this Samiti was closed by the Police for two years. The other reason probably was that in 1926 there were Hindu-Muslim riots in April and July, and certain Hindu youth thus wanted to train themselves physically. Durga Puja of those times was more centered on Hindu religiosity and also Hindu nationality to some extent. The country was viewed as “Mahamata” and the physical training as the prayer of “Devi-Chandi”. The idol was also called ‘swadeshi-thakur’ by the commoners. Durga puja was not only a puja or a religious affair rather a great celebration intertwined with the nationalist movement and inspiration. The 1939 edition of the festival was inaugurated by

¹³‘Katham Chhere Juddhey’, *Ajkal*, 15 October 1993

Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose who was then also the president of the Indian National Congress. Nitai Pal's image that year was special—Durga towering at twenty-one feet and the hitherto *ekchala* image separated into five frames.¹⁴ Netaji was also involved in a number of Pujas like Kumortuli Sarbojanin and Bagbazar Sarbojonin being the secretary of both in 1938 and 1939 respectively. The Bagbazar Puja was known for its elaborate *birashtami* celebrations. During the Non-Cooperation Movement against British, arrests became widespread and the Simla Byayam Samiti Puja was suspended from 1932 to 1935. With the waves of freedom struggle in the air, the Goddess herself changed her avatar from the mother of her four children to *Bharatmata*. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Vande Matarama* already got its depiction in the structures of the Goddess and the associated Pandals—religion of patriotism was invoked and worshipped irrespective of devotees' caste and creed. Writer Sunil Ganguly¹⁵ recalls a puja of his childhood in Faridpur, which is now in Bangladesh. Netaji, who had been put under house arrest by the British, had escaped to Europe in 1941, and people believed him to be the messiah who would come back and free the country from the shackles of the Raj. Ganguly's uncle who was then in college, was someone who was keeping faith and also involved in the struggle. The artisan was given special instruction about the idol, and the image was crafted in secret. At Durga's feet lay a sahib in military gear—khaki uniform, spiked boots, rifle slung over the shoulder; her mount—the lion was tearing at his abdomen. Closeby in place of Kartik and Ganesh stood Subhas Chandra Bose in dhoti-punjabi and khaddar cap, an unsheathed sword in his hand. The *atchala* where the puja was happening was filled with overwhelmingly interested villagers coming from far. A spontaneous chorus started in the name of Subhas Chandra Bose. But this puja was very much short lived as Sunil Gangopadhyay remembers. Three days later on the day of Ashtami, two big boats full of policemen docked at the village ghat. Though the inspector was a Bengali Hindu, he was a representative of the British Raj and threatened the organizers for the “anti government prank”. The image was seized and the village had to carry the worshipping with the symbolic *ghat*.¹⁶ It is also really interesting to note that in

¹⁴ Ghosh. *Durga Puja Sekal Theke Ekal*. pp 143

¹⁵ Gangopadhyay.S. *Ek Jibone Eto Rupantar*. Ananda Bazar Patrika, 22nd October 1993

¹⁶ Sunil Gangopadhyay, *Ek Jibone Eto Rupantar*. Ananda Bazar Patrika, 22nd October 1993

Rajshahi Jail, now in Bangladesh, Durga Puja was hosted with the initiatives of the inmates. The chief Secretary Sir Hugh Stephenson, granted permission to host the Puja in association with the jail staffers and sanctioned an amount. In 1918, a white goat was sacrificed to the Devi, with the significance of the colour of the goat, as the British were largely referred to as Whites.

When the country achieved its independence in 1947, the Puja Pandals had patriotic songs played in loudspeakers and portraits of freedom fighters lined the pandal walls. The Devi could now openly be worshipped as Bharatmata with tricolor flag in hand. A guessing game was held in a puja organized by women, with the participation fee pegged at ten paisa. The proceeds went to buy bedding materials and clothes for the revolutionary Ullaskar Dutta who had just returned as a penniless man from the Andaman Islands where he had been serving a life term.¹⁷ However till date it could be said that Durga Puja being the most important and biggest religious festival of the Bengalis, reflect different social issues that is bothering us or making us think seriously.

With the growing of so many pujas in close proximity, people started pandal hopping. When the crowd moved from one locality to the other, comparisons were bound to happen and with comparisons competition also cropped up. The first West Bengal government sponsored competition was organized in 1975. In 1976, the Kolkata Police walked into the fray, backing the North Kolkata Co-ordination Committee effort. This contest however stops in 1977.¹⁸ Asian Paints Sharad Samman came into form as the foremost corporate enterprise on 1985. For the first five years since its beginning the contest took place in three categories- best image, best pandal and best lighting. But in the present scenario the names of the enterprises have become countless in number and the nature of Durga Puja have changed from the Sarbojonin nature to become partially or sometimes totally corporatized with hundreds of new inventions of contests and prizes.

Earlier pujas were a representation of their wealth and power for the zamindars and the 'babu's who carried out the pujas. It was a marker of prestige and status for these

¹⁷ "Pujor Smriti", *Bartaman*, 16th October 1993

¹⁸ Ghosh. *Durga Pujo Sekal Theke Ekal*, pp 274

people. Thus expenses associated were huge. Their main concern laid in inviting people of importance such as British officials of those times. In a writing, Bhabanicharan Bandhopadhyay said in '*Kolikatar Komolaloi*' – '*Kolkatar Durgotsab debarchana naa bole jhaar utsav, baati utsab, kobi utsab, kinba gohona utsab baa bostro utsob bolileo chole*'¹⁹ which means that, rather than calling the Durga Puja in Kolkata as a religious worship we can call it as light festival, poet-festivity, jewellery festival or dress-festival. Thus its relevant to note that exaggeration of these festival is not a new affair for the Bengalees but what is new here is the dominance of capitalistic enterprises into our lives and thus into the festival and the celebration. What was previously dependent upon ones ability to spend has now become ones compulsion to spend. The so called created needs dominate us in such ways that we can hardly come out of the obsession of 'brands', 'trends' etc. The Bengalees are seen to have a great appetite for the 'new' in every case be it newness in pujas, themes of the pujas, idols, pandals, lights, dresses, magazines, Cds, food and numerous other things. Capitalism has entered conveniently and captured our lives in each sense of the term. The Puja is now not obviously an affair of the traditional "have" classes who were specially the upper castes but now the new material "have" classes have emerged to consume the puja. Though the working class also makes their good sum of profits during this time of the year, but then the festivity is dominated by the people who consume the pujas through their material affordability. Competition has entered even into the rituals of the puja with the zeal to showcase it as something "new", in a new packaging which will attract more consumers and appreciators. Through the whole process, the capitalistic and the corporate enterprises are making the major share of their profit. In the next chapter, the effort is to discuss about some of these contemporary pujas which in a way will portray the changes and the nature of commodification and commercialization of the contemporary "*Durgotsab*".

¹⁹ Ashok Manna. Shekaler Pujor Kotha. *Anandamela Pujo Barshiki* 1415 (2008), Anandabazar Patrika Pvt. Ltd. 6, Prafulla Sarkar Street, Kolkata- 700001

Chapter III

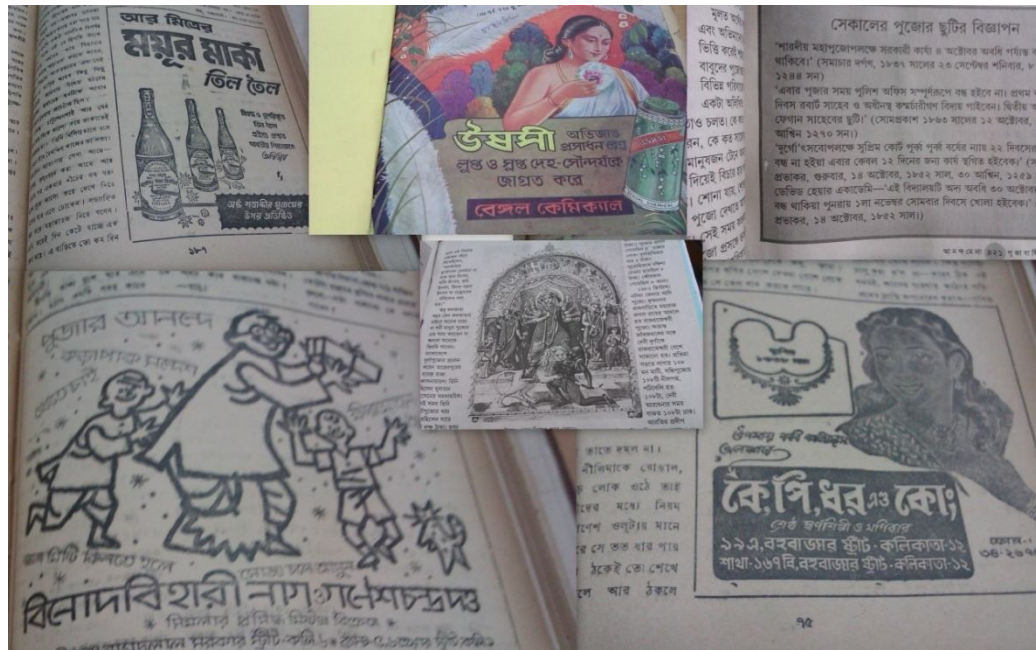
DURGA PUJA AND ITS MARKETIZATION IN CONTEMPORARY KOLKATA

“Crome Durgotsober din sonkhep hoye porlo; Krishnonogorer karikorera kumortuli o sidhesworitola jure boshe gelo. Jaigai jaigai rong kora paater chul, tobolkir mala, tin o petoler oshurer dhal tolowar, nana ronger choban pritimer kapod jhulte laglo; dorjira cheleder tubi, chapkan o peti niye dorjai dorjai beracche; ‘modhu chai!’” sankha nebe go!’ bole feriwalara deke deke ghucche. Dhakai o Shantipuri kapure mohajon, aatorwala o jattrar dalalera aahar nidra porityag koreche. Kono khane kansharir dokane rashikrito modhupokker bati, chumki ghoti o petoler thala ojon hocche. Dhup dhuno, bene mosla o mathaghoshar extra dokan boshe geche. Kaporer mohajonera dokane double porda feleche; dokan ghor ondhokar prai, tari bhetore boshe jotharto pai labhe bouni hocche. Sindur Chupri, mombati, pinre o kushasonera oboshor bujhe dokaner bhitor theke beriye eshe rastar dhare aiekuduckter upor bar diye bosheche. Bangal o parageye chakrera aarshi, ghunsi, giltir gohona o bilati mukta ekcheteyo kinchen; roborer juto, komfortor, stick nejwala pagri ogunti uthche; oi songe belowari churi, angiya, biliti sonar sil angti o chuler guard chain’ero osongoto khodder. Etodin jutor dokan dhulo o makorshar jaale poripurno chilo, kintu pujor morshome biyer koner moto fenpe uthche; dokaner kopate kaie diye nana rokom rongin kagoj mara hoyeche, bhetore cheyar para, taar niche ek tukro chenra carpet. Shohorer sokol dokaneri seetkaaler kager moto chehara fireche. Joto din ghuniye ashchee, totoi bazarer kena bechaa barche, totoi Kolkata gorom hoye uthche. Polligramer tulo odhyapokera britti o barshik saadte beriyechen; rastai rokom rokom torbetor cheharar bhirr lege geche”²⁰(Nag, 2012 : 149).

The above mentioned Bengali text beautifully captures the essence of Durga Puja of 19th Century, especially around year 1862. It says that eventually when the days of pujas came near, sculptors from Krishnonogor started coming to Siddhesworitola and Kumortuli. Jute wigs, garlands, brass and tin shields and ‘talwars’ for the demon, colourful clothes got displayed in different shops; tailors would go door to door selling caps, belts and earcaps for boys; they would shout “do you want honey !”, “would you buy some couch shell bangles”, the vendors would ask as they roamed about. The merchants of Dhakai and

²⁰ Nag.A. 2012. ‘Durgotsab’ in *Sateek Hutum Pyachar Noksha*. Kolkata. Ananda Publishers. Pp- 149

Shantipuri sareers, perfume sellers, and *jatra* organizers started having a busy schedule with great business. Somewhere in some bellmetal's shop, utensils such as *modhupokker bati*, *chumki* studded 'pot' and brass dishes are being weighed. Extra shops were open to sell incense sticks, spices and soaps. The cloth merchants would put up new curtains in their shops and it is time of profit for them. Taking advantage of time, some are also seen selling vermilion cases, candles, tools etc. outside their shops sitting near the aqua-ducter on the side of the road. *Bangal* and *paragaye* labourers are religiously buying mirror, imitation jewellery, foreign pearls etc.; shops are flooded with rubber shoes, comforters and different kinds of turbans, along with it bangals, rings, hair guards and chains also had numerous buyers. The footwear shops that were covered with dust and cobwebs all these days, suddenly is decorated and look like a new bride during the puja times. The entrance of the shops is decorated with colourful papers and carpets even if old and small, are added to the interior of the shops along with the chairs. The shops are back in healthy business and it's the time for profit and celebration for them. With each passing day, the market becomes a busy place and Kolkata turns into an active hotspot. Even the village teachers could not stop requesting for a rise in their salary. In this time of celebration the roads are filled with different faces.



Puja now does not wait till *Shasthi-bodhan* for its start. Kolkata is all flooded from *Chaturthi* and *Panchami* evening. This is the recent trend of the well known puja committees to inaugurate their pujas showcasing interesting themes from *dwitiya* itself. But the Kolkata Police still remains laid-back who after lots of discussions and meetings ultimately become prepared to control the crowd only in the evening of *Shasthi*. As a result people are all stuck in long heavy traffic and immense crowd. Alipore, Chetla, Taratala or Tollygunge, everywhere the picture seems the same. It seems that the traffic has failed badly in their challenge of controlling the crowd systematically. However, this year's puja (2011) went quiet well, the police inspite of their inefficiency in certain areas moreover has done a good job, metro service was slow but steady, bus service was there throughout night as well which helped people to a great extent and ultimately a small rain in the evening of *mahaashthami* even brought a relief to the people. Thus it is being said in newspapers and media that "*ebarer pujo aamjonotar*" which means that, this year the puja is of the people, which also signify the change of power in West Bengal after a long period of more than thirty five years. Puja now is not an affair of four days but has been extended to a nine-days affair which started more or less on the evening of *tritiya* and end quiet late because even the *bisharjan* remains a grand affair where the numerous pujas need to accommodate themselves on the way to Ganga. I would like to quote a small newspaper piece of Friday, 30th September, The Telegraph to give a small idea of the contemporary trend. It starts with the heading "Attention Pandals ! Here Come the Young Judges", this time the rule will be turned and the grown-ups will be marked by the children.

On Shasthi around 40 students will tour the city and rate 16 pujas as a part of Choto Chokhe Boro Pujo, presented by Idea, in association with the Telegraph In Schools (TTIS) and partnered by NGO Education for All and Techno India Group. Drawn from among underprivileged students being funded by Education For All, student reporters of TTIS (called Tigers) and student of Techno India Group, the lucky 40 will have to judge the top three pujas, the most beautiful Durga idol. Joining the young judges will be actors Arindam Sil and Rachita (of Chaplin fame). The best part? The tour will be an all-nighter starting at 4pm and ending 4am, with a dinner halt at Taj

Bengal in between. “It will be super exciting”, gushed TTIS Tiger Unmona Paul, a Class XII student of Ballugunge Shiksha Sadan. They said that this would be an unique experience for all of them. The kids will tour the city in a air conditioned Volvo Bus, covering Barisha Youth Club, DumDum Park, Tarun Sangha, Hindusthan Park Sarbojonin, Lohapatti Durga Puja etc. The bus will be accompanied by three cars and one ambulance from CMRI, a leading hospital in Kolkata. The five winners of the Choto Chokhe Boro Puja contest will be presented with awards and cash prizes on Saptami. “.....Through such endeavours, we also wish to reach out to the masses during Durga Puja, which is a festival closest to the Bengali heart”, said Sudhir Pradhan, chief operating officer (service area east), Idea. (Madhurima Chatterjee, The Telegraph, 30th September 2011)



Durga Puja remains the festive season to strengthen old relations and forming new ones in the process. Its both a festivity of “poriborton o protyabortan” – change and return. As there are different changes which are happening, there are even some customs and trends that are coming back from the times of past. For all Bengalis, the time of Durga Puja has always been of great excitement and expectations-- the expectations of new clothes, meeting the distant family members, some changes from the daily routinized

life, to enjoy, to celebrate. It is now a festival with many old traditions mixed with new flavours. Gone are the days of '*feriwalas*' who came door to door to sell things during pujas. It is now the time of capitalistic 'markets' which captured the shopping fervor of the bangalees. Its now the competition of 'brands' to gift oneself and others with new clothes and jewellery. Online shopping is the recent trend of this time where buying is just a matter of some "clicks". The different advertisements of new stocks of clothes, home materials and offers make people conscious that time has finally arrived to start their "pujo-shopping". There's an interesting advertisement which said "*pujor aage shopping pujo*" which means before the puja starts, the shopping-puja is to be done. Shopping actually is no less than a grand religious affair in this time of the year. But one thing that has not changed is that, the puja time is the most profitable period of the year for the shopkeepers of all kinds. Kolkata then and Kolkata now both become busy during this national festivity of the Bengalis. "Gifts", still forms a part of the Durga Puja celebration. However, now it has turned into a war of brand fetishism though. Durga—the goddess of power seems powerless with the overarching influence of corporatization and commodification. The tradition of devotion still continues, nonetheless, looking at the growth of the "theme" based pandals, lights etc, it seems that it has turned into a great spectacle fueled by competition and craving for recognition and acknowledgement through awards. Though on one hand, there is a rise of recognizing the upcoming talent and creativity of young artist, increasing opportunity in the field of employment during puja times, but one cannot stop but question aloud the extravagance when the idol is drowned with the splendor and the puja mandaps is reduced to a tourist spots for the people of Bengal and outside.

While the Bengalis starts celebrating Durga Puja in Bengal, the rest of India also joins in the festivities with Navratri beginning from Mahalaya in the month of Aswin. But in no other part of India is the worship of Durga Puja so closely linked with the lives of the people as it is in Bengal and specially in its capital, Kolkata. The puja has assumed a cosmopolitan image in the city embracing all communities alike. It calls for participation of all residing in the city irrespective of caste, creed or religious differences. Kolkata's puja is a unique combination and reflection of artistic and aesthetic craftwork

as well. Durga Puja is not just about some religious rituals; the governing principle is a cultural connect between people of all religions and from all walks of life. It's a bond of peace and friendship. Chandranath Basu tries to capture the whole feel of the puja through his following lines – “Our Durgotsav (festival of Durga) is not a Durgotsav. Our Durgotsav is the greatest epic of this world: better than the Illiad, better than Aenied, better than Paradise Lost, better than Inferno and far more superior than Jerusalem delivered...” (Bhattacharya 2007). These lines however show how Bengalis perceives this festival with a larger than life appeal. It is much more than just a religious festival.

Walking through ten baroari pujas:

This year, October 2011, I walked through ten of these puja pandals and would like to give a brief picture of this grand affair. The puja venues I chose to visit were Badamtala Ashar Sangha, Suruchi Sangha, Ekdalia Evergreen from the South of Kolkata. I also went to College Square Sarbojonin Durgotsav Committee, Mohammad Ali Park, Santosh Mitra Square from Central Kolkata. And F.D Block Sarbojonin in Saltlake, Telengabagan Sarbojonin, Sreebhomi Sporting Club Saradotsav and Jorasankho Saater Palli Sarbojonin Durga Puja .



Mahisasurmardini : the Apple-white Goddess

Jorasankho Saater Palli's puja was basically a *para-puja*²¹ of North Kolkata, which was now trying and striving hard to compete with the upcoming wellknown Pujas. It was a puja with seventy to eighty members with Sri Nirmal Kumar Das as their President. It is in 45th year of its celebration, but they have started with this theme culture just before five years. It is interesting to trace this puja because it is among those rising and competing pujas who craves for recognition and with time is in the process of becoming a well known puja. When asked about the need to provide a theme in a puja celebration, they answered that prizes popularize a puja and also encourage them to work on the puja celebration more. It's for name, promotion and also fame that they chose to be in the competition. They have a decent budget with approx. 6.5 lacs which includes a distribution ceremony of new clothes to the needful children. They feel that it's a special ceremony of their puja besides the tollywood celebrities visiting as special attraction. The "sondhi puja" is also said be a special attraction where they do the puja with "dry fruits, sweets and chocolates" as "prasad". Their theme was "Mahisasurmardini", and they have tried to highlight this basic theme with colour effects of lotus and the idol of maa Durga. Besides the chanda collection they also go for the corporate house help. And they start their planning from the month of April or may. For them "Durga Puja" is all about "national integration" where through this cultural celebration all people without any distinction come together and celebrate this festivity. Before I was leaving they gave me a "VIP entry card" which means in those four days I can visit their puja from a different line which are only meant for the committee members, their families and other invitees of the puja. I actually felt happy and sad at the same time, I was happy to get a special invitee card but at the same time I did not like this concept of special invitation card because why in this festival also there will be separate lines for peoples to enter. It is not based on caste, creed, profession but it is biased towards association, social capital of a person. The question that arouse is why at all we need separate lines as in 'general' and 'VIP' to enter the pandal premise? The pandals which didn't gave me the priviledge to be in the VIP lines took three or four hours just to reach the pandal and do the "darshan".

²¹ Para Puja is the pujas carried out by people residing together in the same neighbourhood.



Mrinmoyee Rupee Chinmoyee Maa : the Mud Art

Badamtala Ashar Sangha was a committee comprising around thirty two core committee members with Sudhir Kumar Datta as the president of the Saradotsav. They were in their 73rd year of the puja. Their theme was “Mrinmoyee Rupee Chinmoyee Maa”. When asked about ‘why’ theme puja they had a unique answer. For them theme puja basically helps young and no so popularized artists to exhibit their art and culture before the massive crowd and eventually help the artist to showcase his/her art and help them monetarily. They had a budget of 15 lacs and interestingly they did not have any corporate sponsorship as they said. The speciality of their puja is spectacular artistic display which is very colorful and attractive and the base of the art was mud-work. ‘Mrinmoyee rupee chinmoyee maa’, means maa Durga presenting through mud-work. Generally idols are made through mud but here the pandal decorations and the theme was

mud-work. This has been an well known puja for some years now. Slowly and steadily they have made a position among the best and the well known pujas of Kolkata. These puja committee said that they donot take any sponsorships from any corprorate houses. 'chanda' collections from para and other funds are the source of their money. But it has been an attractive puja, and has own Ananda Snowcem, Rotaract Sharod Shiromoni, Asian Paints Sharrod Samman, M.P Birla Foundation, Doordarshan Shalimar Chevrolet Sharod Shamman, Ananda NIC and also Impact Safety Awards are names of the many awards they have been awarded with. Durga puja to them meant mostly exchange of ideas, thoughts through massive gatherings.



It's All Rhedyt: the German Art

Ekdalia Evergreen Club with twenty two members are celebrating their puja for the 69th year this time. Sri Subrata Mukherjee, the honorable public health engineering minister and Ballygunge MLA is the president of this puja committee. This time they had a very different concept on Indo-German friendship. The name of the theme they tried to capture was “It’s All Rhedyt” influenced by German artist Gregor Schneider is presented by Goethe-Institute / Max Mueller Bhavan India in collaboration with the Ekdalia Evergreen Club Kolkata. During his 2010 visit to Kolkata, Gregor Schneider was inspired to design a Puja pandal which would incorporate his thematic work “Haus u r” as well as contain the ideas of local artisans who make these annual and temporary artistic structures typical of this great Hindu festival of Bengal. He was quite inspired to create a work of art that would be an integral part of the Durga Pujo celebrations in his own special way. As a foreigner and a sensitive artist, he saw a mysterious and unexpected angle to the artistry of the pandal which housed the idols. In fact, he was prepared to “expect the unexpected” in Kolkata and this is the feeling he wants to convey with his design. This is a collaborative arts project conceived and designed by Gregor Schneider of Germany and fabricated by artisans of Bengal. More importantly, he wants the design to be completely executed by local artisans using locally available materials so that the collaborative nature of the construction becomes apparent to all visitors.

When asked about “why” theme based puja, the Ekdalia Committee members tried to clear that the word “theme” is not well applied and is misconceived. “Theme” in general sense of the term means ‘replica’ of certain thing. But in this case it’s the concept they are using to create certain pandal architecture etc. Subrata Mukherjee sees the puja is two different parts, the “inside” puja, which is happening in the pandal with the traditional (sabeki) idol of maa Durga, where all rituals and religious functions are performed and the “outside” puja which is happening outside the pandal where people are in the midst of celebration in the “utsov”. The budget was not talked about at all and was said to be totally confidential. And it has been noticed that the pujas where there was the presence of any MLA, Minister or Political Leaders involved as the presidentship, the budget was however kept confidential. ITC Ltd, Berger, Vodafone, Coke, Pepsi was

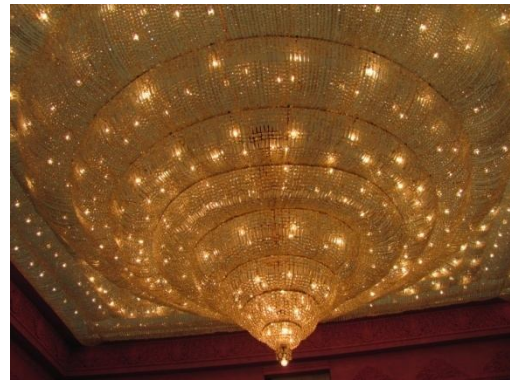
some of the corporate houses that were involved in this puja. The presence of any celebrity was told as yet to be announced, though the newspaper told that Mamata Banerjee's presence is expected in the pandal quiet eagerly. Durga puja is all about love, harmony and peace to them. However, there were no presence of any movie stars rather the pujas has been inaugurated by the German ambassador in Delhi and senior officials of Goethe-Institute in Kolkata.





Guessing the Theme

Santosh Mitra Square Sarbojonin Durgotsov Committee was a puja where the public were requested to guess the pandal which replicate some structure and the right answer would call for 5 lacs rupees as the price money. Prodip Ghosh was a wellknown Congress leader of West Bengal who was also the President of this puja committee. The theme however is said to be the assimilation of religion- sorbodhormo sammanaye purono notun sob manush. When I tried asking him about sponsorship, he said that no sponsor actually fund the whole puja so its just that the sponsors want to showcase themselves in this puja premise because in Kolkata this becomes the space during Durga puja where there are thousands of people coming each day. Budget for him was totally need based and did not comment on any approx amount of budget. Their souvenir is said to be one of the most attractive one where the souvenir committee president is Ardrish Bardhan, and leading writings, poets write in their souvenir. Durga Puja for them could be called as a national festival and these days even as international festival. The vice president of this festival is a Muslim man, which proves that religion, caste, creed nothing really binds this festivity in Kolkata or even in other parts of Bengal. Every year they need 2300 police officials to manage the security and crowd of the puja premise.



It is one of the well known pujas from the past. In 1996, they worked on a theme on Subhas Chandra Bose 100th birth anniversary and made a ship ‘kamataru’ where the rush of people was overwhelming and media also tried their level best to cover the puja.

From earth to space : An Homage to Eternity

Sreebhoomi Sporting Club Saradotsav Committee was also having a Trinamul leader as the president of the puja named Sujit Bose- the Bidhannagar MLA. It was a puja in its 39th year of celebration and having 15 members in the committee. Sambhunath Banik was the working president of the puja. The concept that they were having in constructing the pandal was “from earth to space”. But they did not want to call their puja a theme based because they had a “sabeki” protima as the previous years. This puja attracts so many crowds because of their goodwill and renound character, was their explanation of the speciality of the puja. They however were reluctant to name the

corporate houses that were associated with this puja. They started preparing for this festival from last seven to eight months. When asked about performances by celebrities, they told that there will be many celebrities present as always. Durga Puja to them is relief from the daily cores of life and also the grand social gathering.



Sreebhumi Sporting Club
Sharadotsav Committee 2011 - Theme
Subrata Gangopadhyay

An Homage to Eternity


Neither superstitions, nor any belief is enough to justify or glorify the existence and influences of the Supernatural Entity or an omnipresent energy spreading over universe and whole of our consciousness and beyond.

A poet or an artist's mind only combines, in terms of visuals statement, all these highly imaginative content of the Epic and sagacious wisdom preserved in any human culture and ancient civilizations with the innovation of science. Science had always been touching even beyond we imagine, making things possible that we think to be impossible.

Such a strange fusion takes here place; wherein an UFO (Unidentified Flying Object) stands resting over the entrance doorway to the sanctum of Infinity or here as the Goddess Durga, the mother who is holding in herself all the supernatural forces accumulated from diverse sources of terminal universe at a point of time when evil is at its catastrophe.

Concept behind the construction of the main inclined Dome over a main housing built in an idiom of Victorian architecture and on the top of it crafted a simulated the solar system symbolizing the radiation of concentric planetary of Goddess Durga as a dominant supernatural force over all evils and bearing boons to men the devotees, appears as a cosmic manifestation. It's a symbolic concept of universal imagery which the wise sages or the poet-artists imagined in the inception of human civilization and have been depicted sometimes in the old scriptures, a genesis of power embedded with all both know and unknown natural extraterrestrial forces combined is evoked as the Goddess Durga or the Mother deity with ten hands holding celestial weapons.

The present concept comes from an able and contemporary artist of our time, is also linked to that cosmic idiom as a reloid dialogue.




The Sreebhumi Sporting Club explains their theme saying that “*neither superstitions, nor any belief is enough to justify or glorify the existence and influences of the supernatural entity or an omnipresent energy spreading over universe and whole of our consciousness and beyond. Such a strange fusion takes place here, wherein an UFO (unidentified flying object) stands resting over the entrance doorway to the sanctum of infinity or here as the Goddess Durga, the mother who is holding in herself all supernatural forces accumulated from diverse sources of the whole universe at a point of time when evil is at its terminal and human survival is on the face of unbearable catastrophe*”.

The College Square Puja : The Puja known for its lights

College Square Sarbojonin Durgotsav Committee was in their 64th year of puja celebration with almost hundred as their committee members. Sri Soumendranath Mitra, (M.P) was the president of this puja. This puja also has a *sabeki protima* in their pandal but the theme of the pandal was an Iskcon temple in Mayapur which is yet to come into existence in name of Vedic Planetarium. Though all pujas have certain theme which is reflected in their pujas, but many actually said that theme is not that important. What becomes important is the name of the puja. The name itself calls for crowd. The budget approximately stands around 30 lacs. When asked about the speciality of the puja, they talked about their souvenir. This according to them is the best souvenirs of Kolkata and West Bengal. It is being kept in National Library, Sahitya Parishad etc. They believe that the celebrities are invited with an intention to increase the crowd and leading to the *sera pujo samman khetab*. They brought the Chandannagar lightings twenty five years ago by Sridhor Electrics by Sanatan Pal and till date are well known for the best lighting in Kolkata. There are more than 900 advertisements and to name some are ITC, Coke, Pepsi, UCO Bank, Allahabad bank are some of the many corporate houses who helped them funding their puja to certain extent. This is the “*strestha utsav*” of the Bengalis in Kolkata which calls for enriched literary writings, business, festivity and all other aspects of our life. They now think that they have become a name and the crowd is now pulled by the name they have in Kolkata. This pujo is now the “*srestha utsob*” for the religious, for literary works, for business and for many other things



Presenting Shakti-Pith: Highest Durga Idol of Kolkata

F.D Block Sarbojonin gave the advertisement throughout Kolkata that it has the ‘tallest’ idol in this Puja. This time they had a 52feet fibre glass idol which is unique to not only in Kolkata, West Bengal but also in India. They had 40lacs as their approximate budget. Governor came there to inaugurate the puja. Singers like Subhamita and others came on the proceeding days. And Udit Narayan came in the Bijoya Sammilani programme of this committee. The theme is “Saktipith” this time for them. This puja is only 27year old with fifty committee members. Pradip Sengupta is the president of the puja and they think that theme is obviously an integral part of this festivity which has given a new phase to this whole spectrum of celebration. Hindusthan Times, FM are the most important corporate houses who helped them though there are many more.



Durga: Women Empowerment

Youth Association of Md. Ali Park Puja Committee is the puja committee having a non-bengali as the President named Sri Hemchand Jain. This proves that Durga Puja is

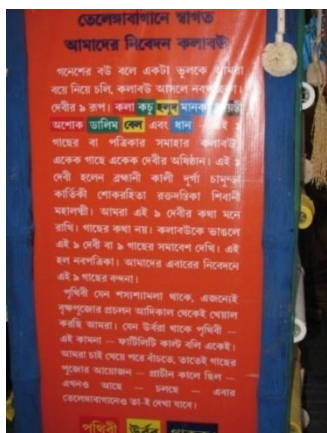
obviously not only restricted to Bengalis but to all whoever stays here. It was a group with 100 members and started in 1969. 'Theme', for them stands important because it always carries some sort of message to people, for which Durga Puja remains the best occasion. This time their theme was "women empowerment". Not only the idol but also the pandal reflects this theme which is quiet interesting because maa Durga herself stands as a symbol of women's power. They were against filling up forms in order to compete in the puja market, but become happy if they earn any prize without the form filling session. The budget they had for this puja was 20lacs approximately which is expected to increase. There were a number of corporate houses involved with this as Lux Cozi, Mala Saris, Raja etc. In their inauguration programme came the governor of the state with some other celebrities as well, on the day of Panchami in order to inaugurate the puja.





Showcasing “Nobopotrika”

Telengabagan Sarbojonin Durgotsab has been one of the most attractive pujas in this season which bagged a number of puja samman of this year. The theme was ‘kolabou’. Kolabou is generally misunderstood as Ganesha’s wife but it actually represents a form of “durga”- “nabapatrika”. Alope Lahiri is the President of this puja committee with approximately hundred members in it. They had 12 lacs rupees as their puja budget approximately. According to this committee the theme stands quiet important in this time of Durga Puja celebration. They has a number of VIP’s and Celebrity as a part of their celebration. Their blue coloured theme this year has really overwhelmingly called for great crowds. This was the 46th year of their celebration. Sananda, ITC, Exide were some of the many corporate houses who helped them in making their puja a grand success.

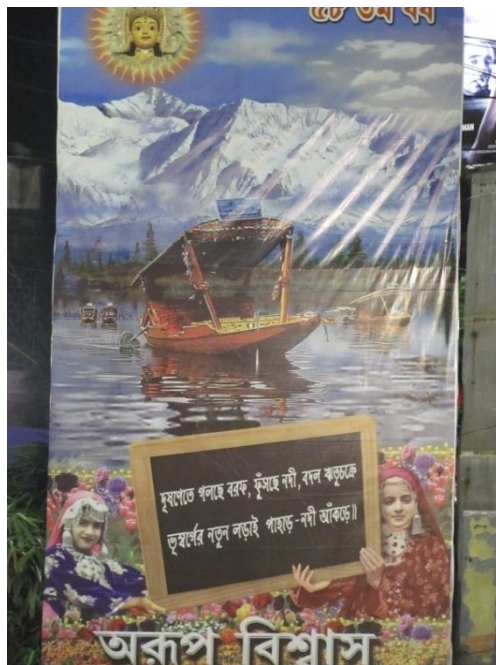




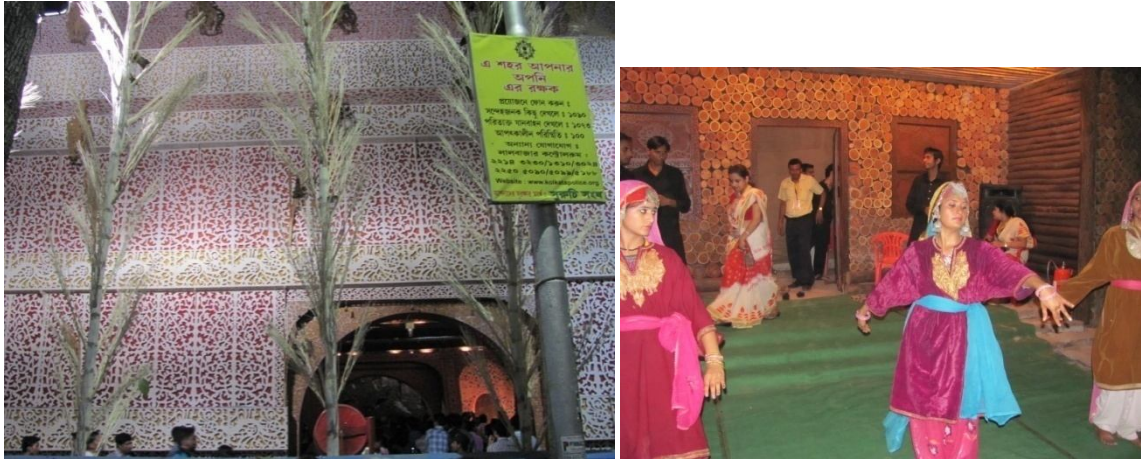
Kashmir in Kolkata: the Issue of Global Warming

The last puja that I will talk about here is Suruchi Sangha Sarbojonin Durgotsav Committee. This puja is said to be one of the best pujas in contemporary Kolkata. Sri Aroop Biswas, a trinamul leader (MLA Tollygunge) is the President of this Puja with other hundred members. This is the 58th year of their puja and their theme is global warming and Kashmir. They think that theme is and has become one of the integral part of the pujas now as it conveys a strong message not only to the fellow Calcuttans but also throughout India and worldwide. This puja remains favourite for the people because it portrays an issue in a non-formal setting. The budget was said to be around 10- 12 lacs this year. Their puja interestingly doesnot collect funds from any local people or individuals. It is totally based on souvenirs and corporate donations. The ‘chanda’ from locality are not being collected. Here as an individual I think there creates a feeling of “alienation” towards the puja and the people. People are obviously coming to see the

pandal and the puja but somehow they are not attached to the whole process unless they are a so called committee member of the group concerned. Suruchi Sangha brought performers from Kashmir to have a real feel in the puja premise. In 2009 their theme was “plant one sapling, save one life” and 2010 they portrayed “rainwater restoration”. These concepts were worldwide appreciated. American president Barack Obama, the then Prime Minister of Britain Gordon Brown, the then governor of West Bengal Gopal Gandhi and also the present governor M.K Narayanan has sent them a note of appreciation in their effort to create a social consciousness among the people. Thus year their theme is on Kashmir— *dushone golche borof, fusche nodi, bodol ritucokre/ bhusorger notun lorai, pahar-nodi aakre*. Pollution has led to the increase of carbondioxide and nitrogen dioxide in air, and with this there is a tremendous increase in cutting down of trees which leads to global warming and thus the beauty of Kashmir also stand at stake at this present scenario. They have also tried to capture and uphold the culture, arts and crafts of Kashmir as much as possible.



Every year they come up with a new idea and concept which also has a social significance. In 2011 as well they have earned a lot many *sarad sammans* from different corporate houses, which are considered as achievements.





The number of community pujas has multiplied its numbers; the innovation factor has also been worked on to attract more crowds. In 1939, the twenty-one feet idol of Shimla Byayam Samiti found proud place in the contemporary chronicles, whereas in year 2011 FD Block of Saltlake advertise themselves as the ‘tallest pratima in the city’ being of 52-feet glass idol. So, its quiet interesting to note that the changes we see in the nature of Durga Puja is more of an effect of socio-cultural, economic and political changes that has come through the times. But the spirit of celebration and the excitement to do something different has always been the prime moto of the ‘sarbojonin pujas’. The large scale expense associated with the festivity is not something new rather has been continuity from the yester years. What changed are the nature of expenditure and the nature of spending. In 1930’s also there were practice of pandal hopping and also there were excitement to see the wel-known pujas of those times. The difference now is that there are hundreds of ‘baroari’ pujas in Kolkata and the pujas are not judged by the commoners but rather get their publicity through the media houses, radio houses, large hoardings etc. The more a puja can spend on these things the more ‘well known’ it will be.

Table 1: Yearwise increase in the number of community Durga Puja in Kolkata

Year	Number of Community Pujas
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1954	300
1962	650
1968	759
1969	901
1977	1003
1979	990
1994	1104
1995	1120
2002	2000

Source: i) Ghosh, A(2000)²²

ii) Ghosal (2006)

The increase in the number of community pujas has meant that there is keen competition among localities to attract large number of people to their pandals to have darshana of the deity. As a result, innovations are carried out in the making of the image, decoration and lighting of the pandals and music played over the loudspeakers. In an effort to catch the public eye, huge amounts are spent on the construction of the pandal and lighting. The escalation in the cost of Sarbojonin Durga Puja can be gauged when we note that, in 1969, a major community Puja would cost about Rs. 37000, whereas, in 1995, their budget would range in the vicinity of Rs.1-1.5 millions. This money is no longer raised through the collection of individual subscriptions from the locality, as had been the practice earlier. Instead ‘mega’ pujas obtain sponsorships from companies through advertisements attached to puja souvenirs. Durga Puja is a phenomenon today.

²²Ghosh,Anjan: Spaces of recognition, Puja and Power in Contemporary Calcutta, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol 26, No. 2, 2000, pp-289-299

Ghosal, P. Chandika: Kolkata’s Changing Puja Ethos, *Economic and Political Weekly*, November 18, 2006

The traditional puja celebrations appear to have adapted to the demands of modernity. With sponsorships and the reach of the media, the social cohesion and the community organization that marked the festivities of the old, have been lost. With Durga Puja festivities peaking, many people feel its essence is being lost in the rush for commercialization and media publicity. It seems that a mindless crowd consumes the whole affair of the puja.

While observing the people, talking with the committee members, some food sellers and watching the high posters, it seemed that Durga Puja has become a grand phenomenon today. Modernity now being in all spheres of life, producers with their interest to update the idea of consumption, seeks to explore different areas of modernity with a view to maximise their profits. In the process, new modes of expenditure are making their way into the consumer world. The nature of our society is changing. Every alternative day new needs are being created with the technological growth. Not only there is a new way of looking at things or understanding them but also there are new 'needs' which are being created to cater the capitalistic materialistic nature. When the forces of globalization are in every part of our society, its forces cannot obviously be ignored by the city and its people. Though there has always been an urge of the people to uphold certain cultural distinctiveness in order to prove its existence, there has also been loss of many. The rise of modern nation states and global markets actually go on to "distend the horizons of the local" and ensure that "local" events are recast as national ones and vice versa". There can be no doubt that the agent themselves were conscious of the power of the modern public sphere—through the new technologies of print, photography etc. And now the whole capitalist market has become closely intertwined with the celebration of this festivity. Each year the puja comes on its own way. But what changes is the way it is being celebrated and performed. Traditional to theme—everywhere there remains a complete urge to find 'newness' in the age old festival of Durga Puja. The intensity of the crowd marks the best pujas of the city. Most of the pujas have certain kinds of 'theme' in order to attract people and also keeping in mind certain social and ritualistic issues to make it meaningful in the present context. Neither the organizers, nor the people/viewers want to be behind in the 'rat race'. To catch up to the best puja remains the wish of most

of the viewers. The television news channels and newspaper are always directing their viewers giving a 'puja-list' of about ten pujas which are compulsory to attend. So in this case we can say that the puja getting the most of publicity is the puja which is attracting more and more crowds reaching towards the 'best puja' khetab (title). There lies the power of the media in constructing certain kind of reality. The media through its cultural reception makes the culture as a commodity which is consumed accordingly. With soaring prices, puja budgets have touched the sky, but no one is ready to compromise on this annual extravaganza. Print and broadcast media, films, tourism, games and other consumables all appear to conform to the cultural paradigm of universal modernity. Religious occasions thus, are not left behind; they too have the blessings of 'sponsors' in their keen-ness to join the Culture Industry as Adorno (1975) would talk about. This in turn popularizes the culture with mass media and is consumed by the society. In addition to the middle classes, another key interest group in the shaping of public culture is the variety of entrepreneurs and commercial institutions that constituted the Culture Industries. As Appadurai and Breckenridge (1996) mention that in the quest of newer pastures, commercial houses have swooped down on an apparently alien area. Thus, the consumer-hunt has propelled big business to invade religious culture. They have now set their eyes on popular religious festivals with lucrative awards for images, decoration, pandals and lights and all most all aspects of this community religious annual festivity.

Community celebrations are important ritual signifiers. They give us a sense of belonging, but can also be the important sites of inquiry. These forms of celebrations also remain as important socialisation factors. Through the participation in community celebrations, we also participate in the construction and the consumption of culture. Usually these celebrations and festivity is repeated once in a year. Cycles of anticipation and remembering are significant human ritual that gives meaning and coherence to our lives (Smith 2002). At present times these community celebrations are no more 'holy-days' rather are all holidays for us. It's quite mockingly said by Deborah Smith that 'even the most religious holy-day celebration is often times married to its secular cousin' (Smith 2002). These events however talk a lot about the community it is performed in. The sights, tastes, smells and ambience that surround this festivity are indicators of the

values, mores and tastes of the community concerned. These are sites for affirming cultural identity, for renewing the acquaintance with the new generation and people, customs and also commerce. The whole society is generally a part of this kind of community functions. With the passing of time the commercial exploitation has become ritualised signifying character of many community celebrations of this sort. Big business, multinational corporations and commodification of the 'lifeworld' has actually overshadowed the actual charm of the religious festivity. *"Celebrations are the ritualized interruptions in the continuum of daily life which remind us of who we are, where we came from and where we are going. Our need and desire to celebrate are powerful drives. Celebrations should be vehicles for nurturing the human spirit. Too often they become a stable of indentured servants for commercial interests. If it were not that the drive to celebrate were so strong, celebrations would not be so attractive to exploit for profit."* (Shannon, 1982:14)

Habermas (1981/87) indicates that the religious institutions are important elements of public sphere. Public spheres are the arenas where people discuss many other things, especially on market, state which are of common interest than only about their private issues. But with the advent of the big forces of media and money, the space of public sphere has been narrowed down, colonized and subjugated by the system. It's even interesting to note when he talks about the 'colonization of life-world'-- the lifeworld means the shared common understandings, including values, that develop through face to face contacts over time in various social groups, from families to communities. It's a notion drawn from Alfred Schutz and Edmund Husserl²³ (1936). It basically indicates a lack of space of interaction of the actors in the public space; it shows the domination of 'technologisation' of our daily lives, the importance of money and media in formation of the ideas. In a way then it could also be referred to the community celebrations where people are been directed by the media and advertisements that how are they supposed to act. The own ideas of human beings are being snatched out from their mind where market and state generated ideas are put into our head and we are expected to behave accordingly. Capitalist market economies formed the basis of this civil society but it

²³ In "Crisis of European Sciences".

actually affect to much more than just forming the base of the society. He tried to make sense of the growing intervention of the 'formal systems' in our everyday lives as parallel to development of the welfare state, corporate capitalism and the culture of mass consumption. 'Commercialization' in general term means to make something commercial in character; to emphasise the profitable aspects at the expense of quality; make available as a commodity. In this study, the term 'commercialization' basically refers to an activity or festivity which is commercialised through the intervention of external capitalist forces and sponsorship culture, which traditionally was not by nature commercial.

Private capital has successfully moulded the puja atmosphere by becoming an important part of the festivity of Durga puja celebration in Kolkata. Swati Ghosh (2000) mentions that some fifteen years ago, it was just an expression of tribute by Asian Paints towards the artistic excellence shown forth through the gesture of award presentation. On part of the organizers, it gradually surfaced as an active participation with a focus towards the '*Asian Paints Sharad Samman*', the award for excellence as they called it. The panel of judges was chosen from the city's top celebrities that included noted authors, painters, film-stars, stage artists and singers. In spite of late initiatives, now many new private companies have stepped in Pujas trying to highlight Bengal's small scale industries and handicrafts which were selected this year for the "Keventers Samman" awards. The jury includes another impressive list of intellectuals from the city. Series of awards were announced jointly by Snowsane India and Anandabazar Patrika for the best 'protima', best 'mandap' and best lighting. Another set of Sharad Sammans have been announced by Priya Food Products. An award for the 'artiste of the year' was announced by the Asian Paints along with prizes for the best puja and one for the discovery of the year. Dabur Chyawanprash published a puja metro guide, comprising a complete schedule of visiting the prized puja mandaps. Bharat Petroleum Corporation published a list mentioning the high points each of the puja pandals worth a visit. Private Companies have started organizing competition, opinion polls, photo exhibition and many other events alike. Berger Paints sponsored prizes for the 'best puja' on the internet. Cadbury announced 'candid contest' of the best photograph and creative piece on the celebration of the pujas. Snowsane and Anandabazar Patrika stepped further into the literary world

promoting the best novel, best story, and the best piece of prose published in selected puja specials, along with the best audio albums. Durga puja today is a sponsored event. It is sponsored by the private companies. The sponsorships and patronage comes about in different forms. The magnanimity of the show speaks for itself with no less than a political leader or a national hero coming to inaugurate the show and the extensive arrangement of tacking thousands of people for five long days and nights together. In a discussion among some intelligentsia in a TV (ATN TV, 1pm/7th November 1993) show confirmed this process of commercialization and corporatization of puja by saying “.....*as long as the sponsors donot intervene and dictate terms, they are welcome.....for money is a stark necessity for any cultural event whatsoeversports has accommodated sponsorships and vibrates with life, so why not the pujas.....and as yet, sponsors have helped in improving and maintaining the worth of tradition and ambience of the pujas*” (S.Ghosh:2000). At this present societal structure, capital frames all the dimensions of festivity. It defines the contours of the cultural spaces embracing the pujas. It bounds the creative spontaneity with rewards for innovation and refinements. The taste and preferences of the few are allowed to dominate over that of the others. The capital remains the pace-setter, it does not forget to be environment conscious with an eye towards the efficient management of fire and traffic. The festival has always been a season of bonanza for producers of all sorts of consumer goods from cosmetics to dress materials, from kitchen wares to furniture.

Changing social structure and its impact on puja:

Previously, Durga Puja was an affair of the high castes which through time and space changed gradually to wealthy ‘babu’ class and then to a commoners- *baroari* or *sarbojonin* festival now. Though it has always been a community festivity in the sense that previously, even though the function was performed in the zamindar family but the whole village use to come together to make it a fuctional celebration. Hutum in his noksha while discussing on ‘*Durgotsob*’ says that these days even ‘*punte-teli*’ performs the puja, which signifies that even the lower castes during the British period started celebrating the pujas in their houses in order to show and enhance their status and also to please the Britishers. Then Durga Puja became an important celebration for the national

leaders, but the festivity was mostly hinduised unlike now, during the 21st Century when irrespective of caste, creed, religion, people involve themselves in this community festival. Thus, in a way modernity has its impact on this social and cultural religious festivity where this categorization has now been replaced with forces of different nature. As Dipankar Gupta would say that modernity is significantly noticed when there is changes between the relations between people. Much before consumerism and technological development, the codes of conduct between classes and strata underwent changes. Thus here as well we notice the changes and movement of this festivity from one social class to other with the changing period of time.

Another factor which also needs to be discussed is the changing nature of the family structure which also in a way has an impact on the changing trend of the puja celebration. As A.M Shah (1996) would say that the increasing numbers in nuclear families must not only be noticed rather the connection of the families with their joint families must also be taken account. In a way, due to urbanization, employment opportunities and other social capital, people generally migrate to the urban spaces forming 'nuclear' families which in a way also impact on the 'sarbojonin' puja of the recent times. People staying together in a para or community tend to come together to celebrate this festivity with great enthusiasm. But the other trend is also noticed where there are celebrations of puja in traditional ways in familial settings. In that case, the family members may not be there staying in the native place throughout the year, but tend to come together during this celebration, which also remains a time of get-together for them.

The earlier homely aspect of the worship enabled women to involve themselves in different aspects of the domestic sphere during the period of the festival, till the mid-20th C. But the trend seems to have changed now. The early 20th C puja epitomizes the traditional role of women. The housewives or women in the home were in charge of ritualistic chores where they played a key role in instilling a homely spirit in the social get-together that had been part of the occasion. The focus now has strategically shifted to the image, the pandals, decoration, illumination and other showy consumables to overwhelm the public. The decorative items are of sole indicators of excellence now. It

seems that we have reached the time of professionalism. Earlier, it was more like a *jajmani system*, where different tasks were carried out by different castes of the village which now has been replaced by the capability to adapt with the changing social conditions. There now rise a profession of “Theme-Maker”, which was not there during earlier times when people performed the puja in their *thakur-dalan* and later in simple pandals. The professional theme makers are coming into existence, which was not the trend earlier. Now with the intervention of sponsorships, the competition has gone much higher with rise in the affordability of the people which calls for “professional” and efficient work and conceptualization of thinking about some “new-ness” in the old puja custom. It in a way portrays a wide range of creative art and architecture from different parts of Bengal and abroad showcasing them in the pandals of Kolkata which also gives recognition to these upcoming professionals.

The organizers aspire for the stature of accomplished showmen to please their promoters. Because of the sponsors, the prominent puja pandals have adapted to theme based decoration. The craving for coveted awards fuels artificially stimulated fantasies that are alienated from the concrete, real selves. It has acquired a unique dimension with hordes of frenzied people, pandal hopping, throughout the city not to miss the top ten lists of the select and the prized pujas of the season. The “religiosity” remains but in a very different nature of the term. People revolve around the puja but with no so called religious ritualistic practice in it. Enjoyment becomes the mission and there comes the fulfillment of the many created “needs” which grasp an individual in this whole process of commercialization and marketisation without even conscious realisation. The puja pandals has now been reduced to a site of ‘tourist’ exploration. A dominant Bengali daily (AnandaBazar Patrika, 7th October, 2011) notes the crowds of different pujas on the “nabami” night. The list according to the newspaper has been given below:

<u>Name of the Puja</u>	<u>At 8pm</u>	<u>At 10pm</u>	<u>At 12pm</u>
95 pally	8000	10,000	12,000
Naktala Udayan	7000	9000	10,000

Barisha Club	6000	8000	10,000
Notun Dol	6000	8000	10,000
Hindusthan Park	6000	8000	10,000
Telengabagan	3000	4000	5000
Desopriyo Park	3000	4000	5000
Jubobrindo	3000	4000	5000
Kumortuli Sarbojonin	3000	3000	4000

The busy schedule of the people to catch up the best pujas also reduces the culture of “adda” to a great extent, which could be related to the British philosopher Bertrand Russell’s idea of ‘social gossip’ that referred to two or more people who are usually like minded, discussing anything under the sun and completely ignorant of time, cause and effect. But with the great speed of life and the competition of catching up the best pujas, time for this ‘adda’ and social interaction becomes quiet less. In the well-known pandals people are not even allowed to stand after they have finished observing the pandals and idols. It is now a culture among the “abasan” pujas and “barir-pujas”, where puja is yet to be corporatized and commercialized totally. The concept of “adda” has been commercialized where the corporate and capitalist enterprises enter this field of social interaction through different games, quizzes, or competitions arranged in these housing complexes.

And last but not the least, the relationship of God and Man has also changed a lot where the sphere of “sacred” and “secular” seem to have changed. The secular has entered into the space of “sacred” and the “sacred” enters in the life of the everydayness of people making it secular. Durga Puja is more of a “utsob” than of a religious “puja”. The importance now is not on the rituals of the festival, not on the Brahmin and his acts to perform the festivity rather the presentation of the puja, the coming together of people, the recognition, the acknowledgment of the masses etc. And the question thus remain, whether “Durga” only remains an idol among the grand showcasing of festivity or its just the entry point of the celebration where the whole festival centres around “maa Durga”.

Puja in our times: ways of seeing

Politics in Puja : This year what has been noticed is the participation of the political leaders as the President of many puja committees. Their participation cannot be trivialized as their names are mentioned in the pamphlets, posters etc. However, the real burden of work has to be taken by the vice-president or the working president of the Committee. The presence of Mamata Banerjee is also expected by them. And as I noticed that organizers of many such pujas were very much reluctant to disclose or even talk about an approximate budget of the puja which creates a discomfort in accepting the fact that these names actually do not matter in the pujas celebration. There remains a political agenda and a propagating mission by appointing the political leaders to the post of president of the puja committee and with some of their political posters in and around the puja premises.

Other than the capitalist interventions in every sphere of the Puja, the political-religious connection seems quite interesting as well. What could be noticed this year is the contest to gain popularity within the Trinamul Congress with party colleagues going all out to compete each other in the role of chief patrons. Budgets of several previous modest pujas has soared high which is evident from the scale of preparation and hoardings across the city with the names of the associate leaders in bold. The chief minister is expected to visit the pandals, and in some pandals she is also expected to inaugurate. There are some puja committees who have governor as the chief guest with some Bollywood or Tollywood personalities. The presence of the Chief Minister and the Governor or other political personalities probably talks about two aspects. One is that there is a collective effort to make the festival a success, when the common mass could connect to the political leaders as well. The other fact that could be deduced from the presence of political leaders, posters and hoardings of their parties around the puja premises is that—political propagandas are propagated during the time of celebrations. The big banners with the name of the president in bold, talks much more than just the organizer of the pujas. It is quiet interesting to note that in spite of the leaders being in the place of the “*sobhapoti*”, there remains a working president who does the actual work

and take all the responsibilities but is hidden somewhere in whole process of big names and big banners.



Profitization of the religious festivity: Shopping has always been an integral part of the puja affair. Starting from garments to jewellery, cars, gadgets all has equal market during this period. Earlier people use to travel from village side to the city for shopping for their friends and relatives. In 1927, there was a train run by the Eastern Bengal Railway named Pujo Bazaar Special which reached the remotest of places in the state with different items of clothes, culinary, cosmetics, utensils etc. From 31st August to 1st October, the train with three compartments travelled 1,124 ¼ miles, stopping at twenty stations. The average daily turnout at each stations was 5000 and articles worth more than Rs. 1 lakh were sold.²⁴ New magazines, new music are released during this period as special publications. Sales in the festive season are much higher than other times of the year, but still the demands for the new song albums are not like the previous times. Previously, even *saradiya sankha* which are the puja magazines were also less in numbers and had a

²⁴ 'Pujobazar Special', Anandabazar Patrika, 13 Oct 1985 in Sudeshna Banerjee.2006. Durga Puja Celebrating the Goddess : Then and Now. Rupa. Kolkata. pp-61

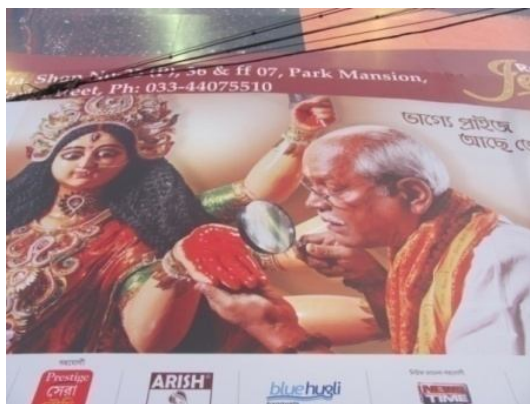
better quality than that of now. Anandabazar Patrika brought out a separate magazine in 1926. Later, *Desh*, *Dainik Basumati*, *Jugantar* and *Hindusthan* also published puja magazines featuring stories, essays, etc. Theatres and movies during this period also have huge business in this time. Food being another core part of the puja, from street vendors to the restaurant owners all make good profits. Durga puja provides the biggest opportunity for the sale. The street vendors generally try to flock in and around the puja pandals to have a good amount of customers. However, the ones in the pandal premise need to pay certain amount to the puja committee in order to acquire the opportunity to grab the place. It has become a grand carnival with intense commercialization and urbanization.



During this month of the puja, Kolkata is all shaded with different kinds of hoardings advertising about some puja and its unique theme, the corporate houses which are there to prize the best pujas and mandaps. There is whole lot of advertisements of food, restaurants, clothes etc. Its also quiet interesting to see that, there are even prizes for “the best BHOG” in the pujas as well. *Bhog* is the food that is cooked for maa Durga on certain days of the ritual. This was sponsored by Emami Tasty and healthy Cooking oil. The other advertisement speaks the following, “ Are your recipes finger licking good? Grab this opportunity to become the idol cook in your complex”. This was sponsored by The Telegraph, Berger Paints mainly and co-sponsor as Canon, Nokia, Pantaloons, Kara-

skincare wipes, Tupperware, Parle Top, Royal Challenge. The gifts sponsor are Oreo, Monginis, Saregama, Columbia Asia, Blue and Blues, B18 Salon, Amoda, Irony and Croissant. TV partners were Sananda, Radio Partner's as 91.9 Fm, Web partner as 'Ananda Utsab 2011' and Outdoor Partner as AD Touch. There were even contest of fresh face called as "Pujor Nondini" presented and sponsored by Ponds and Anandabazar Patrika and Radio Partner's as 91.9 Fm friends. The camera moving around in the specific stalls of different puja pandals may spot a new face and then award "her".

Now it has also become a product of competition, that too in the pujas happening in the 'abasan' that is in a local complex or flats. Royal and Stag Mega Durga Puja Awards 2011, presented their advertisement in a very catchy way which goes like this "Tagore had dreamt of a world that has been broken up by narrow domestic walls. We bring it alive with the world's 1st digital sharodiya awards that are beyond the borders of just Kolkata, West Bengal or even India. It will be a competition amongst the best pujas across the globe. Its simple. Just enter your pujo on our website and our Facebook page. The whole world will see your pujo online and vote for the best. There are a number of categories to enter this mega pujo contest. To win, its not the budget but your spirit that needs to be large." From 'theme' to the 'contest' Durga Puja has actually reached to a 'glocal' level. Tourists from different parts of India and also from world come to Kolkata during its autumnal celebration to catch a glimpse of the famous "Durga Puja".





Puja through media : The newspapers and TV channels show as their most important news direct the mass pointing out which puja to attend and which pujas has what uniqueness in it and which are the pujas that got prized as the best pujas. It also includes celebrity talking about their dressing style in particular days, which makes us to think that the style of dressing is also however tried to be controlled by the media. There is this continuous coverage of the “puja porikroma” in all the news channels as if there is no other news happening in those four days of the month. Century Ply 2011 also presented “Sharodiya Shera 25 Puja Parikroma Bus”, the passes of which were given as prize of radio FM shows. Not only that the daily soaps also popularize the culture through their

episodes mostly portraying the woman protagonist as maa Durga, for example the heroine of the serial punish the evil-doer in the family representing women power on the day of “*Dashami*” when mythologically maa Durga helps Ram to kill Ravana which signifies good over evil. Thus it also becomes a part of the “culture industry”. Moreover, Baudrillard’s discussion on “simulations” (1983) would also be relevant here where he would say that the consumption of images and signs through the media stands more important in comparison with the material reality. The culture of the fashion trends, communications, opinion polls and many other aspects are constructed by the mediated images. All the news-channels focusing on certain pandals and stating it as “must-watch” may apparently seem simple but it is actually a construction of a social world with certain models and simulations to capture the attention of the viewers which consequently attract the crowd or make the crowd move according to their wish-list. Habermas’s (1981/87) concept of “colonization of life-world” gets reinforced through this powerful construction of media images. Puja becomes a grand spectacle to the mass, where the creative theme, its decoration, lightings attract us more than the “puja” in actuality. People even watch this whole festivity through the eyes of television and internet. This showcasing of puja through media becomes “true” because it appears and seduces and attracts the attention of the people propagating its message and images. This kind of construction of images and spectacle reduces the thinking ability of the viewers and thus it gains the power over thinking which in a way alters the way of seeing things of the people. It paralyses the viewers when they start believing the constructed and mediated simulations of these idea constructed in the industry of media, who make their share of profit by dominating their thought process and colonizing their creative and critical imagination. The winners of the contest amongst the pujas were selected by Public poll, where people were requested to SMS and help win the best puja among some given options, and accordingly the ‘best’ pujas are selected from different regions. In some cases there were celebrities who also chose the Pujas in rank. The rank of the Pujas are not only given according to ‘theme’, ‘idol’, ‘lightings’ and ‘pandal’ but also ‘how much safe’ a puja is in terms of electricity and crowd management. It seems that the people are involved consciously in this whole process of awards and ceremonies created by the media, whereas the reality seems disappointing. Appadurai notes that the electronic media impact on a greater part

of society than the earlier traditional mass media. Thus it also gives new pastures to be explored using new resources and new imagination for the construction of ‘imagined selves and imagined worlds’. The recent trend is to be associated with glomour, cosmopolitanism, and other fields which tend to subvert, interrogate, and also transform the contextual realities thus transforming the daily discourse of life. This imagination also enters into the domains to art, crafts, culture and becomes a part popular culture of the people.



However, certain things have also become a tradition, as the playing of “Mahisasuramardini” on the day of Mahalaya. Previously, in 1932, this programme was broadcasted on the day of “Shasthi” but two years later, it became a routinized norm to be played on the dawn of “Mahalaya”. When we were children, there was only one ‘Mahisasuramardini’ show in the “Doordarshan” (Kolkata), but now with countless upcoming Bengali channels there are countless shows featuring this show. Now on the day of ‘Mahalaya’ different channels like Zee bangle, Alpha Bangla, ETV Bangla and many others have their different shows scheduled at different times of the day. It was a charm to get up early in the morning to listen to Mahisasurmardini, but now it can also be

found in CDs and VCDs, which diminishes the craving of listening to these, age old recitations.

Awards in the religious fair: The awards are now not only an affair of any one organization rather there are awards of many leading corporate houses. Hereby I mention only a very few of them. ‘CESC The Telegraph True Spirit Puja 2011’ was held in association with Jain Infraprojects and Lux Cozi. The initiative was partnered by Calcutta Police, CMC and West Bengal Fire Services and supported by the Bengal and Berger Paints. According to them the ‘*model puja*’ khetab’ went to Chetla Agrani Club. ‘*True to tradition*’ was given to Sahapur Colony (East) Sarbojonin Durga Puja Committee, ‘*Five Star Puja*’ goes to Santoshpur lake Polly and Olabibitola Sarbojonin Durgotsab Committee. ‘*Four Star*’ Pujas were 66 Palli Sarbojonin Durgatsob Committee, Behala Fatak sarbojonin Durgotsav, Naktala Udayan Sangha, Jorasankho 7er Palli Sarbojonin Durgotsav. ‘*Puja that cares*’ goes to Behala Natun Dal, ‘*Truly Green*’ sponsored by Berger Paints goes to DumDum Park Bharat Chakra Puja Committee, ‘*True to Social Commitment*’ sponsored by Lux Cozi goes to Lalabagan Yubak Brinda (Nabakur Sangha). Suruchi Sangha gains the award of ‘*Truly Imaginative*’ and ‘*Hall of Fame*’ goes to Barisha Youth Club. Asian Paints Sarrad Shamman started around twenty six years ago to honour the three best pujas—“*Bochorer Bismoy*” (Best Discovery) “*Nobo Noksha*” (innovative excellence) and “*Protima Shilpi*”(Best idol maker). This years the winners for Discovery of the year is ‘Naskarpur Sarbojonin’, the other winners were, ‘Suruchi Sangha’, ‘Nalin Sarkar Street’ and ‘Naktala Udayan Sangha’—which also was awarded the best artisan of the year to Mr. Bhabatosh Stutar. The best innovative award went to Chokroberia Sarbojonin. Star Ananda, one of the leading 24 hours Bengali newschannel also was the awardees of “Blockbluster Puja” which went to Suruchi Sangha, Alipore and “Megastar” to Natun Dal, Behala. There were many other prizes for the ‘superstar’ pujas. Other than these mentioned names of the awards there are many more, like ‘Exide Ami Shrestha’, ‘Shalimar Paints Rotary Sharad Swikriti’, ‘Sonar Bangla Sarrad Somman’, ‘Protidin Puja Perfect’, ‘Highest Crowd Attendance Award’, ‘Samsung Sarrad Samman’ and many other countless names. Yuba Kalyan Sarrad Somman is one of the important mentions among the awardees names which is a joint

initiative by West Bengal Child Protection Cell and Lokayukta, West Bengal Network and the total event is organized by Paschim Bangla Yuba Kalyan Manch. They give our prizes for ‘*shestho bhabna*’, ‘*bocchorer srsthi*’, ‘*srestho poribesh*’, ‘*srestho protima*’, ‘*strestho shilpi*’, ‘*shestho baroari*’, ‘*srestho somaj bondhu*’. Its quite interesting to note that none of the sphere however is kept untouched by the corporate houses. Now it becomes the question that this new award system actually encourages the pujas in getting better each other with concepts, ideas, or just create an unnecessary fuss which actually loses the charm of the previously celebrated community puja.



Puja through the People’s Eye: When asked the significance of “theme” and keeping the “*sabeki*” idol, one of the committee members in Ekdalia Evergreen would respond that there are two phases of the puja happening in Kolkata’s Sarbojonin Pujas, one is inside the pandal where maa Durga stays for four days and are worshipped and the other is the outside celebration of the puja. He believes that the *sabeki murti* stands as a symbol of tradition while the celebration out is more according to the trends and needs of the time.

Some however believe, as one organizer of Jorasankho Saat’er Palli, that the celebration outside the pandal is taking over the inside ritualistic religiosity. People are more interested in clicking pictures and seeing the artistic creation of the pandals rather than really concentrating much on the puja as such. As a result they also want recognition which made them focus on their theme and work on the concept which would call for “fame” with name of their earlier para puja. He would agree that now the competition is

not only to showcase the best theme of the puja rather also to “buy” the theme from the theme-makers before it is taken by anyone else.

To generalize the different idea of what Durga Puja actually meant for the individuals, they would mostly give a very similar perspective that it is the time when people come together celebrate in full energy buying new clothes, having good food and going beyond the daily chores of their hectic life. It is not a religious festival alone rather a grand festivity. Durkheim’s concept of functionality thus comes time and again through people’s perception of the puja. It is also quite noticeable that Chetla Agrani Club has Firhad Hakim (Calcutta Port MLA and municipal affairs minister) as the chief in administrating the pujas. There theme was a temple and a mosque standing side by side. The pandal was being made inside a park that already had a mosque. The organizers are making a replica of an ancient ‘mandir’ beside it. Following this idea they belief that the sound of ‘azan’ will merge with temple bells ringing simultaneously inside the pandal. It somehow really stand significant in pointing that unlike the pre-independence and pujas in 1950s, Durga Puja now has a different dimension of its own coming out from the narrow boundaries of religion, caste, creed etc. And almost all the committee or puja organizers have certain social works done through out the year for the needy people. They organize blood donation campaign, donate clothes etc. An organizer of Badamtala Ashar Sangha would say that this is the time when through the pandal designing, the designers, artists, craftsmen earn their share of money and also has the opportunity to showcase their creative potential in front of the great mass.

The food stalls are really busy where interacting with people becomes quite difficult because either they are busy buying food or having them or selling. But talking to them shows that they wait for this time of the year to come as it yields them the highest profit. Though all could not afford putting up stalls inside the pandal premise because that needs contribution to the puja committee, thus they try to sit near the entrance and exit to get the attention of the crowd. The restaurants remain over flooded throughtout the day and night. From puchkas, to jhalmuri, rolls, to biryani stalls are found along the sides of the roads which have crowds overflowing the stalls.

When asked about the puja magazine to a middle aged man in the pandal, he replied that the previous craze for “*saradiya*” *sonkhas* from *Anandabazar Patrika*, namely *Desh*, *Anandalok*, *Anandamela*, along with other publishing houses however is also lost to some extent, when asked to people they say one reason as the busy schedule even in the days of pujas and the second as the quality of writing in the new magazines. He doesnot find the charm as the early writers/ authors as Sunil Gangopadhyay, Samaresh Mazumder, Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay and obviously Satyajit Ray and thus do not feel like reading them more than once. But still *Saradiya Sankha* has its own importance in the lives of Bengalis and Durga Puja. In this festivity many things has changed, whereas many has remained the same.

A young college girl when asked to comment on the growing trend of corporatization of this religious festival, she would say that though we lament in the loss of human creativity, human interaction and loss of human soul, we have no other way but to accept the change and be in the mechanized, technologized and institutional dominance. From the simple relationship between two people to the highest institution of our society, everything has been bureaucratized and dominated by the capitalistic monetary interventions which eventually change its nature.

One question that has striken me in this whole process is that there were hardly any woman *sobhapoti* (president) in any of these pujas I have visited. On one hand women power is being portrayed and on the other hand we still find women confined in inner space of the domestic sphere rather than organizing a public grand celebration. They may be present in all spheres doing their piece of work but recognition as the leader of the leading puja committees are generally found to be men.



However, the Durga Puja which was once called the '*solo-ana puja*' because of its all encompassing nature where the whole village use to come together in order to celebrate the puja contributing in some way or the other has now become a great affair of 'consumption'. Be it food, clothes, advertisements or TV serials we are consuming the puja in different ways and nature. Durga Puja is the time when the demonic powers are been killed by the sacred and true power of the goddess. But in present day, maa Durga herself has been sublimed with the 'demonic' capitalistic powers and huge externalities. 'Fetishism' is at its best during this time of the community celebration. The spectacular huge pandals also reminds us of the huge money that has been spend to make it. The 'logic of market' and the 'power of money' proves that the creativity of human power has now been judged with the dominant ideas of 'great-pujas'. Its also sad to note that the 'themes' which stands as the most creative and new potent ideas are also bought and sold in the market. Thus as soon as the puja ends on 'doshomi', the ideas of the next year puja starts culminating. The decoration, lighting, puja-idols, food, recreation all make us feel the magnanimity of the festivity. As Habermas rightly points out that the logic of market has actually colonized our daily phenomenon of lives be it education, domesticity, religion etc. The competition, the increasing intervention of

corporate cultures and business has however turned the domains of 'sacred' and 'profane'. Now the previously thought of 'sacred' sphere of "puja" now loses its 'sacred' nature to a great extent and stand as just an 'idol' among the huge crowd who are also in the rat-race of catching up with the best pujas in the city. The community pujas of previous times where different people of the community or 'para' contributed and made efforts to make the puja happen has now turned into the business of business houses and the corporate houses who are the ones to contribute in huge numbers in return of advertisements and the role of 'individual' diminishes with the enhancement of 'organizational and institutional' power. The idea of individual intervention in decorating the pandal, making the bhog by the female members of the 'para', 'adda' in the puja mondop has now been replaced by the "theme", professional designers and monetization of "time". This kind of community puja are now only seen inside some 'abashan' and small 'paras' who still carry out the pujas with individual efforts and creative participation. Thus we can say that the nature of the 'public sphere' has changed with the nature of 'sacred' space in this religious festival.

CHANGING TIMES: PUJA AS A SPECTACLE

The transformation or the changes in the celebration of Durga Puja is quite interesting in the sense that it could be closely linked with the socio-cultural and economic changes of our society. Ideally, the manifestation of maa Durga is that of a feminine power. “*Shakti*” represents women empowerment. However the Shaiva manifestation of “ardhanarisvara” integrates the female and male principles of life. Though women were held in high esteem in ancient times, the scenario has changed thereafter. The high growing rates of female foeticides, rapes, dowry deaths, etc makes us question whether the worship of female power has only stayed just as a norm or is a part of our everyday life? Changes and development has occurred, but the question remains whether the development has only happened in the externalities of life or has also entered our mind? Are we thinking critically or just going with the flow? Are we taking our decision of change ourselves or are they being forced upon us? These queries cannot be answered and solved in a single discussion, rather is something on which we necessarily should contemplate and think upon. The portraying of Durga Puja in this capitalistic market scenario is just one little aspect of discussion which could make us think consciously on other issues of “created needs”, “corporatization and commodification of our life world”, the colonization of our thought process and the relevance of religion in our day to day lives. The concern of this paper here is not to give a judgement of thoughts whether what is happening is right or wrong, good or bad, ethical or unethical, rather to make ourselves think and rethink about certain things which may normally in everyday life seem very simple and natural but the question that arise is whether they are actually as are natural as they are portrayed to be.

One cannot avoid but notice that Durga Puja has always been a function of extravagance and expences. During the British period, the emerging ‘babu’ community always tried to showcase their wealth through the celebration of this puja as a “status-symbol”. So a question again arises as to, why suddenly this botheration with the issue of “money” and expenditure in the pujas. Here, I would like to point out that it is because of the nature of the “money”. Earlier, it was more or less the wealthy class who used to celebrate this religious festival according to their affordability and showcased their private property to gain respect and status in front of other people and also the British

officials. But now, consumption has become a compulsion. It has been turned into a necessity that we cannot avoid. We need to spend money on clothes, food, etc in order to make ourselves happy. It is not something which is done by a handful number of people rather it has become a practice of the mass-culture, which makes it a matter of concern. The process of globalization and modernity may not necessarily bring transformation in our lives but it does influence some aspects of our culture are definitely being influenced. And as Durga Puja has always been a festivity where there has been a reflection of other aspects of life in the celebration, it is noticed that though the change in time has brought a great deal of changes in the pattern and structure of puja celebration; the excitement and effervescence related to this festival had not really changed much among the Bengalis. The 'theme' pujas have replaced the 'sabeki' pujas to a great extent but they too have their own importance. Each 'theme' puja puts up a new issue and portrays it through the pandals and 'murti' (idol). The religious space not only is kept limited with worshipping, praying rather it is also used as a space of learning where people becomes conscious about certain issues like global warming, women empowerment, different usages of jute etc. It portrays a different kind of art-form and also provides a platform to those artists who are otherwise not acknowledged or appreciated. But this upcoming craze of coming with new concepts, ideas, architecture, lightings and idol also makes 'committee' compete with each other. There comes the 'rat-race' in order to win the 'best' prize. The offering of 'bhog', a very basic ritual of any pujas has also not being able to stay away from the clutch of the capitalist market. The parameters of assessment have been diverse ranging from save traffic rules, arrangements for senior citizens to security of the pandal hoppers, drinking water and many others. Extra points are also added to the puja committee who does social services throughout the year and it has been noticed that all the puja pandals does associate themselves with some sort of welfare activities, which in a way also enhance the wellbeing of the locality. The previous 'baroari' pujas were organized with collections or 'chanda' that is subscriptions, where the people were engaged personally with the pujas. It is now being replaced by the corporate sponsored cultures where people stand in long queues for hours just to catch a glimpse of the well-known pujas. Another interesting thing that has been noticed is the presence of the political party leaders as the '*sobhapati*' of different pujas. The budgets of many middle-

ranged pujas have soared high. Political propaganda is being done through the big hoardings and advertisements put up at the entrance of the pujas. Thus, it is clearly noticed that the power of 'money' and the capitalistic structures have come to control the entire process of this festivity, which may not strike as an issue if seen casually, but a deeper eye on this process would actually reveal that things have changed its nature to a great extent.

The entering of the big powers of capital and corporate structures in the locales of our life and cultures have also changed the nature of 'sacred' to a great extent. The changing nature of religious activity is also created by a free market in culture, wherein different religions are compelled to enter into the process and thus are kind of forced to change its nature and characteristic in order to accommodate both religions and secular commercial amusements in a cultural marketplace. However, it is only an illusion that the traditional forms of religions are declining; rather the forms are being reinforced by the modern socio-cultural innovations. While "culture war" is the term that has been used to describe the battle between religion and popular culture, the interaction between religion and marketing seems to be less of a war than a negotiation. Religion and marketing are not, in fact, at war. Nor are they mutually exclusive. Rather, there is a symbiotic relationship between religion and marketing. Religion and marketing are both forms of meaning making. Religion and marketing are both part of identity creation and share a similar process of acceptance by their users. In all, these institutions are much more alike than they are different. 'Market' has entered even in the remotest of not only this religious affair, but also in all spaces of our private and personal life as well. Even if we lament the cultural impacts of corporate globalization; the inundation of the tele-visual media, the increasing centrality of consumption, the constant refashioning of the taste and aspirations of middle and upper class urban folk can actually not be avoided in any circumstances. It is being said that the Indian middle classes are benefitting the most from neo-liberalism and globalization. The pro-market reforms have brought the state and the corporate sector in a closer collaboration with the religious sentiments. The neo-liberal reforms and globalization are creating the circuits of demand and supply which did not exist before. The technological infrastructure and the economic logic of

globalization have actually touched every spheres of our life.²⁵ With the opening up of the markets and accompanying liberalization and privatization as a part of globalization, a lot of changes have come in our ways of living. Technological innovations especially communication technology has changed the notions of “private” and “public” sphere.

A resurgent middleclass had benefitted out of this social and economic mobility. It promotes a consumeristic culture and also leads to changes in the attitudes and values within the individuals and the society. The new middle class in India is however different from the traditional middle class with respect to income level, life style and social outlook. The lucrative packages of the multinational companies vest the middle classes with the purchasing power which ultimately lead them to be the consumerist class. Celebration of the culture of consumerism is one of the visible consequences of globalization. This is evident from the proliferation of mega malls, marts, multiplexes and magnificent markets. This is also obvious from the emerging brand conscious life styles, refined tastes, choices and preferences. The culture of consumerism is not only about consuming more, rather refers to a classy lifestyle. The distinctive traits of such lifestyles are concerns for brand equity, craze for the latest, and proliferation of wants over needs and a tendency of exhibitionism. The desire for the latest is systematically kept up by the Durga puja organizations by means of continuously coming up with something “new and different”. It is also sustained by stimulating a desire to stay ahead of others. “Wants” are manufactured desires generated by advertisements patronized by media. Globalization had actually led to multiplication of wants over needs and a trend of unabashed consumerism. In this kind of cultures human beings are reduced to the status of products who will consume the other products which capitalism produces. In a way we have been colonized by the cultural imperialism not only mentally and psychologically but also through the colonization of our culture and ways of life.

Puja through the changing time also changes itself adequately with the forces of modernization, globalization, liberalization and capitalist corporatization. It has now become a huge spectacle. A spectacle could be defined as an extravagant art which is remarkable or impressive in nature with a grand public performance or display. Durga

²⁵ Nanda.Meera. 2009. *The God Market: How Globalization is making India more Hindu*. Random House

Puja in Kolkata is in no way less than this huge spectacular show to its people. The emergence of religion as an object of study within the context of the burgeoning exhibitions, with the celebration of advancing industrialism and multiplying commodities has become a vibrant field of research. The astonishing spectacle with the sole focus on display and performance seems interesting. Showcasing the large idols according to the themes, the pandal concept and representation of lightings in streets all are a part of performing the great event and a competition with each other to become the 'best'. Religious representations through innovative artistic creations, sculptures, costumes, paintings, music and also now in the contemporary media like TV, film, internet has produced this grand "spectacle". Previously, small ritual objects, iconic replicas, small works of craft were generally used to recreate a personal space for religious spectacle in home or neighbourhood spaces. But now the modern and technologically developed media also created or recreated the space for this showcasing business in a large scale. Religious themes are now reflected through music, films, television etc.



Religion has in no way lost its importance; rather it has changed its nature with the changing time and space. A new term which comes up while we discuss religion is 'spirituality'. Historically, spirituality was not distinguished from religiousness till the rise of secularism and disillusionment with religious institutions as a hindrance to

personal experiences of the 'sacred'. Whereas religiousness historically included individual and institutional elements, spirituality is now commonly regarded as an individual phenomenon and identified such things as personal transcendence, supra-conscious sensitivity and meaningfulness. As the label of spirituality has conceptually broken away from religiousness, it has been adopted by identifiable groups of believers. This has again lead to a long list of spiritual "leaders" or "gurus". And more interesting is the intervention of these leaders in the political sphere. Marxian views on religion say that religion is the opium of the masses which satisfy people temporarily from their hard real conditions of life. In a similar way, the uncertainties of life in the competitive material life world have made people believe more and more in religion, spirituality, astrology where they seek a space of bliss and solitude. Thus religion in everyway has reinforced itself on our lives and is hard to be avoided. Is it due to the process of secularization that these agencies enter into the space which was so long being maintained as an exclusive space of "sacred"? The notions of 'sacred' and 'profane' thus are deconstructed here. The capital has become the new 'religion' and we are towards the worship of money. It has the power to control us as we suppose the divine power would be having on us. Devotion however has lost its grand aura on people.

When compared with the village household puja, these pujas seem huge and overwhelming, whereas those pujas still maintain the rituals with rigid conformation following the traditional way. However that doesnot mean that these baroari or sarbojonin pujas are not performed in the way mentioned in the religious texts, but they are much liberal in performance. Understanding the *slokas* which we recite during 'pushpanjali' is also not expected from the generation performing it. And it is also very interesting to note that after dashami, it is a practice among people to wish each other "subho-bijoya" which has now become a SMS culture at our convenience. Changes at very many levels have come across, but still the puja brings to us smile and all the people of Bengal look forward to this *Saradotsab* with great expectation and excitement. It is the time to take a break from the daily routinization of life and engage ourselves in the grand annual celebrations. Being the most important festival among a community, there are many other aspects which could be studied in order to get an indept picture of the whole festival, as for example the interplay of capitalist enterprises and the workers, artisans

and craftsmen who are engaged through their work in this puja, studies could also be done on the issue of caste and gender in reference to this religious festival. The globalization of such a cultural process needs the support of the local artisans, as like the presentation of art of Bankura or Puruliya needs the artisans and craftsmen to come to Kolkata and project their creativity. There have already been problems regarding the disintegration of the traditional community values due to immense globalization, industrialization and urbanization. There remains a host of other aspects which could not be touched upon in this paper due to time and scope of the study. But the whole idea of this work is to make ourselves conscious about the changing process and to make us “think” and “contemplate” on certain issues related to our culture and society.

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Appendix

The structure of my questionnaire was the following while having an interview in the informal setting with the committee members of the puja.

1. Name of the Puja
 2. Number of Committee members of the Puja
 3. President of the Puja
 4. How old is the Puja
 5. Is there any theme of the Puja ? If yes, discussion on the theme. When has the ‘theme’ started in their puja.
 6. Do you think “theme” has become an integral part of the leading pujas of Kolkata?
Why?
 7. Name of the associated corporate houses
 8. Discussion about the budget of the Puja. Increase or decrease from the earlier pujas.
 9. Importance of “souvenirs” in these pujas.
 10. What is the speciality of the Puja to pull the crowd?
 11. What are the Steps taken to control the huge crowd?
 12. When do they start planning for the pujas.
 13. How is the fund managed? Through “chanda” collection or sponsorships from the different media and corporate houses.
 14. Is there any celebrity being expected to visit to inaugurate the puja or even during the following four days programme.
 15. Has the puja culture in Kolkata changed in their eyes?
 16. What does Durga Puja mean to them?
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