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**Contested Spaces : Puja
and its Publics in Kolkata**

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I address the question of multiple publics and their conflicting interests in terms of the spatial effects of the Durga Puja celebration in Kolkata. My instances are culled from a survey of the Puja conducted during 2002-04, as well as from newspaper reporting on the Puja in the English language press, from which I have tried to discern how far public participation during the festival converged with the idea of the 'public sphere' or 'publics' as proposed by Euro-American thinkers. What are the implications of a plural public for the celebration of the Puja in the city? Moreover, how is the space of the locality produced through the festival?

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INTRODUCTION

Every year in the autumn month of Aswin (September-October) the city of Calcutta undergoes a wondrous transformation for five days during the Durga Puja festival. For the Bengali Hindus, Durga Puja (henceforth mentioned as Puja) is the biggest and most popular festival. The days of the Puja evoke a festive spirit and a holiday mood which engulfs the city and its different communities. During those days, large numbers of people both from the city and its vicinity descend upon the city's streets, visiting the *pandals* (temporary designed shelters in which the goddess Durga and her children are housed) dressed in their new clothes and fineries, and partake of the public festivities during the day and night. Even as the distinction between night and day gets blurred with the bright illuminations of the *pandals* dotting the city's fields, parks and streets, it enables people who do not generally inhabit the public realm much to make their presence felt. Hence women, children and the elderly mingle with the crowds at all hours of the day and night to constitute a festival of mass participation and joy.

In this paper¹ I address the question of multiple publics and their conflicting interests in terms of the spatial effects of the Puja celebrations in the city. Information was collected through a survey of selected Pujas conducted over three years (2002-2004) during which I tried to discern how far the ideas of the public converged with that of the 'public sphere' or 'publics' proposed by Euro-American social theorists (Emirbayer and Shellar 1999: 145-197). What are the implications of a plural public for the celebration of the Puja? How is the space of the locality produced during the festival?

In a recent essay Partha Chatterjee (2004: 131-147) asks, 'Is the Indian City Becoming Bourgeois at Last?' The import of this question does not lie in marking the insignias of industrial advancement on the body of the city. For capitalism and its attributes like industrial organizations, commercial enterprises, manufacturing were never absent from the colonial metropolises in India. Many of them were the seedbeds of industrialization and the industrial way of life. Instead what Chatterjee was referring to was a more incipient shift in policy and attitudes among the government and public.

Distinguishing between citizens and populace among the latter, he suggests that while citizens belonged to the realm of civil society, the 'population' was constituted by the field of governance. As Chatterjee puts it,

Civil society, for instance, will appear as the closed association of modern elite groups sequestered from the wider popular life of the communities, walled up within enclaves of civil freedom and rational law. Citizenship will take on two different shapes - the formal and the real. And unlike the old way ... of talking about the rulers and the ruled, I will invite you to think of those who govern and those who are governed. Governance, that new buzzword in policy studies, is, I will suggest, the body of knowledge and set of techniques used by or on behalf of those who govern. Democracy today ... should be seen as the politics of the governed (Chatterjee 2004: 4).

The shift that Chatterjee marks is a reversal of the inclusiveness of the civic community. In contrast to the state, the civil society in Europe was to expand in an inclusive manner. Yet in the postcolonial societies, the formal signs of inclusion like in the Constitution remained fraught and unrealized. The promise of formal equality remained constrained and not expansive. In his essay Chatterjee traces the bourgeoisness of Indian cities to the increasing withdrawal of the state from its redistributive functions in favor of the market and its institutions. This signals a shift in the mindset of the urban middle class, keen to protect and expand its autonomy in regard to the state but having scant regard for the survival of the populace. Hence urban renewal has meant the demolition and displacement of squatter settlements, the loss of livelihood of the urban poor, homogenization of urban neighborhoods (Roy 2003; Dasgupta 2003: 30-44) and the dispelling of claims on community resources like parks and open spaces, on water-bodies, pavements and other spaces. The embourgeoisement of a city like Calcutta has cultural consequences and is transforming the life of the community in its *paras* (neighborhoods). This leads to a clash of publics, increasingly evident in the contest over city space during the Puja.

A MATTER OF PUBLICS

On the eve of Durga Puja in October 2002, Calcutta's mayor Subrata Mukherjee² as President of the Ekdalia Evergreen Club, was asked by a leading English city daily, whether by blocking the road to set up its pandal for the Puja, his club was not violating civic rules? In his reply Mukherjee said,

I do not think blocking roads is in any way a transgression of the law. During the Puja everything is shut, so people should be out only to visit the *pandals*. In the course of that if they get caught in traffic jams, they should take it in the Puja spirit (*The Telegraph*, Oct. 4, 2002).

The city's first citizen's remarks underlines an outlook which transcends both his and his party's inclination. The conceptualiser and designer of the Bosepukur Sitala Mandir Puja, Bandan Raha echoed similar sentiments a year later when besieged by police imposed civic restrictions on the Puja³. *The Telegraph*, a leading English city daily, asked similar questions of politicians from different political parties associated with leading city Pujas in 2002, and received similar responses. The exchange of views reveals a contradictory notion of the public and a pattern of cross-talk evident across the developing world.

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

(T)he entire life of societies in which modern conditions of production prevail, announces itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into representation ...reality becomes a spectacle ...the spectacle becomes real ...and the spectacle is the image of capitalist production (Debord 1970).

The Puja is the time when prominent news events are represented in a decorative form for the populace. Events which capture the public imagination from train accidents to celebrity deaths like Princess Diana's death, to Hollywood blockbusters like *Titanic* or *Harry Potter*, or terrorist attacks on public institutions like Parliament or Akshardham temple, become grist to the mill of re-presentation as spectacle. For it is the spectacle which fuels the popular imagination.

But the embedding of reality and experience in the media is available in an attenuated form to the homegrown public. Instead the media especially newspapers and television channels by launching on their previews of the Puja before the actual commencement of the rituals, help to disembed the local (*para*) Puja into a spectacle. Often the theme of the Puja decoration serves as a surrogate experience of distant places for the city's lower middle and under-classes. As one of the organizers at Barisha's Tapobon Club remarked, 'We try to depict a significant landmark or temple which may be inaccessible to some of our poorer neighbours'.⁴ Others advertised their Puja as replicating a tourist destination. For instance, Suruchi Sangha of New Alipore advertised their 2003 Puja as a depiction of dance forms of Kerala and their 2004 Puja as bringing a bit of Rajasthan to Calcutta. Banners at prominent road crossings promised the deserts of Rajasthan in exchange for the bus-fare to New Alipore! As the principal organizer of Suruchi Sangha said,

'Bengalis like to travel to far off tourist destinations during the Puja holidays. We try to depict some of these destinations through our Puja, so that those who are unable to travel to these places, can at least get a taste of these place'.⁵

In this carnivalesque atmosphere, I examine the kinds of transgression of public space and local community that occurs in the city.

How is the public sphere constituted? Habermas defines the public sphere as,

(F)irst of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. ... Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion ... about matters of general interest (Habermas 1974: 49).

Implicit in this is the idea of 'rational-critical argumentation and collective will-formation regarding the paths, along which the state, economy and civil society itself are to develop' (Emirbayer and Sheller 1999:155). Such formations consider citizen as participating individuals in terms of contributing to the discursive body of public opinion. The public is constituted by rights-bearing citizens and there is no distinction between the citizen and populace. Formation of public opinion requires not only linguistic competence but also the ability of rational judgement and articulation that permeates individuals heavily inveighed with cultural capital. Collectivities of this kind are difficult to ascertain in any historical circumstances including India.

In the above vein Cohen and Arato (1992) describes publicity as the 'moment of open communication and popular participation through which alternative directions for social life are collectively reflected upon and adjudicated'. Here the subject becomes so through their articulations. In an effort to valorize the processual and interstitial nature of 'publics', Emirbayer and Sheller remark :

We define publics as open-ended flows of communication that enable socially distant interlocutors to bridge social-network positions, formulate collective orientation, and generate psychical "working alliances", in pursuit of influence over issues of common concern. Publics are not simply "spaces" or "worlds" where politics is discussed, as the popular

"public sphere" idea suggests, but rather interstitial networks of individuals and groups acting as citizens (Emirbayer and Shellar 1999: 156).

The idea that socially distant individuals speak the same language to communicate and seek to bridge their positions for common concerns as citizens remains an anathema in the Indian context. Segmentation is the key ordering principle which prevails and groups which find recognition from the state constitute their own publics. Meanwhile, even within publics the distinction between citizen and denizen persists. Hence the language of communities is set by the former for the others to resonate. Common concerns are scarcely collectively ascertained and more often than not are foisted, thereby lacking the investiture of trust.

To account for the communitarian presence in the public domain, Freitag (1990) characterised the space between state and society in early twentieth-century India as 'public arena'. Identified as the space for performative action, the will of the public was manifested in mimicry and simulation. Hence Freitag defines her notion of public arena as,

(A)world of ritual, theatre and symbol. It is a universe that sometimes reinforces hierarchy ... and at other times expresses conflict among unequals, it may even do both simultaneously. Most important, it is a world tied closely to the social and political contexts of its locale and hence accommodates and reflects change (Freitag 1990: 19).

In her idea of political arenas there is no assumption of universal subjects or autonomous action among equals. Action is encoded in performativity and occurs to reinforce hierarchical relations. Even shifts are incorporated in reconstituted hierarchies. So articulations are contextual and often reactionary.

In tracing the genealogy of the *andar-bahir* (private-public) distinction in a city like Calcutta, Sudipta Kaviraj (1997: 99) notes how in India, 'traditional cities did not have a conception of the *civic* in the European sense, since the cities performed very different historic functions'. The 'outside' or public spaces were considered as sites of lawlessness and unruly practices by the colonial authorities and appear to have been sustained by the ruling elites in the post-colonial era. The unregulated movement of the masses on the streets of Calcutta during the time of the Durga Puja is considered an infringement of the civic responsibility of private citizens. Kaviraj notes the distinction between the corporate presence of the civic in European cities and the urban populace in India,

In the modern European conceptualization of the public, there is an unmistakable strand of control, of order and discipline, which is altogether absent in the indigenous Indian one. Instead, there is a sense that the "outside" is not amenable to control – not by the individual or the restricted resources of a small family, not by any organized authority. The exterior is abandoned to an intrinsic disorderliness. No order, rules, restraints can be expected there (Kaviraj 1997: 99).

Kaviraj transposes the public-private distinction into an elite public and a plebeian public. The latter is referred to as *public*. While the former valued their privacy and wanted the public spaces to be regulated for the smooth functioning of their corporate routines even during festival times, the latter preferred to take a holiday and engage in activities which was different from their quotidian existence! The local community or neighborhood within whose precincts the Puja was held also found their space transgressed upon, as Puja organizers drew in non-local audiences for their installations. But before turning to the dislocations and displacements, a few words about the Puja.

FROM HOUSEHOLD RITUAL TO PUBLIC EVENT

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

Without recounting a history of the Durga Puja celebration in Calcutta (cf Ghosh 2000: 289-299) suffice it to say that popular attention has shifted from the celebration of the Puja in prominent households in the nineteenth century to *baroari* (association of 12 friends) worship which were engaged in concurrently, to the emergence of the *sarbajanin* (open to everyone in the community) Puja. It is the *sarbajanin* or *parar* Puja (neighborhood Puja) which commenced from the second decade of the twentieth century in Baghbazar, a locality in north Calcutta, that has now become the principal form of Puja.

Today over a 1,000 such Pujas are organized in the city itself. With the proliferation in numbers, competition among the Pujas to attract viewers has increased. This has been accorded a competitive edge through the

institution of prizes and awards by corporate houses and private companies keen to capitalize on the publicity. Elaborate decoration of the *pandal*, through lighting and illumination as well as novelty in the iconography of the image, is engaged to attract the crowds. However, designer Pujas often require substantial funds to lavish adornment on the *pandal*, lighting, decoration and the idols. Budgets for such major Pujas used to range from Rs. 500,000 to Rs. 2,000,000. According to a newspaper survey in 2002, only the top and middle level Pujas in Calcutta spent on an average Rupees twenty five crores every year for their basic requirements⁶. This has of course escalated more recently. Clearly this kind of money is not available through neighborhood collection of subscriptions or donations. Sponsors and advertisers underwrite a bulk of the cost, prompted sometimes by political personages from different political parties who generally patronize the Puja of their locality, but also for the publicity their products receive. Pujas are a time of extravagant consumption hence highly appropriate for advertising and promotion of consumables. Moreover, advertising during this time acquires high visibility and reach, as large number of people come out on the streets during the festive season and visit different *pandals*.

Over the last two decades, competition among the community Puja organizers has been recognized and institutionalized. Led by companies like Asian Paints and Patton, many other companies have now instituted awards and prizes for different aspects of the Puja like the best image of the goddess, decoration, *pandal*, lighting, the way the rituals are performed, the best *purohit* (Brahmin priest), the best ceremonial drummer (*dhaki*), the best environment and public amenities, the best family Puja, the best Puja in highrise housing and in housing complexes, and in other such categories. But to be eligible for such competition, till 2004, the Pujas needed to restrict their expenditure to a maximum of four hundred thousand rupees. Pujas exceeding this amount of expenditure were not eligible to compete.⁷ Organisers of the Puja, especially the ones located on the periphery of the city, the most rapidly developing areas, are under pressure to innovate in regard to their Pujas to attract public attention. Some of these Pujas have become prominent crowd-pullers after winning awards while others have attracted attention by using novel substances like small clay pots, bagasse, discarded records or buttons

for their decoration, Prizes have not only drawn media attention but also universalized the *para*. Instead of the Puja being conducted for the people of the neighborhood, the latter has become known to the people from across the city and other places by its Puja. The Puja has universalized the locality in the imagination of the *pandal*-hoppers, thereby identifying a *para* with its Puja.

Theme based Pujas are a recent innovation and were not widely prevalent before the end of the millennium. Here the idol, decoration, lighting and general ambience speak to a theme and are conceptualized and choreographed by a designer. The Puja arena becomes a transformed space either recounting other times through the reconstruction of historical events or monuments, or other cultural spaces. Thus in recent years we have seen the reconstruction of Titu Meer's (a nineteenth century Muslim peasant rebel of rural south Bengal) *Bansher Kella* (bamboo fortress) in Dhakuria during 2002, a Roman Fountain of Trevis being put up in Kidderpore in 2003, or a depiction of Mesopotamia in the same locality in the wake of the Iraq War in 2002. New Alipore, Suruchi Sangha recreated a Kerala dance village with its myriad dance forms being inscribed on separate panels with a brief description surrounding the *pandal*. Shristi Club in Behala put up a Madhubani village at its Puja site in 2002, while their neighbors Sahajatri Club reconstructed a village of Ghana in 2004 (Guha Thakurta 2004: 34-56). The sheer diversity of themes make Durga Puja in the city a cosmopolitan affair.

Such theme-based Pujas scarcely catered to the local residents need for ritual observances and social conviviality. They seek to attract a wider audience from other localities as well as the upmarket crowds to enhance corporate sponsorships. Institutionalisation of designer Pujas has meant that the public is keen to view the non-conventional Pujas which are publicized through the media and become the talk of the town, rather than only the traditional or the neighborhood ones. The print and electronic media like local newspapers and television channels are a major source of previews and often set the trend of viewing. It prompts the local organizers of the Puja to advertise their Pujas as a brand, packaging their wares as depictions

of exotic locations, historic monuments or the nostalgic past. In 2002-03 the village scene became a widely prevalent theme. Rural motifs were introduced through the use of *patua* (scroll) paintings, or setting up a crafts *mela* (fair) with the craftspeople plying their trade in market stalls at the site of the Puja, as in Bakul Bagan or through the use of straw mats and bamboo weaves for decoration. The theme of tribes and the depiction of tribal culture as a return to nature became popular the next year (2004).

Swelling crowds, enhanced media attention along with the announcement of awards attract sponsorships and advertising revenue for the future. It also provides much needed recognition and accolades for designers, artists, craftsmen and organizers. While this has promoted a set of artists and designers like Amar Sarkar, Subodh Roy, Bhabatosh Sutar and several others into the big league, it has also made space for young artists and designers, fresh out of the art college to also display their talent in choreographing the various Pujas. Increasingly the Puja has become a display of the artistic imagination around the ritual event. Local artists are afforded a unique opportunity to foreground their productions in one of the largest 'public "art" event' (Guha Thakurta 2004: 34) in the city and perhaps the world. Durga Puja's transient efflorescence of cultural and artistic creativity holds a mirror to the city's embedded talents.

TRANSGRESSING THE SPACE OF THE COMMUNITY

Over the last two decades now certain major structural changes have become evident in Calcutta. The decline of traditional manufacturing industries like jute, engineering, textiles, iron and steel or paper, in the larger metropolitan area has meant that employment in manufacturing has dwindled. This has sharply reduced the opportunities of a traditionally skilled workforce in the other sectors. Even the small scale industries have suffered as they were often vertically integrated with the larger industries. Whatever expansion has occurred has been largely in the service sectors including hospitality, trade and retail, health, real estate, media, education, communication and IT. This has meant that the nature of the labour force has undergone a sea change requiring very different skill sets unavailable to the manufacturing

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

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

Every year during this time of the year everything except what has to do with the festival of Durga Puja, becomes motionless. All offices and even banks are shut for four days; this year the closure extends to five days. Nowhere else in India is this procedure followed, such a situation would have been acceptable if West Bengal worked on full steam for the rest of the year. This as everybody knows is not the case ... Bengalis love not having to work for reasons religious and secular. Work in West Bengal is not sacred (*The Telegraph*, Oct. 17, 1999).

Though the newspaper found evidence of 'detailed organisation' of the Puja it had little qualms in dismissing it as 'unproductive activity'.

Even as entertainment, the Puja was 'cheap and vulgar', 'bizarre' and 'tasteless'. Clearly the daily, while averse to the excesses of the Puja, could hardly find any redeeming feature in such a mammoth enterprise. Yet a few years later, from 2003, TT would institute awards for the 'True Spirit Puja', to reward the Pujas which were most environmentally sensitive and provided the best civic amenities for the viewers.

In 2002 the issue was not work-culture but infringement of civic rules. Through a series of interviews with some leading political personalities associated with well known Pujas, the newspaper pointed out how by constructing *pandals* on public thoroughfares, the organizers were transgressing the law and basic civic amenities.

While most of the politicians-cum-Puja organizers acknowledged that roadside Puja *pandals* flouted the law or 'bent it a bit', as some maintained,⁸ yet this was done not out of choice but compulsion. The absence of open spaces in some localities led to the blocking of roads. As a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader from Burrabazar said,

When people object to roads being blocked, I politely ask them to provide us with an alternative site and we shall shift the *pandal* there. Till then nobody should object (*The Telegraph*, Oct. 11, 2002, 18).

The upholding of popular sentiment for organizing the *pandals* on the road was unanimously echoed, if with varying vehemence. Mukherjee as the mayor of the city from Trinamool Congress (TMC) said,

(P)ujas are a mass movement and that no leader, no matter what his standing, wants to become unpopular by disrupting it in any way (*The Telegraph*, Oct. 16, 2002, 15).

Political leaders could hardly go against overwhelming public opinion. Moreover, they were unwilling to rob the populace of their brief period of joy. Sanjay Bakshi of the TMC from north Calcutta said,

I know very well that blocking roads is illegal. Despite this I do not mind flouting rules time and again, as it brings a smile to the faces of children (*The Telegraph*, Oct. 16, 2002, 7).

While the inconvenience to a minority was sought to be mitigated by the joy and pleasure that the Pujas brought brought to many. Popular enthusiasm for the Puja as secular festivity overrode concerns of transgression of public space. As a trade-off between the preference of the masses and the grouse of the classes, the choice was tipped in favour of the former.

A prominent Communist Party of India (Marxist) CPI(M), Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) from Ballygunge, Rabin Deb spoke in a similar vein in regard to the Puja at Bosepukur :

Some residents of the area have objected to the roadblock. We asked them with folded hands to bear with us for the cause of the millions who come here (*The Telegraph*, Oct. 7, 2002, 21).

On the other side of town, a TMC leader of Lake Town, Sujit Bose of Sreebhumi Club maintained,

The Pujas are enjoyed by an overwhelming majority of Calcuttans and those coming to the city from other parts of the state. Those who find it inconvenient should respect the sentiments of the majority and bear it (*The Telegraph*, Oct. 9, 2002, 18).

While the politicians pandered to the populace to secure their space, *The Telegraph* remained a stern critic of the infringement of civic rules. It expressed its disappointment with Calcutta's civic consciousness. Calcutta had seemed to be growing towards a basic civic awareness in recent times.⁹ But the apprehension of the corporate-public was more about the lurking prospect of chaos and lawlessness,

And where crowds are large, it can also be dangerous. The law is not conditional or partial either, it is not made to be broken ... A civilized consideration for everyone's convenience, a lawful approach to organization, environment-friendly arrangements are all essential for a successful festive season (*The Telegraph*, Oct. 13, 2002, 8).

Evidently the irony escaped the author. For in the name of 'everyone' a small minority was asserting its civic rights which were inconvenienced but not jeopardized. It was apprehension of disorder which made the transgression of public space marked.

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

PRODUCING THE LOCALITY

The public worship of mother goddess Durga was largely a community affair in the city. It was the local community which was involved, demarcated in local parlance as the *para* (locality or neighborhood). Inhabitants of the *para* recognized themselves through their daily interactions and through the local clubs set up to provide community services like games, reading rooms, TV viewing and generally as a meeting place for the local people. Young and old men would gather at the *para* club to play indoor games, read newspapers, watch TV or engage in gossip. Sometimes there were also attached gymnasiums for the fostering of physical culture among the youth. In other words the daily interaction of people in a locality acquired an aggregative form in the notion of the *para* with definite boundaries and

identities. The *para* was constituted by the affective life-worlds in the locality. As Appadurai (1996: 42) has noted :

(L)ocalities are life-worlds constituted by relatively stable associations, relatively known and shared histories, and collectively traversed and legible spaces and places. As a dimension of social life the locality comprises both a 'structure of feeling and ... its material expression in lived "co-presence" (Appadurai 1996: 42).

Yet is the *para* a collective expression of a holistic sensibility? There were several activities associated with the Puja which involved the people in the *para* and invoked their solidarity. For instance collecting subscriptions from the local households for the Puja, overseeing the arrangement for the *pandal*, getting the idols of the goddesses from Kumartuli, the traditional neighborhood of the image-makers, shopping necessities for the rituals of the Puja, organizing the distribution of the *bhog* and *prasad*, the consecrated food and fruits of worship, managing the crowds at the *pandal*, as well as making announcements over the public address system to inform *para* people about the sequence of rituals. While *para* identity is nowadays manifest in the nature of the theme depicted during the Puja, the awards that it wins or the crowd that it draws, many of the activities have now been corporatised. Subscriptions from local inhabitants are no longer the mainstay of the local Pujas. Corporate sponsorships and advertisements have to be obtained to sustain the budgets for theme Pujas. These can only be obtained either through *para* residents associated with the corporate sector or through politician-patrons.

Para Puja committees often reflect this divide. There are the patrons and honorary members who are local business people, eminent professionals or corporate executives and obtain sponsorship or advertisements for the Puja. Others contribute their organizational skill and effort towards the conduct of the Puja itself.

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

Without winning prizes one cannot attract viewers in the outlying areas. Unless large number of people visit our Puja *pandal* we cannot increase advertising rates. At Ekdalia Evergreen Club more than one million people visit their *pandal* during the Puja. This enables them to charge high rates for display advertisements. If we are able to pull large crowds we can also increase our sponsorship and advertisement rates. For new Pujas like us this would allow us to continue with our innovative trend.¹⁰

Older neighborhood Pujas like the Simla Byam Samiti Puja in north Calcutta still remain locality based *parar* Puja. It is entirely dependent on its members to collect subscriptions and advertisements for the Puja but most of their active members are in middle age or elderly. There is a paucity of younger members who can shoulder the responsibility of organization. This historic Puja well known for its association with the nationalist movement, has not departed from its tradition. They have neither adopted a theme nor opted for corporate sponsorship to sustain their efforts. Other north and central Calcutta Pujas have their traditional brand value and draw viewers without adopting themes or designs.

The proliferation of theme Pujas which became a success in the peripheral areas of the city's municipality have now become major draws in the city itself. What had been the means to attract attention of the crowds has now become central to establishing the distinctiveness of the club or *para* engaged in the Puja. But these Pujas are no longer contained within the locality. Community Pujas earlier the site of local congregation, conviviality and socialization, with neighbors engaging in the ritual and social activities of the

festival, has now become an arena of display and spectatorship. Take for instance the case of Bosepukur Sitala Mandir Puja.

Thirty years ago Bosepukur was not a well connected suburb largely inhabited by the poorer classes of East Bengali refugees. As better roads developed to connect the market hub of south Calcutta, Gariahat, with the newly built Eastern Metropolitan Bypass, the third north-south corridor on the eastern fringe of the city, the Bosepukur area was embourgeoised. While the Puja there was five decades old, it began to attract public attention at the turn of the millennium, through the adoption of unusual modes of decoration. In 2001 they used small clay pots used for serving tea to construct their *pandal*. The next year they used bagasse or sugar cane residue which was utilized for the *pandal*. The conceptualiser for all these years was artist Bandan Raha. He succeeded in drawing huge crowds to the Bosepukur Puja through the use of unconventional decorative substances. The Puja received many coveted prizes including the Asian Paints award. The brand value of the Puja sky rocketed and it became a regular destination for viewers visiting south Calcutta.¹¹ Every year it draws huge crowds and has become one of the most prominent Pujas in south Calcutta.

On the other hand a mega Puja like Ekdalia Evergreen Club patronised by the erstwhile Mayor of the city, constantly transgresses the precincts of the *para*. Through its spectacular displays, it attracts larger audiences than the locality population. It attracts viewers from far and wide including some expatriate residents who return to the locality during the Pujas to participate and partake of the fun and frolic. The large crowds that it draws as well as its powerful patrons ensure for it lucrative corporate sponsorships which sustains the scale of the Puja. But here the involvement of the *para* residents is minimal as even the organizing secretary of the club is from another neighborhood. The initiative rests with the erstwhile Mayor's party functionaries and some local assistants.¹²

The *para* is changing in the city. Old residential homes are being dismantled especially in the southern parts of the city and new highrises are being built to accommodate the pressure of population. With the Hooghly river in the

west and the marshy land and water-bodies in the east, Calcutta has in recent times developed along an elongated stretch. The post-1980s spurt of highrise housing complexes has occurred mostly in the east and north-eastern peripheries of the city along the Eastern Metropolitan Bypass and in New Town at Rajarhat. Older residents from the southern wards of the municipality are being displaced into the fringes of the city or its *mofussil*. As the Bengali speaking middle-class vacate the core city areas, the non-Bengali ethnic groups are able to disperse from their ethnic concentrations and create more mixed neighborhoods. Its impact was evident in the Mudiali Club Puja. The construction of highrise apartments in this south Calcutta locality has changed the complexion of the *para* but not the spirit of the local Puja. Even with the influx of non-Bengali speakers in the neighborhood, the spirit of a large 'joint family' is sought to be maintained during the festival. The non-Bengali residents are now as much a part of the celebrations as the older Bengali residents. They work closely together to make the local Puja a success.¹³

Increasingly neighborhood Pujas are looking beyond the *para* for its viewers. Many of the theme Pujas scarcely depend on their neighborhood for its resources nor for its audience. The way the local community is transgressed emerges from an instance of the Jodhpur Park Puja during 2002. That year the Jodhpur Park *pandal* was constructed as a replica of the Dilwara Temple of Madhya Pradesh. The stone carvings of the original were represented on thermocol and plaster of Paris. Word of the exquisite designs had spread rapidly fuelled by the electronic and print media coverage of it. This led to a huge rush of viewers. The onrush was further aggravated because the organizers had ruled that like at the original temples, the gates of the *pandal* were to be closed at 5 pm.

On *ashatami* (eighth day of *Debipaksha*) it is a practice for Bengali households to offer *pushpanjali* (floral offerings to the goddess) in their neighborhood Puja before visiting other *mandaps* or *pandals*. At Jodhpur Park that day a long queue had formed to view the images. In the crowd were many people of the locality including children and elderly people who had come to offer *pushpanjali*. However, even before they could enter the

pandal, a melee ensued and the police on duty to maintain order made a *lathi* (cane) charge to disperse the crowd and restore order. In the process many elderly local residents who had come to offer *pushpanjali* lost their places in the queue and some were even assaulted. The complaints of the local residents went unheeded as the spectacular display gained supremacy over the devotion of neighbors. Puja had become a performative act for the benefit of the wider audience which enhanced the brand value of the *parar* Puja, conferred awards and made the *para* a popular destination during the Puja, transgressing the customary claims of the locals.

This happened when an outsider (i.e. non-*para* resident) was heading the Saradiya Utsab Committee and had completely commercialized the Puja. The local residents had lost control over their neighborhood Puja and were at the receiving end. Subsequently the local residents instituted a law suit against the Committee Chairman for misappropriation of funds and wrested control over the Puja. In recent years the commercialization of the Puja has been toned down to facilitate neighborhood participation.¹⁴

The institution of awards and prizes by a number of corporate houses since the mid-1980s has on the one hand promoted a competitive edge to the Pujas along with artistic innovation. While competition has created heartburns and disappointments, it has also set high standards of design and artistry in the choreography of the Puja. Attention has shifted from spectacular displays to artistic decoration and curating providing a boost to homegrown creativity (Guha Thakurta 2004: 34-56).

Elaborate theme based Pujas have become the normative exhibition ground for universal crowds but does it fulfil the ritual and social expectations of the neighborhood? Now a neighborhood is recognized by the work of particular artists or designers who have become well known for their innovative conceptualization and design of the Puja. Prize winning theme Pujas are well publicized in the media and draw large crowds. Large queues and the constant crush of people mark out the significant Pujas for the viewing public, even as the neighborhood socializing is impaired.

The same localities like Barisha, Bosepukur, Selimpur or Kidderpore, have been identified as sites of innovative designs. The swelling audience attracts advertisers and sponsors who help to support such Pujas transforming Durga Puja today into the city's largest open-air art and sculpture festival (Guha Thakurta 2004: 34-56). Even as the *para* becomes the exhibition ground of the global, the proliferation of the theme *Puja* is a tribute to the city's embedded artistic talent and cosmopolitan viewing public.

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

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Notes :

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2. Mayor Subrata Mukherjee (200-2004) at that time belonged to the Trinamool Congress (TMC) Party, the principal opposition party in the state of West Bengal. The TMC in alliance with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won the Calcutta Municipal Corporation elections in 2000.
3. Interview with Bandan Raha, Bosepukur, Calcutta, September 27, 2003.
4. Interview with members of Tapobon Club, Barisha, Calcutta, September 14, 2003.
5. Interview with Arup Biswas, Secretary, Suruchi Sangha, New Alipore, Calcutta, October 18, 2004.
6. *The Statesman* (Calcutta), 'Austerity is not for Puja organisers', October 20, 2002, 5.
7. Mentioned by Arup Biswas, Secretary, Suruchi Sangha, on *Live Dashta*, Tara Bangla (a cable TV channel), October 5, 2003.
8. Indian National Congress leader Somen Mitra's statement in 'Sound of revelry in silence zone', *The Telegraph* (Metro), (Calcutta), October 5, 2002, 15.
9. *The Telegraph*, (editorial), 'Wrongway down the road', October 13, 2002.
10. Interview with Bhabatosh Sutar and other club members of Barisha Shrishti Sangha, Calcutta, September 14, 2003.
11. Interview with Samir Kumar Dasgupta, President, Bosepukur Sitala Mandir Puja Committee, Calcutta, September 27, 2003.
12. Interview with Ekdalia Evergreen Club members, October, 2002.
13. Interview with Mudiali Club members, Caclutta, October, 2002.
14. Interview with Dr. M.K. Sengupta, President of Jodhpur Park Residents Association, Calcutta, September 29, 2008.