



The sacred in democracy and the sacred in excess: Studying the sacrals in the theme pandals of durga puja

Asmita Kundu

PhD, Research Scholar, Centre for English Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India

Abstract

Durga Puja, as it is celebrated in the theme pandals of West Bengal, have been viewed as a peculiar sociological event by many. While some think of them as being at the crossroads of what is considered “sacred” and what is understood as “secular”, others have viewed it with critical eyes either perceiving them as a more neo-Hindu event masquerading as secular while others think of it as the domination of market politics in the sphere of religion. However, it is undeniable that it presents a picture of accommodation of religion in a modern liberal secular democracy. Can this affair be thought of as something redefining our ideas of the “sacred” and the “secular” or can this open up more poignant discussions about the nature of the public sphere in countries like India? This paper looks at the nature of this festival and analyses it through the critical lenses bestowed upon by scholars who have commented on similar issues.

Keywords: sacred, secular, durga puja, democracy, religion, worship, liberal, modernity, capitalism, market politics

Introduction

The festival of Durga Puja in recent times has been an event of an extremely peculiar character, subjected to various interesting sociological studies. On why it is considered to be peculiar, is probably best described by Partha Chatterjee because it is an event of ‘heterotopia’, “where the real blends with the impossibly unreal and where several incompatible elements can coexist.” (*Critique of Popular Culture*, Chatterjee, pg. 182). In other words, it is the event which defies the definition of what is considered to be religious or sacred (unlike other pujas or worships are generally perceived) and would neither be hailed as an event which is completely bereft of religion and lies purely in the order of secular (whether in terms of its much accused consumerist nature or the fact that it is known to represent a larger democratic and cosmopolitan forum, where anything of concern or interest to the society can be grounded through art) nor can it be interpreted in terms of traditional religious ideas. Some critics have also tried to define it purely in the order of entertainment where spectacle wins over piety. But considering the fact that this event singlehandedly draws millions of spectators, devotees and non-believers alike, what cannot be denied is the sheer promise of excess, surplus, and luxury that it provides. There had been ample critical enquiry about the nature of this event but what has been relatively less spoken about (if not completely overlooked) is, if at all there lies a sacrals element to it, how exactly can the very element of sacred be defined? Has it been completely obliterated by the gobbling up of the secular market and is but a fetishized affair mostly at the hands of the capitalists? Is it still but a different version of the institutionalized form of Hinduism, which it is a part of? Or is it simply to be read as an affair of art, as art historian Tapati Guha Thakurata would define, as an event which stands as the enormous celebration of installation art, where it is the seduction of the spectacle that draws crowd? (Guha Thakurata, p. 106) It is probably understood that in one way or the other these questions are

largely tied up to the question of the coexistence of the sacred in its tryst with modernity. Moreover, when the idea of sacred becomes thoroughly intertwined with religion or worship, tampering with its inherent structure by including forces which are secular or that which might disobey the very idea of exclusion, seems highly improbable. Keeping in mind the event of Durga Puja just as an example, this paper would try to address the concern of how the sacred and everything that is tied up with it like divine ecstasy, a certain transcendental desire etc., survives when it exists at the intersection of multifarious secular, cosmopolitan and capitalist affairs. Or does what we now know as sacred transform itself to be something new, and its definition itself has to be rethought?

The basic nature of theme pandals and some classical anxieties

The practice of theme based pandals in place of traditional pujas gained prominence in Calcutta from the early nineties and has been expanding its scope ever since, continually giving space to newer agendas and calling forth previously unthinkable experimentations. Briefly described, it is the trend where a specific theme is thought of for a puja (generally organized by a local committee or a club) which would be the primary attraction to bring in crowds and the idol, the *mandap*, and the subsequent decorations are made accordingly at par with the theme. In the recent years, the themes have traversed a range of issues from environmental pollution, women empowerment, space and extraterrestrial life, dilemmas of urban existence, the simplicity of rural life to the support of LGBTQ movement. And not just in terms of the theme, the pandals work in intersection with various other aspects highly dependent on commerce. These pujas are held mostly by clubs and organizers in a neighborhood or community and some of them have grown popular over times, almost acquiring a brand status and prides itself on being a decent crowd puller. As Chatterjee has rightly said, these community pujas are “celebrations by millions

involving clothes, fashion, food, tourism, music, theatre, and most importantly...the mass viewing of Durga images in their specially constructed pavilions in each neighborhood.” (Chatterjee, p. 184) A typical popular pandal in the evening would be characterized by long queues of visitors beaming up in the celebratory mode, in anticipation to view the Durga image in lawns lined up by myriad lighting and a series of billboards and food stalls. Now, such a phenomenon which has been mostly viewed as an example of commercialization of religion by a considerable section, is bound to give space to a lot of anxieties. There are certain palpable discomforts with the event of Durga Puja which because of the larger debate they are a part of can be termed as *classical*.

Avijit Pathak in an essay says

Religious moments get colonized. 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 culture. No wonder, in recent Durga Puja festivals we experience the story of this transformation. (Pathak, p.11)

The general tone of the author in this essay is a that of despair which was a result of initial befuddlement with the interference of themes such as Titanic, Godzilla, World Cup Soccer etc in the domain supposedly carved out for pure devotion of the Goddess was actually an anxiety of not encountering the sacred in the profusion and overabundance of profanity. Pathak sees the tyranny of the market where the fluidity of life is now determined by the economy of the capital and a space where life processes including that of divinity is audaciously tampered by the workings of the market. This supposed gnawing absence of the sacred is bemoaned by critics as the ultimate overpowering of religiosity at the hands of secular democracy in its complacency towards capitalism. Such an anxiety can easily be justified by few case studies of Puja pandals which would suggest that their popularity in itself is intricately tied up to the game of sponsors. For example, quite a popular puja in Northern Kolkata, Sreebhumi Sporting Club in the year 2014 (International Business Times, Oct 2014) saw a massive upsurge of crowds, for the mere show of the grandiose ornaments of the Goddess sponsored by Tanishq. Since Tanishq has been spectacularly advertising this particular range for a long time creating a permanent fetish in the minds of the people; that fetish in turn got magnified and catalyzed by the power of display in the puja. This form of anxiety would not only be in terms of the power of profane wealth that is thought to mar the sacred and the religious element but would sometimes be in terms of the incompatibility of certain popular demands which arise out of these community pujas (since they have been known to do that) and the religious logic which would not sanction such. Partha Chatterjee mentions an incident of such disparity where Sanatan Dinda, a contemporary artist creating Durga idols of a modern and distinctive character would refuse to sell those precisely because of the refusal to deviate from the norm of visarjan which would dictate that idols be immersed in the river after worship. (Chatterjee, p.190)

Another anxiety, along similar lines to critique globalization and capitalism, but more critical of religion as such being able to instill illusion into people, would believe that such affairs because of the sheer use of capital is in turn titillating the fanatic in everyone by espousing virtues of

ethnocentrism, xenophobia and absolute loss of rational capabilities detrimental to human existence. These forms of critique would obviously be in tune with the conventional critiques against religious practices as such which when coupled with globalization creates a greater evil. Such an indignation with the event of Durga Puja is also known and, in that case, it is accused of being an open display of Hindu fundamentalist forces and a symbol of cultural hegemony. The main thesis of Meera Nanda's book would probably be in sync with such an argument and would look at any mass scale religious affair with certain suspicion. Her book talks about how “this entire arc of development – starting from India's deepening links with the global economy, the increasing religiosity of the Hindu majority, the growing inter-penetration of popular Hinduism and the public sphere, all the way to Hinduism's purported superiority over “Semitic monotheistic” civilizations and the prospects of secularism under the conditions of globalization.” (Nanda, p.150) Before going into the larger disagreements with such an idea which would recur in the rest of the paper, let us for now, suggest a certain agreement with this sort of argument. One may not talk about a possible generation of xenophobia but can observe a certain mass scale production of ethnocentrism which has sometimes led to direct palpable disadvantages. In 2015, a certain puja in Deshapriya Park, Kolkata created a huge fuss on account of its eighty-eight feet idol which is by far arguably the largest. The hype instigated by the sponsors, creating bill board, television and radio announcement of the same that its fame predictably crossed borders. (TOI new report, Oct 2015) The advertisers also ensured to provide enough Bengali Hindu markers in the advertisement so the event becomes a mandatory duty on part of a Bengali Hindu, anywhere in the world to come and see the magnificent idol. This was successful in the sense that the number of spectators for this particular pandal increased manifold, with visitors from Bangladesh and Bengali diasporas from other parts of the world. Not surprisingly so, the space was not strong or secure enough to hold such massive crowd and there were incidents defying law and order and reported occurrences of injuries from getting stamped and death due to suffocation. To a certain extent, this was indeed an event where hype (allegedly of a religious and ethnic order) superseded rationality. These two somewhat extreme positions one can take to either be critical or anxious about the affair of Durga Puja is premised on the fact that it has spotted an utter disappearance of the sacred in it. The former position sees the waning away of religiosity in the face of it and the later sees religiosity doing away with the sacred to transform itself to the more dangerous institutionalized form where it exploits all other spheres of life to emphasize its dominance. The point of the paper however is to come out of the binary and conclude that the sacred in this case lies elsewhere and is of a different order.

Theoretical underpinnings of the sacred in the modern universe and how it relates to theme pujas

Any attempt to theorize religiosity and the sacred have been characterized by conceptual differences pertaining to what constitutes modern liberal democracy and what constitutes the religious sphere which arguably is supposed to be of a different order than that of secular democracy. However, theoreticians have also understood and identified that whatever would be sacred in a pre-modern world might not

be so in a world torn by modernities, or the experience of the sacral can also be subjective and context sensitive. This has to be thought of with conjunction to the ability to imagine modernity outside a single paradigm. It would foster the belief that since there can be no one standardized definition of modernity; it cannot produce or transform one standardized definition of the sacred. The assumption that we will be always at the receiving end of a universal modernity, which we know prefers a certain sense of rationality and would undermine what our cultures know to be sacred, is one of the probable causes of anxiety and insecurity with the entire process of theme pandals, which critics like Pathak feel. The very assimilation of themes like Titanic, Godzilla, space invasion etc within the domain of worship, the only space unfettered by postcolonial dilemmas and where the dignity of the culture is secured in an everlasting way, seems to be an uncomfortable thought where once again we are left as the brainwashed “consumers of universal modernity” and all our powers to produce a modernity of our own remains suspended. Chatterjee addresses this insecurity as the effect of “the same historical process that has taught us the value of modernity has also made us the victims of modernity.” (Chatterjee, p.15). However, in reality, the market, where the very forces of modernity comes to play, too have recognized that contemporary postcolonial society is fraught by different versions of modernity and for its own benefit would try to recognize them and make it a part of global market exchange. Anjan Ghosh in his essay about the same issue of Durga Puja has said,

Modernity as a condition of existence is no longer epitomized by a singular set of attributes manifest in particular localities of the West. (Ghosh, p.290)

The pandals strive to represent all forms of reality, classical and indigenous alike. There have been pandals made as an exact replica of a certain popular Hindu temple, there have been pandals depicting intricate Mughal architecture where idols are made according to a certain genre of sculpture and there is an abundance of pandals depicting the scenario of rural Bengal, it being one of the most well known recurring themes every year. A rather cynical reading of such a process would suggest that this supposed space given to all sorts of existences is but a way of museumization and exoticization of the pre-modern processes by capitalism where the actual essence of the themes being depicted is not realized and the public feeds of the entertainment produced by such mimetic illusions. An immediate counter argument to such is that not always does the means and methods of production of such theme pandals lie in the hands of highly popular clubs backed by lucrative sponsorships but more than ever, small neighborhood pujas make interesting use of the art of theme pandals where the possibility of the representation of an absolute indigenous and subaltern sensibility of art and craftsmanship is also there. Later on, in the beginning of twentieth century *baroari puja* gave way to *sarbojanin puja* or community worship. A very unique case of Baghbazaar puja is worth mentioning. (Ghosh pg. 288)

All the forms of public worship of Durga Puja that were characterized by “glitter, gimmick and excess” (Ghosh, p. 289) has a history of uprising from a specific context with a value system and morality of its own. They were not in any way a part of a homogenizing capitalist fanfare that only relies on empty ornamentalisation to seduce spectators. To go back to the original problem, as to where does one locate

the sacred element in such complex structures of interconnected modernities, we might have to rethink what constitutes sacred philosophically. Admittedly, religion in itself like the present situation of modernity is extremely heterogeneous and exists as a confluence of various processes. But the general assumption is that the only thing that religions have in common with themselves is the idea of sacred, which more or less remains same across all religions. Christina Andrea Matiriu in her essay provides a rather basic but essential definition of sacred,

The sacred is the transcendental essence of the religious phenomenon. Religions include very heterogeneous beliefs and manifestations. But they have something in common and specific by which the religious phenomenon is distinguished from all others. The sacred is something outside and above individuals. It is therefore an individual’s encounter with a reality that transcends. (Matiriu, p. 24)

Such a description would suggest the possibility that the sacred is a sphere which is by and large completely outside the clutches of the profane. And what is the distinctive character of the sacred is the sanctity and the reserve, the fact that it is restrictive. To speak in the strictest sense solely guided by this concept, it would appear that the sacral in the public theme pandals lies in the small area where no public is allowed to enter. Generally, there is a space separated out just for worship and rituals where only the likes of the priest are allowed to go. Since more than often theme-pujas would display a large grandiose idol which for all practical purposes would be problematic to be “used” for carrying out of rituals, there would be a smaller and “manageable” idol on which the puja is to be carried out. The small space carved out for ritualistic worship in theme pandals, in the frenzy of maintaining the queue, looking at the idols and the decorations and various other things which capture the interest of the spectator, more than often escapes their attention or just remains as a status of small rule one needs to follow. That small space therefore would hardly contribute to the experience of the sacred. This space does not have the capability to mystify. There is an inherent paradox in the definition of sacred. The fact that sacred would deal with absolute transcendence would mean that the domain of sacred would not be concerned with the power politics that belong to the domain of the profane. Subjective positions of oppression or privilege would also be dissolved in the transcendental sphere of the sacred and hence there is a certain promise of egalitarianism ushered in by the sacred. However, precisely because sacred manifests itself in the material world, things like the accepted norms of morality and hierarchies which shape the profane domain of existence, also express itself in the sphere of the sacred. Numerous examples of sacred spaces which does not allow entry to women, lower caste people or the followers of other religion adhere to the fact that the sacred is created keeping in mind the desires and privileges of the community. The most prolific theoretician on the question of sacred and religiosity, Emile Durkheim, said that the sacred is felt to be something outside the experience of the individual because it has been internalized by the community at large, where the morality endorsed by the community receives a religious pedestal. (Durkheim, p. 231) One can take the easy way out by proclaiming that since not unlike modernity, the sacred is also highly context sensitive or even tied down to individual experience and each and every spectator visiting the pandal will have their subjective experience of sacred the origins of

which cannot be charted out. However, the concern here is, whether or not theme pujas, consciously cater towards the propagation of a distinctive character of what is sacred; the experience of which has a certain formulaic nature to it and the nature of which stands as a metaphor for the intersection various ideas of modernity. The experience of religiosity in its constant tussle with the accepted notions of rationality propagated by secular democracy would undergo various transformations. And in this case, one can argue of the existence of two such concepts are the concept of absolute egalitarianism and the idea of the surplus or an excess. It is these two concepts that are formulated in the modern understanding of sacred and is found expression in theme pujas. In the modern understanding of the sacred, the distinctions of profane and the sacred can also not be taken as absolute binary. Sacred has to be thought of as something which has the force and potential to transform the politics of the profane. Anjan Ghosh in his essay mentions that not unlike the subtle revolts the poor rise to civic virtue by their own acts of “tampering” the public sphere, the tendency to rise pandals for pujas has been extended to poorer clubs and groups and they freely exercise the right to worship and monumentalize it through the construction of the pandal. The ability of puja pandals to radically transform a quotidian space to the symbolic value of housing the divine speaks about a tendency of doing away with the watershed boundaries of the sacred and the profane. It also represents a certain ubiquity in the idea of sacred which is materialized through nothing but will. (Ghosh, p. 212)

The democratic sacred and the sacred of excess

The primary anxiety faced by states governed by a liberal secular democracy is the seeming miscommunication that can happen between religious and secular minded citizens. There lie several paradoxes in the domain of secular democracy in its documented form. Talal Asad says that liberal politics leads to “universalization” where the presumption is that every citizen will be treated “no more, no less and no different” than the other and because of the creation of an electoral polity. There is a “substitutability” where each individual is the substitute of others. (Asad, p. 16) The paradox here is that despite the valorization of certain sense of rationality and secular ethics, a democratic society, for the benefit of democracy only has to give equal and unconditional voice to all citizens despite the fact a considerable number of citizens would be the follower of logic and reason incompatible with the larger sense of secular democracy. These other sets of citizens in Western societies are often considered to be the devout religious ones. In a society like India, where the majority of the population is enmeshed in diverse mediums of faith, each in supposed contradistinction to the other, secular democracy becomes more than just an efficient form of governmentality. Working on the logic of absolute equality, where each citizen is counted in terms of a positive integer, Chatterjee argues that modern democracies valorize this logic of counting to the level of utopia. The ethics of substitutability and abstraction of people in terms of numbers is part of the utopian imagination of the homogenous empty time on which both liberal democracies as well as capitalism seems to function. This also looks for a philosophy of radical equality and unity in the world. Chatterjee says, Such a conception of politics requires an understanding of the world as one, so that a common activity called politics

can be seen to be going on everywhere. Politics, in this sense, inhabits the empty homogenous time of modernity. (Chatterjee, p. 80)

In a way empty homogenous time is what is both indispensable yet utopian to secular democracy and therefore somewhat sacred. Devotion to the divine or the concept of worship at large can also make claims about equality which one feels is required in the profane existence. It is this realization that somewhat formulates the conception of the sacred in contemporary times. To imagine an equality which transcends the intricacies of the social condition and seems almost unreal. (Chatterjee, p.89) Theme pujas have been known to establish cultures of enormous fluidity and equality by working on a sense of cosmopolitanism which defies the religious boundaries of Hinduism. Ghosh remarks, The popularity of the festival has enhanced its festive aspect while eroding its ritual features. This has to an extent 'secularized' the worship of a Hindu goddess into a cosmopolitan festival. (Ghosh, p. 295)

The very fact that a festival can be secularized, while retaining subsequent elements of religiosity, gives credence to the fact that a common language between the secular and religious forms of existence can be made possible and theme pandals in a way is a realization of the epistemic responsibility that Habermas talks about. Chatterjee talks about one such pandal which was designed as the bamboo fortress of Titu Mir, who was a fiery Jihadi Muslim, in order to foster the need of Hindu-Muslim harmony (Chatterjee, p. 231). It was done so in the year where Gujrat massacres took place. The pandals show a tendency to cross the barriers of religion and cultures where from the buildings of Palestine, to World Trade Centre to the streets of London, everything can be realized. Individual political movements like the issues of global warming or women emancipation also have received considerable representation in the mandap decoration of Durga Pujas. To create a spectacle out of something, especially in the domain of visual culture is to create a myth of fuzzy overlapping time frames where the experience of a linear direct time is suspended and everything is experienced in ruptures. It is the spectacular and grandiose decorations of the pandals, the impossible reality expressed through the innovation of themes, the profusion of lighting and music creates an aura of spectacle and enchantment creates the atmosphere where this darshan can be in sync with. It is in the excess, that the larger than life, sacred procedure of darshan is realized. This is something which would be incompatible with the quotidian secular existence. Now a certain critique of the process would suggest that this spectacle is not “the celebration of piety but that of entertainment” because it is entirely dependent on market games involving the production of an illogical fetish in people that capitalism creates and manipulates. But one would like to think that just because market games are part of the highly profane existence, the intervention of market unto something does not necessarily hamper the essence. Market here might be playing with religiosity but in itself does not obliterate religiosity or the sacred. In fact, sometimes it is the market that caters towards its sustenance. As Talal Asad says, that more than often a counterpart of a religious concept exists simultaneously in the secular socioeconomic universe (like blasphemy and copyright) the domain of excess and fetish lies both in the market as well as religion. (Asad, p.37)

Conclusion

Both market and divinity work on the notion of enchantment. The creation of enchantment is crucial for the realization of the sacred. It is only then the sacred is felt as something superseding reality into something phantasmagoric. So, it might be true that puja pandals are highly susceptible to market games but one cannot exactly lament the loss of divine ecstasy or the sacred in such a process because it is through the spectacle catered and catalyzed by the market that the process of necessary enchantment continues and one experiences the sacred. Theme pandals, in a sense becomes that unique space where the sacral does not only come in terms with modernity and creates a common language, but becomes something highly aided by modernity.

References

1. Asad Talal, *et al.* "Free Speech, Blasphemy, and Secular Criticism." *Is Critique Secular?: Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*, Fordham University Press, 2013, 14–57.
2. Aupers S, Houtman D. *Religions of Modernity: Relocating the Sacred to the Self and the Digital*, International Studies in Religion and Society University of Ottawa, 1969:12:201-222.
3. Chatterje P. *Lineages of Political Society: Studies in Postcolonial Democracy*; Critique of Popular culture, Columbia University Press, 2011, 182-312.
4. Ghosh A. "Durga Puja: A Consuming Passion". *Seminar* 559, 2006, 13-35.
5. Ghosh A. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Spaces of Recognition: Puja and Power in Contemporary Calcutta. *Special Popular Culture and Democracy*, 2000:26(2):289-299.
<https://durgaonline.com/2015/hindusthanpark>
6. International Business Times article, 2014.
<https://www.ibtimes.co.in/durga-puja-2014-diamond-ornaments-worth-10-crore-goddess-durga-video-610367>
7. Mitariu C. *Cross-Cultural Management Journal*, The Concept of Sacred in a Multidisciplinary Perspective, 2013:15(1-3):23-29.
8. Pathak A. *Mainstream*, Durga Puja as Mass Cultural Consumption: Changing Scenario of Religious Festivals, 1998:36-49:11.
9. Sudipta Garai. *Changing Character of Religious Festivals: A Sociological Enquiry with Special Reference to Kolkata*; Dissertation submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University, Centre for the Study of Social Systems, school of Social Sciences, 2012.
10. Thakurata T. *In the Name of the Goddess, Durga Pujas of Contemporary Kolkata*, Primus Books, 2015.
11. Times of India article, 2015.
<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/near-stampede-shuts-down-deshapriya-park-durga-puja/articleshow/49446378.cms>