

COMMERCIALIZATION OF DURGA PUJA IN KOLKATA

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Abstract: Religion and market, as spaces, were never very far away from each other, but in recent times it's quite interesting to see how both has changed its nature. The question that arise is whether it's due to the process of secularization that the profit making agencies enter into the sphere which was so long being maintained as an exclusive space of "sacred"? The notions of 'sacred' and 'profane' thus become issues of contestations where the capital becomes the new 'religion'.

Keywords: Religion, Market, Commodification, Capitalistic Corporatization

Introduction: 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. Durga Puja, being the most significant annual festivity of the Bengalees calls for a deep view as it also goes beyond the boundary of religion to the other social, cultural, economic and political conditions of the state. 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 of religious transformations for journalists, authors, sociologists and people from different other professional backgrounds as well. The focus here is to look at the process of changes from a sociological perspective. 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' and it use to be under certain norms and restrictions. Now every creation has been reduced to a commodity and human beings is rapidly internalizing this cultural ethos looking at the world, nature, each other and themselves also in terms of monetary value and exchanges. Market turns into God, where the profane merges into the sacred sharing more or less the same space of existence. Market, Free Choices and Religion as Commodity With the emergence of capitalism and globalization, the ways of life has altered to a great extent. Religion is now just not a product of beliefs and rituals but also a product in the market which is expected to gain profits. Brands create new identities and it also becomes important to make it saleable to the consumers. Religion is now presented in a total new form. One cannot deny that the freedom of free choices of religious forms has led to the creation of open market in religion. The 'greed' to gain and maximize profits and reproduction if the endless 'desire' to consume has broadly changed the

nature of religion which was traditionally supposed to be in a 'sacred' sphere of life. It not only enters into the field of commercialization and commodification of gods but also the belief systems, festivities and other aspects of the same. The secular and technological developments donot eliminate the need for religion rather changes its form and nature to a great extent reinforcing the rules of market into it. In the context of secularization, Berger 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. 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. With the secularization in society and culture, there is also a secularization of consciousness. Through secularization there is more of a privatization of religion where religion is not necessarily viewed only in terms of institutional structures rather as a 'bricolage' of the client cult as well. It enters into interactions with other social institutions which are necessarily secular with the private choices of the individuals. Habermas also argues that modernization had resulted in an independent sphere of secular knowledge and the life world is threatened by reification due to

overwhelming power by the non-communicative media of money and power leading to the 'colonization of the life world'. 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'. As secularization marks a decline of the sacred, so does sacralization denote an increase in the sacred in one form or the other and at different levels. 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. The space of sacred is changing rather than fading away. Religion in modern India is both a product of modernity and also a process in producing modernity. The commodification of religion not only makes the festivities as a spectacle rather also the leaders into celebrities and their lives into a phenomenon. Religious commodification is a complex historical and cultural construction, which are produced in specific cultural contexts and thus require an understanding of cultural framework in order to unlock their symbolic and socio-economic significance. Commodity processes are highly inventive and specifically embedded in the local global trajectories of the market economy and post modern religious explosions. This process however do not necessarily lead to religious malaise or produce new religious forms or movements that oppose the institutionalized beliefs and practices of the old religious institutions. It rather walks along the way to capture its essence giving it a new form. Diffusing religion via a commodity market and the intervention of the media coverage has redefined the ritual procedures which have affirmed the prosperity of the religious spaces in the everyday lives of the Asian people. Durga Puja: A brief view of its mythological origin 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. Durga, 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. There are several mythological stories in SkandaPurana, MarkendeyaPurana, VamanaPurana explaining the reason of her emergence to destroy the evil to give birth of the sacred power. It is however quite interesting to note in "Intimate Relations" (1989:129) by SudhirKakar, 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. 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 womens' issues: thus the logo and name of India's first feminist press, Kali for Women. Madhu Kiswar and Ruth Vanita (1984) 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.

Changing Times: Puja as 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 expenses. 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 wellknown 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 neoliberal 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. 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. Puja through the changing time had changed itself adequately with the forces of modernization, globalization, liberalization and capitalist corporatization. It has

now become a huge spectacle. 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.

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