

# Durga Puja in Kolkata



DURGA PUJA IN KOLKATA

Text copyright © 2022 by Brandy Williams

Durga Puja in Kolkata is licensed under CC BY 4.0

Ebook ISBN-13: 978-1-957581-04-0

Photos by Brandy Williams and Alex Williams

**Mnemosyne Press**

## Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	3
Introduction.....	5
In Transit: Prathama, Dwitiya, Tritiya .....	8
Navaratri and Durga Puja .....	8
Devi Returning.....	9
Preparing for Devi: Chaturthi .....	11
Flowers for Devi: The Malik Ghat Flower Market .....	11
Making Devi: Potter's Lane .....	12
A neighborhood shrine .....	14
The artisan's pandal.....	14
The potters of potters lane .....	15
Sacred statues.....	17
Durga's changing face .....	17
Women potters.....	18
Offerings to Devi: Panchami .....	20
Music for Devi: Drummers.....	20
Dhakis, the drummers.....	20
Dhaks, the drums .....	22
Rituals and dances .....	23
Food of Devi: Kolay Market .....	25
Devi in the Temple: Shashti - Durga Puja Day One .....	26
Kalighat Temple .....	26
A Kali in every neighborhood .....	28
Kali the Mother.....	29
Devi in the Palaces: Saptami - Durga Puja Day Two.....	30
Devi's Plants: Navapatrika .....	30
My five minutes of fame .....	31
The navapatrika ritual .....	32

Kola Bou, the banana bride .....	33
The palaces of Kolkata .....	34
Landowners and Merchants .....	36
Devi in the Home: Ashtami, Durga Puja Day Three .....	38
Kumari Puja .....	38
Devi on the Street: Navami - Durga Puja Day Four .....	41
Neighborhood pandals .....	41
Theme pandals .....	43
Holiday lights .....	45
Devi Departing: Dashami - Durga Puja Day Five .....	46
Immersion .....	46
Family Ritual .....	48
Changes to Durga Puja .....	49
Confronting pollution .....	49
Challenging the caste system .....	50
Pandemic effects .....	50
Continuing Durga Puja .....	51
Postscript: Bringing Durga Puja Home .....	52
Illustrations .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>
Appendix One: Timeline .....	54
Appendix Two: Navapatrika .....	55
Glossary .....	59
Works Cited .....	62
Notes .....	<b>Error! Bookmark not defined.</b>

## Introduction

Can you name the largest Goddess festival in the world? It isn't a Pagan festival in America or the Day of the Virgin of Guadalupe. It's Durga Puja in Kolkata. Every autumn a city of 14 million people throws an elaborate five-day party in the streets.

I have searched the world for the Goddess, in academic texts, in temple ruins in Egypt and Greece, in library-quiet museums filled with glass cabinets where her statues are held like hostages away from worship. We are told that she is history, past, gone.

In Kolkata the Goddess lives out loud. Durga Puja is anything but quiet. Drummers pound out beloved rhythms and loudspeakers broadcast songs. Her temples are not stone but bamboo, her statues are not stone but clay, a literal epiphany. Goddess emerges through the deliberate evocation of her worshippers. While she resides in the clay she is showered with flowers, plied with food and incense, entertained with dance, offered hymns and chants and songs. In Kolkata at Durga Puja the Goddess is most definitely present.

My husband Alex and I visited Kolkata at Durga Puja in 2019. We were very fortunate to go just before the COVID-19 pandemic shut down travel. When we came home I started researching the background of what we had experienced. I found that there is very little written in English about this festival in Bengal. For that reason alone I thought it would be worth recording our experience and what I've learned about it since.

This travelogue is meant to encourage readers to learn more about India and Durga. Most of all I want to share the joy of traveling to places in the world where the Goddess is central. She isn't a memory of the past or spouse of a god, she is the ultimate power which creates and sustains the universe. Her yearly festival is the most important religious and cultural celebration in West Bengal. This is inspiring for Goddess worshippers, Pagans and Witches, and Tantric practitioners.

I write this book as a scholar practitioner. As an independent scholar I have written on Pagan history. As a practitioner I am a Witch, a Pagan, a Ceremonial

Magician practicing theurgy, and a Shri Vidya student engaging in Tantric practice. The travelogue is filled out with background information about the people, places and events which I experienced.

In creating this work I have had several guides. The first was our contact in West Bengal, a lifelong resident of Kolkata who comes from a Shakta family. His knowledge and connections gave us entry into experiences we could not have navigated on our own. He gave us an insider's look at the history and religious significance of the festival. He spent hours in conversation with us helping us to understand what we were seeing. He hosted us as fellow practitioners, not as researchers, and for that reason I keep his name and his family private.

In post-trip research four authors have provided critical information that has informed my understanding of Durga Puja. June McDaniel documented some of her field work in West Bengal in her book *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls: Popular Goddess Worship in West Bengal*. As I travelled I often tripped over the traces of ideas she had followed up.

Hilary Peters Rodrigues chose to study Durga Puja for his doctoral dissertation. He found a Bengali family in Varanasi who allowed him to document their family rituals. They connected him with priests who could translate the chants and texts which he documents in *Ritual Worship of the Great Goddess, The Liturgy of the Durga Puja with Interpretations*. Although Rodrigues worked with a Bengali family in Varanasi his book provided context and detail for the celebrations I observed in Kolkata. His work is especially helpful because of his essential sympathy for the rites. His descriptions of the meaning of the rituals match the comments of my guide in Kolkata, my teacher's lessons, and my own experience.

Tapati Guha-Thakurta's ten-year survey of the festival *In the Name of the Goddess, the Durga Pujas of Contemporary Kolkata* provides the vital connection to the event as it is experienced by the people who make it today. She studies Pujo (as it is called in Kolkata) not only as a religious event but as a public cultural one, as an academic and as a resident of Kolkata who grew up with the festival.

Finally, my encounter with Durga is continually deepened by the work of Laura Amazzone. Her work *Goddess Durga and Sacred Female Power* opens a

portal into the liberating power of the Mother Goddess. I find new meaning whenever I re-read it.

## In Transit: Prathama, Dwitiya, Tritiya

Her face is everywhere. From the moment we drove into town until the day we returned to the airport her numinous eyes looked out at us from posters, shrines, advertisements. Durga is the one who comes when you call and during her festival she is luminously present. Her gaze enveloped me, drawing me in, calling me home to my heart. The call rang out on every street, "Jai Ma!" Victory to the Mother!

Alex and I arrived on the last frantic days of preparation for the grand yearly celebration of Durga Puja. Navaratri is celebrated all over India but West Bengal takes the holiday to the next level. People flood into Kolkata from all over India to celebrate the largest Goddess festival in the world. The whole city strings up lights and sets up statues on every street corner. Women dress up in brand new saris, vendors serve holiday sweets, crowds of people gape at the elaborate displays. It's like Christmas, if Christmas was about a lion-riding Goddess slaying a buffalo demon.

## Navaratri and Durga Puja

Alex and I developed a relationship with a travel agent in America who works with a Kolkata guide. As we jointly planned our itinerary the difference between Navaratri and Durga Puja in Kolkata kept tripping me up. I didn't actually get it until I experienced it.

Navaratri is a fall harvest festival celebrated over nine nights (literally nava, nine and ratri, nights). Our travel agent explained that in Kolkata the celebration of Durga Puja begins on the fifth day of Navaratri. I thought that meant that Durga Puja was just another name for Navaratri, that people were celebrating quietly for the beginning of the holy days and then took the last few days off work to spend with their families. I didn't realize that Kolkata's Pujo has its own distinct rituals and its own story arc about the Goddess.

Navaratri is about the goddess Durga. The tale is told in several texts, notably the Devi Mahatmya or Chandi Path. In this story powerful demons have chased the gods from their homes. They call piteously on Durga to rescue them -



she is the only force in the universe who can vanquish the demons. She engages in fierce battles and ultimately triumphs. Her victory restores order for the gods and for humanity. Although Durga vanquishes many different demons West Bengal focuses on one story in particular, Durga's triumph over the buffalo demon Mahishasur.

Navaratri is both a religious and a cultural occasion. Devotees read chapters in the Chandi Path daily. Each day is associated with a form of the goddess called the NavaDurga or nine Durgas. Each day also has a different color and people wear the color on that day. Dance floors spring up in cities in India where people try out garba dance moves and party with their friends. It is a colorful and exuberant celebration of Goddess energy, Shakti.

## Devi Returning

There is another story about the Goddess that is told across India. In this tale Devi decided to take human form. She was born to the king of the Himalayas, Himavan, and the daughter of Mount Meru, Menavati. When Parvati was old enough to marry she undertook a severe practice, chanting without eating or sleeping, for the boon of marrying Shiva. She succeeded. When she married Shiva she left Himavan and Menavati's home and moved to Shiva's home on Mount Kailash. There she became mother to the gods Ganesh and Kartikeya.

Parvati's story layers on top of Durga's story at Navaratri. In India brides often move into their husband's homes, leaving their families and friends to live with virtual strangers. The dislocation is keenly felt. At Navaratri daughters journey back to their paternal homes and bring their children along. In West Bengal Durga is understood to be coming home, bringing her sons Ganesh and Kartikeya with her. Bengalis add the goddesses Lakshmi and Saraswati to the family group as Durga's daughters.

In the weeks and days before navaratri preparations are made to welcome the returning daughter and the returning goddess. Temporary shrines called pandals are set up all around the city to house clay statues of Durga and her children. The Goddess leaves Mount Kailash on Mahalaya, a day which is fixed by priests consulting the lunar calendar, and usually falls six days before Shashti. A

recording featuring the beloved singer Birendra Krishna Bhadra has been played on All India Radio continually since 1932 to kick off the holiday season.<sup>1</sup>

Navaratri proper begins on the new moon day, Prathama. Bengalis move statues into the pandals and home shrines on the fifth day, Panchami. On Shashti, the sixth day, she is invoked into the statues in private homes, neighborhood pandals, and major temples. This is the beginning of Pujo. Devi stays through Saptami, Ashtami and Navami and then leaves on Dashami for Mount Kailash while the statues are dissolved in the river. These five days are Kolkata's Durga Puja.

In one sense Devi comes home at Durga Puja. In another sense she has never left. Rodrigues details the rituals which coax her latent presence into active manifestation, in the wood apple tree, in a pot filled with water, in a bundle of plants, in the clay statues, in young girls, and finally in all women. Each manifestation sets up the possibility of darshan. The individual worshiper has an encounter in which deity and person mutually recognize each other.<sup>2</sup>

Alex and I made our own transit to India on the first three days of Navratri. By the time our Kolkata itinerary commenced I was already well into my observance of Navaratri. At night in the hotel I chanted the Chandi Path, plunging into the story of Durga's battles and triumphs. By day on the streets I watched the community evoke Durga tangibly for everyone to see and feel. These two experiences, the private religious and public cultural one, proceeded for me as intertwining tracks.

---

<sup>1</sup> "Mahishasura Mardini", Birendra Krishna Bhadra.

<sup>2</sup> Rodrigues, *Ritual Worship*, p. 12.

## Preparing for Devi: Chaturthi

On the fourth day of Navaratri, Chaturthi, we plunged into the preparations for the Durga Puja festivities. Our first stop grounded me to the Shakti of India's earth and water.

### Flowers for Devi: The Malik Ghat Flower Market

While our driver parked the car our guide led us between buildings down to the river. We stepped out into a postcard scene: a river, a bridge, steps leading down to the water crowded with people taking a bath, a red brick building, women in bright saris sitting on the packed mud stringing flowers. I took in a deep breath and thought, *I'm in India!*

Our guide swept his arm at the vista before us. "The Ganges," he said.

This confused me instantly. The Ganges is the great sacred river of India flowing from the Himalayas down to the Ganges Delta. The river herself is a goddess whose water purifies and consecrates; devout Hindus make pilgrimages to bathe in her waters and tiny vials of Ganges water are sold in puja kits. However the maps called this particular river the Hooghly and it runs into the Bay of Bengal. I learned later that the official name of the river is a colonial relic of the Portuguese incursion. The Ganges shifted in the mid-1700s and turned the arm flowing through Kolkata into a distributary. Even though the water is now channelized to a great extent Kolkata residents still treat this branch as the Ganges - they bathe in it, cremate bodies beside it, and return clay statues to the waters.

The women sitting on the packed earth ground stringing flowers had spilled over from the Malik Flower Market, one of the oldest and largest in India. It's named for the Malik Ghat. A ghat gives access to the river and almost always includes mud or stone steps down to the water. The market and ghat sit beneath the colonial Howrah Bridge (renamed Rabindranath Setu Bridge), the fourth largest cantilever bridge in the world.

Our guide led us to a set of steel stairs descending beneath the bridge. I took in the scene and faltered. Alex and I had prepared for our trip by going to the gym

five days a week for a solid year. We made a particular effort to climb the stairs up to the second floor walking track. This turned out to be a completely inadequate preparation. The decorous gym stairs were level, evenly spaced, and had a handrail to the right. I had failed to account for the fact that India's traffic patterns were set by the British who drive on the left hand side of the road; it turns out they walk on the left side too. It didn't matter much that the handrail was on the opposite side than I was used to because I couldn't get to it anyway, the edges of the bridge were lined with bags of bright yellow and orange flower garlands. Picking up my skirt I stepped gingerly down the stairs and managed to make it to the ground level without falling.

What spread before us is one of the largest flower markets in Asia. Devi loves flowers, every shrine and statue is decorated with garlands, and this is where Kolkata goes to get them. Thousands of vendors line the walkway beneath the bridge, working in shifts from early in the morning to well after dinner.<sup>3</sup>

Our guide plunged into the river of people pushing between the flower stalls lining both sides of the walkway. All three of us avidly snapped pictures of the beautiful displays. Women and men sat on the ground amidst huge open bags of colorful blossoms. Porters heaved massive bags of blooms onto their shoulders and trotted away. Beside every woman stringing a garland stood a porter holding the finished strings ready to hurry them off to their customers.

All throughout Durga Puja we would see those garlands everywhere, draped on statues, decorating the pillars of the pandals, hanging from the stalls around the temples. Surrounded by all these colors I couldn't help but wish I could cart an armful home to decorate my own altars.

## Making Devi: Potter's Lane

Potter's Lane is where the goddess takes shape.

We piled back into the car and raced off to Kumortuli. Our guide called it Potter's Lane, a literal translation, Kumor – potter, tuli – place. The word lane implies a street but it's really a district incorporating multiple blocks. Brick and

---

<sup>3</sup> De, "Howrah Mullick Ghat Phool Bazar".

concrete houses rise two, three and four stories, all roofed over with bamboo scaffolds and polythene sheets. Larger streets allowed carts to pass but most of the narrow lanes between houses did not permit any wheeled traffic, just pedestrians, making an oasis of calm in a city where cars honk incessantly. The area was so quiet I didn't register its scale until our guide pointed to a house and said, "Hundreds of people live on every block." I looked down the streets counting up blocks and lost my breath for a moment as I registered the psychic weight of so many people around me.

The artisans in this district make the statues that are displayed in private and public shrines all around the city. As we strolled past the hundreds of little workshops a picture of the process slowly came into focus. First straw is pressed into a wire framework and shaped into the poses of the deities. Clay is slathered onto the straw. When the clay dries the statues are painted, sometimes airbrushed but mostly by hand. Hair, clothing, tinsel and gilt finish the images. Once again the three of us took many pictures. I was trying to document as much of the process as I could.

The last touch is to paint in the eyes of the statues. I saw one artisan do this with great concentration. For the potters this brings the statues to life. This is exactly what happened in antiquity in the great Egyptian and Mesopotamian temples – once the statues of the gods were finished priests would touch their eyes and mouths with special tools to open them to enable them to see, eat, and receive offerings.

Once the statues are complete they have to navigate out from the workshops. In the narrowest of lanes they were lifted up over heads to make their way to the larger walkways. Medium-sized tableaux were lashed onto bamboo poles to be carried on shoulders. The wider alleyways were large enough to accommodate hand-pulled carts. All of these were taken out to the nearest street to be loaded onto trucks and carried to pandals all over the city. As each statue left the workshop a cry would ring out, "Jai Ma!" and everyone on the street would answer, "Jai Ma!"

On the day we toured the district all the big pieces had long ago been finished and installed. A few workshops were hustling to send out the last of the displays ordered by the smaller neighborhood clubs. Most potters had already

pivoted to cranking out the statues of Lakshmi for the celebration of Divali that falls just a few weeks after Durga Puja.

Our guide gave us a story that rarely shows up on the tourist web sites: every potter has to obtain a little clay from a sex worker in the red light district near Kumortuli. This clay is taken from the sex worker's doorstep to be mixed into the Durga statues. Our guide said this honors the understanding that everyone is sacred and that prostitutes do important work. He believed that other parts of India don't keep this practice, just Bengal, which has held onto the religion of the mother. Guha-Thakurta notes that the sex workers sell the bags of soil to the potters for a few rupees one month before the pujas.<sup>4</sup>

## A neighborhood shrine

In Kumortuli we saw our first shrine to Kali. Tucked in among the potters shops was a little altar. A priest sat cross-legged below a shelf crowded with deity statues. Because it was a shrine I did not take a photograph so I don't have an record to check my memory of the statues. While Alex paused to pay his respects to the goddess I worked to identify the other images on a shelf behind the priest while our guide corrected my identifications. I came away with the certain knowledge that there is a great deal of detail in the localized deities that doesn't make it into the books.

There was a metal object in front of the shrine that I couldn't immediately identify. It gradually dawned on me that this was a sacrifice yoke. West Bengal is Tantric country and Kali eats goats. Actually she receives the goat sacrifice on behalf of the petitioner while the priests eat the goat meat. The presence of this sacrifice area in a public lane signaled the widespread acceptance of the practice.

## The artisan's pandal

We finished our tour of Kumortuli at a neighborhood pandal. Our guide told us that art students had constructed this display. A bamboo scaffold wrapped with bright yarn formed a tunnel into a courtyard. The front wall of the pandal itself was an elaborately sculpted art installation.

---

<sup>4</sup> Guha-Thakurta, *In the Name of the Goddess*, p. 151.

The courtyard stood directly adjacent to a tree. I was arrested by a bundle of branches strung from the tree trunk through a circular hole in the pandal's front wall. Once inside I saw that the bundle of branches dropped down behind the image of Durga in the tableau. As a yogini I know that trees are important, they sometimes house the spirits called yakshis and yakshas, and village women wrap yarn around trees to honor the spirits. Later I thought that this linkage of tree and statue might also draw on the tradition of the plant bundles called navapatrika which embody the goddess. On an energetic level it seemed clear that the tree was powering the statue.

While most neighborhood pandals stick to the traditional tableau imagery some clubs experiment with new imagery each year. The young artists had produced a distinctive Durga. She was delicate, finely detailed, smiling. Her usual attendants Lakshmi, Saraswati and Kartikeya were joined by Krishna playing on his flute. The image of Mahishasur at her feet was not ferocious or distressed but calm, gesturing upward toward her.

The artistry, the intimate scale, and the connection to the tree charmed me. I predicted to our guide that this would be my favorite pandal. He advised me that this was my first pandal and to wait to make that decision until I had seen more of them. Going back through my photographs my judgement stands: the Durga of the potters spoke to me more than the statues of the aristocratic families or the massive neighborhood displays. It was fresh, young, and heartfelt. And they knew to connect her to the tree.

## The potters of potters lane

The tour of Kumortuli left me with a lot of questions. Who were the potters? What is their quality of life? Are there any women potters? Torsa Ghosal, Geir Heierstad and Tapati Guha-Thakurta helped me build an understanding of the history and the lives of the residents.

Kumortuli, the potter's district, lies beside the Hooghly or Ganges river. This facilitates transport of the specific clay used in the statues as well as the water of the river. The district was created during the colonial period when the British East India Company designated geographical districts for specific castes. They

marked out a swamp near the river as the live-work neighborhood for the potters caste. Today it's a heritage site and the last caste-based neighborhood in Kolkata.<sup>5</sup>

Before the commercial production of housewares the potters made ordinary clay vessels like the cups still used in streetside tea stalls. The business of the district shifted when wealthy merchant-landowners turned the autumn harvest festival into a competitive entertainment. Then the workshops started turning out clay statues of Durga and her family for the Durga Puja celebrations.

Guha-Thakurta reports that a little over 500 families live in the district. Their cramped quarters and uncertain livelihood has been a concern for decades. The potters formerly depended on money lenders to fund the workshops but recent unionization of the trade has made bank loans accessible. Even so income remains variable and loan repayment uncertain.<sup>6</sup>

In the early 2000s an urban renewal project proposed to replace the leaky-roof shanties of the district. This involved moving the potters to temporary quarters, demolishing their homes, and building new multi-story structures with apartments above and modern studios below. In the mid-2000s the first phase of the project relocated 170 families into temporary quarters.<sup>7</sup> When the project was suspended by a new government the temporary quarters became semi-permanent. The dislocated families report a sense of loss of connection to the district and in particular to the soil, rain and sun of their open-air workshops.<sup>8</sup>

Being a potter, shaping the body of a deity, is about more than making a living or creating art. Heierstad reports that potters identify their ability to make the statues as hereditary, it's in the blood, and call themselves murtikars, makers of murtis or sacred images.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Ghosal, "How Immigrant Sculptors Shaped an Artists' Hub".

<sup>6</sup> Guha-Thakurta, *In the Name of the Goddess*, p. 157.

<sup>7</sup> Guha-Thakurta, *In the Name of the Goddess*, p. 159.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Mukhopadhyay, "Contesting Spaces of Urban Renewal Project".

<sup>9</sup> Heierstad, *Caste, Entrepreneurship and the Illusions of Tradition*, location 265.



## Sacred statues

The centerpiece of the Durga Puja festival is the statue that sits at the heart of every pandal. The unfired clay statues are called pratima, images which are worthy to manifest the deity. When Durga's presence is called into them they become murti, a physical object carrying the energy of deity. Scholars struggle to find an English term for these images which become a goddess: figure, idol, effigy, statue complex, icon.

For Durga Puja in particular these displays function like a Christmas creche with instantly recognizable images. The earliest form of this image remains popular. Durga is central, surrounded by smaller figures of her children Ganesh, Saraswati, Lakshmi and Kartikeya. She has ten arms with their particular tools. At her feet her lion Simha attacks the demon Mahishasur while she spears the demon's heart.<sup>10</sup>

The potters use clay shipped along the river from the village Uluberia. They prefer this clay for its workability and for the way it dries without cracking, although efforts have been made to substitute clay from other locations.<sup>11</sup> Recently potters have branched out from clay to using lime plaster and fiberglass.

The gold and silver foil decorations and ornaments for the statues are created in shops surrounding the district. Jute fiber used to create the lion's mane and the hair of the goddess has traditionally been supplied by Muslim women from the Howrah neighborhood, although this traditional craft is being replaced by nylon doll hair.<sup>12</sup>

## Durga's changing face

The artistic representation of Durga has shifted in the last century. In the traditional form the eyes of the goddess are elongated, she is painted yellow, and Mahishasur is painted green. When potters made statues for the aristocratic families they tended to portray Durga's features as a white woman, a memsaheb style that appealed to colonial tastes. Gradually the shapes of the statues shifted.

---

<sup>10</sup> Guha-Thakurta, *In the Name of the Goddess*, p. 161-163.

<sup>11</sup> Ganguly, "Komortuli artists make idols with soil from Diamond Harbor instead of Uluberia".

<sup>12</sup> Guha-Thakurta, *In the Name of the Goddess*, p. 157-158.

Artistic developments in the 1900s introduced realistic human and animal forms, tableaux broken up into individual statues, and ornate decorations of silver foil.

An influx of refugee potters brought a new style into the district. In the 1940s the British government separated Muslim-majority East Bengal from Hindu-majority West Bengal. Hindu potters from East Bengal fled to Kolkata and took up residence in Kumortuli. The immigrants brought a new sensibility, fashioning their Durga as a round-faced Bengali mother.<sup>13</sup>

Ghosal notes that the first potter to get an education at the Government Art College was looked on with suspicion as having an unfair competitive advantage. Our guide identified the pandal we toured in the district as created by art students so this may be changing. Today established artists create elaborate statues for the theme pandals. In the workshops of Kumortuli the statue faces are made separately from molds that are kept from year to year as a trademark of the workshop.<sup>14</sup>

Guha-Thakurta comments that every change in the face of the goddess echoes the political and cultural concerns of the time.<sup>15</sup>

## Women potters

All the artisans I saw were men and boys. The profession is caste-based and hereditary and sons usually inherit the workshops. However there are women in the profession. Some inherit workshops from their fathers and husbands, others grew up with the trade.

China Pal and Mala Pal felt a strong calling to make the images and took up the profession despite their fathers' opposition. (The potters share the surname Pal). Mala Pal inherited her father's workshop when none of his sons wanted to follow him into the trade. Kakoli Pal turned to making murtis after her husband died to support herself and her children.<sup>16</sup> Other women specialize in making clothing and tinsel for the statues, and at least one woman learned the trade from her mother.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Ghosal, "How Immigrant Sculptors Shaped an Artists' Hub Called Kumartuli".

<sup>14</sup> Guha-Thakurta, *In the Name of the Goddess*, p. 151.

<sup>15</sup> Guha-Thakurta, *In the Name of the Goddess*, p 165.

<sup>16</sup> "The Women Artisans of Kumartuli".

<sup>17</sup> Sengupta, "The female sculptors of Kumartuli".

The women report that they faced down social opposition from the men around them to follow their profession.

Guha-Thakurta reports that the women potters Kanchi Pal Datta, Bharati Pal and Sandhya Pal were vocal participants in the protests against the relocations, raising concerns about displacing women's families and drawing attention to the invisible and unacknowledged work of women in the family workshops.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Guha-Thakurta, *In the Name of the Goddess*, p.159.

# Offerings to Devi: Panchami

## Music for Devi: Drummers

Durga Puja has a drumbeat.

On Panchami our guide took us to the loudest street corner in Kolkata. We parked nearby and walked toward the Sealdah Railway Station drawn by the thumping sound. Troupes of men bearing large two-sided drums set up shop along the street and worked through their repertoire of beats. Commuters streaming in and out of the station paused to listen to the sounds while Alex, our guide and I filmed the drummers.

Our guide explained that these performances were a form of advertising. Sealdah Station is the largest in Kolkata. It's fronted by a major street so there's plenty of room and everyone knows where it is. This makes an excellent location for drummers to demonstrate their skill for prospective employers for the home and neighborhood celebrations. In 2019 there were at least 4000 celebrations around Kolkata and music is essential. Live music gets the crowd dancing.

What I noticed at the time was that the drummers, like the potters, were entirely men, and a few had brought young boys with them. The drums were decorated with plumes and I wondered what they signified. I wanted to know where they came from and what their lives were like. Since the trip I've been able to assemble a bit more information about them.

## Dhakis, the drummers

Viplob Majumder's documentary *Divine Drums* is not translated into English, but Shoma A. Chatterji provides a translation of some of the comments in *Filming Reality: The Independent Documentary Movement in India*. News sources writing in English on the web also post articles about the drummers during Durga Puja.

The drums are called dhaks and the drummers are called dhakis. They come from no particular caste but it's a hereditary profession, sons play with their fathers

and uncles and grow up as drummers. They come from several country districts including Birbhum Province (which was studied by McDaniel and which we toured later in our trip).<sup>19</sup>

Dhakis flow into the city from country districts at Durga Puja and often stay until Kali Puja three weeks later. In this time frame they earn almost all the money they will make from their drumming all year. Consequently many have other occupations as construction workers, brick layers and rickshaw pullers. They're strong men. They have to be, the drums are enormous.<sup>20</sup>

Traditionally the drummers have all been men. However all it takes to cross a gender barrier is one man willing to break ranks. For the drummers that man is Gokul Chandra Das, a famous drummer from Machlandapur village. He started with one daughter and daughter-in-law, built up to five women, then twenty-five, and grew to seventy players pre-pandemic. They toured other parts of India before braving the pandals of Kolkata where they were warmly received. They've even traveled to London to perform.<sup>21</sup>

Chatterji reports that the drummers say their way of life is fading.<sup>22</sup> Brass bands and DJs playing recorded music are replacing them, and when dhakis are hired the fees for appearances are meager. Sons don't want to follow their fathers into a low-paid profession. It's not surprising to see women moving into drumming - as with the potters, where sons do not pick up the family business a space is opened for the daughters to do so. Gender-restricted trades with diminishing numbers find their pool of candidates double when the restriction is lifted.

One objection raised to women playing the drum was that the traditional dhak would be too heavy for them to carry. Gokul Chandra Das solved this problem by having drums constructed from fiberglass. This is one of the several innovations that are modernizing the drums themselves.

---

<sup>19</sup> "Durga Puja: Meet dhakis".

<sup>20</sup> Chatterji, "The Distant Drummers of Durga Pooja".

<sup>21</sup> Goswami, "These women dhakis or drummers".

<sup>22</sup> Chatterji, *Filming Reality*, p. 90-91.

## Dhaks, the drums

Until the new fiberglass drums were commissioned Dhak drums have been constructed from wood in a barrel shape. They're double sided with cow or goat skins stretched across each side to form the drum heads. They hang on a strap which can be slung over one shoulder for one-handed play or around the neck to play with both hands. They can also be placed on the ground and played from above. Smaller versions are played with bare hands, the larger ones are played with a thin wooden striker in each hand.

Chatterji records the comments of several dhakis about their drums. Dinabandhu Das noted that he plays 12 different percussion instruments. He makes the drums along with his son and learned the trade from his father. He hollows out the trunk of mango, neem, and other trees to make the drums. Each wood makes a different sound.<sup>23</sup>

We saw other drum types than the large dhak. A troupe of young men carried drums on their necks with both wood and metal rims. They resembled western style marching drums and were played the same way. Other percussive instruments included rattles, hand-held metal cymbals held by straps, and wood-and-skin tambourines also held by straps.

Dhak drums are often decorated, wrapped with colorful cloth or ridged with ribbons. Some of the drums sport a traditional plume of white feathers and black cow tails which drew my attention at first sight. The tails and drum head skins cause some controversy. Conservative Hindus are vegetarian and object to killing animals. Since each dhak drum represents at least one dead cow or goat there is a protest against their use. I note that the Hindu and Tantric temples of West Bengal sacrifice goats and other animals, and culturally West Bengal consumes meat, so this is a social clash that affects more than just drummers.

The use of feathers on the other hand is specific to the drummers. The white plumes arching over the drums are constructed from stork, heron and egret feathers. It takes three to four birds to collect enough feathers for one drum and each year hundreds of birds are killed for the purpose. These birds are protected by

---

<sup>23</sup> Chatterji, *Filming Reality*, p. 90-91.

the Indian Wildlife Act so there's a suspicion that the law is being broken. Dhakis protest that they obtain the feathers from a scheduled tribe who have permission to catch the birds. However the feathers are taken to the city and sold in batches so it's impossible to tell whether they were procured legally or not. Forest rangers try to stop poaching but it's difficult to police the entire countryside. Wildlife enthusiasts protest the destruction of wild birds and the threat to the viability of their protected populations. In the past decade there's been a campaign to require pandal organizers not to hire dhakis who have the plumes. Police spring spot checks at neighborhood pandals and issue fines to organizers who haven't enforced this.<sup>24</sup>

Videos posted online in the last decade turn up examples of traditional feather-and-cow-tail plumes along with drums decorated with plumes of crinkled tinsel and drums without plumes altogether.

The press accounts of this discussion don't talk about the power of the animals. There's an energy to sacrifice, an energy in skin and tail and feather that is not present in crinkled tinsel. The plumes give off the aura of the countryside and the natural world. I haven't seen a discussion of this but I imagine that this is part of what the drummers will be losing in giving up traditional plumes.

## Rituals and dances

Many commentators say the drummers are essential to Durga Puja ritual. The rhythmic patterns are as distinctive as Brazilian samba drums or Voudon drum beats that call specific Orishas. Chatterji reports that dhakis have rhythms for six different moments in Durga Puja, including the moment the statue is lifted onto its platform, the moment Durga is welcomed, and during puja when she is worshipped by day and by night. Chatterji quotes a drummer saying "I cannot give it up as it is a compulsory ritual of worship, is sacred and is our own tribute to the Mother Goddess." Drummers perform for many hours at a time and report falling into a trance while they drum.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> "Dhak minus feather frills" and "Dhak feathers for Durga Puja at the cost of birds".

<sup>25</sup> Chatterji, *Filming Reality*, p. 90-91.

The drummers play for an evening ritual in which incense is presented to Durga. The incense is called dhuno, the resin of the sal tree, and is compared to frankincense. The sal tree grows in West Bengal and provides many substances for commercial and subsistence use; management of the sal forests is under review to ensure the sustainability of the practices.<sup>26</sup>

The dhuno resin is burned in a clay pot called a dhunuchi. Dancers wave the burning dhunuchi pots in front of the murtis or clay tableaux. The dance is called the Dhunuchi Naach (or naach or nautch). An article in *The Statesman* notes that it was formerly danced mostly by men but that women increasingly perform it.<sup>27</sup> However the videos I found online almost all feature groups of women performing this dance. The dancers perform to the beat of the dhakis, the drummers circle outside and inside the rings and lines of dhunuchi dancers.

The music is called essential not just because it is needed for ritual but because it is woven into the culture. Bengalis writing about the dhakis say that the drum beats instantly conjure a nostalgia for the sights and scents and emotions of the Durga Puja celebration. They report that the rhythms are maddening and call them to dance.

I celebrate Navaratri as a Tantric practitioner, not Hindu or ethnic Indian, so I experience nostalgia for the drumming differently. For me hearing the beats reminds me of the power I felt in the land, the water, and the people of West Bengal. I'm glad I had the opportunity to feel the drumming in person and build the beat into my experience of Durga Puja.

---

<sup>26</sup> Shahabuddin, "Ecological sustainability of forest management practices".

<sup>27</sup> "Durga Puja: What is Dhunuchi Naach?" and Jha, *Dhunuchi Dance by Bharti jha*.



## Food of Devi: Kolay Market

In the Devi Mahatmaya the Goddess promises that when she is needed she will return as Shakumbari, the one who nourishes with vegetables. From Sealdah Railway Station it's just a short walk to Kolay Market, one of the biggest wholesale vegetable markets in the city and the region.

We paused outside the building to watch a group of men heave an enormous bundle onto a truck. It was an impressive coordination of effort. Much of the produce that flows into Kolay Market and back out again is transported by hand.

Our guide led us confidently into the dark interior of the building. Baskets hung in the rafters of the market. On the floor they spilled over with the bright colors of vegetables: purple potatoes, red peppers, yellow onions, green herbs. Along the narrow aisles sellers sat with their wares, buyers looked them over and made purchases, and porters heaved bags onto their shoulders to trot out the door. Many of the photos I took here are blurred as I continually hopped out of the way of the porters who zipped past us at a tremendous clip. It occurred to me that this was a hazardous place for a tourist to be.

The market is open 24/7. The sellers are women and men, Hindu and Moslem, casual and commercial. Farmers come in on the railway several days a week to set up in the stalls, while in the interior of the market huge quantities are bought and sold.<sup>28</sup> Our guide told us that many of the contracts are still concluded with a handshake in a trusted network of connection.

The word for a ritual food offering is naivedyam, an essential part of every puja. Fresh and cooked vegetables are presented formally and then distributed to the worshippers. The body of Shakumbari herself is made up of vegetables which she gives to the starving people. Kolay Market may seem like a commonplace commercial center, but here too the Goddess is manifestly visible.

---

<sup>28</sup> "The wholesale markets of Kolkata" and Mukherjee, "An Appraisal Of Wholesale Marketing In Kolkata"

## Devi in the Temple: Shashti - Durga Puja Day One

Shashti is the first day of Durga Puja proper. In private rituals priests perform rites to welcome Durga into the physical objects which carry her presence. Our guide chose this day to take us to one of the major temples in India.

### Kalighat Temple

The parking lot was jammed at festival time. Our driver let us off at the temple gate and swung away to park the car. For me there was a distinct click as we entered the temple grounds, a place where the energy started. I felt the emotional impact of the Mother slam my heart. My eyes filled with tears. I thought, *this is what we came for*. The experience definitively answered the question, why travel if you can see a photo or a film? Because only through physical presence can you feel the power of the land herself.

I had anxiously prepared for our visits to the temples of India. What was appropriate to wear? I settled on patterned cotton maxi dresses that covered me completely but remained clearly western. Alex wore cotton pants and tunics. As we entered the crowd streaming in and out of the temple grounds it was clear that Alex's garb was closer to what the men wore. I on the other hand fell far short of the women's finery. I gaped at the brilliant saris adorning every woman from oldest grandmother to smallest child. Later I learned that every woman wears a new sari at Durga Puja, and the wealthiest women change saris several times a day during the festival.

The temple is surrounded by a kind of sacred market, lanes crowded with little stalls selling items to offer to the goddess and souvenirs to take home. I had read that this is where visitors leave their shoes to enter the temple with bare feet. I'd fretted about this, how would that work?

Our guide threaded the throng and led us directly to a little shop that was already prepared for our arrival. The proprietress perched in the window and waved us in. Our guide parked us on a bench at the back of the shop so we could take off our shoes and sit while we waited. He went off to fetch a priest while we watched the shopkeeper hand down marigold garlands to her customers.

When our guide returned we stepped onto the temple grounds in bare feet. I'd worried about this too. Would the ground be dirty, or hot? It turned out the temple grounds were kept clean and were mostly tiled so they were cool and smooth. As we walked I started chanting a Kali mantra. Alex and our guide chanted too.

The priest led our guide, Alex and me past the long lines waiting to see the goddess and slotted us into the premium line. People kept pushing past us and trying to go with us while the priests shoved us and asked us for more money. When we reached the inner temple we gave our flowers to one of the priests. He put my hand on an aarti lamp. Alex and I tried to see the statue's eyes but didn't have the time to connect, we had only a few seconds before we were pulled out of line to make room for the next pilgrim. Later we learned that there was a place in the temple where it is possible to stand and look at the statue in a more leisurely way. That would probably have been crowded too but I would have liked to try for Alex's sake. At seventy and hard of hearing, being shoved and shouted at while he tried to make a connection was deeply unsettling to him.

The priest quickly left us. Our guide spent a few minutes touring us around the temple grounds. The first stop was a Shiva lingam shrine. Our guide said a Shiva lingam is necessary in a Kali temple, but the actual Bhairava who is paired with this Kali is in another location. Later I learned that the Bhairava for Kalighat is Nakuleshwar whose small temple is near Kalighat and is much less well visited.<sup>29</sup>

Our guide also showed us a little Radha-Krishna shrine. Although there is tension between Vaisnavites and Shaktas, in West Bengal and Assam we saw Krishna's shrines sitting companionably in several of Shakti temples, and Krishna imagery was included in some of the pandals. After our tour of the grounds we did a little shopping and found a statue of Durga spearing the demon Mahishasur which is installed on our house altar.

On our way out of the temple grounds we passed a tree hung with ribbons. Tree is one the very oldest forms of the Goddess. I would have liked to stop there

---

<sup>29</sup> Avishek, "Nakuleshwar Bhairav Temple, Kolkata – The eternal guard of Kalighat".

to spend some time with them but our guide quick-marched us back to the car. He and our driver were both eager to get out of the festival crowds.

## A Kali in every neighborhood

At a less crowded neighborhood the driver let us off on the street and parked the car. On our way to the next temple our guide stopped at a tea stall. He ordered a chai for each of us and we sipped it standing in the street. The tea came in little cups called bhar which are made by the city's potters from Ganges clay. We threw them into a large trash can where they broke into pieces. Later they would be tipped into the river to return the clay to its source. Kolkatans are proud of this tradition which has elsewhere been replaced by the use of plastic which can't be thrown back into the river.

Our destination was another Kali temple. I suspect our guide had planned the day's itinerary knowing that Kali Ghat's commercial atmosphere would hamper our devotional. This little street temple lacked the crowds of the Shakti pith and was frequented mostly by people in the neighborhood. Like many temples in West Bengal it had an iron yoke where goats could be sacrificed. The head of the goat is offered to the goddess, the body of the goat is eaten. Our guide told us that this temple is where Ramakrishna would send Vivekananda to get goat meat from the sacrifices. Later I learned that Ramakrishna's meat eating scandalizes his contemporary vegetarian followers.

We left our shoes and all our belongings in the car as we stepped into the street. Our guide bought flowers and gave them to the priest. He turned to us quickly and said "Do you have diksha names?" We told him. The priest offered us his blessing.

Only one woman stood in front of the statue of the goddess. Alex stepped up to stand next to her. There in the peace of the shrine he was able to spend as much time as he wanted, looking into the eyes of Devi, touching his forehead to the railing. I was deeply grateful to our guide for arranging this stop where Alex could have the experience he had longed for. Later he told me she said to him, *not yet*. It was not time for him to make his sacrifice. She was leaving his life in place for now, but one day he knows she will come for him.

## Kali the Mother

West Bengal has been called the land of Kali. While the rest of India celebrates Diwali a few weeks after Durga Puja, West Bengal celebrates Kali Puja. We visited four major temples and numerous smaller shrines to Kali in our fortnight in the province.

Alex came to Kolkata to experience Kali and I came to experience Durga. There's no contradiction in this, Kali and Durga are aspects of the Goddess. Hindu goddesses don't slot into neat functional categories like the Pagan goddesses of the west where, for example, austere Athena is distinct from earthy Demeter. In the stories about Durga's battles with the demons she brings other goddesses out from herself. They spring forth in sets, seven mothers, nine Durgas, ten Mahavidyas. In one of the stories Durga brings forth Kali. In another story Shiva's wife Parvati becomes enraged and turns into Kali, dancing to destroy the world until Shiva throws himself under her feet to stop her. Kali and Durga both hold the power to destroy and create.

Kalighat is a Shakti pith or goddess seat. Among the millions of temples in India only fifty-one earn the designation (although there are several variations of the list). Each Shakti pith is the temple of a local goddess, Kamakhya, Varahi, Lalita, Ambika, Durga. They are brought into relationship through the story of Sati, Shiva's first wife whose body was cut into pieces and scattered across India. Each Shakti Pith identifies the piece of Sati's body it enshrines; Kali Ghat has her right big toe. The temples vibrate with the power of the earth and the energy of centuries of devotion.

## Devi in the Palaces: Saptami - Durga Puja Day Two

### Devi's Plants: Navapatrika

Devi manifests in plants.

We were up early on Saptami. Our driver let us off among busloads of people heading to the river. Women in saris and men in dhotis carted armloads of plants, pots and puja materials down to the river. It was a good spot for this ritual as the river bank sloped from the street down to the water's edge. Groups would come to do their ritual and then leave again to be replaced by others. Half a dozen families were on the river at any given time.

The three of us set about taking still pictures and film. Alex and I have more shots of this ritual than any other place we went, we spent at least two hours watching and filming. It struck us as an extraordinary opportunity to witness and document something that we had heard nothing about. We were far from the only photographers though, every little group was surrounded by people with cell phones and large cameras madly clicking away, some family, some not. No one seemed to mind.

It was very festive. The ritual took a while so people settled in to spend time. Some families brought dhakis with them pounding out the beats. Women made a ululation which echoed up and down the river. Families jumped into the river while the rite was going on, women and men and children immersing themselves in the water, diving and splashing.

Meanwhile the serious puja commenced. A priest set up a puja tray. Family members held the navapatrika, nava – nine, patrika – plants. These plants had already been lashed together before they arrived at the river. The large waving leaves of the banana plant topped the bundle. Sometimes the men of the family held the bundle. My favorite family had half a dozen women surrounding their priest.

The priest said prayers, made mudras or hand gestures, and offered ritual items to the navapatrika, including flowers, rice, and incense. This made something

of a mess but the priests brought plastic bags and neatly swept up these items at the end. Some families also brought a clay pot or kalash, some decorated, most not. These had also been prepared with leaves poking out of the mouth of the pot.

Next the priest and the family carried the navapatrika, and the pot if they had one, down to the river. Whoever was carrying the navapatrika walked straight into the river to immerse the bundle in the water. The pot was carried into the water as well.

When everyone emerged from the water the navapatrika was wrapped in a new sari. Various web sites say that the sari should be white edged with red and we saw some of these, but we also saw cloth with bright red and yellow patterns. The newly wrapped bundle was brought back to the puja tray on the river bank for additional worship.

During the rite people anointed themselves as well. One of my film clips captured a priest dipping his hand in the water and making a complex series of gestures. The family of women I followed took a plate of some substance and wiped it on each other's faces.

At the end the family would pack up their materials and cart off the navapatrika and kalash, trailing their dhakis with them.

## My five minutes of fame

After we'd been there for some time our guide approached me diffidently to point out a camera crew. They had observed the three of us shrewdly and detected that he was guiding us. They had asked to interview me. I consented.

The interviewer was a young man in white shirt and trousers. He smiled and said, "It's primitive isn't it?" I said immediately, "Oh no, it's wonderful! It's about the harvest and about honoring Ma." He brightened. He spent a few minutes asking me questions and getting my answers. He said "This is the kolabau, the banana bride. She is the bride of Lord Ganesh." As a Tantric and educated westerner I knew the navapatrika as a form of Durga and part of the Navaratri ritual, but I did not presume to correct his own cultural experience.

Satisfied, he set me up where he wanted to film me and told me to stand by for the camera. While we were waiting he said, “You’re about to go live.” I said, “Okay.” He said, “Everything you do will be seen. Worldwide.” It was a nice warning and a little intimidating. As it happens I have been a public Pagan for several decades and have been trained to look at the camera and speak clearly.

When we went live the interviewer gave an intro to the camera and then repeated his questions. I put my hands on my heart and talked earnestly about how wonderful it was to see women honoring Devi and how we all feel her in our heart. “Oh, there goes one now,” he said as a navapatrika passed by heading up the street. I said, “Jai Ma!” He asked how I’d been treated in Kolkata and I said, truthfully, that everyone had been warm and welcoming. He asked me if I had anything to add and I said “West Bengal tourism!” which made him laugh. At the end he said “And the banana plant is the wife of?” I chirped, “Lord Ganesh!” He smiled and gave his sendoff to the camera.

After the interview he thanked me politely. Our guide reconnected with me. “The wife of Lord Ganesh?” I said. He winced. “I don’t know where it comes from,” he said.

I have spoken live on camera to small audiences. This is the only occasion in my life so far where I have been seen worldwide, as a snippet of local color during Durga Puja. Later I searched online to see if there was a recording but didn’t find anything. Alex filmed the interview so I do have a record of it although our conversation is mostly drowned out by drums.

## The navapatrika ritual

Our guide explained that the navapatrika is a form of Durga. When I asked him what the nine plants were he referred me to Madhu Khanna’s written work. He didn’t have the reference but Laura Amazzone has since kindly pointed me to the paper “The Ritual Capsule of Durga, An Ecological Perspective”. Khanna not only identifies the plants but also nine aspects of Durga that each represents. The appendix “Navapatrika” includes several lists of plants and their associated deities.

How can a bundle of plants represent the goddess? The navapatrika strikes many as a very old recognition of Durga as the life of plants. It seems to come



from the tribal villages in the forest in pre-Vedic times. The TV host who interviewed me called the ritual primitive and laughed apologetically. I surmise that it's a bit embarrassing to see plant worship in the midst of a modern metropolis.

Whatever its origins, the navapatrika ritual has been incorporated into the fall Navaratri rituals. Rodrigues details the rituals of Bengali families living in Varanasi and describes the worship of the navapatrika on Saptami. The purohita bathes each of the nine plants in nine waters and invokes a different form of the goddess into each of the plants.<sup>30</sup> Rodrigues and the *New Age Purohit Darpan* manual both specify that when the navapatrika has been bathed it should be placed on the right side of Ganesh on the clay tableau. We saw several examples of this in the family homes and pandals.

The rite Rodrigues observed in Varanasi is performed in the family home. This is different from the ritual which I saw in Kolkata where the navapatrika was dunked directly in the Ganges. Writing about his own family puja, Dhruva Chaudhury says that the men of his family carry the navapatrika to the river early in the morning, bringing along several priests. It is possible that the indoor rite Rodrigues documented is also performed in Kolkata. I wonder if some Bengali families in Varanasi carry their navapatrikas down to the Ganges.

At least some of the neighborhood associations participate in this ritual. I found a video by Arjun Dey made October 9 2019, the same day I saw the ritual, though he filmed at different locations. He followed priests to a public pandal where they installed the navapatrika beside Ganesh in their tableau (time stamp 3:08 in the video).<sup>31</sup>

## Kola Bou, the banana bride

It caught me by surprise when the TV interviewer called the navapatrika the wife of Ganesh since Ganesh is widely held to be Durga's son, not her husband. Why is the navapatrika identified as the wife of Ganesh? Rodrigues notes that his

---

<sup>30</sup> Rodrigues, *Ritual Worship*, p. 47-56

<sup>31</sup> Dey, *Maha Saptamir*.

educated informant called this ignorant and my guide called it incorrect. Priests conducting the ritual know the navapatrika as a form of Durga.

However, Rodrigues says that most people he talked to were positive the navapatrika is the banana bride of Ganesh. They often are not aware that there are nine plants in the collection, they just see a banana tree wrapped with a sari that looks like a bride. There are also groups of women from neighborhood pandal clubs who conduct the ritual without a priest present. It would be interesting to interview one of these groups to learn whether they view the navapatrika as the kola bou.

The sari makes the navapatrika seem like a bride, but why the bride of Ganesh? Possibly because it's placed beside Ganesh in the tableau. Rodrigues says the idea makes sense to him as a connection through the spirits of the forest. Pre-Vedic village religion recognized the spirits of the wild areas as yakshas and yakshis. Ganesh emerged as a yaksha. So if the plant bundle is a bride, and is placed next to Ganesh, the navapatrika must be the kola bou, Ganesh's banana bride.<sup>32</sup>

A web search on "navapatrika" brings up a few references to the plants themselves, while a search on "kola bou" will bring up pages and videos describing the navapatrika immersions as part of the Durga Puja rites.

## The palaces of Kolkata

Our guide told us that Kolkata is the city of palaces. On Saptami we toured the Bonedi Bari houses where Durga Puja has been celebrated for centuries. They were rightly called palaces, magnificent, opulent, and superbly decorated for the festival.

This tour was an extraordinary opportunity for westerners. Tour buses move between the neighborhood pandals but we wouldn't have been able to navigate the heritage houses on our own. They're hard even for native Kolkatans to find; Amitabha Gupta compiled a guide to more than forty heritage houses to help

---

<sup>32</sup> Rodrigues, *Ritual Worship*, p. 147-148.

people locate them.<sup>33</sup> Our guide drew on his connections and his knowledge of the town to pick the oldest and grandest pujas for us to see.

The first home we visited lifted two stories above the street. The public streamed through massive open doors into an open-air courtyard wrapped with hallways, stone pillars and latticework. At the end of the courtyard massive stone steps led up to a marble floor. This is where the clay statue of Durga and her entourage had been set up. All the figures were buried in flower garlands; piles of food and flowers and coins spread on the floor around them.

The house was cool and welcoming. A fabric canopy shielded the courtyard, chairs were dotted around for people to rest, and an amplified chant filled the air. People held up their cell phones to take pictures and videos.

Alex and I wanted to get closer to the statue but we eyed the marble stairs dubiously. "They're wet," Alex said. He was walking with a cane and didn't want to risk a fall. I was slightly steadier on my feet and decided to brave it even without a handrail. I stepped very carefully on my way up and back. I was rewarded with a better view of the statues. The navapatrika, wrapped in an all-red sari, stood prominently on the platform looking very much like a person.

On our way out I spotted a kalash with a bilva tree branch at the base of one of the pillars. It had been smeared with a red design which wasn't clear but had probably started out as a sun symbol (swastika).

I didn't capture the name of the first house we visited. Fortunately the second house featured a plaque explaining that this was the Ramdulal Nibas where Durga Puja has been celebrated for more than 200 years. Here the statue was locked behind a metal grate so visitors couldn't walk up to it as we had at the first house. It featured a large Durga surrounded by smaller figures of Ganesh, Saraswati and Lakshmi, all of them virtually buried under mountains of flowers.

This house is where a bug finally caught up with me. Travel is inherently dangerous, and travel in the tropics is particularly hazardous for pampered westerners. I have friends who have come home from Egypt and India with

---

<sup>33</sup> Gupta, "Durga Puja of 'Bonedi' Families at Kolkata".

illnesses they couldn't shake for years. Alex and I did our best to stay healthy. We took anti-malaria pills, drank bottled water, ate at the hotel or at restaurants vetted by our guide, and never consumed anything but cooked food. All of us, Alex, me, our guide and our driver religiously sanitized our hands every time we got in and out of the car. Even so we were moving in very crowded spaces and my number eventually came up. I wanted to go on with my day but when the nausea hit I was worried I was going to be sick in one of those beautiful courtyards. I decided it would be prudent to retreat to the hotel.

The hotel was a palace in itself. The Oberoi Grand is a five-star hotel with marble floors, a massive lobby chandelier, and the most attentive staff I have ever experienced. As I walked through the doors the manager fell in step with me with immediate concern. He and our guide chatted every morning and he had seen us go out early to catch the navapatrika immersion. Since I was coming back alone mid-morning something was clearly amiss. I confessed my queasiness. He promised to send something immediately. Before the hour was out he had sent up a lime Perrier on a tray. Meanwhile our guide called the hotel pharmacist and had an electrolyte packet delivered as well.

Since I had to cut the day short I asked Alex to continue the tour. Our guide took him to another three houses. Alex reported that he had participated in a puja in one of the houses, the priest had sprinkled everyone there with water and waved incense over them.

That night we had a room service dinner. The hotel is used to travelers with stomach upsets and recommended a soothing gruel and plain bread for me. Whatever ailed me subsided by the next morning. I was fortunate. Dengue fever swept through the pandals that year, and six months later the COVID-19 pandemic took over the world. Modern medicine, meticulous attention to sanitation, and the caring concern of our in-country hosts brought me through a month of travel with only half a day of illness.

## Landowners and Merchants

The houses we toured are today called heritage houses. They were built in an era when money flowed into the city. The colonial government exerted control

through English speaking administrators as well as landowners and merchants whose interests aligned with the British.

Rodrigues thinks that the first Durga Puja in West Bengal was probably celebrated in the early 1600s as a protest against Mughal (Moslem) rule. It continued quietly for a century and a half. When the British overthrew the Mughal dynasties one wealthy landowning family threw a lavish public display in celebration and the party took off.<sup>34</sup>

In colonial times the zamindars, landowners, opened their houses to the public to share their Durga Puja celebrations in a display of civic pride and family status. The idea spread to the caste families of merchants and British East India Company bureaucrats. They vied with each other for the most lavish displays to attract customers and impress colonial officials. Today these are described as Bonedi Bari, aristocratic house pujas.<sup>35</sup>

The fortunes of the landowning and merchant families declined sharply with the withdrawal of the British East India Company after Indian independence. Many of the mansions are in disrepair and there are fewer displays in private homes. Post-independence the patronage of the festival has shifted to corporate sponsorship of pandals open to the public.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> Rodrigues, *Ritual Worship*, p. 19-21.

<sup>35</sup> Ghose, "Spaces of Recognition", p. 296-297.

<sup>36</sup> Guha-Thakurta, *In the Name of the Goddess*, p. 32.

## Devi in the Home: Ashtami, Durga Puja Day Three

On Ashtami Durga is celebrated at home.

Sandhi Puja is held all over Kolkata. The timing is particular. In 2019 the eighth day Ashtami changed to the ninth day Navami in the middle of the morning. The days of Navaratri are calculated by a lunar calendar. The change between one day and another can happen at any time during the solar day. The ritual of Sandhi Puja is performed in a 48 minute period spanning the end of Ashtami and the beginning of Navami. For Bengali families this marks the time that Durga in her aspect as Chandi slays the buffalo demon Mahishasur.<sup>37</sup>

Alex and I were invited into a home for a private ritual. Thus far we had toured the pandals and the houses as a traveler, an outsider, but this home visit brought us into Durga Puja as active participants. We were humbled and grateful for the opportunity. We were also trusted to keep the ritual private, so we do.

However there are public accounts. Rodrigues details the elaborate Sandhi Puja performed in Varanasi by the purohita on behalf of the family. This ritual traditionally includes animal sacrifice, although in conservative Varanasi that custom is fading among Bengali families. The sacrificed goats are made into goat curry.

For the Kolkata version the Ramakrishna Mission posted the video “Sandhi Puja 2019 at Belur Math” documenting the ritual the priests performed publicly at that moment. Listening to the chanting on the video recreates for me the feeling of that moment.

## Kumari Puja

Kumari Puja is the ritual worship of Durga in a living human. A pre-pubescent girl is dressed as the young goddess Kumari and worshipped with flowers and offerings. Rodrigues reports that Ashtami is also the traditional day to perform Kumari Puja. However, because this day is so filled with rituals, it often

---

<sup>37</sup> Rodrigues, *Ritual Worship*, p. 59

moves to Navami, day nine. He notes that one of the families he studied actually performed the ritual on three successive days to include a large number of girls.<sup>38</sup>

I've seen Kumari Puja performed but not in Kolkata and not on Ashtami. When Durga Puja ended in Kolkata Alex and I toured Birbhum Province where we ran into Durga Puja festivities. In the countryside the rituals are sometimes delayed as villagers pour into the city to work during the festival, then come home to their own postponed holiday. We saw a kumari puja at Kankalitala Temple three days after Dashami. Several priests faced a row of little girls decked out in red-and-gold finery while their mothers fussed at their dresses and their fathers held up their cell phones to record the event.

Alex and I also saw a Kumari Puja at the Hindu Temple and Cultural Center in Bothell, Washington in 2018 when we visited at Navami. A row of little girls was lined up on the floor in front of a statue of Durga while women placed foil-wrapped packets in front of them. There the activity seemed to have shifted from the priests, who were quite busy with Navami activities, to the women of the community.

The travel blogger Mariellen Ward witnessed a private kumari puja in Kolkata on Ashtami in 2019. She was invited by fellow travel blogger Ayandrali Dutta to participate in the Dutta family rituals which they have been performing for more than 165 years. Ward filmed one of the women of the house describing the ritual in English while the little kumari fidgeted, the film is embedded in her post. Ward reports that the women of the family performed the ritual and describes it as woman-centered.<sup>39</sup>

Kumari Puja is associated with Navaratri and Durga Puja but it can be performed at any time of the year. Ira Trivedi also reported participating in a Kumari Puja when she visited Kamakhya Temple outside the festival seasons. She describes the ritual in a bit more detail. She was invited by a "loin-clothed man" to participate in a puja which would guarantee her marriage and the birth of a "rajkumar", a princely son. The man produced a ten-year-old girl in a school uniform. Trivedi was instructed to wash the girl's feet with water poured from a

---

<sup>38</sup> Rodrigues, *Ritual Worship*, p. 219.

<sup>39</sup> Ward, "About Durga Puja in Kolkata: A complete guide".

bowl representing the yoni of the goddess. She made a border around the girl's feet with red dye representing blood, and poured flowers and rice and water over her feet while chanting mantras. She says "After a quick ten minutes, my man gives the girl ₹50 and she goes scampering away to school."<sup>40</sup>

Rodrigues notes that throughout the Durga Puja rituals the priests invoke Durga into:

- themselves;
- objects including a pot, mirror, and sword;
- the navapatrika;
- the clay statues of Durga;
- a little girl.

The Kumari Puja brings the worshipper face to face with the goddess in a living human form.

---

<sup>40</sup> Trivedi, *India in Love*, p. 14.



## Devi on the Street: Navami - Durga Puja Day Four

On Durga Puja Devi lives in the streets.

There are two distinct types of pandals: neighborhood displays which house traditional images and provide pujas for local families, and massive theme pandals with corporate sponsorship making artistic and political statements.

We viewed a number of pandals throughout the festival. We'd pass a pandal on our way somewhere and our driver would drop us off so we could walk through it while he drove around the block. The crowds come out at night and traffic becomes impossible to navigate so we did almost all our visits during the day.

Some of the pandals we passed barely had room for the statues. Others were multi-room complexes where a series of halls led to the room which held the statues. Usually that's where the pandal ended, but one that we toured included a ramp that let us walk behind the statues to admire them in three dimensions. There were paintings on the walls, art objects hanging from the ceilings, and music piped through speakers. Each pandal cast a different ambiance. It was like walking into an enchanted world.

Durga is the focus but the pandals incorporate many other images and religious themes. One pandal had images of the matrikas, little mothers, on the walls. Another featured stories from the life of Krishna. In another a glowing golden Durga stood serenely atop a sturdy Mahishasur which did not menace her but instead supported her. I responded to this as a powerful image, a re-imagining of Mahishasur's role in the story.

### Neighborhood pandals

The public celebration of Durga Puja developed out of the landowner and merchant house displays. In the eighteenth century a group of Brahmin elders were prevented from attending one of the Bonedi Bari Pujas. They formed the first Barowari Puja specifically meant to include people who had not been welcomed at

the house pujas. In the twentieth century the nationalist movement developed a new identity for the neighborhood puja, the Sarbojanin Pujo open to everyone.<sup>41</sup>

These neighborhood pandals serve the local families where rituals are conducted by priests. Alex and I saw navapatrikas in pandals and heard a Sandhi Puja ritual broadcast outside our guide's house. The priests of these associations seemed to be conducting the same rituals that Rodrigues describes in the aristocratic homes.

Durga Puja is the major festival of the year much as Christmas is the major festival in America. Kolkata residents and emigrants reminisce about their hometown memories: helping to build the pandals, eating the special holiday foods, spending a whole day catching up with relatives and friends, shopping for gifts, wearing new clothes.<sup>42</sup>

Guha-Thakurta describes her childhood experience of Durga Puja. She grew up in a new neighborhood of Kolkata, New Alipore, where a Sarbojanin Puja was held in a local park. Her grandmother and her friends treated this as their own personal puja, cutting up fruits and vegetables and preparing the ritual food (bhog) to be handed out to visitors. She watched her uncle perform in puja theater and dance with his friends. Meanwhile she spent time with her cousins showing off their new-clothing finery.<sup>43</sup>

Durga Puja also resembles Christmas in its increasing commercialization and emphasis on consumption. The custom of having new clothes for the festival has evolved into having a new sari for each of the five days, and in wealthy families, new saris every morning and evening of the five days. Families trade presents and Durga's face smiles from posters advertising Durga Puja sales.<sup>44</sup>

This lavish spending on display and gifting comes under some criticism as people long for the simpler family experiences of the past. However Guha-Thakurta points out that Durga Puja has focused on the ostentatious display of

---

<sup>41</sup> Guha-Thakurta, *In the Name of the Goddess*, p. 91-93.

<sup>42</sup> Ward, "About Durga Puja in Kolkata"; Chaudhuri, "Outlook Traveller asks eminent personalities from Bengal about their favourite Pujo memories"; Sinjana, "Kolkata's Durga Puja – A Complete Guide" and "Durga Puja in Kolkata - 5 Reasons why it is Unique".

<sup>43</sup> Guha-Thakurta, *In the Name of the Goddess*, p. 99.

<sup>44</sup> Guha-Thakurta, *In the Name of the Goddess*, p. 45.

wealth dating back to the original zamindar and merchant families.<sup>45</sup> Another way in which Durga Puja and Christmas resemble each other is that each sparks nostalgia for the perfect holiday which exists primarily in our desire for it.

## Theme pandals

Durga Puja is a religious and cultural festival, but it is also one of the world's largest open air art festivals. The whole city turns out to go pandal hopping - as many as 10 million people crowd the streets every night.<sup>46</sup>

In the 2000s theme pandals emerged. They are sponsored by corporations who donate the thousands of rupees necessary to construct the elaborate buildings. While there is concern that these have stepped on the homely neighborhood pandals, Guha-Thakurta argues that they layer on top of the smaller neighborhood pandals and add to the public extravaganza.<sup>47</sup>

Another layer of the pandal experience is the contest. Puja committees register on contest sites and compete for prizes sponsored by businesses and corporations. Each contest has numerous categories – best Bonedi Bari pandal, best neighborhood pandal, most visited pandal. The planning committees for the large corporate sponsored theme pandals train their members to give interviews to the press and even create theme saris for their teams of volunteers.<sup>48</sup>

Corporate sponsorship of theme pandals is all about attracting crowds. These gigantic displays arch over streets and blaze with electric lights while blasting music into the street. The massive statues at their heart are created on site and can take months to complete.<sup>49</sup>

Corporate sponsored pandals can be huge and semi-permanent, erecting replicas of temples, palaces, opera houses, caves, villages. They can create fanciful shapes like the sphinx or Hogwarts. In addition to faithful replicas of existing

---

<sup>45</sup> Guha-Thakurta, *In the Name of the Goddess*, p. 91.

<sup>46</sup> Guha-Thakurta, *In the Name of the Goddess*, p 66.

<sup>47</sup> Guha-Thakurta, *In the Name of the Goddess*, p. 32.

<sup>48</sup> Guha-Thakurta, *In the Name of the Goddess*, p. 39.

<sup>49</sup> Guha-Thakurta, *In the Name of the Goddess*, p. 102.

buildings, artists materialize their visions of houses and temples and other worlds. They are built not only of bamboo and clay but plaster, plywood and terra cotta. They compete to attract the greatest number of the visitors who flood the streets.

Guha-Thakurta reports that in the early 2000s a counter-esthetic emerged valuing smallness and natural materials. Pandal designers squeezed into tiny spaces decorating the surrounding house fronts as part of the display. Small areas allowed artists to explore individual styles. Artists working in these spaces sometimes created the statues first and then designed the pandal around it. The emphasis on natural materials also aligned with new fire and environmental regulations.<sup>50</sup>

Some pandals make decidedly political statements. Alex and I saw one of the most controversial. The Beliaghata 33 Pally Durga Puja wanted to portray Hinduism, Christianity and Islam in harmony. The pandal included hundreds of small models of churches and mosques and synagogues hung from the ceiling, while hands projecting from the walls held symbols of the three religions. The spark for controversy was the sound piped into the pandal which was meant to represent all three religions. Some thought they heard the azaan, the Moslem call to prayer, in the soundscape and were offended to hear this in a pandal dedicated to Durga. They made complaints but the civil authorities declined to intervene.<sup>51</sup>

In 2020 the Barisha Club pandal was reported to have a portrayal of Durga as a refugee woman, with Lakshmi and Saraswati as her small daughters and Ganesh and Kartikeya as her sons.<sup>52</sup> This drew attention to the pandemic transportation shutdown which stranded many migrant workers who were forced to walk hundreds of miles to return to their homes.<sup>53</sup>

Images can be playful and political. One idol maker modeled his Mahishasur to resemble a controversial cricket team coach, others shaped the face of Osama Bin Laden onto the demon.<sup>54</sup> In 1944, two years before independence, a village pandal featured a British general being mauled by Durga's lion.<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> Guha-Thakurta, *In the Name of the Goddess*, p. 203.

<sup>51</sup> "Kolkata: 'Secular' Durga Puja pandal leads to social media outrage".

<sup>52</sup> "A Durga puja pandal showcases women migrant workers in place of the goddess".

<sup>53</sup> Biswas, "Coronavirus: India's pandemic lockdown turns into a human tragedy".

<sup>54</sup> Guha-Thakurta, *In the Name of the Goddess*, p. 86.

<sup>55</sup> Guha-Thakurta, *In the Name of the Goddess*, p. 97.

The neighborhood puja with a traditional statue is created as a collective effort of potters, pandal makers, food preparers, and local family entertainers. In contrast the theme pandals facilitated the development of individual puja artists, some with art college degrees, others working in the neighborhood traditions who developed a broader reputation. In the 2000s these tended to be men, although women artists with established reputations have been able to break into this field.<sup>56</sup>

## Holiday lights

One evening our guide kept us out after dark so we could experience some of the colorful lights that festoon the city. They decorate shop fronts, hang over the streets, and light up the brilliantly painted pandals. It's clearly a festive and special time of year.

In our younger days we would have spent at least one night pandal-hopping along with the rest of the city. As older folk we were happy to tour the pandals by day and return to our hotel at night. This allowed our driver to get home before the holiday traffic made driving impossible. It also allowed him to take his kids out to the pandals to build their own Durga Puja experiences.

---

<sup>56</sup> Guha-Thakurta, *In the Name of the Goddess*, p. 207-208.

## Devi Departing: Dashami - Durga Puja Day Five

The day after Navaratri is the tenth of the lunar period. In Bengal's celebration it is the fifth day of Durga Puja. This is the end of both Navaratri and Durga Puja, the day in which the goddess leaves.

On Dashami many of the statues are hauled with great cheer down to the river where they are thrown into the water. In a city of 14 million people there are thousands of neighborhood shrines so this process goes on all day and into the night. It's the end of the story, the goddess has vanquished the demons which plague humanity and dissolves in the triumph of her victory.

### Immersion

On Dashami our guide picked us up early. He was on edge all day trying to make the timings work.

Our first stop was at one of the Bonedi Bari houses. He said it was the first house in Kolkata that held a Durga Puja in the 1750s. The Chaudhury family makes that claim but I am not certain that this was the house we visited. Our guide explained that this is also the first house that sends its tableau to the river. When we arrived at the house and found the idol was still present he relaxed.

The statue had been taken to the courtyard across the street from the house. The lane was filled with people who crowded around to watch the festivities. Dhakis drummed while a man, presumably either the priest or the family head, removed tools from the hands of Durga and replaced them with foil versions. He also replaced her headpiece and fixed a paper arch behind the statue. When he was done the dhakis stopped drumming. A woman of the house then stepped up to smear food on Durga's mouth. Every statue of Durga we saw that day had food on her lips.

A group of men dressed in white sleeveless shirts took over the process. Our guide explained that they came from families who had been providing this service to the aristocrats since before independence and that they still held to the custom.

They tied the tableau to two large bamboo poles and carefully lifted it onto their shoulders.

Our guide moved us down the street to an open area where we could see the procession and take pictures. At the moment the statue set off a bunch of balloons were released into the air. The balloons have replaced the custom of releasing birds at that moment.

We saw the paper arch of the image coming around the corner. The procession was now accompanied by a marching brass band. The porters moved down the street at a smart clip, hand-carrying the statue to the river. Our guide told us that this is the way the statues were moved before powered transport and the traditional family still did it the traditional way.

Next we drove down to the river ourselves. Many of the roads were closed by police to make way for the processions and the surrounding roads were clogged with people. The driving was so difficult even our unflappable guide commented “dangerous!” Our driver made some deft moves and got us within blocks of the water.

Our guide found us a position on the road overlooking one of the ghats where the statues are returned to the river. Here they came, the statues from the pandals, loaded onto trucks for transport to the river. The trucks would stop and men would offload the statues to carry them down by hand. Some of them would stop and turn the statue around and around, then continue to process down to the water.

One particularly large statue showed up with its own brass band. There were so many people around us it was difficult to move and it looked like the procession might mow us down. Then the band planted itself right in front of us. They were so close Alex couldn't lift his hands to take pictures but I appreciated the protection.

Our guide found us there trapped behind the band. He shared my concern that Alex would get pushed over in the crowd. He moved us down the street to a stone platform looking upriver at one of the ghats where the idols are dropped into the river. As we waited a crowd gathered around us, singing and lifting up their cell phone cameras. We watched a statue being loaded onto a boat which

maneuvered to the center of the river. Another boat hovered nearby with a large balloon. Finally the statue was pushed into the river, the balloon was released to the sky, and the people around us sang softly.

We'd heard the triumphant shout "Jai!" as the statues left the potter's district to be delivered to their pandals. This "Jai" was a quiet one; there's a sadness to the end of the festival, the moment the daughter leaves the family home again, the moment the Devi withdraws from all her visible physical manifestations. The girl returns to being a girl, the pot becomes a pot, the clay returns to the river.

Our guide returned from his own photo shooting and moved us back to the car. He offered to take us to another ghat to see more immersions, but we had run out of energy and we didn't see the need to put our driver to the effort.

With the thousands of pandals in the city the process of pushing all those statues into the water would take all day and all night. As we drove back to the hotel our guide pulled up an image on his cell phone. It was a water color painted in 1915 by Gagenendranath Tagore, a member of the artistic Tagore family. The image shows a torchlight procession escorting a Durga idol along dark streets.<sup>57</sup> Seeing this hundred-year-old image cherished by a contemporary native of Kolkata deeply affected me. It linked the present to the past in a grand procession like the thousands of statues flowing from the neighborhoods and homes back to the river.

## Family Ritual

Rodrigues explains that in the rituals of the wealthy houses the family priest conducts the final rituals on Dashami. He asks Devi to withdraw from the objects where she has been dwelling: the statue, the pot, the mirror. However he asks her to remain in the house, the earth, and the water. She is always there, ready to emerge again when she is called.

The women of the house conduct one more ceremony, smearing the mouths of the statues with food, as we had seen on the street. Rodrigues explains that the women are feeding the daughter before she leaves. She is returning to Mount

---

<sup>57</sup> See the Wikimedia image "Pratima Visarjan by Gagenendranath Tagore", [upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7e/Pratima\\_Visarjan\\_by\\_Gaganendranath\\_Tagore.png](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/7e/Pratima_Visarjan_by_Gaganendranath_Tagore.png).



Kailash to share the austerities of her husband, and they are feeding her to withstand the rigors of the coming year and to encourage her to return again next year.<sup>58</sup>

Rodrigues asked his host family why they observe Durga Puja at such expense year after year. His host replied that he could not imagine life without it. It's the time of year when his daughters return, the house is filled with children and grandchildren, everyone is happy. It is, he said, the focal point of his life. Rodrigues comments, "although she is perceived as a returning daughter, the Devi also presides as the arch matriarch, the symbol and embodiment of womanhood, under whose nurturing and protective wing the family's female lineage may gather. The Devi brings them together..."<sup>59</sup>

## Changes to Durga Puja

### Confronting pollution

Traditionally statues were made of clay and painted with natural colors, so they could be returned to the river just like clay tea cups from the chai stalls. Today the statues contain plaster of paris and are decorated with toxic paint and plastics. Throwing these materials into the river results in significant pollution.<sup>60</sup>

Efforts to end the immersion ceremony have been unsuccessful, however there are moves to mitigate the environmental impact. For several years cranes have been placed at a few of the ghats where the idols are dropped in the river to fish them back out again. Among the things I did not see that I learned about later I would have liked to see the idols recovered.

In 2020 the municipal authorities set up ponds near two of the pandals. The statues were taken to the ponds where they were melted with sprays of water. The ponds were lined with plastic to contain the chemicals and plastic which were later cleaned up by the municipality.<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup> Rodrigues, *Ritual Worship*, p. 64.

<sup>59</sup> Rodrigues, *Ritual Worship*, p. 66.

<sup>60</sup> Basu, "Idol immersions after Durga Puja leave rivers polluted yet again".

<sup>61</sup> Basu, "Rare green immersion stands out after Durga Puja".

## Challenging the caste system

Our guide made us aware that some tribal people do not celebrate Durga Puja. For them the story encapsulates the Aryan conquest and the literal demonization of their people. There is a tribe called Asur and the people of the tribe bear that surname; this tribe is designated as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group and faces discrimination.<sup>62</sup> Some tribal people hold a festival to honor their benevolent king Mahishasur, others hide until Durga Puja is over.<sup>63</sup>

Some Bengali writers declare that they do not participate in Durga Puja celebrations in solidarity with the tribal people. For them Durga Puja reinforces the caste system, with male Brahmin priests in charge of neighborhood celebrations, and the zamindar families continuing to display their wealth in the Bonedi Bari festivities.<sup>64</sup>

There is a challenge to gender distinctions as well. In 2021 one pandal club announced their theme as “Mother goddess will be worshipped by mothers”. Their senior priest had died and they decided to replace him with four women to serve as the officiants. Women have become potters and organizers, they said, why not priestesses?<sup>65</sup>

## Pandemic effects

Just a few months after Durga Puja in 2019 the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the world. The 2020 version of Durga Puja was severely curtailed as civil authorities limited crowd sizes and people opted to stay home. The pandemic eased up in 2021 but uncertainty dampened planning.<sup>66</sup> Durga Puja organizers planned to cut back on grand displays, feeling this was not the year to throw an elaborate display.

This has severely impacted the artisans who create the Durga Puja experience. The potters of Kumortuli reported that 2020 and 2021 brought a small

---

<sup>62</sup> Sundaram, “Reclaiming Mahisasura, Durga Puja, and Bengali Identity Politics”.

<sup>63</sup> Pandey, “Meet the Asurs — a marginal tribe that describes Durga as a goddess who enticed Mahishasur”.

<sup>64</sup> Jyoti, “Taking a stand for tribal rights: Why I am not celebrating Durga Puja”.

<sup>65</sup> “This famous Kolkata Durga Puja has appointed four female priests for the first time”.

<sup>66</sup> “Durga Puja celebrations set to be low-key affair in Bengal for second year in row”.

fraction of the orders they had received in 2019. Some clubs have shifted to buying fiberglass displays to be for several years in a row to cut costs. The artisans who create the hair for the statues and the workers who cart the clay to the potters lost their orders too. Fewer drummers were commissioned to come to the city.<sup>67</sup>

Up until 2019 pandals were shaped like a funnel channeling visitors from the entrance to the inner sanctum housing the image of Durga. In 2020 and 2021 the civil authorities instructed the pandal committees to make the image visible from a distance to cut down on crowding. To encourage smaller crowds club organizers arranged for digital displays on their own social media accounts. Digitaldurga.com offered a virtual pandal-hopping experience for people staying home.<sup>68</sup>

In 2020 and 2021 puja committees chose to redirect some of their funds to support children orphaned by COVID-19 and artists who have seen a drop in festival demand.<sup>69</sup> Public funds have been redirected to distribute masks and hand sanitizer.<sup>70</sup> The pandemic has been incorporated into the changing imagery; one theme pandal featured a Durga wearing a gold face mask, replacing her traditional tools with medical supplies like syringes.<sup>71</sup>

## Continuing Durga Puja

Durga Puja fades slowly in the days after Dashami. If space permits the pandals remain in place to be re-used for the Kali Puja eighteen days later, then the bamboo poles are stacked away until the next year's festival. In the 2000s the creation of public pandals became a year-round event, with planning for the next year starting as soon as the idols marched down to the river.

Guha-Thakurta says "The resonance of the Pujas wraps the city thickly, and then slowly wears thin, but never seems to entirely leave it." 72

---

<sup>67</sup> Ray, "With six weeks to go for Durga Puja, the Kumartuli potters are hoping for a miracle".

<sup>68</sup> "Kolkata gears up for Durga Puja, all involved to be vaccinated in 3 months".

<sup>69</sup> "Durga puja committees cut costs to support orphans, poor".

<sup>70</sup> "Durga Puja organisers need to spend 75% of ₹50,000 grant on COVID-19 equipment".

<sup>71</sup> "Coming up in Kolkata: 20 gm gold mask for goddess Durga to keep Covid at bay".

<sup>72</sup> Guha-Thakurta, *In the Name of the Goddess*, p. 30-31.

## Postscript: Bringing Durga Puja Home

Durga Puja is both a religious and a cultural celebration. It is pointedly public. The Bonedi Bari or household celebrations have always integrated caste workers in the production of the festival and have integrated Moslem artists.<sup>73</sup> Writer Oindri Ghosh says, “The best thing about it is the fact that it is not a festival for the Bengali Hindus alone. All are welcome,” noting that Muslim, Christian, Parsi and Sikh residents participate in pandal building, and everyone loves to go pandal-hopping.<sup>74</sup>

As an American and ethnically White I came to Kolkata as an outsider. I am deeply grateful to have been welcomed to Kolkata at festival time. This warm welcome allowed me to experience my journey to Kolkata as a return of the daughter to the mother. Visiting the Goddess in temple ruins and museums around the world was like sipping Shakti through a straw. In Kolkata I was tossed into the Shakti pool, surrounded by her, immersed in her.

I didn't grow up with Durga Puja but I celebrate it now, adding it to the Pagan religious festivals I keep and the secular holidays of the American calendar. At Navaratri I put the Mahishasuramardini statue on my puja altar and center offerings there while I read the Chandi Path. In that tangible sense I went to Kolkata and brought Durga home.

As I write I am celebrating Navaratri 2021. Alex and I continue to find videos documenting Durga Puja in Kolkata. In one documentary a dhak drum maker demonstrates the craft and his explanations are translated in English in subtitles.<sup>75</sup> The Ahritola 1st Lane neighborhood pandal club documented their navapatrika blessing, walking down to the river and returning to the pandal.<sup>76</sup> Mindia Films made an English language film describing the festival. Footage includes dhak drumming, pandal hopping, and a neighborhood association taking the navapatrika down to the local pond, with a cameo appearance by Devdutt

---

<sup>73</sup> Guha-Thakurta, *In the Name of the Goddess*, p. 96.

<sup>74</sup> Ghosh, “Durga Puja: Cultural or Religious Festival?”

<sup>75</sup> Kaahon, "Joy Dhak, An Ecstasy with Dhak, Process of Making Dhak".

<sup>76</sup> Saha, "Durga Puja 2019 Kola Bou Snan".

Pattanaik describing the navapatrika as an ancient form of plant worship, and also as the kola bou, Ganesh's wife.<sup>77</sup>

It is clear that research is never-ending. Also more people are making videos available, and a number of the films that have been helpful to my understanding were made or uploaded in 2019. The move to digital displays sparked by the pandemic makes the festival more accessible to worldwide audiences. I've enjoyed 3-D views of pandals on thepuja.app which lets viewers see 34 different pandals. The view of Sreebhumi Sporting Club's massive Burj Khalifa pandal begins with a drone view overhead! I've been able to catch some of the livestreams from Belur Math where the Ramakrishna Mission is conducting the traditional rituals, including the sandhi and kumari pujas.<sup>78</sup> My own experience continues to evolve as my appreciation for Bengali culture deepens.

During Durga Puja I encountered Goddess in all the forms Rodrigues lists – the tree, the pots, the navapatrika plants, the young girls, and the stunning number and variety of statues. Each successive encounter deepened my relationship with her and my ability to encounter her presence within myself. At Durga Puja she lives in every woman, even a White woman, even an outsider. She lives in me.

---

<sup>77</sup> Mindia, "Durga Pujo feat. Devdutt Pattanaik".

<sup>78</sup> Belur Math, "Durga Puja 2021, Sandhi Puja" and "Durga Puja 2021 : Mahashtami Puja & Kumari Puja".

## Appendix One: Timeline

Because I did not grow up Indian it took me a while to realize that the religious festival of Navaratri relates to the solar-lunar calendar. The solar month is divided into two lunar fortnights, new moon to full moon, then back to the new moon. Navaratri counts the first nine days from the new moon. In that sense every month has a Navaratri. People do celebrate Navaratri festivals at other times of the year. I read Chandi during the spring, summer and winter Navaratri periods in addition to the main fall celebration. Our guide in Varanasi said his family celebrates nine Navaratri in the year.

The holiday of Durga Puja in Kolkata is celebrated on the last five days of the fall Navaratri. Here is the mapping of Navaratri and Durga Puja in 2019.

<b>Date in 2019</b>	<b>Navaratri Day</b>	<b>Durga Puja</b>
September 29	Prathama	
September 30	Dwitiya	
October 1	Tritiya	
October 2	Chaturthi	
October 3	Panchami	
October 4	Shashti	Day One
October 5	Saptami	Day Two
October 6	Ashtami	Day Three
October 7	Navami	Day Four
October 8	Dashami	Day Five

The days of the fortnight continue from Dashami to Ekadashi, Dvadasi, Travodasi, Chaturdasi, and either Amavasya and the new moon or Purnima and the full moon.

## Appendix Two: Navapatrika

My Bengali guide referred me to Madhu Khanna for a list of the plants in the navapatrika bundle. Laura Amazzone referred me to Madhu Khanna's article "The Ritual Capsule of Durga Puja". Khanna lists the plants along with their Linnean taxonomy and the aspect of Durga each embodies.<sup>79</sup>

Number	Plant	Taxonomy	Goddess
1	Banana	Musa paradisiaca	Brahmani
2	Kachu, Kacchavi	Colocasia antiaquorum	Kalika
3	Turmeric, haridra	Curuma longa	Durga
4	Jayanti	Clerodendrum phlomidis	Kartiki
5	Bilva, bel (bael)	Aegle marmelos	Shakti
6	Pomegranate, dadima	Punica granatum	Raktadantika
7	Asoka	Saraca indica	Shokarahita
8	Arum, mankacu	Alocasia indica	Camunda
9	Unhusked rice, dhan	Oryza sativa	Lakshmi

In *The Ritual Worship of the Goddess* Hilary Rodrigues lists the plants used by the families he studied in Varanasi along with notes about how their color links to the goddesses. The order of the plants differs from Khanna's but the plants themselves and goddesses are the same, with the exception of the bilva which Rodrigues assigns to Shiva and Khanna assigns to Shakti as the power of Devi.

---

<sup>79</sup> Madhu Khanna, "The Ritual Capsule of Durga Puja", p. 476-478.

Number	Plant	Goddess
1.	Kadali/Rambha (plantain)	Brahmani
2.	Mana (a broad-leaved plant)	Camunda
3.	Kacvi (or Kacci) (a black-stalked plant)	Kalika (dark complexioned)
4.	Haridra (turmeric)	Durga (golden complexioned)
5.	Jayanti (a kind of creeper, or barley)	Kartiki
6.	Sriphala (a bilva branch containing two fruits resembling breasts)	Shiva
7.	Dadimah/mi (pomegranate)	Raktadantika
8.	Asoka (a large shady tree; in the month of Caitra it blossoms with small red flowers)	Sokarahita
9.	Dhanya (rice paddy plant)	Lakshmi

Rodrigues notes “They are bound with the Aparajita (*Clitoria ternata*) creeper.”<sup>80</sup>

Later in the book Rodrigues details the ritual the purohita performs on Saptami which bathes the navapatrika in a variety of liquids. While being bathed in five products of the cow (urine, dung, milk, curd, ghee) the navapatrika is addressed the names of five goddesses - Candika, Gauri, Trinetrayai (She who Possesses the Third Eye), Bhairavi, and Bhuvaneshvari. During a bath of nine waters the plants are addressed individually and as a goddess; three of the plants are not addressed by goddess name but by descriptions.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Rodrigues, *Ritual Worship*, p. 129-130.

<sup>81</sup> Rodrigues, *Ritual Worship*, p. 142-145.



Number	Plant	Goddess
1	Plantain (Kadali)	Candanayika
2	Kacci	Durga
3	Turmeric (haridra)	Hara (Shiva), Rudra
4	Jayanti	Jaya
5	Sriphala	(descriptions)
6	Pomegranate (dadima)	(descriptions)
7	Ashoka tree	Durga
8	Mana	(descriptions)
9	Rice (dhanya)	Lakshmi

The manual *New Age Purohit Darpan: Durga Puja* issued by the Association of Grandparents of Indian Immigrants records a list of plants but lists the goddesses they are associated with separately, so it's not clear which goddess is intended to be associated with which plant. The authors use the term "wood apple tree" interchangeably with "navapatrika", and the bathing ritual addresses the navapatrika as a whole.

#### **Plant list**

Banana (kalagaach)  
 Colocassia (kochu)  
 Turmeric (halud)  
 Jayani  
 Wood apple (bel gach)  
 Pomegranate (daalim gaach)  
 Arum (mankochu)  
 Rice plant (dhan)  
 Ashok tree

#### **Goddess list**

Brahmani  
 Kalika  
 Durga  
 Rudrani  
 Jayani  
 Kartiki  
 Shivani (wife of Shiva)

Raktadantika  
Ahoka-Sokrahita  
Chamunda-Lakshmi

This manual is intended for use by Indian emigrants outside of India. The authors recognize that many of these plants are not widely available outside the region. They note:

With the spread of Bengali culture around the globe, sticking to the above plants in building the traditional Nabapatrika does not seem to be justified. Instead we choose any nine branches of trees growing in the area, preferably fruit bearing. This is a compromise between the thought planted by our ancestors and the modification adjusted to the current environment of our lives.<sup>82</sup>

---

<sup>82</sup> Mukherjee et. al., *New Age Purohit Darpan*, Durga Puja, p. 5-6.

## Glossary

### **Bisarjan**

Immersing clay statues of deity in a river.

### **Bhog**

Food given as a blessing or prasad.

### **Bonedi Bari or Banedi Bari**

Houses of the wealthy landowners and merchants who celebrate the traditional Durga Puja.

### **Dhak**

Traditional drum. The drummers are called dhakis.

### **Dhunuch**

Resin of the sal tree burned as incense.

### **Dhunuchi**

Clay pot for burning dhunuch.

### **Ghat**

A stone or clay slope or steps leading from a river's edge down to the water.

### **Kola Bau**

Banana bride, another term for the navapatrika.

### **Kumor**

A potter of the trade caste. In Kolkata many kumors live in Kumortuli, the potter's district. They share the surname Pal.

### **Kumari Puja**

Ritual where a young girl is worshipped as Durga.

**Murti**

A statue which houses a divine presence. During Durga Puja the clay statues representing Durga and other deities become murtis.

**Navapatrika**

Nine plants bundled together to represent Durga.

**Navaratri**

Nine nights of the lunar calendar beginning on the new moon. They are:

- Prathama, day one
- Dwitiya, day two
- Tritiya, day three
- Chaturthi, day four
- Panchami, day five
- Shashti, day six
- Saptami, day seven
- Ashtami, day eight
- Navami, day nine

Dashami is day ten, the day after the nine nights, when the festival concludes.

**Pandal**

A temporary structure of bamboo and other materials which house the statues of Durga and her entourage.

**Patachitra**

Folk art images painted on cloth.

**Pratima**

Word describing a statue of a deity, a sacred likeness which can become a manifestation of the deity.

**Pujo**

Kolkata natives call the festival Durga Pujo in addition to Durga Puja.

**Purohita**

Family priest versed in Vedic and Tantric ritual practices.

**Sarbojanin Pujo**

Public puja. The word breaks into Sarbo, for and jan, people, meaning for the people.

**Yajamana**

Family head who commissions the purohita to perform the Durga Puja rituals.

**Zamindar**

Wealthy landowner.

## Works Cited

"A Durga puja pandal showcases women migrant workers in place of the goddess". *Indian Express online*, October 20, 2020, [indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/life-style/durga-puja-pandal-to-showcase-women-migrant-workers-in-place-of-goddess-6757447](https://www.indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/life-style/durga-puja-pandal-to-showcase-women-migrant-workers-in-place-of-goddess-6757447). Accessed August 29 2021.

Amazzone, Laura (2010). *Goddess Durga and Sacred Female Power*. Hamilton Books.

Avishek (2018), "Nakuleshwar Bhairav Temple, Kolkata – The eternal guard of Kalighat". *Discovering Kolkata*, Nov. 5 2018, [discoveringkolkata.wordpress.com/2018/11/05/nakuleshwar-bhairav-the-eternal-guard-of-kalighat/](https://discoveringkolkata.wordpress.com/2018/11/05/nakuleshwar-bhairav-the-eternal-guard-of-kalighat/). Accessed September 27 2021.

Basu, Jayanta (2020). "Rare green immersion stands out after Durga Puja". *The Third Pole*, November 3 2020, [www.thethirdpole.net/en/pollution/rare-green-immersion-stands-out-after-durga-puja/](http://www.thethirdpole.net/en/pollution/rare-green-immersion-stands-out-after-durga-puja/). Accessed September 3 2021.

Basu, Soma (2013). "Idol immersions after Durga Puja leave rivers polluted yet again", *Down to Earth*, October 18 2013, [www.downtoearth.org.in/news/idol-immersions-after-durga-puja-leave-rivers-polluted-yet-again-42509](http://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/idol-immersions-after-durga-puja-leave-rivers-polluted-yet-again-42509). Accessed September 3 2021.

Belur Math (2021). "Durga Puja 2021, Sandhi Puja, 13 Oct 2021, 7:44 pm, Belur Math". *Belur Math*, October 13 2021, [youtu.be/\\_ANOxx7S4p4](https://youtu.be/_ANOxx7S4p4). Accessed October 13 2021.

- "Durga Puja 2021 : Mahashtami Puja & Kumari Puja, 13 Oct 2021, 5 : 40 am". *Belur Math*, October 13 2021, [youtu.be/XYHevT4YqKs](https://youtu.be/XYHevT4YqKs). Accessed October 13 2021.

Biswas, Soutik (2020). "Coronavirus: India's pandemic lockdown turns into a human tragedy". BBC News, March 30 2020, [www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52086274](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52086274). Accessed Aug. 29 2021.

Chatterji, Shoma A. (2016). *Filming Reality: The Independent Documentary Movement in India*. Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd.

Chatterji, Shoma A. (2019). "The Distant Drummers of Durga Pooja". *The Citizen*, October 6, [www.thecitizen.in/index.php/en/NewsDetail/index/16/17665/The-Distant-Drummers-of-Durga-Pooja](http://www.thecitizen.in/index.php/en/NewsDetail/index/16/17665/The-Distant-Drummers-of-Durga-Pooja). Accessed 7/21/2021.

Chaudhury, Dhruba (2016). "Oldest Durga Puja in Howrah and Kolkata District." Dhruba Chaudhury, August 30 2016, [www.scribd.com/document/322571468/Oldest-Durga-Puja-in-Howrah-and-Kolkata-district](http://www.scribd.com/document/322571468/Oldest-Durga-Puja-in-Howrah-and-Kolkata-district). Accessed July 21 2021.

Chaudhuri, Sharmistha (2017). "Outlook Traveller asks eminent personalities from Bengal about their favourite Pujo memories". *Outlook Traveller*, September 29 2017, [www.outlookindia.com/outlooktraveller/travelnews/story/61582/durga-puja-oh-special-memories](http://www.outlookindia.com/outlooktraveller/travelnews/story/61582/durga-puja-oh-special-memories). Accessed August 31 2021.

Dey, Arjun (2019). "Maha Saptamir - KOLA BOU SNAAN - BODHON 2 BISHORJON - Durga Puja Kolkata 2019", [youtu.be/nUndOhM54AU](https://youtu.be/nUndOhM54AU). Accessed August 4 2021.

De, Ellora (2020). "Howrah Mullick Ghat Phool Bazar: One of Asia's largest flower hubs". *Business Economics*, February 14 2020, [businesseconomics.in/howrah-mullick-ghat-phool-bazar-one-asias-largest-flower-hubs](http://businesseconomics.in/howrah-mullick-ghat-phool-bazar-one-asias-largest-flower-hubs). Accessed August 5 2020.

"Dhak feathers for Durga Puja at the cost of birds". *IndiaDivine.org*, September 15, 2006, [www.indiadinivine.org/content/topic/2110500-Dhak-feathers-for-durga-puja-at-the-cost-of-birds](http://www.indiadinivine.org/content/topic/2110500-Dhak-feathers-for-durga-puja-at-the-cost-of-birds). Accessed July 28 2021.

*Divine Drums*. Directed by Viplab Majumder, 2010, [vimeo.com/177442584](https://vimeo.com/177442584). Accessed July 30 2021.

"Durga Puja celebrations set to be low-ley affair in Bengal for second year in row". India TV News Desk, July 05, 2021,

[www.indiatvnews.com/news/india/durga-puja-celebrations-guidelines-west-bengal-coronavirus-covid19-716961](http://www.indiatvnews.com/news/india/durga-puja-celebrations-guidelines-west-bengal-coronavirus-covid19-716961). Accessed September 5 2021.

"Durga puja committees cut costs to support orphans, poor", *Times of India*, September 6 2021, [timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/kolkata-durga-puja-committees-cut-costs-to-support-orphans-poor/articleshow/85975279.cms](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/kolkata-durga-puja-committees-cut-costs-to-support-orphans-poor/articleshow/85975279.cms). Accessed September 13 2021.

"Durga Puja: Meet dhakis - Bengal's traditional dhak drummers". *India Express Online*, October 3, 2019, [youtu.be/A42CjHgw1c8](https://youtu.be/A42CjHgw1c8). Accessed July 17 2021.

"Durga Puja organisers need to spend 75% of ₹50,000 grant on COVID-19 equipment", *Livemint.com*, October 16 2020, [www.livemint.com/news/india/durga-puja-organisers-need-to-spend-75-of-rs-50-000-grant-on-covid-19-equipment-calcutta-hc-11602845452803.html](https://www.livemint.com/news/india/durga-puja-organisers-need-to-spend-75-of-rs-50-000-grant-on-covid-19-equipment-calcutta-hc-11602845452803.html). Accessed September 13 2021.

"Durga Puja: What is Dhunuchi Naach?" *The Statesman*, October 7, 2018, [www.thestatesman.com/what-is/durga-puja-2018-dhunuchi-naach-significant-1502693696.html](https://www.thestatesman.com/what-is/durga-puja-2018-dhunuchi-naach-significant-1502693696.html). Accessed July 29 2021.

Ganguly, Ruman (2018). "Kumortuli artists make idols with soil from Diamond Harbor instead of Uluberia". *Times of India*, July 27 2018, [timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/65165151.cms](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/65165151.cms).

Ghosal, Torsa (2018). "How Immigrant Sculptors Shaped an Artists' Hub Called Kumartuli". *Catapult Magazine*, July 12 2018, [catapult.co/stories/how-immigrant-sculptors-shaped-an-artists-hub-called-kumartuli](https://catapult.co/stories/how-immigrant-sculptors-shaped-an-artists-hub-called-kumartuli). Accessed July 21 2021.

Ghosh, Anjan (2000). "Spaces of Recognition: Puja and Power in Contemporary Calcutta". *Journal of South African Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 2, Special Issue: Popular culture and Democracy (Jun. 2000), pp. 289-299, [www.jstor.org/stable/2637495](https://www.jstor.org/stable/2637495). Accessed August 5 2021.



Ghosh, Oindrila (2020). "Durga Puja: Cultural or Religious Festival?" The Pangean, January 29, 2020, [thepangean.com/Durga-Puja-Cultural-or-Religious-Festival](http://thepangean.com/Durga-Puja-Cultural-or-Religious-Festival). Accessed September 5 2021.

Ghosh, Sonali (2016). "Living with the Idols, Behind the Scenes With The Durga Makers". *News18.com*, <https://www.news18.com/news/immersive/making-of-durga-puja-idols.html>. Accessed August 5 2021.

Goswami, Shreya (2016). "These women dhakis or drummers are ushering in a new-age Durga Puja in Bengal". *India Today*, October 9, 2016, [www.indiatoday.in/lifestyle/culture/story/women-drummers-dhakis-durga-puja-kolkata-gokul-chandra-das-lifest-345730-2016-10-09](http://www.indiatoday.in/lifestyle/culture/story/women-drummers-dhakis-durga-puja-kolkata-gokul-chandra-das-lifest-345730-2016-10-09). Accessed July 25 2021.

Guha-Thakurta, Tapati (2015). *In the Name of the Goddess, the Durga Pujas of Contemporary Kolkata*. Primus Books.

Gupta, Amitabha (2013). "Durga Puja of 'Boned' Families at Kolkata". *Amitabha Gupta*, October 8 2013, [amitabhagupta.wordpress.com/2013/10/08/durga-puja-of-boned-families-at-kolkata](http://amitabhagupta.wordpress.com/2013/10/08/durga-puja-of-boned-families-at-kolkata). Accessed August 6 2021.

Heierstad, Geir (2017). *Caste, Entrepreneurship and the Illusions of Tradition: Branding the Potters of Kolkata*. Anthem Press [Kindle version].

Javed, Zeeshan (2020). "Band parties fall silent in Kolkata in Covid season." *Times of India*, Sept. 6, 2020, [timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/band-parties-fall-silent-in-covid-season/articleshow/77954266.cms](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/band-parties-fall-silent-in-covid-season/articleshow/77954266.cms). Accessed July 30 2021.

Jha, Bharti (2018). *Dhunuchi Dance by Bharti jha, Durga puja, Dhunuch nach*. Oct. 18 2020, [youtu.be/eFOSFkvI5jI](https://youtu.be/eFOSFkvI5jI). Accessed July 25 2021.

Jyoti, Dhruvo (2016). "Taking a stand for tribal rights: Why I am not celebrating Durga Pujo". *Hindustan Times*, October 10 2016, [www.hindustantimes.com/opinion/taking-a-stand-for-tribal-rights-why-i-am-not-celebrating-durga-pujo/story-RWvXVmwnIVIJdKNcJWK7TK.html](http://www.hindustantimes.com/opinion/taking-a-stand-for-tribal-rights-why-i-am-not-celebrating-durga-pujo/story-RWvXVmwnIVIJdKNcJWK7TK.html). Accessed September 3 2021.

Kaahon (2019). "Joy Dhak, An Ecstasy with Dhak, Process of Making Dhak". Oct 4 2019, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=HcoyYuji3bc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HcoyYuji3bc). Accessed October 7 2021.

Khanna, Madhu (2000). "The Ritual Capsule of Durga, An Ecological Perspective". *Hinduism and Ecology: The Intersection of Earth, Sky and Water*, edited by Christopher Key Chapple and Mary Evelyn Tucker. Harvard University Press, p. 469-498.

"Kolkata gears up for Durga Puja, all involved to be vaccinated in 3 months". Hindustan Times, July 15 2021, [www.hindustantimes.com/cities/kolkata-news/kolkata-gears-up-for-durga-puja-all-involved-to-be-vaccinated-in-3-months-101626333922868.html](http://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/kolkata-news/kolkata-gears-up-for-durga-puja-all-involved-to-be-vaccinated-in-3-months-101626333922868.html). Accessed September 5 2021.

"Kolkata: 'Secular' Durga Puja pandal leads to social media outrage, triggers complaint". *Indian Express online*, October 6, 2019, [indianexpress.com/article/cities/kolkata/kolkata-secular-durga-puja-pandal-leads-to-social-media-outrage-triggers-complaint-6056202/](http://indianexpress.com/article/cities/kolkata/kolkata-secular-durga-puja-pandal-leads-to-social-media-outrage-triggers-complaint-6056202/). Accessed August 29 2021.

McDaniel, June (2004). *Offering Flowers, Feeding Skulls: Popular Goddess Worship in West Bengal*. Oxford University Press.

Mindia (2020). "Durga Pujo feat. Devdutt Pattanaik". *Mind of India*, October 20 2020, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=I6yj1kucSho](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I6yj1kucSho). Accessed October 12 2021.

Mitra, Prithvijit (2009). "Dhak Minus Feather Frills". *The Times of India*, Sept. 14, 2009, [timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/Dhak-minus-feather-frills/articleshow/5007307.cms](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/Dhak-minus-feather-frills/articleshow/5007307.cms). Accessed July 28 2021.

Mukherjee, Kanai L., Bibhas Bandyopadhyay and Aloka Chakravarty. *New Age Purohit Darpan: Durga Puja: Fourth Edition*. Association of Grandparents of Indian Immigrants. Accessed July 28 2021.

Mukherjee, Nabanita (2017). "An Appraisal Of Wholesale Marketing In Kolkata: A Case Of Kolay Market." *University of Burdwan*, April 2017, [www.researchgate.net/publication/323545946\\_AN\\_APPRAISAL\\_OF\\_WHOLE](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/323545946_AN_APPRAISAL_OF_WHOLE)

ALE\_MARKETING\_IN\_KOLKATA\_A\_CASE\_OF\_KOLAY\_MARKET\_INTR  
ODUCTION. Accessed July 30 2021.

Mukhopadhyay, Rishika (2019). "Contesting Spaces of Urban Renewal Project: A study of Kumartuli's Artist Colony". *The Routledge Handbook of Henri Lefebvre, The City and Urban Society*, Michael E. Leary-Owhin and John P. McCarthy, editors. Routledge.

Pandy, Prashant and Premankur Biswas (2016). "Meet the Asurs — a marginal tribe that describes Durga as a goddess who enticed Mahishasur". *The Indian Express*, December 8 2016, [indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/meeting-the-asurs-a-marginal-tribe-in-eastern-india/](http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/meeting-the-asurs-a-marginal-tribe-in-eastern-india/). Accessed September 3 2021.

Rajaram, Prema (2021). "Coming up in Kolkata: 20 gm gold mask for goddess Durga to keep Covid at bay", *India Today*, August 9 2021, [www.indiatoday.in/cities/kolkata/story/coming-up-in-kolkata-20-gram-gold-mask-for-goddess-durga-to-keep-covid-at-bay-1838487-2021-08-09](http://www.indiatoday.in/cities/kolkata/story/coming-up-in-kolkata-20-gram-gold-mask-for-goddess-durga-to-keep-covid-at-bay-1838487-2021-08-09). Accessed September 13 2021.

Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission. "Sandhi Puja at Belur Math 2019", [youtu.be/-4Oq1zO19rg](https://youtu.be/-4Oq1zO19rg). Accessed August 21 2021.

Rao, Rashmi Gopal (2016). "Mallik Ghat Flower Market". *Times Travel*, June 28 2016, [timesofindia.indiatimes.com/travel/Kolkata/Mallik-Ghat-Flower-Market/ps52946781.cms](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/travel/Kolkata/Mallik-Ghat-Flower-Market/ps52946781.cms). Accessed August 5 2021.

Ray, Shantanu Guha (2021). "With six weeks to go for Durga Puja, the Kumartuli potters are hoping for a miracle". *Money Control*, August 29 2021, [www.moneycontrol.com/news/trends/features/durga-puja-is-just-six-weeks-away-kumartuli-potters-are-hoping-for-a-miracle-save-7337601.html](http://www.moneycontrol.com/news/trends/features/durga-puja-is-just-six-weeks-away-kumartuli-potters-are-hoping-for-a-miracle-save-7337601.html). Accessed Sept. 5 2021.

Rodrigues, Hilary Peter (2003). *Ritual Worship of the Great Goddess, the Liturgy of the Durga Puja with Interpretations*. State University of New York Press.

Saha, Gopal Sankar (2019). "Durga Puja 2019 Kola Bou Snan". October 6 2019, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=zN5usr1d6UI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zN5usr1d6UI). Accessed October 7 2021.

Sengupta, Anuradha (2017). "The female sculptors of Kumartuli". *Gulf News*, March 29, 2017, [gulfnews.com/lifestyle/the-female-sculptors-of-Kumartuli-1.2002364](http://gulfnews.com/lifestyle/the-female-sculptors-of-Kumartuli-1.2002364). Accessed July 17 2021.

Shahabuddin, Ghazala (2003). "Ecological sustainability of forest management practices: The case of the regenerating sal forests of south-western West Bengal, India." *Social Change* 33 (2-3): 142-172. June 2003, [www.researchgate.net/publication/258185595\\_Ecological\\_sustainability\\_of\\_forest\\_management\\_practices\\_The\\_case\\_of\\_the\\_regenerating\\_sal\\_forests\\_of\\_south-western\\_West\\_Bengal\\_India](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/258185595_Ecological_sustainability_of_forest_management_practices_The_case_of_the_regenerating_sal_forests_of_south-western_West_Bengal_India). Accessed July 29 2021.

Sinjana (2018). "Durga Puja in Kolkata - 5 Reasons why it is Unique", [backpackxplore.com/durga-puja-bengal](http://backpackxplore.com/durga-puja-bengal), September 2 2018. Accessed August 30 2021.

--- (2019). "Kolkata's Durga Puja – A Complete Guide", [www.backpackxplore.com/kolkata-durga-puja-guide](http://www.backpackxplore.com/kolkata-durga-puja-guide), September 13, 2019. Accessed August 30 2021.

Sundaram, Dheepa (2020). "Reclaiming Mahisasura, Durga Puja, and Bengali Identity Politics", *The Durga Puja Mystery Game*, [blogs.helsinki.fi/durgapuja-the-videogame/reclaiming-mahisasura](http://blogs.helsinki.fi/durgapuja-the-videogame/reclaiming-mahisasura)", November 23 2020. Accessed September 3 2021.

"The wholesale markets of Kolkata", [www.ayashbasuphoto.com/kolkata-wholesale-markets](http://www.ayashbasuphoto.com/kolkata-wholesale-markets). Accessed July 30 2021.

"The Women Artisans of Kumartuli, North Kolkata, Durga Puja 2019". *Indian Express Online*, Oct 4, 2019, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=e6cNmVSDYcg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e6cNmVSDYcg). Accessed July 27 2021.

"This famous Kolkata Durga Puja has appointed four female priests for the first time", [timesofindia.com](http://timesofindia.com), August 13 2021, [timesofindia.indiatimes.com/travel/travel-news/this-famous-kolkata-durga-puja-](http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/travel/travel-news/this-famous-kolkata-durga-puja-)

has-appointed-four-female-priests-for-the-first-time/as85303267.cms. Accessed September 3 2021.

Trivedi, Ira (2014). *India in Love, Marriage and Sexuality in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Aleph Book Company.

Ward, Mariellen (2020). "About Durga Puja in Kolkata: A complete guide". [breathedreamgo.com](http://breathedreamgo.com), October 15, 2020, [breathedreamgo.com/about-durga-puja-in-kolkata-a-complete-guide](http://breathedreamgo.com/about-durga-puja-in-kolkata-a-complete-guide). Accessed Aug. 29 2021.

"What is so special about Durga Puja in Bengal: Eight amazing facts about the grand festival you should know". *India Today*, October 16 2015, [www.indiatoday.in/education-today/gk-current-affairs/story/durga-puja-268437-2015-10-16](http://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/gk-current-affairs/story/durga-puja-268437-2015-10-16). Accessed 8/5/2021.

"Why Soil from Brothels is Used to Make Goddess Durga's Idols". *News18.com*, October 7 2019, [www.news18.com/news/india/durga-puja-2019-why-is-soil-from-brothels-used-to-make-the-goddess-idols-2331645.html](http://www.news18.com/news/india/durga-puja-2019-why-is-soil-from-brothels-used-to-make-the-goddess-idols-2331645.html). Accessed July 25 2021.