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Source: *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 66, No. 4 (Nov., 2007), pp. 919-962

Published by: Association for Asian Studies

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20203237>

Accessed: 15-12-2015 11:53 UTC

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Tracking the Goddess: Religion, Community, and Identity in the Durga Puja Ceremonies of Nineteenth-Century Calcutta

TITHI BHATTACHARYA

Focusing on colonial Calcutta in the later decades of the nineteenth century, this essay explores the evolution of a particular festival, the Durga Puja, to explore the ways in which religion negotiated its place in the ideological determinants of modernity. The essay surveys the evolution of the goddess Durga from premodern times and shows why and how the perception of both the deity (in gender terms) and the festival (in historical terms) had to be recalibrated following the imperatives of new classes and new discursive parameters. While the essay interrogates the development of new particular categories introduced by modernity, such as urban spatiality and the rhetoric of individual rights in colonial Calcutta, it also aligns these developments to answer the general paradigmatic question of the actual relationship between religion/faith and the modern moment.

Our Durgotsav [festival of Durga] is not a Durgotsav. Our Durgotsav is the greatest epic of this world: better than the Illiad, better than AEnied, better than Paradise Lost, better than Inferno and far more superior than Jerusalem Delivered...

—Chandranath Basu (Jana, Jana, and Sanyal 1987, 13)

THIS ESSAY BEGAN AS an investigation of a particular experience that my mother had upon her return to Dhaka, her city of birth and childhood, after a long-enforced absence of nearly thirty years. This was, as one can imagine, an extremely difficult and emotionally intense experience for a woman well past her fifties. Childhood streets had turned into impersonal urban arteries; familiar faces had been replaced by metropolitan anonymity, while childhood memories had been corroded equally by time, absence, and political dispossession. The city had become for her a confused map of spatial and temporal displacement all at the same time.

Her tour of Dhaka finally brought her to the old Dhakeshwari temple, located in the western part of the city. Her interest in the image was purely that of a historian who studied iconography and feminine imagery. My mother,

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it must be emphasized, has impeccable atheist credentials. She is also an active participant in democratic grassroots movements encompassing the entire left spectrum, from labor issues to women's rights to, in the more recent past, movements against communalism. I state these political attestations in order to highlight the incongruity of what was to follow.

As she faced the image of the goddess, suddenly an unbridled swell of grief overcame her, and all the stored up pain of separation, lost friends, and the ultimate horror of having one's past really turned into a strange country overtook her in a uncontrollable tidal wave of tears. My mother apparently stood there for a full ten minutes, weeping unabashedly in front of the benign goddess.

So much for the story. The incident highlights two separate, if interrelated, issues: First, it is an index of the social power of religious symbolism. Of all the images in the city that must have been evocative of her past, it was the image of the goddess that finally proved to be the catalyst for my mother's memories and emotions. This is even more significant given the scrupulously nonreligious background of our subject. Second—and this forms the basis of the main argument of this essay—this evocative power, I argue, can only come from the religious symbols and practices of the religion of the dominant group, in this case Hinduism.

Let me briefly anticipate my argument. From the late nineteenth century, Hinduism in Bengal assumed a "secular" status in society whereby a selective array of its discourses and rites were used to define a political community. The anticolonial as well as revivalist aspects of this phenomenon have been well documented in recent scholarship (Sarkar 2001; Datta 1999). I am going to make a slightly different point here regarding the "secular" nature of religious discourse.

Hindu discourse and practices were used to strengthen a language of anti-colonial nationalism in Bengal from the late nineteenth century.¹ In this revivalist rhetoric, religion in general, but Hinduism in particular, came to acquire a unique status as an inviolable "pure" zone that had survived "foreign" influence. This rhetoric of Hindu revivalism was significantly different from the liberal/reformist rhetoric that was the other voice of anticolonial nationalism in this period.² Whereas the latter, through official and bureaucratic means, was negotiating its modest demands with the colonial state, the former was creating a compelling image of a grievously wronged community that demanded retribution for past wrongs and transgressions. It is this process of image making that I would like to concentrate on in this essay.

¹Tanika Sarkar (2001, 191) puts a more precise time frame to this process, placing it in the last four decades of the nineteenth century.

²A good example of this distinction is the case of the Brahma reformer and leading progressive activist Rajnarayan Basu. In 1852, he gave a lecture on the superiority of Hinduism over all other religions. Having a Brahma reformer uphold the virtues of Hinduism created a stir in contemporary society. Basu was consequently invited by the traditionalist Hindus, those who practiced idolatry, to lecture at some of their meetings. Basu refused for "fear of being perceived as having merged with the idolaters" (Basu 1909, 88).

To begin with, as is obvious from the project itself, it was a self-consciously religious language that was being used to make an anticolonial, hence political, point. Second, the images used to construct this political rhetoric were all culled from what is traditionally understood to be the “private” sphere. The images were overwhelmingly those of the nation as a woman, dishonored and violated, who cried for justice. This is how the “women’s question” acquired a unique centrality in the nationalist discourse, whereby women and gender relations were seen as the last bastion of a pure precolonial order that needed to be defended against an invasive colonial state and Western legality.

Partha Chatterjee’s highly influential argument about the separation of private and public spheres of nationalism is relevant here. Chatterjee advocates that nationalist discourse in the nineteenth century was forged in the “inner” or spiritual domain of culture and later emerged out of this domain into the “outer” or material domain of the modern public sphere. There is a temporal dimension to Chatterjee’s argument that is significant for our purposes. According to him, the nation was *first* conceived in this spiritual sphere through a complex of cultural practices before it ventured outside. Nationalism, he clearly indicates, “begins its journey after, let us remember, it has already proclaimed its sovereignty in the inner domain” (Chatterjee 1995, 10). The strength of this argument about the private domain lies in the fact that, as I have pointed out, all of the images used to construct the new language of nationalism were “private” ones. Where we depart from Chatterjee’s argument is in regarding the two spheres as so scrupulously discrete, to the extent of nationalism first emerging in one and then in the other. Thus, I argue that Hindu revivalist rhetoric from the latter part of the nineteenth century created a highly gendered language of nationalism that, for the first time, *linked* the emergent public sphere of modern political discourse to the sphere of private and domestic practices, thereby reconstituting them both.³

Legitimate concerns, however, have been voiced by historians and theorists about the validity of applying a category such as “public sphere” to colonial South Asia. Can we fruitfully talk about bourgeois citizenship and its attendant “rights,” in the Habermasian sense, when studying colonial Bengal under despotic British rule? Sandria Freitag’s concept of a “public arena” suggests an excellent resolution to this problem. Freitag characterizes a public arena as

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

³Here, I use the word “public sphere” in its Habermasian sense of a mediator between state and civil society. In its ideal form, a public sphere is “made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state” (Habermas 1991, 176).

The notion of a public arena helps us retain the “public” aspect of the emergent nationalist discourse, but it also crucially emphasizes for us the ritual aspect of public life that from the late nineteenth century was becoming the dominant language for expressing the common will. But while this may be so, it is equally impossible to deny the intimations of a very modern “public” from the nineteenth century. One only has to look to the literature of marginal groups—women and the lower castes, for instance—to realize the power of printing networks and the exhilaration of the newly found ability to articulate issues and demands for an audience (Bandyopadhyay 2004). These people were not writing for any premodern community but were invoking very modern contexts of open debate and discursive strategies based on the notion of rights and equality. How did these twin impulses, one of revitalizing older networks of belief and performance and the other of an increasingly modern social context, constitute the colonial “public”? Here in our answer, we depart from the previous scholarship on the subject in the following way.

It has been forcefully argued by postcolonialists in recent times that we ought to consider the possibility of alternative or multiple modernities, such that the modern form as articulated in Europe does not serve as our only template of diagnosing modernity (e.g., Chakrabarty 2000). Attractive and empowering as this argument maybe, it leaves us wanting in two analytical respects: (1) Without a substantive definition of modernity, how are to recognize its alternative? In other words, if the alternative form is different in every respect from its European counterpart, then what about it makes it “modern”? And (2) if we are to nominate a particular social institution or practice of the colonial world as “modern” in an alternative sense, then what ultimately are our registers for doing so? Are we then not falling back on European definitions of modernity and simply constructing mirror images of European institutions (civil society, public sphere, national belonging), albeit within an altered context?

Fresh scholarship on the nation-state and capitalist development in South Asia has persuasively indicated the unsustainability of this particular postcolonialist claim. Increasingly, scholars are pointing to the dangers of ignoring the context of global capitalism when cataloguing the formation of colonial nation-states (Goswami 2004; Bailey 2005). In this argument, *global* factors in general, and capitalism in particular, are seen to be closely related to the *local* context inasmuch as the much-celebrated “difference” of the local (in this case colonial) is ultimately a manifestation of unevenness and difference produced by the very processes of capital accumulation. Celebrating the *formal* representation of difference from European social forms in the colonial world blinds the alternative modernity thesis to the understanding that capital sustains, even encourages, difference as a conditional necessity in different parts of the system as long as they are orchestrated at a general level of determination by the logic of capital. The form of local practice does not necessarily reveal the nature of the economy unless the local is seen in the context of the universal.

In certain senses, this is not a new argument. Anthropologists such as Talal Asad have long argued that in order to understand non-Western local histories, one needs to inquire into “Europe’s past,” for it is “through the latter that universal history has been constructed” (Asad 1993, 201). I contend that it is in this intensely entangled and ultimately dialectical relationship between the universal and the particular, between the global and the local, that we need to situate the emergence of the new “public” sphere in colonial Bengal. The local—in this case, the colonial “public”—did not emerge in *structural* opposition to the global imperatives of colonial capitalism. New regimes of time, space, and labor disciplined people’s location in regard to each other and the world around them. But though these conditional necessities of the world market and Bengal’s premier but subordinate place in it dictated the parameters of the social formation, this is not to overlook or underestimate the role of the social agents themselves. To say that being in society was structurally overdetermined by global imperatives is not to say that the social being could not act, resist, or comply with it. Indeed, it is to re-alert ourselves to the famous formulation that agents make history, but not according to circumstances of their choosing.

So where does this leave our emergent colonial public/private distinction? Again, we display our theoretical debt to anthropologists for providing us with vital conceptual clues. A recent contribution to the history of religion and public life in Southeast Asia provides an excellent elaboration of precisely this relationship of entanglement between the “local” and the “transnational.” The editors of this stimulating volume illustrate how the rise of modern nation-states and global markets actually go on to “distend the very horizons of the local” and ensure that “local” events are “recast as national ones and vice versa” (George and Wilford 2005, 10). We need to locate the emergent public sphere in colonial Calcutta within this understanding of an entangled notion of the particular and the universal. There can be no doubt that the agents themselves were conscious of the power of the modern public sphere—through the new technologies of print, railways, and photography—when it came to asserting their views vis-à-vis the colonial state. But the uniqueness of the colonial context lies in the agent’s *conscious negotiation of the contradiction between the private and the public spheres*.

I contend that the Hindu middle class in Bengal from the middle of the nineteenth century was acutely aware of both the disempowerment and the potential of the new public sphere. It is particularly with an understanding of the division between the public and the private that they employed a rhetoric about the private sphere in the domain of the public. Furthermore, it is precisely the very modern concept of the private as inviolable and separate from statist concerns that this rhetoric utilizes in order to dramatize the violations of the colonial state in particular, and colonial subjection in general. It becomes clear from this period that the concerns of liberal nationalism around “public” issues were far

less effective mobilizers than those employed by the revivalists around “private” issues. For instance, the central demands of the moderate nationalists of this period were about issues that were all squarely within traditional understandings of the public sphere, such as the reform of the supreme and local legislative councils, greater representation of Indians in local government and chambers of commerce, and the Indianization of the civil service (Sarkar 1983, 88–89). The revivalists, in sharp contrast, campaigned about the age of consent bill, which was slated to raise the age of marital consummation for women from 12 to 14, and about various rights involving religious practices. In other words, they focused on issues designated “private” (marital norms, religion) by modernity. The success of the revivalists’ discourse lay in their ability to emphasize the absolute transgression of colonialism when it allegedly encroached on this new private sphere. This, I argue, would not have been possible without this discourse being acutely self-aware of a very modern notion of both a “political” public and a “personal” private.

Finally, then, the essay tries to establish how this process of an entangled private/public formulation brought Hinduism into public life in such a way that certain idioms and practices that were previously considered “religious” and particular became “political” enough to be considered universal. Thus, a language that had been the purview of a particular religion was generalized through the new public arena, through print and new urban practices, thereby giving a very specific tinge to the new nation under construction. I call this process the “secularization” of Hinduism.

There is an important qualifier to this argument. A clearly religious community with well-defined boundaries that called itself “Hindu” was in itself created in this process. There is now enough evidence to suggest that even as late as the 1880s, the definition of a Hindu community was still sufficiently unclear in the minds of its members. Thus, when I suggest that a language of Hinduism linked private issues to the public sphere, this is not to suggest that there had always existed a pure language of Hinduism available when needed by a Hindu community. The process that I outline in turn created such a language and such a community.

In this essay, I focus on the Durga Puja ceremonies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Calcutta in order to trace this process of secularization of religious language. This is far from a random selection. Durga Puja was (and still remains) the chief festival of the Bengali Hindus for this period. An important literary tradition exists from this time onward linking the goddess to nationalist desire. Durga also combines in herself the attractive duality of a familial imagery along with political agency. She is both the ideal daughter/mother and the valiant slayer of demons. Thus, she is “good” in the small sense of the domestic, as well good in the more cosmic sense of the eternal struggle between good and evil. Moreover, the very status of her *puja* changes during the nineteenth century to become part of a civic sensibility. Thus, as we track the goddess,

we can also witness the social processes that contributed to the construction of such crucial historical formations as “community” and “nation.”

HISTORICAL ROOTS

The worship of Durga remains central in many ways to the Bengali cultural identity. The form in which the goddess is worshipped is, however, unique to Bengal and forms a major departure from the other regional myths and theological disquisitions about her.

Recent scholarship on the goddess has forcefully established her non-Brahminic and non-Hindu origins. Durga, it seems, was familiar with the process of theological appropriation to suit human needs even before the nineteenth century. According to Kunal Chakrabarti's excellent study on the subject, from the sixth century onward, the Hindu Puranas began a conscious and highly creative process of integrating non-Vedic goddesses into the Brahminic pantheon. Hindu texts that mention Durga before this process began, such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Harivamsa*, have a very different picture of Durga than the one that we are familiar with. She is described as a fearless virgin, hunting and living in mountains (Vindhya or the Himalayas), craggy terrains, and caves. Her companions are ghosts and wild beasts, and she is dressed in peacock feathers. Her diet, consisting mostly of meat and alcohol, is not very Brahminic either. Chakrabarti sees her in these texts “primarily as a war-goddess who is fond of battles and destroys demons—especially Mahisasura, is endowed with a variety of weapons... and protects her devotees” (2001, 170). She is a clearly non-Vedic deity given space for the first time in a Brahminical text. Her assimilation, which begins from this time onward, is completed in the *Devimahatmya*, which forms a part of the larger *Markandeya Purana* (thirteen chapters), possibly composed in the sixth century.

The *Devimahatmya* retains most of Durga's non-Vedic features in recognizable form but “with the help of myths and epithets... subtly connect[ed] her with a Sanskrit tradition” (Chakrabarti 2001, 170). She is thus still a warrior-virgin but now, for the first time, is seen as the manifestation of Sakti, that very Vedic notion of divine energy. As Chakrabarti correctly points out, the result of this textual maneuvering is that the goddess in the *Devimahatmya* is neither wholly Brahminical nor fully non-Vedic. However, it is this text in particular that gave the goddess her most enduring form, and the Bengal Puranas, as later creations, took this as their model of construction. Thus, one can safely surmise that the model of the goddess that the Puranas in Bengal began with was already suffused by extremely diverse traditions—some of them from highly questionable origins as far as the Brahminical legacy was concerned.

To make matters worse for the Brahminical order, until as late as the Gupta period, Bengal was largely out of the orbit of Vedic-Aryan influence. The region

thus enjoyed a fairly unbroken history of goddess worship until the Brahmana migration, a tradition that the Brahminical corpus was forced to reckon with in order to strike roots in the region. Winning favors with the locals hence required yet another process of theological choreography whereby local goddesses were adopted (with modifications) into the Brahminical pantheon and given an unbroken textual history as Vedic divinities. Chakrabarti has called this practice of textual mutation that the Bengal Puranas engaged in, obviously with successful results, the “the Puranic process” (2001, 172).

To summarize, then, what the Puranic tradition in Bengal achieved was the accommodation of several tribal goddesses within the Brahminical pantheon. This was done in several ways, sometimes placing the diverse deities under the generic notion of Devi and sometimes relating them all to Sakti as the source of feminine power. In this extraordinary process, the tribal goddesses retained their distinct specificities, but the individual deities were subsumed under a highly hierarchical Brahminical order that now determined their more general traits. Several female tribal deities were thus, through the Puranic tradition, given Brahminical status in Bengal. Our survey of Durga’s roots demonstrates that as a goddess, she was neither “authentic” in any originary Vedic sense nor representative of any single religious tradition. It is now with a certain amount of irony that we see her emerging in the late nineteenth-century literature as the embodiment of a pure Hindu tradition and the bearer of an undifferentiated past of Hindu glory simply waiting recovery.

But how did the warrior goddess, drinking copiously, socializing with ghosts and other members of polite society, bedecked in peacock feathers and not shy of human sacrifice, turn into the benevolent nurturing mother, needing to be protected by her nationalist sons? Did the nineteenth century invent this image in its entirety? Invented traditions usually involve not the introduction of wholly novel ideas but rather the subtle and creative manipulation of existing ones (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). There were certain specific historical practices that had coalesced around the Bengali Durga that the nineteenth century could look to when constructing its image of the bountiful mother goddess.

DURGA AS MOTHER

The crucial difference between the familiar form in which the goddess is worshipped in Bengal and the Durga of the pre-Puranic tradition is that the former is worshipped *en famille*. One is accustomed to the image of the goddess as she vanquishes the buffalo demon Mahisasur while her two sons, Kartikeya and Ganesa, and her two daughters, Lakshmi and Saraswati, stand by supportively. If Durga can be said to have been tamed from a non-Vedic warrior-virgin by the Puranic process to become part of a highly masculine Vedic/Sanskritic order, then this was a step even further in her domestication.

Some scholars have understandably questioned the validity of this familial imagery because descriptions of Durga in several texts are far from such pictures of domestic bliss.⁴ According to Yogeshchandra Ray Vidyanidhi, Lakshmi et al. have no business being around Durga. Indeed, he claims that such appendages have actually diminished the glory of the goddess (1951, 115–16). The domestication of the glorious virgin, powerful in her inner virtuous anger, into an ordinary mother with four trailing offspring to boot has rightfully irked scholars. This iconography, however, has important implications for the social affects associated with the festival.

It is difficult to trace the genesis of this form of the image beyond a few centuries.⁵ The sixteenth-century texts of the lawgiver Raghunandan, often seen in Bengal as the origin of a host of medieval and early modern rituals, do not mention the worship of this familial Durga. The first appearance of the goddess in this recognizable form is in Mukunda Chakrabarti's narrative ballad, the *Chandimangal* of the sixteenth century. The hunter Kalketu offers the goddess his prayers as she is surrounded by her family. The literary tradition of the *Mangalkavya*, of which the *Chandimangal* was a part, had a colorful and catholic past. They appeared around the fifteenth century as a new genre of mythological literature in the vernacular Bengali to be sung as ballads at auspicious occasions. Although their basic material was culled from the Puranas—that is, from Sanskrit sources—they also displayed very local and certainly non-Aryan roots. The portrayal of the gods in these ballads was thus often remarkably free from pristine Brahminical precepts. The illustrious Durga, the divine salvation of mankind, appears in the *Chandimangal*, for instance, as the indolent shrewish daughter of rich parents who berates her penniless husband Siva for being a worthless dependent to his wealthy in-laws. The heavenly beings brawl, complain about their poverty, and worry about domestic chores. Durga, like many of her mortal sisters, despairs at the state of her home overrun by the family's eclectic menagerie of rats, snakes, peacocks, and lions (Sen 1975, 24–27).

The form of worship to the goddess in the *Chandimangal* is also significant. Mukunda informs us that she is worshipped in every home throughout Bengal in the month of Aswin. His contemporary Brindaban Das details various musical instruments—*mridanga*, *mandira*, and *samkhya*—that occupied a place of pride in every Bengali household because they were used in the worship of the goddess (Sen 1945, 37). The nineteenth-century newspaper *Samachar Chandrika* of 1893 asserts that during the regime of Hindu rajas, it was difficult to find a single *bhadralok* household that did not host a *durgotsav*, or Durga

⁴In the *Mahabharata*, for example, Durga is referred to as Kokmukhi, or “one with the face of a wild dog,” who resides in places of death (crematoriums, burning *ghats*) and blesses the valiant at wartime (see Vidyanidhi 1951, 81).

⁵For earlier representations of the goddess without children, see figures 1 and 2.



Figure 1. Figure of Durga at Aihole temple, erected by the Chalukya dynasty in the sixth and seventh centuries CE. Reproduced from Zimmer (1968), plate 117.

festival. The report further qualifies that not all of these *pujas* were necessarily on a grand scale with images but were often conducted simply with a *ghat*, a *pat*, or a modest *shalagram shila* (Bandyopadhyay 1994, 530). This suggests a much more unassuming performance compared to the rich and ostentatious



210. Ellūrā. Kailāsanātha. *Durgā, Slayer of the Titan Buffalo*. c. 750–850 A.D.

Figure 2. Figure of Durga at the Kailashnath temple, 750–850 CE.

display of worship in the nineteenth century. However, it also implies that ritual practices perhaps lacked a strict bifurcation between private and public, as developed under modernity. After all, worshipping the goddess quietly at home was not conceptually far from singing about her feats through the *Managalkavya* ballads at local gatherings.

The *Mangalkavyas*, like most of the literary productions of this period, were narrative ballads composed to be chanted and sung. They were part of a larger culture of orality that moved the gods and goddesses from their celestial moorings into the homes and backyards of ordinary people. The cultural traffic clearly happened both ways, as ordinary domestic concerns began to inhabit the hallowed predilections of the gods. Late eighteenth-century composers such as Ramprasad Sen (1718–75) and Kamalakanta Bhattacharya (1772–1821) belong to this convention of depicting an unaffected and artless world caught between ordinary human sufferings and extraordinary divine play. Having lived through an intense social transformation from Mughal rule to the unfolding of the rule of the East India Company, their poetry abounds with references to zamindars and their estates, leaking boats, lawyers and their court battles, and the poor bemoaning their poverty and social status.

The *agamani* and *vijaya* songs were yet another form that embodied this principle and allowed the goddess to escape the confines of ritual worship. These songs were the result of Vaishnav influence on an existent stratum of tantric tradition that was the primary site of the *Mangalkavya* tradition. Scholars have now established that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Bengal witnessed an unprecedented rise in the worship of Sakta deities such as Kali and Durga (McLane 1993, 89–90). The tantric roots of both Durga and Kali as they were most commonly worshipped in Bengal have also been widely accepted. The sixteenth-century reform movement initiated by Chaitaniya introduced a very different form of devotion. Tantric practices of dark and mysterious worship were replaced by the idea of ecstatic devotion. Although the Vaishnav movement in Bengal was mainly centered on Krishna, from the seventeenth century, elements of Vaishnav Bhakti began to appear within the tantric tradition. The *agamani* and *vijaya* songs belong to this tradition of Sakta lyric poetry, which bears strong traces of Vaishnav piety.

The two groups, *agamani* and *vijaya*, deal with the goddess's arrival at and departure from her natal home, respectively, events that also mark the opening and closing dates of her annual festival in autumn. A wide range of authors from a variety of literary traditions have distinguished themselves as composers of these songs: This list includes eighteenth-century figures such as Bharatchandra Roy (1712–60), Ramprasad Sen, and Kamalakanta Bhattacharya alongside nineteenth-century stalwarts such as Dasarathi (Dasu) Roy (1806–57), Kali Mirza (1750–1820), and Iswar Gupta (1812–59).

The songs depict the goddess as Uma, daughter of Himalaya and Menaka, who renounces her parents' wealth in order to be with Siva. For her royal

parents, the daughter's poverty is only compounded by their separation from her. The start of her *puja* on earth is thus a universal occasion of joy, as it is then that, for a short while, the daughter returns to the tender and carefree surroundings of her parents' home. The exchange between Uma and her mother, as depicted in these songs, is particularly poignant. In one moving *agamani* piece by the nineteenth-century poet Iswar Gupta, Uma comes home to a distraught Menaka, who is beside herself with joy upon her daughter's return. Once she is safely ensconced within the maternal embrace, the daughter, however, lovingly accuses the mother of having forgotten her in the past year. Did she not expect to be sent for in this one year and have her hopes dashed every day? To worsen matters, her plight has become public knowledge at Kailas. People have even asked her whether she has a mother at all, thus shaming her still further. Finally, at year's end, having vainly waited for her mother to turn up and bring her home, Uma is forced to come home herself. Having been humiliated and disappointed thus, she vows not to stay home too long (cited in Gupta 1966, 61). Such a conversation between a mother and her young married daughter sharply corresponded to the social world from whence these songs arose. The songs evoked sentiments that a large number of mothers could identify with and their daughters could find solace in.⁶ During a time and in a society when women's emotions, feelings, or sentiments were increasingly being relegated to the background, these songs must have managed to carve an emotional space in which many an Uma could find consolation and hence come home to.

Vijaya likewise is colored by the emotional strains of parting as the daughter returns back to her husband, not to be seen for yet another year. This undoubtedly was the fate of the majority of mothers and daughters in this period. Once married, the young bride would become inaccessible to her childhood home, companions, and family, thus deepening the anguish of mother and daughter alike. These songs thus evoked an emotional universe of domestic consciousness that went far beyond the scope of religious ritual. The songs become even more significant once we consider the social milieu from whence they sprang. There are no festivals, no ritual markings in the Hindu religious calendar to mark a woman's relationship to her natal home. No ceremony recognizes the brutal uprooting of a young woman from her mother's care into the strange, and possibly hostile, realm of strangers. No ritual concedes the agony of the mother who is forced to bear the separation from her beloved child. Hence, one can easily appreciate the social scope of songs that drew their poetic strength precisely from such emotions and descriptions. Consequently, the festival of the goddess who purportedly embodied the longings of millions of mothers and the joy of all daughters at their homecoming could not have failed to evoke a universal response. Although part of a particular religion, they spoke of a social world

⁶Many of these songs explicitly condemn the son-in-law (Shiva) as a useless layabout and side with the daughter (see Roy 1926).

of ordinary men and women that could be appealing across religious affiliations. Nineteenth-century observers of the Durga Puja recognized this with noteworthy astuteness:

[W]hen the village housewife with tearful eyes sent-off the Mother [Durga], one forgot the divine and all-powerful goddess. It seemed as if the tableau of bidding farewell to a village bride on her way to her in-law's had just been re-enacted. (Sarbadhikary 1933, 83)

By the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the narrative of the goddess had thus become part of much wider network of cultural exchange with several extra-religious connotations that were beyond the scope of narrow ritualism. More importantly, beginning with the *Mangalkavyas*, a uniquely feminized and familial element was introduced to the imaginaire of Durga, and by the eighteenth century, this emotional scape had been given precise articulation through Vaishnav and Sakta devotionalism in two important ways.

First, although Vaishnav devotional discourse did not have any “high” female deities in its iconographic universe (Krishna being the supreme figure of devotion), its historical instantiation in Bengal created a distinctive space for freedom and mobility for women as devotees. Similar to the *agamani* and *vijaya* songs, Vaishnav piety expressed the joys and agonies of a woman's world through the powerful trope of Radha's longing for Krishna.⁷ Male betrayal, eroticism, and illicit romance—emotions and themes that could never be voiced by women in normal social situations all found intoxicating release in devotional expression, thus retaining in important and complex ways a feminized conception of agency despite Brahminical masculinization of the religious scape.

Second, the mother–child relationship that received special emphasis in the Sakta devotional tradition added a lasting element of familial nurture to Durga's previous single and virginal status. The complete surrender of the *bhakta* to the divine mother must have had particular resonance in the eighteenth century, when society was perceived by most as being in a state of flux in which the ordinary mortal had little or no control over his or her surroundings. In contrast, in the world of devotion, a bountiful mother ensured the balance of the universe and, moreover, guaranteed the material prosperity of the devotee. It is thus not coincidental that it is in the eighteenth century, amid its attendant political and material instability, that Durga earned her most potent nomination of Annapurna—literally, the one who provides food. Bharatchandra Roy's contribution to the *Mangalkavya* tradition is an excellent example of the presaging of the mother Durga over all her other representational forms.

⁷Feminization in general, not just through Radha, had a significant genealogy within Bengali Vaishnavism. There was also comparative freedom for Vaishnavi women in terms of access to education and sexual mores. For details, see Chakrabarti (1985).

Bhartachandra, a Brahmin poet in the court of Krishnachandra Roy of Nadia, composed the *Annadamangal* around 1753, only a few years before the momentous events at Plassey. The main purpose of the ballad in the *Mangalkavya* tradition was to establish the goddess Annapurna's worship on earth. It describes the transformation of Parvati into Annapurna, the goddess of food and plenitude. A particularly poignant moment in the narrative, one that would be repeated several times in the colonial era, is when Ishwari, a ferrywoman, asks the goddess to bless her so that her children can be "kept in milk and rice" forever ("amar santan jeno thake dudhe bhate") (Ghosh 1963, 159). Iswari does not ask Annapurna for fame, fortune, or any ostentatious riches. In fact, all she is really asking the goddess to do is to keep her progeny safe and happy. Milk and rice are her indices of this modest prosperity because food and access to food are, for her and for several others by now, important indicators of happiness. But if Iswari's request affirmed in her audience a new anxiety about social change, it also animated the community of listeners into a new relationship with the goddess. A trope of material prosperity, an image of bounteous maternity, and a language of earthy devotion all combined in persuasive ways to establish Durga's motherhood. The association of Durga-as-mother with food also assumed dramatic proportions in the late nineteenth century, when famines and colonial expropriation brought hunger into sharp focus for society as a whole (Bose 1999; Sarkar 2001).

The foregoing discussion of Durga's motherhood was simply to establish the existence of a living tradition of feminized agency that the nineteenth-century writers could later appropriate. Although Durga-as-mother underwent significant transformations in both reception and construction, it is important to remember that there already existed in the popular mind a lyrical memory of her motherhood that could be selectively evoked by a new generation of writers and poets. It is also, however, worthwhile to bear in mind that although there seems to exist in the nineteenth-century literature a seamless continuity between the iconic representation of the goddess in the precolonial and colonial period, the social import of this imagery was significantly different for both eras. In other words, an apparently unaltered goddess from the sixteenth century was actually serving a very different ideological purpose for a very different community in the nineteenth. This is nowhere clearer than in the actual mechanics of her worship, which began to change during the transitional period of the eighteenth century.

THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY AND THE PERMANENT UNSETTLEMENT OF BENGAL

Historical records display several contenders for the honor of having hosted the first public Durga Puja. The strongest candidates remain Kangsanarayan, the zamindar of Taherpur (Rajshahi), when he inherited his title in 1583; the Sabarna

Chaudhuris, whose *puja* dates back to 1610; and Raja Krishnachandra Raya of Nadia, whose reign (1728–82/83) has been the focus of several myths. The publicness of worship already implies a degree of diffusion of the original religious message. The *pujas* were marked by fairs and nightlong entertainment and were occasions for the peasant to forget his daily drudgery and partake in the festivities. Could such a public display of pomp and splendor by the Hindu Rajas under Mughal rule be a covert assertion of political identity? Was Durga, as early as the eighteenth century, a standard bearer for Hindu political assertions?

It is not entirely coincidental that Raja Krishnachandra Raya (1710–82/83) is seen as the most likely initiator of the public *puja*. The Raja had earned his spurs by backing the British at the battle of Plassey, thereby inadvertently linking the fortunes of Durga to those of the new regime of the East India Company. His commitment to Hinduism can be safely assumed from the chronicles of his court poet, Bharatchandra, whose *Annadamangal* documents the contemporary Maratha invasions as a Hindu crusade against Muslim rule. Indeed, Krishnachandra's strength of feelings toward the goddess can be gauged by the following incident. The missionary William Ward reported that the Raja "cut off the hands of a goldsmith, who had mixed inferior metals in a golden image of Doorga" (Ward 1817, 1:100). But before making a convenient assumption about Durga representing the political ire of a Hindu gentry against a Muslim Nawabi regime, it is important to understand the imperatives of this new class of Hindu rulers and the roots of their devotion to the goddess.

It is now widely recognized that, contrary to the old colonial hypothesis—that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw a period of economic chaos and political anarchy with the "fall" of the Mughal Empire—this period actually witnessed vigorous economic activity and the rise of new local elites all over north India (e.g., Bayly 2003). In the case of Bengal, this social group was mostly Hindu.

As the nawabs of Bengal slowly but surely cut their ties with the Mughal ruler in Delhi and became independent rulers in their own right, they were presented with a new set of historical problems. Although independence from Delhi meant more freedom and power to the nawab, it also meant that a new ruling class had to be reconstituted locally from Bengal itself, for with the separation from Delhi the old Mansabdari system could no longer be sustained with recruitments from the imperial court. Delhi had ceased the transfer of *mansabdars* to Bengal after 1713. It was in this new and essentially local ruling structure that bankers such as the Jagat Seths, large landowners such as Krishnachandra Raya of Nadia, and new state officials such as Rai Durlabh found their respective niches.

Murshid Quli Khan, who arrived in Bengal as *diwan* in 1700, introduced several changes in the administrative and revenue collection policies of Bengal. For our purposes, the principal result of these innovations was the creation of gigantic holdings of land by a handful of zamindars. Because of his own outsider status with the old Mughal *mansabdar* class, Murshid Quli preferred Hindu

zamindars in his awarding of contracts and allowed them to enlarge their landed estates. The bulk of the most powerful zamindars of the eighteenth century, mostly Hindus, thus acquired their power under Murshid Quli Khan. This process of administrative changes was backed by the strengthening of credit networks, so that the Marwari Hindu banking house of the Jagat Seths gained unique prominence in the state's finances and subsequently made inroads into the state's political decisions. Both of these dynamic political and economic forces—the Hindu landowners and the bankers—would eventually become prominent partners against Siraj-ud-daula at the battle of Plassey.

There is no doubt that despite the land and revenue policies of the nawabs birthing this class of large Hindu landowners, their relationship to Murshidabad was not one of uniform and unquestioned loyalty. This was so for a variety of reasons. First, with the change in economic arrangement, they resented both the tax and the political allegiance that they had to cede to the court at Murshidabad. Historians have commented on how during the last years of Alivardi Khan's rule, the zamindars became "less dependent, less supervised, [and] less integrated into the provincial administration" (McLane 1993, 43). Likewise, although formal political sovereignty lay with the nawab, indigenous merchants began to play a decisive role in the economic and political network of Bengal. The house of Jagat Seth, for instance, financed loans for all the major contemporary players, including the English, the Dutch, the French, the nawab, and, of course, the Hindu landowners.

Second, the Hindu large landowners became little rajas of their own, controlling not only vast territories in their own right but also enjoying supreme authority over their local subjects (Raychaudhuri 1953, 22–31). This local authorial eminence, however, was not always rewarded by any official political power or adequate social recognition. Social glory and conspicuous authority still lay with the nawabs. Moreover, from the middle decades of the eighteenth century, successive Maratha raids (1742–51), coupled with the rise in the state's revenue demands, started to disturb the uneasy balance of power between the nawab and the local zamindars. Finally, the rise of the East India Company as a significant power base further contributed to the undermining of Nawabi authority. But despite these historical trends, a simple case cannot be made for a Hindu landowning class conspiring against a Muslim Nawabi and using Durga as their insignia for reconstituting rival political authority. The history of this period points toward a more complex set of social processes.

There is little evidence, John McLane suggests, to show that Bengali Hindus as a community resented Muslim rule because of Nawabi interference with religious practices. It was more likely, he argues, that Hindu zamindars, because of the power and autonomy they enjoyed, were "reconciled to the continuation of Nawabi rule, despite the news of momentous changes in other parts of India" (McLane 1993, 175). The fact that a few Hindu zamindars and financiers conspired against a Muslim nawab in 1757 speaks more about the opportunities

presented at that particular moment rather than a consistent and long-standing policy of sustained opposition or religious antagonism. McLane stresses the lack of “shared expectations” of the Hindu zamindars as a whole and emphasizes “opportunism” of particular parties over any “constancy or principled action” (175). This being the case, it is also undeniable that the eighteenth century witnessed a rapid spread of Sakta practices, whereby Kali and Durga rose head and shoulders above all other local gods and goddesses and combined in their *pujas* an element of mass participation like never before. The answer to this paradox should perhaps be sought in premodern notions of kingship and authority rather than in communal rivalry.

Recent histories of precolonial India provide us with sophisticated accounts of the relationship between Hindus and Muslims before the advent of either modernity or colonialism. More importantly, they alert us to the larger and, to my mind, more fundamental question of what it meant to be a Hindu or a Muslim in premodernity. These findings, by common consensus, question the existence of homogenous Hindu or Muslim identities in any meaningful sense before the nineteenth century (e.g., Bayly 1998). The sponsorship of elaborate Shakta rituals by the Hindu zamindar/raja in the Nawabi era may not have been the articulation of a solely *religious* identity as it is understood in the modern sense. It is more likely that these festivals were a display of several elements of regal authority: political, material, as well as religious. As late as the nineteenth century, there is evidence of Hindu festivals being patronized by Muslim zamindars and vice versa.⁸ There is, however, something to be said about the resurgence of Durga and Kali worship in the eighteenth century.

Although 1757 is read by the modern historian as the high-water mark of eighteenth-century political history, the same opinion may not have been shared by a contemporary chronicler. Compared to the dynamics of a century that included brutal and repeated Maratha raids, Afghan insurrections within the Nawabi ranks, changes in revenue arrangements, and volatile realignment of regional ruling coalitions, the incident at Plassey must have seemed like yet another new permutation of power, not particularly novel or unprecedented. If the eighteenth century taught any lessons to the Hindu zamindars of Bengal, it was the need to be extremely alert and wary about their political loyalties. Thus, in this milieu, in which political affiliations were fluid and constantly shifting, there was perhaps a particular need to assert and display political authority, financial stability, and administrative control over the ruled. The splendid and ostentatious ceremonies around Durga and Kali may have helped consolidate

⁸Cynthia Talbot’s study of premodern south Indian inscriptions shows how even a conscious use of the term “Hindu” could have a different meaning from that of modern usage. “The fact that some non-Muslims called themselves Hindu in fourteenth-century South India,” she argues, “does not imply that a unified religious consciousness developed in this period, however, contrary to the current Hindu Nationalist view” (1998, 10; see also Chattopadhyay 1998).

zamindari influence in an era of dynamic social change. The pragmatic need to publicly manifest authority was undoubtedly reinforced by more sacral ones. In accordance with medieval notions of kingship, both Hindu and Muslim ruling personages encouraged their subjects to “see divinity in kingship by associating themselves with royal and sacred symbols, through their darshans, celebration of rites, personal devotions and religious study, and patronage of holy persons.” (McLane 1993, 16). The festivities around Durga and Kali were thus essentially drawing together two different kinds of identities—political and religious—but the boundaries for both were neither committed nor stable but open to overlaps, negotiations, and contingencies.

What is significant about this state of affairs is the fact that only incidentally was the older ruling order Muslim and the new dramatis personae mostly Hindu, for although this period saw an unprecedented rise in religious conservatism on the part of the major Hindu landowners, this was not so much a display of their anti-Muslim credentials as an effort to consolidate their own political authority. Lavish spending for Hindu rituals, zealous espousal of Hindu “tradition,” and the recreation of a new Hindu *doxa* to establish their power base were as “political,” I contend, as formal alliances and treaties. It was within the courts and palaces of these Hindu zamindars that Sakta practices were given a new lease on life through rejuvenated festivals, new religious rites, and socially binding rituals.

This historical perspective is important to bear in mind when we face the new defenders of Hinduism in the nineteenth century. The incidental, in this period, is transmuted as the immanent, and the differences between the zamindar and the nawab, so much more nuanced and complex in actual fact, are translated as a struggle between an oppressed Hindu gentry and a decadent Muslim Nawabi. What was in reality a collection of contingent alliances, strategic opportunism, and anxious display of power was interpretively blunted by a later generation into a Hindu versus Muslim struggle.

The *Samachar Chandrika* of 1833, for instance, approvingly maintains that under the evil rule of the Muslims, it was only because of certain key royal figures that Hinduism could maintain its existing rituals and rites. The paper names the kingdoms of Nadia, Natore, and Bardhaman as these fortified islands of Hindu practice in a sea of Muslim sacrilege. But the fact that the *pujas* were often a display of authority could not be entirely masked by the later revisionist interpretations. The *Chandrika* inadvertently reveals how the rajas routinely “ordered” the worship of Durga in households in which such rites were not observed and even paid for or subsidized *pujas* when necessary (Bandyopadhyay 1994, 530). Krishnachandra similarly threatened to punish anyone who did not worship Kali (Kinsley 1975, 99–100). The nineteenth-century context strove to turn the eighteenth-century world of the goddess into a legitimate fight between good and evil, into one purely religious community against the other. Durga, who only a generation earlier had backed a Muslim

nawab against the Hindu Maratha raids (McLane 1993, 166), began to be transformed into the defender of a new community with very new and very modern imperatives.

THE GODDESS AND THE BANIA

The rise in power of the East India Company from the middle of the eighteenth century introduced a new principle in the construction of the public image of Durga. The year 1757, unlike the previous regime changes, was not merely a political revolution but also a social one. The new rulers birthed a unique social and economic order, which required a fresh set of personnel with new rules and novel attitudinal structures. Along with such sweeping changes, they also created a new town as the very embodiment of these transformations, Calcutta. Raja Binay Krishna Deb, writing the history of the town in 1905, noted that several “eminent native gentlemen” settled in Calcutta “previous to the English settlement and after the battle of Plassey.” *Banias*, or native merchants, working closely with the British began to establish themselves in the new town. Families such as those of Diwan Ramcharan, bania of Vansittart, who went on to found the Andul Raj, settled in Pathuriaghata. Others such as Diwan Ganga Govinda Sing, *diwan* of the board of revenue under Warren Hastings, had his house in Jorasanko. Darpanaryan Tagore, the founder of the Tagore dynasty and had worked as the *diwan* of a French company, founded his establishment in Pathuriaghata (Deb 1977, 54–55). All of these families were noted for their Durga Puja celebrations.

The first half of the nineteenth century proved to be a golden age for the indigenous merchant. A man such as Dwarkanath Tagore’s career embraced the full spectrum of the contemporary financial universe as landowner, financier, *diwan* of the Salt Department, and a leading investor in commercial agriculture and industrial ventures (see Kling 1976). In 1833, the value of bonds held by Indians in the joint stock market has been calculated to be worth nearly £7,000,000 (Chaudhuri 1971, 299).

The Durga Puja became an integral part of the public life of the *bania*. There exist grand descriptions of the parade bearing the idol on its way to immersion in the early British accounts of Calcutta.⁹ Stiff competition existed in different parts of the town among the various eminent families over the extent and scope of spending. A typical example was Jorasanko, where the main contenders for the Devi’s favors were the two prominent houses of the Tagores and the Gandhabanik family of Sibkrishna Da. At the Da’s, the idol’s solid gold jewelry were engraved

⁹One can find numerous references to the celebration of Durga Puja in the eighteenth century. Bimalchandra Datta, for example, devotes a whole chapter of his *Durga Puja: Sekal Theke Ekal* to early *pujas* in Calcutta (1988, 109–37) and quotes a travel report from James Mitchell, a British clerk to a sea captain, who describes the *pujas* as he saw them in 1748 (261–62).

with stones imported from Paris, but the bedecked goddess had to be divested of such precious ornaments during her immersion.¹⁰ The Tagores, on the other hand immersed their *pratima* fully adorned in gold. The goddess got to keep her jewelry, along with the superior pride of the Tagores. Neither was the *puja* any small feat at the Malliks, Baishnabdas Mallik being famous for his elaborate and expensive methods. The festivities there lasted for more than 15 days (Roy 2001, 382). But the credit of fashioning the *puja* such that it unmistakably testified to the political destiny of the host surely goes to the man who started it all in the town of Calcutta: Raja Nabakrishna Deb.

Nabakrishna, the famous *bania* of Robert Clive, was among the first generation of “eminent” natives whose dwelling houses in Shobhabazar were noted for their grandeur and style and, according to a late nineteenth-century journal, were “the only two specimens of palatial buildings in a city styled the City of Palaces” (*Mukherjee’s Magazine*, 1861, cited in Deb 1977, 54). By the end of the eighteenth century, Nabakrishna had emerged as the leading landowner in Calcutta and a prominent arbiter of social conflicts in the community (Ghose 1901; Sinha 1978). Nabakrishna’s wealth, the stuff of contemporary urban mythology, was not contingent on his official income from the company. During the historic funeral of his mother, on which he is reputed to have spent 900,000 rupees, Nabakrishna’s official salary was only 60 rupees. According to legend, Nabakrishna was among the lucky few who happened to “inspect” Siraj-ud-daula’s treasury after the battle was won in 1757. Consequently, the entire contents of the nawab’s state treasury was divided among Nabakrishna Deb, Mir Jafar, and a few others who had served their new masters well at Plassey (Mitra 1879, 24–25). It was a time when the threads of financial reward, political loyalty, and social prominence were closely woven and the signs for each were often fused together or interchangeable. This was nowhere clearer than in the spectacle of the *puja* as devised by Nabakrishna.

Soon after the victory at Plassey, Nabakrishna built his Durga Dalan at Shobhabazar in a record time of only three months. The impressive building was only matched by the grandness of the *puja* that it housed. Dancing girls were hired from Murshidabad and even as far as Lucknow. Festivities continued for nearly half a month and made that first *puja* under the new regime iconic in every way. A later observer intuitively remarked that Nabakrishna’s *puja*, contrary to shastric precepts, displayed two standard approaches to Hindu ritual, Sattvik and Tamasik, along with two other modern elements, the social and the political (Mitra 1879, 44). The *devi* was ceremoniously welcomed on the night of Krishna Nabami. The official *puja* celebrations began the following day. The reading of the *Chandi* by pundits and liberal donations of money, clothes, and food to the

¹⁰Another account claims that the Das imported the idol’s jewelry from Germany and spent nearly 3000 rupees on them (see Roy 2001, 410).

indigent and the Brahmin formed some of the highlights of the day's events. The raja's biographer records the proceedings with a certain amount of awe:

On this occasion family and close relatives were invited together with general citizens: Hindus, Muslims, Jews, Armenians and the English. The invited were all welcomed with respect and esteem. The music, singing and dancing had no rest for a full fifteen days (*paksha*). The head of state along with other officials were also present at the ceremony. (Mitra 1879, 45)

There are several interesting aspects to this description. Here we can begin to trace the historical process by which the religiosity of Durga began to be steadily replaced by the sociability of her worship. The aggressively public merriment of Nabakrishna's *puja* was undoubtedly a part of the larger context of conspicuous consumption by the rich and famous in the first few decades of the nineteenth century. But the ritual of Durga Puja as it had evolved by this time was particularly suited to fit this theater of conviviality. Consider the issue of participation itself, the core practice that decided access to a religious ceremony in a scrupulously segregated culture. There is tacit scriptural sanction for any devotee to have the right of worship of both Durga and Kali, irrespective of the believer's caste. But during our period, the literal act of worship is thoroughly swamped by a range social practices that served to both collectivize the religious experience and simultaneously determine the extent of the participatory community.

THE PLACE OF THE "OTHER"

Numerous accounts of the nineteenth century try to establish the democratic and comprehensive nature of the *puja*. Vivekananda's older brother Mahendranath Datta recalls how it was definitely an event at which the masses were fed, irrespective of their social status. The food itself could be plain, but it was important to be inclusive (Datta 1929, 124–25). A perceptive contemporary, Prankrishna Datta, discusses the case of one Bama Thakurani from his native village who was famous for her annual *puja*. Her sole request to the villagers during the event was that everyone had their meals at hers, again regardless of social or economic standing (Datta 1991, 124). At the distinguished houses of Calcutta also, there were no barriers for ordinary folks. Anyone could walk into these abodes of the rich on those few days and be a part of the general entertainment and performances. Any deflection from this norm became worthy of reporting in the contemporary papers. Thus, the *Bangadoot* of 1829 severely admonished those households that mistreated or barred entry to the general public and extolled those that maintained an

open-door policy (Bandyopadhyay 1949, 396). The best account of the communitarian nature of the *puja* is however, by Vidyanidhi:

The potter brought the clay utensils. The Domni provided various hampers and baskets. The Harini would weave palmyra mats... The teli would provide the oil and the fisherman the fish. Once the fish was brought in the Bagdi woman would gut and scale them with great care. The carpenter from a neighbouring village would craft the idol and the gardener adorned it. The village shoe-maker would be the official drummer while a dom from another village played the sanai... the dule's wife would clean and mop the place of worship and the charal's wife brought in a daily supply of fruits and flowers for the devi's offering... the village ironmonger would perform the ritual sacrifice. (1959, 12–13)

This amazing description seems to be the best chronicle of the systemic negotiation between the social and the religious. The specific mention of the various lower castes and their role in providing the key ingredients for the *puja* is perhaps the most significant aspect of the account. It is as though the infrastructure of the ceremony was handcrafted by the lower orders in commemoration of the original roots of the Bengali goddess. The *puja* could not, under such circumstances, be any intimate exchange of vows and promises between the initiated and his or her god. Rather, it was a reinterpreted arena of social exchange in which the participant became a devotee by default. Thus, there exist extraordinary testimonies describing Muslims offering their *puja* to “durgo bibi” (Datta 1991, 122). Similarly, Mahendranath Datta recalls Muslims traveling all the way from neighboring villages to Calcutta in order to render their *salaams* to the munificent goddess (Datta 1929, 125). Let us also remind ourselves that the grand *pujas* of Calcutta, by their very nature, had to cross religious borders. The famous “nautch girls,” who entertained at the various *pujas* of the rich, were mostly Muslim women.¹¹ The new clothes worn by the eminent during the auspicious time were stitched by Muslim tailors. Even the food that was served at the prominent *pujas* could not be said to have scriptural validation. In 1832, a letter to the editor of the *Samachar Darpan* outlined the various un-Hindu practices that were routine occurrence at *pujas*, including the consumption of beef, brandy, and champagne.¹²

If the Hindu goddess, true to her propaganda as universal mother to humanity, could truly represent religious harmony, then surely this should be cause for

¹¹ According to the *Samachar Darpan*, the *puja* of 1820 was fairly lackluster because of the absence of the dancers from the *puja* celebrations. Since the *puja* days coincided with Muharram, the nautch girls refused to prioritize the Hindu festival over their own (*Samachar Darpan*, October 21, 1820, cited in Bandyopadhyay 1949, 259).

¹² *Samachar Darpan*, November 5, 1831, cited in Bandyopadhyay (1994, 265–66). Similarly, Rajnarayan Basu condemned the *pujas* of his own times because, according to him, the restaurant Wilson's products took precedence over dedication to the goddess (Basu 1951, 14–15).

celebration. The real story of spiritual accord, however, was a little different. A never-eliminated core of Hinduism characterized the synthetic unity between the sublime and the worldly. Although universal in appearance, there was no doubt about the particularity of Durga Puja.

Brahminical Hinduism's advantage over newer protest religions such as Islam or Christianity lies in its complete silence regarding human equality. There exists no paradigm against which an unequal or unfair practice may be measured. Whereas Islam or Christianity has formally encoded in them the principle of human equality, this version of Hinduism need make no gestural nods in that direction, and a universe completely structured on the hierarchical principle becomes its natural accessory. Given this theological assumption, the champions of Hinduism can eternally play on a theme of universal inclusion, for it is able to display catholic expansiveness while simultaneously reiterating a group's previous conservative location within the original hierarchical order (Sarkar 2002, 84). It is not that the woman, the Sudra, or the Muslim lacks a place in the Hindu cosmos, they simply have to know their place or the place assigned to them. Indeed the "proper" placement of diverse identities forms an important concern in the writings of the *bhadralok* elite of the late nineteenth century, no doubt prompted in part by lower-caste assertions and the persistent claims to nominal equality from women. Several prominent Bengali intellectuals presented highly sophisticated and detailed arguments justifying the caste system on grounds of social stability and order. Although coming from a range of political and social positions, their ideal social prototype was one that promoted a "model of differentiated yet harmonious unity" in which lower castes and women happily and proudly accepted their place in society and worked harmoniously toward social stability and prosperity (Sarkar 2002, 57). It is in this ambience of unity through hierarchical diversity that we should analyze the Durga Puja festivities and their commitment to universalism.

It must be emphasized that the declarations of widespread hospitality that crowd the accounts of nineteenth-century *pujas* were mostly indexed by the upper-caste Hindu. The goddess may not have been too benevolent toward her lower-caste progeny. The *Samachar Darpan* of 1821 reports a vicious brawl on the *puja* premises at Joynagar, in the outskirts of Calcutta. A weaver who, for reasons unknown, had been socially boycotted by the local upper-caste community had been invited by a Brahmin to the common (*barwari*) *puja* grounds. This infraction of social boundaries was not tolerated, the seasonal spirit notwithstanding. There ensued a brutal fight and blood was shed on *puja* grounds, causing the *Darpan* to comment that the ritual *bali* had been made redundant (Bandyopadhyay 1949, 260). Inclusion, if universal, was thoroughly conditional. The lower caste or the Muslim was part of the celebrations only by being forever distanced from them.

"The poor, if they happened by uninvited to a Brahmin household during Durga puja," Prankrishna Datta assures us, "could always count on a lovingly

served meal" (1991, 124). But what the poor or the lower caste could also count on was segregated sitting arrangements. Vidyanidhi's account is revealing in its descriptive clarity:

Mats were laid out for people to sit on after the Devi's evening puja. Carpets were preserved for the Brahmins, woven jute mats for the non-Brahmin bhadrals, cane mats for some, date-palm mats for others and for the really lower castes there were simple palm mats. (1951, 14)

Here is a brilliant example of meticulous social contempt veiled in a polemic of generosity. The lower castes are not excluded from either the Devi's benediction or the public merriment. They are merely accorded their place in a carefully balanced social order. The entire village, for instance, would be invited to nationalist leader Bipin Chandra Pal's parental home on Dasami day. Pal (1955) reminisces about the "extent of social justice and equality that existed in [the] old village community despite caste rules and discriminations." His father treated the Brahmin guests with the same respect and humility that he extended to the so-called untouchables. The latter, however, had to join the feast "according to their caste ranks" (Pal 1955, 127–28).

Participation, then, becomes a contested terrain: a practice that simultaneously invites the unacceptable and also reconfirms to a wider community their unacceptability. The *puja* celebrations, because of their exceptionally public nature, thus carried the potential of becoming a space where communities were marked out and sometimes even hardened.

Actual instances of conflict between religious communities during the *puja* are rare. I have come across only one recorded instance of direct conflict between Hindus and Muslims during Durga Puja. Reported by the *Darpan*, not known for its love of Islam, the reasons for the conflict are rather vague. Except to firmly accuse the Muslims for having started the fight, the paper remains amazingly silent about any other details of the event. It is significant that fights and open public struggles between religious communities were rare in the nineteenth century, particularly if one takes into account that a mere half century later, Calcutta was set to become a veritable battleground over precisely such issues of community festivals: for Hindus the issue of cow slaughter and for Muslims that of playing music during *pujas*.

The reason for such apparent calm was perhaps that "communities" of either Hindus or Muslims were yet to crystallize into definitive and solely religious identities with firm and fixed boundaries. Sumit Sarkar has recently made an important distinction between developed community consciousness and communalism, as one understands them in the modern-day sense of the terms. He has argued that concrete religious identities need not automatically be communal by the mere virtue of their religiosity (Sarkar 2002, 219–20). Conflictual relations, on the other hand, are seen to arise only when boundaries of communities are

crystallized to the extent that the crossing of such borders is seen as a dramatic act of transgression. It is now widely accepted by scholars that colonial modernity contributed significantly to the tightening of such boundaries. A variety of historical processes, including the operations of colonial law, based on the notion of a rights-bearing individual, census operations, accumulative effects of printing, and other forms of communications, contributed to a combined course of simultaneously demarcating and hardening of the boundaries of communities (for details, see Kaviraj 1993; Bayly 1998; Sarkar 2002). During the period under consideration, however, such operations were yet to produce their full desired effects. What our period demonstrates, however, is the roots of this process of community and religious distancing. The study of Durga Puja festivities is important, above all, in delineating the contours of this process. Participatory events such as the *puja* helped push the symbols and rituals of a particular community into the common sphere of civil society.

THE *PUJA* AS URBAN IDENTITY

By the end of the eighteenth and certainly by the nineteenth century, the status of the *puja* had become more or less determined. They were no longer simply marks of ritual purity but rather huge and ostentatious pageants bestowing social authority on the new *baniyas*. But in a new town that lacked all history and traditions, the newcomers had to establish various symbols and registers to confirm their identity in the fluid and changing times.

The *puja* fused together performance, fantasy, and aspirations in a seemingly unending theater of dramatic spectacle (see figure 3). Popular songs, music, and dancing forced the wider community, irrespective of their religion, to acknowledge the presence of the goddess. Contemporary accounts of the *puja* abound with descriptions of similar performances. A representative editorial in the *Sambad Prabhakar* of 1854 draws attention to the constituent elements of revelry:

[T]he grand festival of the supreme goddess Maheswari [Durga] has been celebrated with due pomp and splendour in the city. The rich families had spent sumptuously on the occasion. The Shobhabazar kings had lavish musical performances and dances at both their houses, and the English had graced the occasion at both places...

The sweet spoken, compassionate Nabakrishna Mallik of Jorasanko had decorated his already beautiful house to look like someplace in heaven... Particularly pleasing was the occasional drum beats of merry English music... (Bandyopadhyay 1949, 434–35)

These bands of singers and dancers were the famous *baijis*, “nautch girls” and the new urban poets of contemporary society. The bawdy satirical wit, frank sensuality, and hearty, unashamed sexual references expressed in these

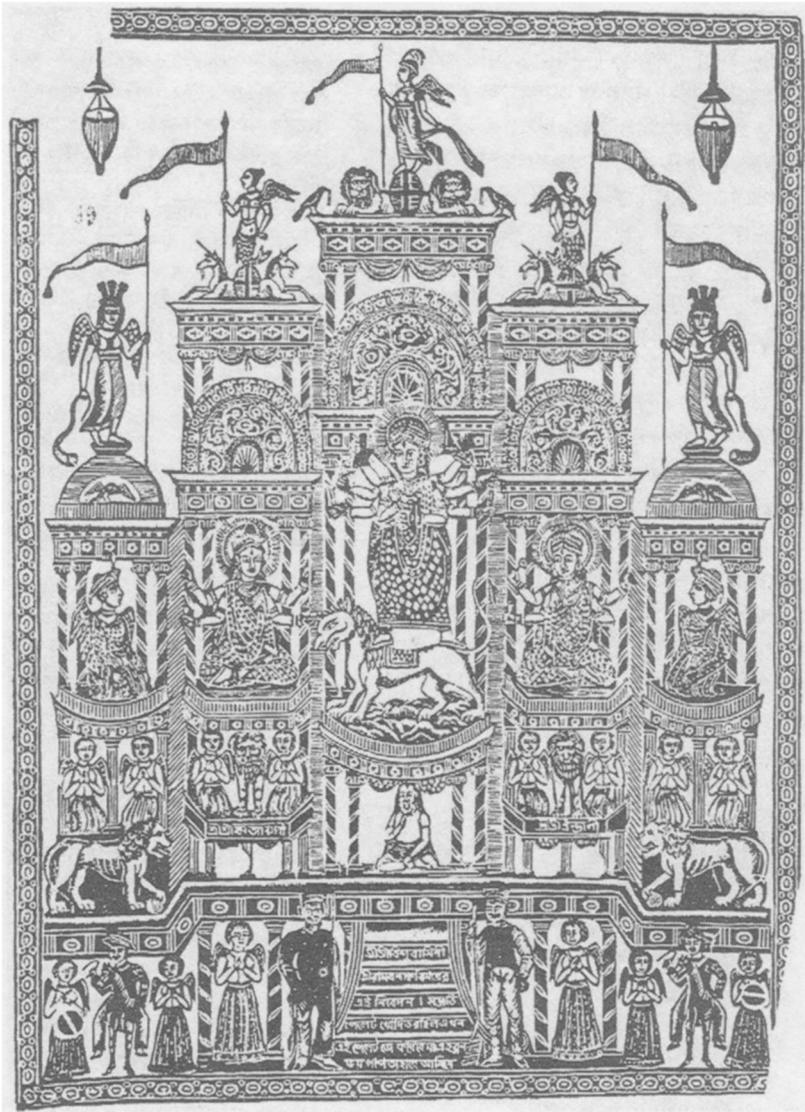


Figure 3. Woodcut of Durga from nineteenth-century Calcutta by Ramdhan Swarnakar. “Western” influence is evident in the use of flag-bearing fairies and unicorns. Reproduced from Arun Nag (1991).

performances of *kheur*, *jatras*, or *akhrai* songs created a distinctive atmosphere at the *pujas* that was far from reverential. In 1806, Reverend James Ward expressed his horror of *kavi* songs, which he first heard at the Durga Puja at Shobhabazar. The arena was cleared of the nautch girls after two in the morning and the main doors opened to the public:

[A] vast crowd of natives rushed in, almost treading upon one another among whom were the vocal singers, having on long caps like sugar loaves... Four sets of singers... entertained their guests with filthy

songs and danced in indecent attitudes before the goddess, holding up their hands, turning round, putting forward their heads towards the image every now and then, bending their bodies and almost tearing their throats with their vociferations. The whole scene produced on my mind sensations of the greatest horror. (Ward 1817, 118).

These songs and performances and glamorous festivities of the *puja* marked a process of creating a new urban sensibility. The city, awakening to modern urbanity, was the site for both the “defamiliarizing enormity” of rootless citizenship and the “exhilaration of its liberties” (Appadurai and Holsten 1995, 188–89). Contemporary accounts of the city are structured by this twin impulse of growing wonder at urban advantage and its obverse anxiety at the loss of customary moorings. The city did not offer its inhabitants any gentle, negotiable territory that could be either easily traversed or controlled. Unlike the rural village of origin, neither did it provide any opportunities for personalizing space. The transient, unruly desolation of this new urbanity perhaps catalyzed the further transformation of Durga. The image of the benevolent mother ceaselessly coming home to her troubled children culturally translated the angst of a new generation of migrants into a language of civic inhabitation.

In a town lacking markers of social cohesion, the annual *puja* provided the new settlers a way to stamp their distinctiveness among their peers and also to mobilize the community around them. There were spontaneous competitions about which family had the best image. On the last day of the *puja*, all images were brought to the Balkhana grounds and the images judged for their aesthetic merit (Sur 1983, 34). No doubt these social practices around the *puja* constituted a sense of identity for the new urban community.

A sense of urban identity is predicated on its locational spread. The idea of an expanding cityscape, shifting its borders limitlessly to occupy even more geography and history, is one of the key motifs for a developing metropolis. The reverse: small, self-contained areas with strong local identities but without reach beyond a certain limit, is an essential hallmark of provinciality. Calcutta in the early half of the nineteenth century subscribed more to the latter model than the former. The place-names—Kumartuli, Kasaripara, Kolutolla—were more than just indications of older occupational pasts. They represented a city that was, still, a sum of its parts. People tended to vigorously belong to their respective neighborhoods (*para*) rather than to the city as a whole. As historians have pointed out, it is difficult to find a description of Calcutta by a Bengali in the nineteenth century that provides a positive account of the city (e.g., Sarkar 1998, 177). Seen as the abode of Kali, the heart of social sins, unhygienic, unhealthy, and definitely ill suited for *bhadralok* living, Calcutta as a city suffered fairly bad press at the hands of its educated Bengali inhabitants.

Particular localities, however, did not fare so badly. This is not surprising, for one way to create a recognizable experiential grid would be to reorganize urban

spatiality to represent the manageable rural reality that one had left behind. S. N. Mukherjee has demonstrated how the initial forays into urban living were conducted by the rich of Calcutta in the form of rural existence. *Dals*, *Jatimala cutcherries*, and intensely populated slums and markets around the palaces of the rich signified an image of city life that was not far removed from the image of rival villages (Mukherjee 1977, 67). Each *para* had its *dal*, both in terms of its social litigations and cultural output, its raja and his palace, and, of course, the one event that bestowed social recognition on an area like no other: its Durga Puja.

The *puja* of the goddess, if inextricably linked with an element of achievement and identity, also acquired a unique geographic positionality. Particular households and families were recognized through the location of their *puja*. Contemporary family histories thus often catalogued dynastic accomplishments through the excess or solemnity of its *puja* ceremony. The housing or placing of the idol was significant. It was as though the abode/shelter provided to the goddess indicated the prosperity of her vicinity. Writing about one of the founding fathers of the Tagore line, Nilmani Tagore, his descendent Kshitindranath Tagore informs us that the original *puja* of Jorasanko was conducted in makeshift accommodations. The narrative is framed in a way that the *puja*'s splendor, or lack thereof, signifies the fortunes of both the family and the neighborhood (Tagore 1969, 10).

The spread of the *puja* was beyond just the house or the local. A contemporary saying vividly describes the prominent *pujas* of the time in terms of divine choice. Durga, upon her arrival on earth, was said to first visit Sibkrishna Da, where she would be adorned with exquisite jewels. She would then eat her meal at Abhaycharan Mitra's house at Kumartuli and then proceed to watch the all-night entertainment at Shobhabazar (Nag 1991, 93). Again, it is noteworthy that the urban locality borrowed its identity from the goddess rather than the reverse. Durga, as the generalized symbol of particular belief, particularized a specific civic location against the general backdrop of the city as a whole.

I have already mentioned the competitions for the best image that caused urban groups to coalesce together based on geographic or local affinities. Similar rivalries existed between entertainers performing overnight at the *puja* grounds. Kaliprasanna Singha's *Hutom* offers us a vivid description of the *haph akhrai* competition between Dhopapara and Chak (either Shobhabazar or Bagbazar):

The Cathedral Clock struck two and the Dhopapara band arrived thoroughly inebriated... they played the dhol, violin, flute, mochong and the sitar in concert while their supporters loudly acclaimed their competence. Ending with an incomprehensible song about the goddess... they left the stage to Chak. The Chak band too played to an applauding audience and to several encores... the stage remained empty for an hour after this... meanwhile collective smoke from

several cheroots and hemp darkened the arena... Once the fog lifted Dhopapara entered the stage with their biraha... soon to be answered by the Chak's version of the same... the audience divided into supporters for each set... some neutral folks decided to act as judges to the proceedings... Biraha was followed by plain kheur. This decided victory or defeat for both party, and judgment was followed by a routine scuffle...

The judges declared victory to Chak. The Dhopapara party was reduced to the ground in shame... the Chak party flying victory colours and singing triumphantly departed home. (Nag 1991, 88–90)

Clearly, each locality took immense pride in its poets and band. Performances varied, but each locality earned repute for its particular skill. Dhopapara and Kansaripara, for instance, were well known for their *sangs*. Short satirical sketches of contemporary times and people, these *sangs* often attracted the ire of both the government and the new educated *bhadralok*. During the *puja*, however, they provided immeasurable entertainment to the consumers of the *puja* spectacle.

The entertainments themselves were crucial in denoting a secular urban status to religion. Besides the song competitions, there were nightlong *jatras*, *khemtas*, and *kobigans* as a part of the *puja* festivities. The performers were often itinerant bards diffusing urban practices into the wider countryside as they toured. Prostitutes plied their trade at the *puja* arenas, and men toured the red light districts through the nights as an accepted part of the occasion.

The city eventually began to recognize this connection between itself and the festival. In the early days of the city, most established families went back to their native villages during important ceremonies such as the Durga Puja in order to maintain some sort of continuity with the past. By the early decades of the nineteenth century, as the city began to assert its identity, this became a source of complaint. Bhabanichran Bandyopadhyay's city dweller in *Kalikata Kamalalaya* grumblingly questions this practice. He asks why some folks prefer to go back to the ancestral village when the city is where their families reside all year round and where they had built their fortunes (Basu 1986, 115). In other words, it was a new civic demand that the inhabitant of the city give back to the city a sense of tradition and embeddedness in cultural terms. Bandyopadhyay again, this time as editor of the *Samachar Chandrika*, approvingly described the *puja* of Raja Harinath Roy in 1832. The raja was unable to return to his ancestral home in Murshidabad that year because of ill health, and hence he had to perform the *puja* ceremonies at Calcutta. The *Chandrika* wished the raja a long and healthy life but hoped that he would henceforth consider Calcutta as the place where his Durga Puja ceremonies would be held (Bandyopadhyay 1994, 284–85).

Durga and her new rituals were thus crucial to the construction of the civic identity of Calcutta as a city. The splendor and excess of the early half of the

century was, however, short-lived. The spectacular festivities of the *banias* and their lavish lifestyles were to become a longing memory in the social angst of a new generation. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the local entrepreneur had been forced out of the capital accumulation network of the agency houses and the East India Company. As the native's place in the colonial economy became more and more uncertain, the *pujas*, too, in keeping with the times, changed its form and associated practices. There were more instances of community celebrations or *barwari puja*, whereby money was raised in a locality for a common public celebration and worship. As the extravagant *banias* gradually faded from the social scene, they carried away with them the sights and sounds of an era of pomp and glory, never to be recovered.

The failing fortunes of the festivities have been recorded by several contemporary observers. In a moving piece in 1896 Amritalal Bose, appealed to the his beloved Bengal to revive her "ancient feasts and holidays" because he feared that her greatest feast, the Durga Puja, ran the risk of "pass[ing] away in the obscurity of testamentary old 'dalans' and the cottage of priests" (Mitra 1970, 481–82). Two very distinct reasons are felt to be the immediate causes of decline of such fervor: English education and the reform movements such as Brahmoism. Both Mahendranath Datta (1929, 34) and Prankrishna Datta (1991, 122–23) subscribe to this view. Contemporary newspapers, too, depending on religious preference, either mourned or celebrated the wane in wide-scale festivities.

What was perhaps being commented on was not a decrease in actual instances of the *puja* but a qualitative change in its performative appearance. The disappearance of the multicaste, colorful culture of the *kabiwalas*, *kathaks*, and *baijis* from the mid-nineteenth century has been well documented in Sumanta Banerjee's work (1989). This diverse assemblage of performers carried with them the last remnants of a cultural past that, though virulently feudal, was also simultaneously open and accessible to the many. They were eventually to be replaced by a narrower, more refined, and definitely more Brahminical *bhadralok* modernity. Although the creators of this latter culture were certainly more liberal or reformist compared to the Nabakrishna Debs of yore, the culture that they patronized and helped to produce was overwhelmingly upper caste and puritanical. I have demonstrated elsewhere how the exit of the *bania* from the social stage because of changes in colonial economy produced its consequent reverberations in the social world (Bhattacharya 2005). A rhetoric of thrift, gentility, and educated bourgeois morality replaced the wild carnival-esque revelry of the past. Outpourings from the newly sprung networks of schools, colleges, newspapers, and journals roundly condemned all relics of the past associative of Babu Calcutta.

But this state of affairs was not without its fault lines. While the new, modern, and eventually renaissance *bhadralok* was anxious to distinguish himself from the past "decadence" of Babu Calcutta, he also intensely longed for the *bania*'s economic vigor and potency. A critique of past extravagance could also turn into

grudging admiration for the splendor that seemed so easily affordable. The *barwari puja* seemed to be an ideal cultural compromise between the new discourse of educated gentility and the liberal guilt around *puja* splendor. Disassociated from individual glory, the *barawari* ceremony granted to the goddess the true status of a communitarian idol. Diffused among the many, the extravagance of a few was dissolved in a new regime of local and collective entrenchment. The local *puja* accorded to a new generation of devotees a novel sense of civic responsibility.

The term *barwari puja* literally refers to *puja* by twelve friends. Kaliprasanna's Hutom locates the first *barwari puja* at Guptipara as early as 1760. The *Friend of India* of 1820 described this in greater detail:

[A] new species of pooja which has been introduced into Bengal within the last thirty years, called Barowaree... About thirty years ago, at Goopti-para near Santi-poorā, a town celebrated in Bengal for its numerous colleges, a number of Brahmuns formed an association for the celebration of a pooja independently of the rules of the Shastras. They elected twelve men as a committee, from which circumstances it takes its name, and solicited subscriptions in all the surrounding villages. (cited in Som 1993, 19–20)

The *barwari puja* in Calcutta was an essentially urban experience, and the myriad performances and practices around the *puja* were some of the avenues through which a notion of a community was resolved in nineteenth-century Calcutta.

Sibkrishna Da (1837–73) of Jorasanko was one of the first to initiate the *barwari* form in Calcutta. Although a rich man himself, having major investments in the railways and in iron, he was noted for collecting subscriptions from the rich and famous of the city in order to hold the festivities. Hutom, however, remains the best chronicler of the *barwari puja*. He called the collectors of *puja* subscriptions as fearsome as the government revenue collectors for the Permanent Settlement that had ruined so many zamindari estates of the times (Nag 1991, 70).

The introduction of monetary subscriptions from the community created a whole new range of possibilities for moving the goddess from her ritual sphere into civil society. In theory, money could be demanded of anyone whom the organizers decided should be contributing to the common fund. It welded the identity of a geographic locality (where the *puja* was to be held) with the inhabitants of the region around the symbol of Durga. It thus increased the social weight of the ritual and pushed the festivities onto a wider social plane. Now the *puja* was not just confined either to the rich or the upper caste but to anyone who had the organizing skills to raise the money for it. The *Samachar Chandrika* of 1837 reports a fight between a group of Vaishnav weavers and Sakta distillers who had both contributed to the *puja* but were now divided over whether an animal sacrifice should be a part of the ritual (Bandyopadhyay 1994, 531–32).

So far, I have outlined some of the ways in which the image of Durga and practices surrounding her worship began to take over civil society in the nineteenth century. In conclusion, it must be stated that the domestication of the goddess through popular lyric traditions and songs and other urban rituals should not give an impression that she was robbed of all her celestial eminence.

It was with a mixture of domestic familiarity and awe that as a child Gyanadanandini Devi, wife to Satyendranath Tagore and one of the first women to defy existing social mores on gender boundaries, viewed the deity. Recalling the spectacle of the *bali* (ritual sacrifice) at her natal home in Jessore, she recounts in her autobiography her profound horror at the death of an innocent animal. While her heart prompted her to shut her eyes to this “senseless” slaughter, the budding theological sensibilities of the five-year-old made her fear the wrath of the goddess for condemning what was supposed to propitiate her (Chaudhurani 1957, 11). In other words, although the goddess was becoming more civic, there remained little doubt about the final religious, and hence Hindu, content of this process. She thus emerges in the rituals and literature of the late nineteenth century, fully formed as the Hindu mother-goddess, completely divested of her colorful past among the less reputable of society.

DURGA AND THE NEW HINDU NATIONHOOD

Awakening is a significant theme in the literature of the late nineteenth century. The nation, the *jati*, an abstract collective spirit are, in turn, made subjects of this theme, but the fundamental message remains simple and direct: the sleeper (as the nation, *jati*, or spirit) must wake. Not discounting the emotional force that a straightforward urging to rouse a collective has for all times and contexts, this discourse in colonial Bengal had certain specific attributes. First, it countered the powerful British argument that India (or Bengal) was a weak and degenerate place lacking in both nationhood and moral fortitude. The nation or the national spirit was, according to this discourse, merely asleep, not absent, and all that was needed to end the dark days was for it to wake. Second, the discourse introduced an idea of agency that was both compelling and vigorous. The sleeping spirit could not awaken on its own. This was apparent by its current oblivious state despite grievous injustices. The sleeper needed agents to awaken it from its unconscious state. And who was better suited to this role of an agent but the Bengali man animated by the history of past wrongs and spirited by the dreams of a just future?

The dyad of a passive spirit and an active agent had the advantage of commonsensically fitting into a range of existing Hindu theological vocabulary. According to the Samkhya school of thought, the universe was created when a slumbering *Prakriti*, or matter, was energized by *Purusas*, or soul. Without going into the subtleties of the philosophical argument that this entails, it is

enough for our purposes to note that the gender of both these elements, *Purusa* and *Prakriti*, were customarily understood to be male and female, respectively.¹³ On a less philosophical and more ritualistic level, the ceremony of *bodhan* that initiates the *puja* of Durga is understood to awaken the goddess in what was previous to the ceremony a lifeless image. What these two strands of Hindu thought, one of abstruse philosophy and one of popular practice, have in common is the fact that in both these discourses, a female principle is awakened to life by a male agent. This awareness helped suture two of the most important ideological formations of the late nineteenth century: the nation and a “reawakened” Hindu edition of Durga. Consider how Bipin Chandra Pal, a radical politician trained in the Western sciences and sensibilities and a Brahmo as well, outlines the depth of his feelings toward the goddess:

Of course, we saw with our own eyes that the icon was made of clay and straw. But though we thought of it as a doll until the morning when the actual worship began [bodhan], thereafter we could no longer think of the idol as a mere image. (Pal 1955, 113)

And just as the ritual *bodhan* breathed life into a mere doll and turned it into a mighty goddess, a different kind of *bodhan*, that of blood and sacrifice, would breathe life into the dormant nation.

Several historians in recent times have commented on the historical construction of the nation as a mother demanding action and sacrifice from her sons (Bose 1999; Sarkar 2001). Bankim’s *Anandamath* and its seminal scene of the viewing of the goddess by a future activist/son still remains the most dynamic instantiation of this motif and one of the most influential in contemporary imagination. I would like to cite here an example from a slightly different literary tradition, that of children’s literature, in order to underscore the pervasive nature of this theme, as well as its universal appeal across age and norms of suitability.

Abanindranath Tagore’s collection of stories about Rajput life, *Rajkahini* (1904), was published on the eve of the first mass movement in the history of Indian nationalism: the partition of Bengal. A lyrical retelling of Tod’s *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* (1829), it was a book meant for children in an age when special conceptual directives were being drawn up about what was appropriate for young minds. *Rajkahini* was certainly a part of the process to reinvent the Rajput hero as the very embodiment of heroism, chivalry, and masculinity when all of these virtues were, colonialism mockingly demonstrated, lacking in the Bengali man. But *Rajkahini* was much more than a simple celebration of a heroic past. Like most successful nationalist literature, it was a rendition of the

¹³I say “customarily” because the issue of *Purusa* as masculine and *Prakriti* as feminine is more complex in the actual scriptures. For details, see Chakrabarti (2001, 195–97).

past that resonated with the truths and experiences of the present. The tale of Padmini the beautiful queen of Chittor was such a tale forged in the past but fired by the passions of a nationalist present.

The story of Padmini was introduced to the Bengali audience by the poet Rangalal Bandyopadhyay in his *Padmini-Upakhyan* (1858). An anonymous play written in 1894 led to several highly successful stage productions of the same story, followed by more established authors, such as Kshirodprasad Vidyabinod (1906) and Rajendranarayan Mitra (1912), trying their hands at this obvious box-office favorite. Abanindranath's older cousin, Jyotirindranath Tagore, had also written his own version of this story as *Sarojini ba Chitor Akroman* (1875) for the stage, for which play Jyotirindranath's fourteen-year-old brother Rabindranath composed a particularly poignant song about the glorious sacrifice by women in the form of *sati*. Abanindranth's *Rajkahini* thus came in the wake of a series of accounts steeped in nationalist fervor and already enjoying wide popularity. But what marks this text as somewhat unique is that it was meant not for adults exposed to the questionable morals of the Bengal stage but for children.

The story of Padmini in Abanindranth's version is set in the context of Alauddin Khilji's attack on the small but fiercely independent Rajput kingdom of Chittor. The Rana, or ruler of Chittor, is married to the beautiful and virtuous Padmini, whom the corrupt and degenerate Muslim monarch lusts after. When the Muslim army finally lays siege on Chittor (for a variety of reasons ranging from sexual desire—Alauddin's for Padmini—to imperial aggression) Padmini is wracked by guilt, for what could have drawn the Sultan's attention to this small kingdom but her accursed beauty? As the small Rajput army lies dispirited in their camps, fearful of facing a sea of highly trained soldiers in the morning, Padmini makes her own solitary trip to the temple of Ubardevi, the protectress of Chittor, and puts on her ornaments. Thus, the queen/woman of Chittor becomes one with the goddess of Chittor, and woman/goddess/mother and nation are joined together in the chilling last scene.

The Rana was like the rest of his men asleep in his camp on the night before the battle. Suddenly in this masculine space there came a waft of perfume, and he heard the soft music of anklets. Then, as if in a dream, from all around him—from inside the walls, from the roofs above and the floors below—rose a fearsome cry, "I am hungry." A blindingly beautiful goddess appeared before him and he heard the goddess say,

I am hungry! A great hunger a great thirst consumes me, I need the ultimate sacrifice, only blood will slake this thirst! Maharana, awake, arise, shed your life-blood for the country. Fulfil my sword with flowing blood. The ruler and ruled, the young and the old must die for Chittor! Only this will wrest the throne of Chittor from the Pathan! (Tagore 1974, 120)

In every soldier's heart, this message echoed on this fateful night and urged every uncertain mind to glorious death and sacrifice. The next morning, the band of faithful Rajputs threw themselves into battle against the invading army while Padmini, along with every woman and child of Chittor, committed themselves to the flames of *jauhar*. When the triumphant Muslim army entered the city, there was nothing left to conquer but ashes.

Exposure to sex and violence do not seem to be of particular concern in this children's tale, incidentally still enjoyed by generations of children in Bengal. Blood, sacrifice, and heroic struggle seem to have undercut what moral anxieties the nineteenth-century parental mind might have had about the implicit violence of the story or the approving promotion of what was, in effect, an illegal act. The goddess in the *Rajkahini* narrative is not named as Durga as such, or her blood-thirsty sister Kali. But there could not have been much trouble by this time to imagine the valiant goddess in this role who craved the ultimate sacrifice from her Bengali sons, indeed even of her children.

One of the most violent renditions of this motif of sacrifice to the goddess is perhaps Chandranath Basu's description of his family *puja* in his autobiography. It should be noted that Basu was one of the more prominent opponents of the age of consent bill for women in 1891. His book, *Hindutva* (1892), written at the height of controversy over the bill, located the ultimate virtue of Hinduism in the Hindu woman immersed in housework and obscured by the smoke of her kitchen. His vision of the goddess in his memoir is an indicator of the terrible journey that Durga had taken from an eclectic past to a Hindu present.

His account begins with a description of Sandhi Puja, the ritual in which he claims Durga is worshipped in her more shocking *Chamunda* form:

When we arrived at the *chandimandap* [*puja* grounds] we would find all the women of the Basu family gathered there... the place was so filled with smoke from several burners and incense, one could hardly see the mother... the mandap was adorned with countless earthen lamps... this is Sandhi puja where the mother is worshipped as Chamunda... This is an awesome, terrible, immensely difficult puja! If you hear some of the mantras [the chants] of this puja you will know that nothing in this world is impossible for those whose imagination crafted this puja... there are so many people in the mandap but a deathly silence has befallen them... I am no longer the naughty schoolboy, I am not a boy at all any more, I am shivering with anticipation. (Jana, Jana, and Sanyal 1987, 10)

Basu's picture of this dark gothic mother reaches its appropriate climax in the ritual sacrifice, or *bali*. He records the blood, gore, and the crazed cries of devotional ecstasy with unsettling and approving detail. This embracing of darkness, of the terrible, is for him the true and only expression of vigor. He ends his unnering narrative on an equally disturbing note. "Those that had thus worshipped

bhishanata [terribleness, dread]” are, according to Basu, “even as Bengalis, the true Hindus, true human beings, and amongst humans the true Aryans” (Jana, Jana, and Sanyal 1987, 12–13). This account, although fairly extreme in its imagery and message, is a grim reminder of Durga’s increasing association with violence and a calibrated specificity of belonging. But compellingly evoking the darkest features of Sakta and tantric tradition, Basu’s account is anything but traditional. Instead, it is harsh guide map of a future, severe in its boundaries and ruthless in its power.

All narratives about the goddess’s power nevertheless could not follow this dramatic path. There were countless patriotic songs and plays published around the turn of the century from both the popular Battala press and the pens of more established writers on a similar theme that were less drastic in their presentation and content. Tanika Sarkar has even called this “remarkable thematic uniformity” of literary tributes to the nation-mother somewhat monotonous (Sarkar 2001, 259). Let me cite here a representative example from a little-known poet from Battala who published his *Bharater Sarbajanin Durgotsav* (1907) during the Swadeshi era to highlight the more common aspects of this genre.

A handy little book of only twenty-four pages, *Bharater Sarbajanin Durgotsav* is an account, in verse form, of a nationalist Durga Puja. The title, which literally translates as “The Universal Durga Festival of Bharat,” is prior notice of its nationalist content. On the title page, the author very ingenuously appoints “all newspaper editors committed to national welfare” as the *purohits* or priests to this new and unique *puja*. It is also not without significance that the book is signed simply as “a certain son of Bharat.” The author effaces individual identity and particularity in order to bring to the forefront the identity and appeal of the collective. This anonymous yet vibrant collective functions as both the audience and the agent of the text. Not only are editors of newspapers recruited to reach this collective, but also the author insists in the preface that if “any nationalist-minded person” should find the book, he should “immediately go about disseminating it” and making sure that at least ten people are recruited to buy it. *Prachar*, roughly translated as “propagation” or “dissemination,” crops up several times in the first few pages of this pamphlet. Used mainly in religious and social contexts for the better part of the nineteenth century, the word was acquiring clear political associations by the latter half. In this text, the word is pregnant with both meanings. On the one hand, it is overtly a manual outlining the mode of worship to an established deity, but on the other hand, each phrase, each idea, is heavy with political implications.

The *puja* starts with the ritual *bodhan*, in which the author implores the mother to

Awake, arise and sleep no more.
Take a look at Bharat once more

Fields of crop have to deserts turned
 Skeletons roam in the place of man. (9)
 Elsewhere, he elaborates,
 Every day a new disease arrives
 Their names and cures unknown
 Villages, towns and cities are turned
 Into desolate cremation-grounds. (10)

The whole text thus overflows with the leading political debates and concerns of the period, all the while transferring to Durga the mother the ultimate responsibility to augur change. Durga herself is not responsible for actually effecting change, but she alone has the power to act as a catalyst for her devoted sons. Her motherhood brings personal intimacy to this appeal while her goddesshood sanctifies the project.

But who really are her sons? Here, the text is clear about the location of the non-Hindu. It begins by stating that “all children of Bharat,” whether “Hindu, Muslim or Christian should unite in brotherly affection and worship the mother for the sake of their mother land.” As we saw in the context of segregated socialization during the *puja*, here, too, this apparent call for harmony and unity are to be conducted only within the rubric of a particular community—namely, the Hindu. Durga as the munificent mother, the poet claims, is equally generous to all her sons, irrespective of their religious affiliation:

She is the mother, all are her sons
 She does not distinguish between a Hindu and a non-Hindu
 If the non-Hindu does not care for her worship
 Can she ignore him?
 Even a bad son (*Kuputra*) does not deserve a bad mother (*Kumata*)
 Hence non-Hindus are equally welcome.

The obvious implication here as to who constitutes the bad son cannot be ignored. The non-Hindu, of course, has the option of turning into the good son as long as he starts worshipping the mother. To put it differently, as soon as the non-Hindu renounces his own religious practice and integrates into the real community of sons—the sons of Durga—he is redeemed. What lends this argument the most weight is the fact that this recruitment for Durga is not done in the name of any sectarian religious reasons but for the most universal of causes: nationalism. Thus, if the non-Hindu fails to worship the mother, then can we not legitimately doubt his nationalist commitment? It is the extension of this very disquieting logic that in the twentieth century created a false divide between nationalism and communalism, whereby Muslims had to choose between their community affiliation and their commitment to the nation. The Hindus, it should be noted, did not have to make any such choice, as the nation by then, like the Swadeshi Durga, encompassed both the community and its prominent religious symbols.

Durga had moved very far indeed from her days of wandering in cremation grounds and being drunk and disorderly with her ghost companions.

A further ominous conflation of Durga, womanhood, and historical purpose comes into effect in Amritalal Basu's play *Sammati Sankat*. Writing against the age of consent bill of 1891, the play is a typical example of the contemporary highly gendered assertion of Hindu hierarchy and discipline.

The narrative opens with the divine beings, Durga and Narad, in heaven, where Durga is much agitated by sounds of distress that seem to be coming from below. Upon asking Narad, she learns that the cries are from none other than the suffering masses of Bengal, where the "holy ties of matrimony" fashioned for the protection of mankind by Durga herself are being severed. Durga's maternal instincts are aroused by such villainous developments, and she seeks to rush to her children's aide, but Narad restrains her. Durga will only suffer in such inglorious times on earth, he argues. Instead, she should instill in her weak and subjugated Hindu children the power with which to ignite in her the *mahasakti* (great power) such that she could arrive once more on earth and slay the demons of change. Failing this, Hindu women would lose their caste, their family, and their *kul*. Aryan women would be suspected of lacking in the virtues of *sattitva*—in other words, all hell would break loose. Siva, who has so far been a somewhat inattentive listener to this exchange, is suddenly sparked into divine anger at the mention of *sattitva*:

My heart is singed at the very mention of someone touching Sati... yes it burns now and the all consuming fire shall erupt from my forehead. In the past I had created one Birbhadra from my hair when they sought to dishonour Sati. Today shall my Sati, my dearly beloved Sati suffer humiliation? Shall the crores of daughters who regard my Sati as their mother, their protector, be humiliated? Nay! I shall create a million Birbhadras; I shall alight upon earth armed with my lethal trishul and devasate the enemies of my Sati and her daughters. (Basu 1950, 5–21)¹⁴

This lurid oratory traces a menacing map of the future. It marks the convergence of an overtly nationalist and male rhetoric with a selectively historical idea of a community. The use of numbers by Siva is particularly significant. No longer are we in an era of speculative participation in which the extent of the evoked community is necessarily "fuzzy."¹⁵ Siva, in his anger, etches in his listeners a

¹⁴As far as the bill was concerned, Basu perhaps had a personal axe to grind, as his own wife was only nine when he married her in 1868. For details, see Mitra (1970, 21).

¹⁵The reference here is to Sudipta Kaviraj's (1993) excellent concept of the premodern community being unenumerated or "fuzzy." Numbers play an important role in the nationalist rhetoric of this period. Partly a product of colonial operations (such as the census) and partly the result of a growing consciousness of a "threatened" community, the Hindu discourse of this period is replete with statistical imagery and numeric emphasis. Several popular nationalist hymns celebrate the "numeric" strength of the sons of the motherland. For details, see Sarkar (2002) and Datta (1999).

definitive structure of the “persecuted” community—a community that can suggest fear simply by its superior numbers.

It is also significant that the deity who is worshipped primarily for her valor has to be championed finally by her husband when her virtues are threatened. Indeed, from this time onward in mainstream *bhadralok* imagery, Durga is completely divested of her warrior image. The bountiful Annapurna, rather than the fearless Mahishasuramardini, becomes the template for nationalist desire and inspiration.¹⁶ Stripped of her weapons, the mother can only look to her sons for security and protection.

The historian can track some of the mechanisms by which the goddess traveled from the altar onto the streets, marking out a new urban geography and community, but with the unique advantage of hindsight, she can also see the political implications of this fatal journey. Increasingly as public (common) spaces became associative of a particular religious identity, other identities and symbols denied their entry into civil society were firmly contained in the sphere of the private (particular). This process, again, would not have been possible without a conscious negotiation in the minds of Durga’s sons between very modern divisions of private and public, between a premodern concept of religion as a range of ritual and social practices to very modern (and Enlightenment) notion of religion as “personal belief.”¹⁷ Durga’s modern advocates were consciously using a former “tradition” of being religious to flout the latter understanding of religion in modernity. This maybe seen *formally* as “contestation” or “resistance” of the universal (Enlightenment notions) by the local (nineteenth-century Bengali Hindu discourse), but I think our story of Durga will demonstrate the need to have a rigorous and substantive analysis of such acts of “resistance.” Our narrative, I think, shows how the dominant’s religion masked into everyday existence, was revitalized as the “festival” of the many, while other religious practices remained the sharp and obvious “ritual” of the few.

If the nineteenth century saw the successful construction of an urban identity for Calcutta around Durga Puja, then the next logical step was to insert this same icon onto an even wider location. Responding to an English professor at Hindu College who claimed that India never had any sense of nationhood, Bhudev Mukhopadhyay was the first to make this ideological leap. He asserted that the legend of Sati, in which the goddess’s body is scattered all over India, is actually an allegory for the nation and that the divine body is the same as the motherland (cited in Raychaudhuri 1988, 39). This was only a historic prelude to the majestic description of the goddess in Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay’s novel *Anandamath* (1882), sealing forever the relationship between the new nation and an

¹⁶Several *agamani* songs document this transformation. Uma’s parents are shown to be horrified by a *rana-rangini* (warrior) Uma—a shocking turnaround from their quiet and rather timid daughter.

¹⁷Asad (1993) does an excellent analysis of this particular history of religion as it was understood by the Enlightenment, particularly exemplified in Kant.

evocative Hindu imagery.¹⁸ “Bande Mataram,” the opening lines of a song from the novel, became the battle cry of the first mass movement against colonial rule. Although the slogan itself does not sound particularly religious, its power lies in the imagery depicted in the novel, as well as in the long tradition of Durga Puja to the people of Bengal. It binds together urban history, popular memory, and a rich and powerful imagination to give shape to a future that seems to have chosen its dominant representation.

As we come back to Dhaka and face a woman in her late fifties who has been through the horrors of a partition, lost friends, family, and her childhood, it becomes clearer why the Dhakeswari icon comes to her replete with past imageries. In another time and in another city, Uma had come home once more, but the disparate images of an eclectic daughter had hardened within jealously guarded borders of an angry nation and community alike, this time without the promise of solidarity or the hope of return.

Acknowledgments

Versions of this essay have been presented at conferences in Irving, Calcutta, and London. I thank Tapati Guha-Thakurta, Subho Basu, Judith Walsh, Rimi B. Chatterjee, and, of course, Bill Mullen for their comments.

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¹⁸An excellent analysis of this later process has been recently developed by Sugata Bose (1999). For a detailed account of the song “Bande Mataram,” see also Bhattacharya (2003).

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