

A Report on Durga Puja Festival in Kolkata: Traditional Cultural Heritage with Art and Architecture

Dr. Shivashish Bose

Architect, Urban Designer, Conservationist
Reader, Department of Architecture
Jadavpur University, Kolkata - 700032, India
E-Mail: shivashishbose@yahoo.co.in

Abstract:

Asian cities are going through a phase of metamorphosis by globalization and urbanization in which, old traditional and vernacular buildings are being replaced by modern standardized large buildings with universal look, thus stated as having started to erase the 'Asian-ness' from the cityscapes. Amongst conflict between global and local culture, there are certain cultural expressions in Asian societies that remain preserved and continuing by people's participation with vigour. Celebration of Durga Puja festival in Kolkata is one such case where artistic craftsmanship and skills and architecture associated with it are continuing and more demonstrative through this living cultural heritage. This paper aims to present a report on this grand traditional religious and socio-cultural practice in Kolkata.

Keywords: Cultural heritage, Celebration, Durga Puja festival, Kolkata, Temporary architecture, Tradition

Introduction

Every Asian city has a particular local cultural characteristic. With growing influence of western culture, there is a concern about the impact of globalization upon local cultural heritage and identity in Asia. An apparent loss of traditional craft and artistic skills and decline in value/sense/feeling of community-attachment with reference to the society has been observed in many parts of Asia. The force of market-economy presently dictates the expressive forms of traditional cultural forces within the society. Tremendous population increment in Asian cities has created a growing competition and frustration in the lives of people. Loss of cultural properties from war, terrorism and natural disaster has also raised manifold. There is growing concern about poverty, scarcity of drinking water, lack of proper sanitation system, provision for education for all, creation of job opportunity, environmental crisis, and how to manage with limited resources. The need for development overpowers the need for conservation. However, within such a complex situation in a transforming city, some traditional socio-cultural and religious rituals mostly intangible cultural heritage are still preserved and celebrated. In the celebration of Durga Puja festival in Kolkata, the religious and cultural expression is traditionally tangible as well as intangible form of cultural heritage. Architecture in temporary form with great artistic craftsmanship is the base of this cultural celebration in Kolkata.

Kolkata

Kolkata (historically known as 'Calcutta') is a linear city grown along the river Ganges (Hugli) in West Bengal state in eastern India. Job Charnock, a British merchant, on August 24, 1690 bought and amalgamated three villages named Sutanuti, Kalikata and Govindapur which constituted respectively the north, central and south of Kolkata then. The British, however, could start planning and development of the city since 1758 after obtaining the territorial right of Kolkata for development from the then King (Nawab) of Bengal. Kolkata became the capital city of British India in 1774 and quickly emerged as the most powerful port city of Asia. However, since the shifting of the capital of India from Kolkata to Delhi in 1911 and the partition of India through Independence in 1947 with sudden influx of population from Bangladesh into the city and its environs, the city's glamour and grandeur were gradually replaced by squalor and decay. Gradually, population increment and rural-urban migrants put pressure on the infrastructural capacity and facilities of the city. The Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) area of the present day consists of 141 wards covering 185 sq. km. area with population of around five million, and population density 24760 per sq. km. as per Census of India, 2001 (Census, 2001). Tremendous rate of urbanization has taken place in Kolkata and its fringe areas since 1990s with construction of high rise buildings and mega structures gradually erasing the historic cultural patinas in the city as commonly observed to be happening in most of the Asian mega cities. Though majority of population in the city

Durga Puja Festival

Durga Puja festival of Bengal being celebrated commonly in October every year is the greatest religious festival of the Hindus for worshipping Goddess Durga symbolizing 'power' who destroys 'evil' called Asur. An ensemble of clay images of the Goddess, her children-two sons and two daughters, Asur, a lion and a slain buffalo is made on a structure of Saal wood (Shorea robusta) logs and bamboos, and the images are made with bamboo, straw, a top layer of clay and are dressed with ornaments (Fig. 10, 11). The image is traditionally made at 'Kumartuli' (meaning - the potters' town) at historic district 'Chitpur' of northern Kolkata.

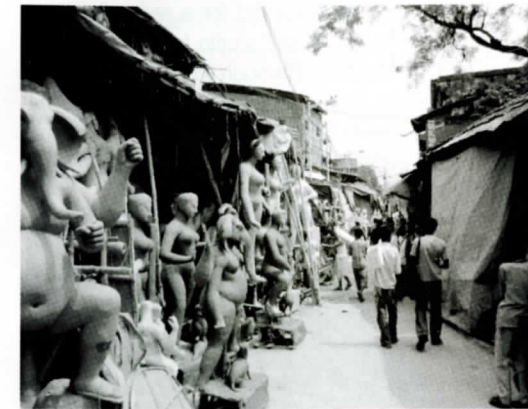


Fig. 1 Streetscape at Kumartuli



Fig. 2 Interior of clay-modelers' studio



Fig. 3 Durga being prepared

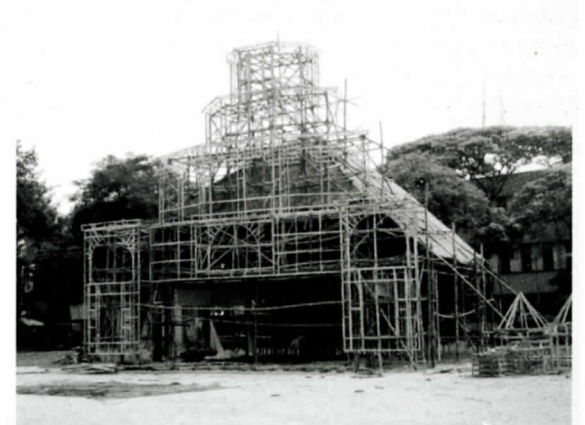


Fig. 4 Pavilion under construction

Kumartuli

Chitpur area at the north of Kolkata was always the designated residential area for the native Indians, mostly Bengali, before and during British rule. Many traditional craft-oriented industries like image-making industry at Kumartuli (Fig. 1), various small scale industries and commercial activities related to the establishment and growth of economic, technological, educational, recreational, religious and socio-cultural aspects of Kolkata were developed along Chitpur Road, the central spine connecting northern part of the city with the southern part and presently named as Rabindra Sarani. In Hindu religion, worshiping of images of Gods and Goddesses are common. Kolkata has a long historical tradition of celebrating religious festivals and rituals in which worshiping of images are part of this socio-cultural form. Terracotta images of deities have been among the oldest archaeological finds in and around metropolitan Kolkata (Bose, 2009). Clay images of various deities made in Kumartuli are supplied in the city and the state, in New Delhi, Mumbai, parts of south India, and are regularly exported to USA, UK, Australia and other countries where Bengali population live.

The studios/workshops (estimated to be about 400 numbers) of the clay-modelers at Kumartuli (spread over 3.8 acres of land) (KMDA, 2010) are mostly single-storied temporary structures with either thin brick walls or partition walls made up of bamboo-twigs with earthen floor and no plinth height at all thus being vulnerable to rainwater invasion into the interior. Three sides of the single-room studio are closed and the front is open. The room height is about 4.5m, and the roof is mostly of tin. As rainwater is dangerous for clay image, polythene sheet is often spread under the ceiling to protect the images from rainwater penetration. The modelers stay at the studios during the day and they sleep at other buildings within the area at night, though during critical hours they sleep at the studios. There is no attached-toilet system; a very shabby and unhealthy common toilet serves many workers of the area. However, the Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority (KMDA) of the government of West Bengal has proposed for a redevelopment programme of Kumartuli's heritage site to provide for new and good condition of housing and studio for the potters of Kumartuli. This project has been under negotiation between KMDA and the beneficiaries (through Kumartuli Mritshilpi Samiti) for some years and there is problem from failure to identify a suitable site for the temporary settlement of the artisans in nearby area. It would be funded partly under the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) of the central government, partly by the state government, and the remaining amount would be borne by KMDA and the beneficiaries (Dam, 2008; Akansha, 2010; KMDA website, 2010).



Fig. 5 Detail of bamboo structure



Fig. 6 Pavilion in a park



Fig. 7 Pavilion like Hawa-mahal of Rajasthan



Fig. 8 Pavilion on a road

Image-Making Process

The clay-modelers of Kumartuli (Fig. 2) use mostly their hands and seldom use any tool. They first make a structural framework along with the skeleton of the targeted image of god with small wooden planks, Saal wood logs, split bamboos and straw (shaping the figure of the deity). The proposed deity stands on a pedestal. They apply clay mixed with rice-husk and jute fiber reinforcement on the straw-skeleton to create the basic form of the image. That form is then kept outside on the road for drying under the sunlight for a couple of days. The image appears to have developed

cracks due to shrinkage after drying under the sunlight. Then the modelers apply a fine layer of sandy clay-paste with jute fiber over the cracks for filling up and later smooth the surface of the images with wet cloth. The head and fingers both made with clay from terracotta moulds earlier are then fixed to the neck and hands respectively with clay paste. The joints of limbs of the images are wrapped with cloth-pieces soaked in clay solution. Then they paint the dry figures with chalk-solution two-three times to make them appear white. Afterwards, paints of various colors according to preference are applied on all over the body. The modelers take special care to paint the face, especially the eyes (Fig. 3), the eyebrows, lips and other delineations, and finally they apply a vegetable oil over the face to make it look glistening. Then they fix hair on the head and put gorgeous dress and ornaments on the figure (Bose, 2009). The process is more like preparing a female model for a fashion show. The backdrop or chali of image is also delineated. Then the image is ready for transportation to the designated pavilion commonly referred as pandal, to other parts of India and for export to foreign countries.

The Temple as Pavilion or Pandal

A temporary temple is constructed for housing the deities for worshipping. This temple is pavilion or pandal and is the architectural product of the greatest range of variety in design, material, construction and 'theme'. Kolkata does neither have plazas that we can see in European cities, nor does it have adequate open spaces. The city has some parks which are more gathering and recreational spaces than green areas. So, the pavilion is built either in a park (Fig. 6) or on the road (Fig. 8) literally blocking vehicular access across it for some days. Permission for erection of pavilion is to be taken beforehand from the department of police and fire-fighting satisfying their rules and norms. Local clubs organize neighborhood-wise the process of fund-raising, erection of pavilion, installation of deities purchasing from Kumartuli, and worshipping for about five days. The fund is raised by the donation from people of the particular neighborhood and through sponsorship from advertisement by Indian and multinational companies like Coca-Cola and Pepsi for example. Globalization has resulted in financial support for this festival in one hand, and introduction of new varieties of associated programs somewhat away from core religious contexts on the other hand. The puja is also traditionally organized by some wealthy families in their residences in Kolkata and presently, residents of the modern housing complexes at their premises.



Fig. 9 Interior of a pavilion



Fig. 10 Images of Durga and others

The structural skeleton of the pavilion is erected entirely at site (Fig. 4) with bamboos tied with ropes made from coconut fibers (Fig. 5) and has tarpaulin sheet roofing. The decorative elements can be crafted elsewhere or at site and fixed on the frames as per preconception. The whole process may take a few days to more than a month depending on the scale, quality and grandeur of the pavilion. The blueprint of design of the pavilion is made beforehand and sometimes even a year before the festival. The design is inspired either from historical architecture of India and abroad, or with the reflection of rural India. Sometimes, the pavilion is of an indigenous quality - a specimen of its own kind. Hence, the pavilion may look like 'Sacre Cour' of Paris, 'White House' of Washington D.C., Pyramid of Egypt, Alhambra of Spain, heritage buildings of India (Fig. 7) and abroad, or an indigenous temple reflecting a 'theme' which none has seen before (Bose, 2008). The basic bamboo structure is traditionally covered with cotton or jute cloth of suitable color or painted to give the look as per design. In recent times, thermocol is seen to be added as the top cladding material of the pavilion which is painted to look like different building façade materials as brick or stone.

Sometimes, processed earth is applied on the cloth to make it look like an adobe hut. A variety of unconventional materials like earthen pot, terracotta tiles, bangle, oceanic conch, ice-cream sticks, spoons, colored threads, glass-pieces, skins of bamboo, kites, etc., are applied on the façade and in the interior to give a unique look as per the chosen theme. The interior is richly ornamented with patterns on the walls and ceiling coupled with decorated lighting and chandelier. The interior of a pavilion (Fig. 9) is basically a rectangular shape three-dimensional space with one end having a raised platform designated for the ensemble of deities and for performing religious rituals called 'puja' meaning 'worship'. The opposite end is kept for the crowd of population to enter, observe the deities from inside the pavilion and then to exit. For safety and security reasons, the famous pavilions provide for separate exit for people. Lighting is a major part of quality of illumination as well as decoration by it both on exterior and in interior, and a centrally hung large chandelier is a must in use in large pavilions (Fig. 12).



Fig. 11 Detail of bamboo structure



Fig. 12 Pavilion in a park

Between Tangible and Intangible Cultural Form

The festival is primarily religious but has socio-cultural tag more dominantly associated with it. Though it is a Hindu festival, but all sections of population irrespective of caste, creed and religion participate with equal vigor in this event. People buy new garments, jewellery, household appliances, furnishing materials and other things to celebrate this festival. Pleasantries and gifts are also exchanged amongst people, especially for kids. The worshiping is actually for five designated days (from Sasthi to Dashami tithi - the sixth to tenth lunar day from new moon) in October, but the ensemble of images is brought at the pavilion two-three days prior to those five days. For five days, these pavilions become urban architecture and tangible cultural forms in the city, and along with participation of all sections of population, the festival becomes the greatest celebration of "Architecture and Life in the City". It is as if, Domenico Fontana's Rome emerges; all attractions are centered on 'centers' the places of the pavilions, and they are connected by 'spines' the roads; and all pilgrims follow the roads to fall into the centers, enlivening Fontana's urban design idea. Usually fairs are organized by the concerned 'puja committees' to add to the festivity to the pujas held at parks. Various food stalls, as well as public facilities are erected and provided to cater to the enormous crowd. The pavilion is inaugurated by distinguished persons from cinema, art and media, sports or from political parties in the country. Huge crowd of thousands of population per hour visiting pavilions from evening to midnight (Fig. 12) and early hours of the next day are managed by local volunteers and police. Traffic flow gets disrupted and slowed during those days. All local government institutions except for emergency divisions, academic institutions and other organizations remain closed for this festival. People, mostly in the housing complexes and of some neighbourhood, get together during these festive days and organize to take common and simple lunch together at the pavilions (Fig. 13), and they organize cultural programmes like song and dance presentations in the pavilions or beside them in the evenings. After five days, the puja ends and the images are immersed traditionally in the river Ganges (Fig. 14) (Bose, 2009). The pavilions are dismantled within about five days after puja ends and the vernacular materials are reused elsewhere. So, after five days there is no sign of any pavilion which housed the festival on the streets or in the parks. Only documents in photography and images in memory are left with people who would wait for the next year to come for celebration again. This cultural expression of the society of Kolkata and the state of West Bengal is a unique form between tangible and intangible and a class of its own in the world.



Fig. 13 Interior of a pavilion



Fig. 14 Images of Durga and others

Some Quotable Problems and Remedial Measures

- Colours (especially lead-based) and accessories used to decorate the images lead to pollution in the river water;
- Immersion of hundreds of images in river Hugli has resulted in silt deposition in the river channel;
- Dumping of accessories, flowers and other garbage materials related to images at the riverbank at the time of emersion is polluting the area and the water of the river;
- Use of non-biodegradable materials in decorating the pavilions is growing according to the latest fashion. This leads to increase of quantity of non-degradable waste in the local environment;
- Many pavilions do not have security-checking mechanism or surveillance system;
- Marketing-oriented aggressive displays or modern cultural performances by the multinational companies distract and spoil the essence of traditional religious and cultural ethos;

New kind of vegetable-based colours are being prescribed for use in the delineation of the images. The Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) has been taking measures to collect the garbage and clear them from the riverbank within a short time. The saal wood and bamboo skeletons of the images are taken out of the water and taken away for reuse of them. Organizers have been instructed by the police to be alert during the festival days and have sufficient arrangements for fire-fighting and accidents. Thousands of police patrol the sites of festivals and transportation systems with their own surveillance network and disaster-preparedness arrangements. The organizers and designers of pandals should refrain themselves from using non-degradable items in the pandals. Multinational companies should respect the cultural ethos of this festival and design their programmes accordingly.

Culture, Tradition, Economy, Modernity and Sustainability

This traditional socio-cultural religious celebration in Kolkata has attracted huge economic investment and exchange. This event also promotes tourism in the city from various parts of the world and especially Europe. Tremendous urbanization, physical and technological modernization and metamorphosis in the city have not been able to produce any negative effect on this event. This cultural heritage between tangible and intangible forms is rather strengthened by the introduction of globalization, economic liberalization and culture-mix. Bamboo, straw, jute, coconut-ropes, etc. are common agricultural products and are recycled until their physical qualities deteriorate. Clay used in deities returns to mother earth. The river in the city is closely related physically, religiously, spiritually and emotionally with this festival. The construction of pavilion creates minimum impact on environment. Almost all the decorative elements are recycled. Hence, this pavilion and associated materials are in sustainable form.

Conclusion

Every full moon is followed by a new moon. So, all is not well in this event unless protected from hazards and recent threat - terrorism. Recent terrorist-attacks in many cities in India exemplify that crowd is where terrorists like to operate. Though the administration and police of Kolkata are alert and work hard for providing safety and security during the festival days, it should be the highest priority for civic administration to monitor law and order situation not

only during the festive days but long before that time. The force of traditional culture in the society and people's spontaneous participation would carry forward the continuity of this festival, which is one of the greatest cultural shows on earth in South Asia repeated every year irrespective of any impact from political, economic and natural disaster in the society.

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