

DURGA PUJA 2016 – RELIGIOUS FEST, SPONSORED PROGRAMME OR REALITY SHOW?

{As the curtains go up on Bengal – and Bengalis - most celebrated festival, Monojit Lahiri investigates.}

Once upon a time Pujas meant an innocent celebration of Joy and Fun. New clothes. New movies. Eating out. Freaking out with friends & relatives for non-stop adda. "It was the one time in the year that you actually got to see, up close, the most breathtakingly exquisite Bangla beauties from those traditional, north Kolkata homes" swears an enthusiastic, veteran, Kolkata based, Puja-tracker, adding "for most of the year, these sublime creatures were either heavily chaperoned or in purdah! God, how we looked forward to our trips to the North Kolkata Puja Pandals. Our annual magnificent obsession" Apart from bird - watching, it was also the one time in the year when status, colour, creed, community or caste was junked, along with everyday tensions & hassles, to embrace, full-on, the true spirit of the occasion. "Oh" continues the enthusiastic flash-backer "the pujas were also a huge match-making setting & countless weddings owe their allegiance to Ma Durga! Overall, it was a much-awaited & eagerly-anticipated 4-day whoopee, a refreshing break from the rigours of everyday life, filled with excitement, fun, laughter..."

Today, as we once again step into puja mode in year 2016, do we feel somewhere, somehow, a change in the puja celebrations...in terms of form and content, look & feel, style & substance? Has the character of yesteryear's innocent fun, simple pleasures, community bonding & bonhomie been savagely replaced by commercialization and show-biz? Has the essential cultural, religious & social aspects been hi-jacked by heavy -duty corporatization with big-ticket FMCG players providing their own mantras? Has **Kumartuli** (Kolkata's revered setting

where the world's finest Durga clay models are created by skilled artisans) been sacrificed at the altar of brand-driven trade & commerce?

There are differing voices.

"In our time" flashbacks an oldie from Delhi's Kolkata-C.R. Park-__ "the first whiff of breeze that indicated seasonal change signalled the advent of Pujas. **Mahalaya** of course was the real trailer before the main event! Puja meant new clothes, fun with family & friends, visiting pandals, eating out, watching theatre & Bangla movies late into the night at the neighbourhood pandal, offering prayers with our near & dear ones.... It was simple, spontaneous, pure, innocent untrammelled by the gaudy, vulgar showy opulence that marks today's Puja celebrations. Modelling Durga Ma's image to look like film stars Hema, Madhuri, Aishwarya,

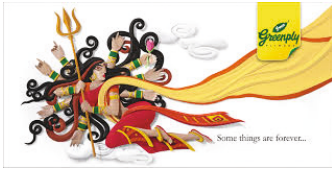
Deepika, Priyanka or Katrina ... Chee Chee!' Adman Swapan Sen (while unable to conceal his amusement at this attack from senior citizens,) believes that such harsh words only represent, old-fashioned stuck-in-a-time warp radical thinking. "Let's face it. Today's Pujas are hi-spend, hi-throng

occasions and big brands will naturally want to grab a piece of the action. As long as it doesn't conflict with the basic cultural & religious template, it's cool".

Interestingly the **Corporatisation of the Pujas** started around the mid-eighties when the Big FMCG Dadas realised that the Pujas (as a mega event) drove mega consumption of products & services like there was no tomorrow! Wouldn't advertising & publicising their brands in such a fabulous "Captive target base," be just purrrfect? That's when it began... and soon a deluge followed! Next up was Awards, Prize money & Publicity for best displayers of Puja pandals ...& the movement took off. Today, three decades later Kolkata has emerged as a major Retail hub with consumption of lifestyle products going through the roof, during the Puja season. A big shot retailer had an interesting observation.

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"Before the Pujas, Bengalis focus heavily on clothes, food & gift items. Afterwards, before Diwali, metal objects hit their wallets & come in for a boom."

So, is the commercialization of Pujas, after all a reality? Kolkata based Management consultant **Partho Mazumdar** believes that the answer has to be an unqualified YES." To be truthful if it weren't for brand support the festival couldn't have ever happened in such a large scale. The flip side is that tradition - in some fashion - will take a hit. The much cherished ANONDOMELA of my childhood has practically disappeared, fleetingly alive in some Delhi Pujas in close-knit Building associations. However, let's salute the corporates who systematically sets aside a chunky budget each year for

socially relevant activities." Delhi based H.R. consultant **Sanjay Chaudhury** however believes that Pujas can never ever be branded or commercialized "because one worships the essence of the idol NOT the idol itself!" He feels that if by "jazzing up the protima (& the entire celebration mode,) one can manage to attract more people, so be it. In these cynical and frighteningly self-absorbed times, it is at least a forced engagement with a deity one frequently tends to ignore, neglect, forget, overlook, and avoid - shamelessly rushing for help only when one's arse is on fire!"

At the end of the day, everything considered, Puja 2016 has to be 'contexted' in the environment, age & times we live in. Today, The Puja celebration is hardly perceived as a religious festival but a full-on celebration of culture, food, bonding. Commercialization and branding. This has only elevated it to a national level with celeb endorsements, big sponsors, top artists, international cuisine, glamorously embellishing the occasion. From Mughlai, Kobiraji to Mach Bhaja. Hard Rock, Bollywood anthems, Bangla Pop to Rabindra Sangeet. Dhoti, Punjabi, Designer dare-to-bare, flesh-flashing stuff - Pujas today is a platform popularly perceived as a carnival, mela & ramp! A hi-decibel hi-profile, pan-India festival, Pujas offer something for everybody. To try, deconstruct it and figure out whether it's really a religious ceremony, festival, event, hip n' hot happening, showbiz or a big, fat spirituality bazar is to attempt hara-kiri in very slow motion...

So as we get into the Puja 2016 fever, the best thing to do is (as the timeless hip-hop Bollywood chartbuster invites us to do)... **JUST CHILL! Durga Mai ki jai!**