

# DURGA PUJA: Blending of Festive Rituals with Brand Building Exercise

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Durga Puja for the Bengalis is much more than a festival. It is a carnival and an emotion that marks the time of happy tides. Families immerse themselves in this five-day gala of awesome food, pandal hopping, music and cultural evenings and welcoming Ma Durga back to her paternal home. Durga Puja is actually, the celebration of ‘life’ and the joy of ‘living’ more than anything else. It’s like all the joys of this ‘City of Joy’; Kolkata is out on its very streets. Durga Puja becomes an expression of the city itself & these pujas of Kolkata are thus not just an annual festival or the carnival of the city, nor are they even the most vivid

symbols of Bengali culture. They are, in fact, the best exhibitions of creative spirit that manifests itself through the popular arts and they are also the most appropriate occasion to be in the city of joy and freedom, to soar high on the wings of human spirit that knows no bounds for four blessed days. Durga Puja today is, no doubt, commoditized primarily through corporate sponsorship and the heavy buying and selling that this annual festivity of Bengali Hindus involves. With this came the trend for giving awards to pujas in several separate categories (idol, decoration, artwork, lighting, music, crowd management, and so on) by the

famous commercial brands and media houses. Advertisements, electronic hoardings and product samplings at discounts and as freebies are a common sight as Corporates chip in to sponsor some major Puja clubs and organizations.

Durga Puja as a public art event is closely tied to the changing social profiles of Kolkata's neighborhoods', and to the shifting hierarchies between elite and non-elite localities, to the transforming aspirations of local worlds of art practices, to the new blending of amateur and professional enterprise. Each season, Durga Puja offers a new city to be discovered and traversed. The city of the festival becomes site for imaginary journeys in time and space across India and the globe, inculcating new tastes in archaeological tours, heritage viewing, and art and craft consumption. In the earlier days, it was the 'Parar Puja' (community worship)". Later it became the Club's (Sarbojonin / Baroari) Puja, and now it seems like the "Sponsors Puja". Pujas are definitely becoming corporatized. Putting up a banner ensures money, depending on the ranking of the Puja and the footfalls. Naturally, the new-age Durga Puja is an efficiently marketed mega festival that boosts various brands. Durga Puja, undoubtedly the biggest festival closest to a Bengali's heart, has also become one of the biggest marketing opportunities for brands. What once used to be conducted on Chanda (personal contributions) has now been virtually taken over by big corporate sponsorships. These days, almost 90% of the revenues the Puja Committees earn, are generated through corporate sponsorship and outdoor advertising, the rest comes from the traditional means like individual contributions (Chanda) and advertising in the Puja souvenir.

So now many Puja Committees preferring to have multiple sponsors who pay for the entry gates, stalls, hoarding or background advertising and banner rights. So, various FMCG Brands, Banks, TV Channels and FM channels were part sponsors at many Pujas across the city.

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 and religious template, it's cool". Interestingly the Corporatization of the Pujas started around the mid-eighties when the Big FMCG Dadas realized that the Pujas (as a mega event) drove mega consumption of products and services like there was no tomorrow. Today, the Puja celebration is hardly perceived as a religious festival but a full-on celebration of culture, food, bonding, Commercialization and branding.

According to estimates by the corporate sector, average footfall ranges from 200,000 to 300,000 per day in each prominent pandal in Kolkata during the Pujas and evidently every brand wants to tap into this vast opportunity and maximize their visibility.

As per ASSOCHAM report, despite falling Rupee, rising inflation and slowdown in the economy, the large business and industries are targeting high profit margins during Durga Puja in West Bengal which is growing at a 'Compound Annual Growth Rate' (CAGR) of about 35 percent. Again, spending in Pujas is a 'social investment'- it improves societal bonds, enriches the cultural nurturing and the entire objective of the festival is to foster solidarity. With increases in disposable income among twin salaried professionals in the city,

consumption of lifestyle products has soared. All Indian retail chains like Pantaloons, Westside and Big Bazar have reported growing sales from the city, exploding during Durga Puja. The volume of business during the two months of the festival period was pegged at Rs 350 crore, according to one estimate two years ago (The Telegraph, 20 September 2003).

It's interesting to see how brands come up with special ads to capture the celebratory mood of the audience and woo them into engaging with the brand. Whether it's Vodafone which promises 'double talk time' or Coke claiming itself as the 'best partner for pandal hopping'. Many brands have taken up the space of felicitating the best Durga Pujas in the city and 'Asian Paints Sharad Shamman' being one of the pioneers in this arena, have taken a clear lead. While there are others who are late entrants, but are doing it in style. For instance, Ghadi detergent is trying its level best to penetrate in the West Bengal market, and has started the Swachh pandal award which gets very well with their overall association with the Swachh Bharat campaign. 'Tanishq', the well known branded jewellery company of TATA adorned Goddess Durga's idol, with jewellery worth an estimated Rs 5 crore, at Kolkata's 'Sreebhumi Sporting Club'. The entertainment industry and the professionals, as well as the industries involved in the lighting and decoration business, seize the opportunity and see more than 35 percent growth in total turnover, while compared to the earlier times. The food and beverage industry was also anticipated for an additional business of Rs. 50 - 60 crores during this Durga Puja season.

business, these days. The most visible aspect of the Changing times in Durga Puja is the standout art and décor, which is simply incomparable. So much time and money is spent on painstaking research, planning and implementation, was unheard of in earlier days. It is getting better and better. Attracting foreign tourists and international media in Kolkata, these days. And growingly there are the 'Theme Pujas', which are replacing the traditional fervor. The social structure has changed. Homely Puja tradition is gone with the joint families. More and more intellectuals, artists and global inputs are getting into the whole affair, making the Pujas a mix of everything: Tradition, Social Gathering, intricate and sophisticated Creative expressions, Cultural Outlets, Food Fiesta, Tourism Hub and Big Business opportunities. All in one.

Vying for visibility and a broader customer base for these brands have indeed made the pujas bigger in scale though many rue that the festival has probably lost the traditional charm that it once had. From the joy of wearing new clothes and witnessing pandals and light works around the city, to being swamped by a multitude of corporate banners, at every step we are reminded that Durga Puja is no longer just tradition; it is an event, a competition, a battle ground for the corporates. ●

Conducting a Puja is almost like conducting a