

*The Making of the Goddess Durga in Bengal: Art, Heritage and the Public*

Ed. Samir Kumar Das and Bishnupriya Basak

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This volume on the “Making of the Goddess Durga in Bengal,” starts on a poignant note with the editors Samir Kumar Das and Bishnupriya Basak tracing its conception in the “threads of childhood memory, wonder, longing and nostalgia” (v). As with these seemingly ephemeral yet embodied feelings, the making of the goddess who is at the center of the annual *puja* celebrations—a cornerstone of the Bengali cultural and social calendar—is a process that demands a uniquely layered mode of intellectual engagement, a plotting of its material life at the intersection of community, culture, history, conservation, and public celebration. The “multidimensional critique” thus mounted in this anthology moves from the clay idols which dot the pandals during the celebrations (1), to the *pratimasilpis* (idol makers) in *Kumartuli* where idol-making originated and was consecrated down several centuries, to the evolving forms that pervade *puja* displays within India and abroad, while also attending to the spectacular celebrations organized around them. Self-consciously located within the framework of “Critical Heritage studies,” the edited volume attempts to highlight through its analytical eye, “not cities but cityscapes,” positing “genealogies as chance coincidences, conjunctures and accidents and not ... a flat and linear history” (1). It is interested both in iconography as an aggregation of innovations and, on a larger scale, in ideating heritage as a formation that does not merely appeal to certain publics but rather effectuates a complicated—and not unproblematic—reciprocation that brings these publics “into existence” (1).

In line with this overarching argument, the volume is broken down into four parts: cityscapes, genealogies, iconographies, and publics. The first section’s focal points oscillate between the old binary of home and abroad. Madhumita Muzumdar reads *Kumartuli*’s local community formation and cultural subtexts. The section then projects outward, in an article by John Reuben Davies, to take stock of *puja* celebrations in diasporic communities in Glasgow and the social ties they help renew. The second section maps the trajectory of development, first, of Durga’s symbolism in pre-independence and post-independence India (Mrinmoyee Deb), and in the other kinship

structures between the *Kumbhakar* caste and their intricately filiated artisanship (Shoma Choudhury Lahiri). The third section on iconography turns to analyze the palimpsestic nature of contemporary Durga idols, through reading, by turn, the “evolving form of the *pratimas*” (Soujit Das, 131) and the “shifting paradigm” of idol-making practices as influenced in no small measure by the much-neglected “artistic contribution of the *pratimasilpi*” (Debdutta Gupta, 155). The final section switches from the idol at the inner sanctum of the *pandal* to the publics which participate in the ritual spectacle of the *puja* in thinking about the dynamics of the “carnavalesque” inaugurated in these mass events (Samir Kumar Das, 173). Relatedly, it interrogates how these publics may be appropriated by state and cultural bodies to various ends, which poses crucial questions about *where* heritage might actually be located, and for whom it can get cannily repurposed (Bishnupriya Basak).

Given the multifaceted nature of the processes that cohere into making the art object in question, the volume offers an analogous range of analysis. It juxtaposes the intangible with the tangible in unearthing the cultural scripts that construct the idol-making practices and the idols’ forms, and the mythological narrative substructure that forms the original impetus for the pomp and ceremony. Its output is made robust owing to the variety in its methodology, with art history, diasporic cultural comparison, ethnographic interludes, and urban studies lens, which together form a mesh of interrelated perspectives enriching the study. As a natural flipside of the range of critical questions unveiled, however, many also go unanswered. While Davies’ article on Durga *puja* in Glasgow offers one interesting instance of present Bengali diasporic cultural formations which reiterate the goddess’s centrality to community ties, the only other counter-text offered is that of North-Eastern USA. Needless to say, forays into other contexts are pending, still, to see how Durga *puja* in Glasgow might bear up to the comparative scrutiny of diasporic spaces elsewhere. Deb’s article on the iconography of goddess Durga and its relationship with nation-making returns to Partha Chatterjee’s formulations on the division of the nation into inner and outer domains, which is by now a well-rehearsed argument in discourse around nationhood in late-colonial India. As much as it is important to see this reiterated in tracing the relationship of idol-making and iconography, an emphasis on the limits of region-based studies would have underscored the inevitably partial nature of the “idealized” nation thus constructed (93), given how national scripts tend to subsume other heterogenous constituencies. It would have been helpful to highlight the publics that get left out of not only the *puja* celebrations (which Das’s article gestures at), but also the cultural and social idioms generated by the unique ethnic-linguistic formation that is the Durga *puja*—and, consequently, any imaginary of the nation predicated on cultures

around the goddess. Yet another interesting seam that remains to be mined is that of concerns raised by environmental pollution and the impact of idol-immersion in water bodies. This is fleetingly touched upon in Davies' article in relation to UK policies on the same and Lahiri's work on transformations in the contemporary practices of idol makers who have to balance financial constraints with sustainable praxis, but certainly merits a much longer discussion.

What is evidenced in all these unanswered questions is that engagement with the life worlds opened up by idol-making practices and the cultures of the *puja* warrant a bookshelf, not just a single book, and further interventions would enormously enrich by addition. Justified, nevertheless, is an unrelated grouse which popped up right from the opening pages, deriving from the structure of the book. The multiple sections and subsections into which the volume is divided serve more to distract and confuse rather than simplify the reading process. Particularly in the introduction, the flow of the commentary is disrupted by the fracturing of the prose into very small chunks, which also obfuscates the logic behind how the introduction is shaped. In turn, this also made unclear the rationale for the manner in which different contributions in the book were arranged. This aside, the volume is a constantly interesting, deeply invested, and multiply inflected engagement with the making of the goddess in art heritage.