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Layers of Social Exclusion in Religious Festivals: A Case Study of Durga Puja

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In the intricate fabric of Indian society, characterized by its complex diversity and pronounced social inequalities, manifestations of social exclusion permeate every facet of social interaction. Exclusion, entrenched along the lines of caste, gender, class, religion, and economic status, is an inherent part of the everyday life of the country's population. Consequently, when scrutinizing a particular event, institution, or aspect of Indian society from the lens of social exclusion, it becomes both imperative and inevitable to employ an intersectional approach. A singular focus on any one aspect of social exclusion would entail an overly simplistic understanding of this complex issue deeply ingrained in India's social tapestry.

Religion, as an enduring source of strife and discord in the Indian context, serves as a focal point for various forms of social exclusion, a tendency particularly conspicuous during religious festivals. Beyond the exterior glimmer of festivals, in this case a Hindu one, lies a concealed and multidimensional issue of social exclusion, often evading close examination. Durga Puja, a 10-day festival predominantly celebrated in the Eastern regions of India, exemplifies this phenomenon. Despite its reputation as a purported 'feminist,' 'inclusive,' and 'non-discriminatory' festival, gender inequality is pervasive throughout all its aspects. Women are routinely absent from the festival's planning committee, the decision-making processes are characterized by their exclusion, and even the construction of the pandal and the idol of the deities. Further, various restrictions imposed on menstruating, disabled, and transgender women underscore the widespread exclusion. Moreover, the performance of the actual puja typically falls to a Brahmin man. Caste-based exclusion, though often obscured under the veneer of a 'casteless' event, also surfaces in Durga Puja. The exclusion of tribal communities from the festival's narrative is another aspect. Thus, Durga Puja invites scrutiny from a multidimensional social exclusion perspective.

The Mainstream Ancient Myth and Contemporary Practice

Durga Puja, one of the most prominent Hindu festivals in India, mainly celebrated in Kolkata and other parts of West Bengal is an annual event that spans ten days, occurring in September and October. It aligns with the seventh month of the Hindu calendar, marking the

arrival of autumn. The festival centres around the worship of the Hindu goddess Durga, with the most significant days being the last six. Over the years, the celebrations have become more elaborate, with the widespread practice of 'pandal hopping' commencing even before the festival's official commencement. Preparations for the Puja, including committee formation, pandal design, idol creation, and pandal construction, begin months in advance. Durga Puja's enormity and its impact on people's lives are palpable, extending beyond the festival period and influencing daily life throughout the year.

Durga Puja originates from two distinct stories in Hindu mythology, both with Vedic origins. The festival's timing during autumn is derived from the Ramayana, where Lord Rama invoked the goddess Durga's blessings before his battle with Ravana. The more popular narrative, however, revolves around the myth of goddess Durga herself, Mahishasura, and their epic conflict, which is recounted and celebrated annually during Mahalaya. As the Hindu myth goes, when an Asura (Vedic term for demon) called Mahishasura (or buffalo demon – as he was half buffalo), who had received the boon that “he should not be killed by a "man or animal" on the face of Earth” (India Today, 2017) from Lord Brahma (as Mahishasura was convinced that women lacked power and strength to do the same), wreaked havoc all over the three worlds – patal (hell), swarga (heaven), and earth. Worried about losing their world, all the gods (only males) went to the three most powerful gods, Shiva, Brahma, and Vishnu, for help. Together, they found the loophole in Brahma’s boon—that a woman can kill Mahishasura—and created a new goddess. All the gods present equipped her with different weapons that they each specialized in. Seeing her beauty, Mahishasura propositioned her to marry him, but Durga rejected him. What followed was a 10-day-long war between Durga and Mahishasura in which the latter kept changing forms and appearing before Durga to mislead her. Finally, on the 10th day, when Mahishasura donned the form of a buffalo, Durga stabbed the demon with the trident (Trishul) gifted to her by Lord Shiva and slayed Mahishasura. This story underpins Durga Puja's practices and rituals, but there are several other versions of it too. The event's radio program, 'Mahishasuramardini,' features hymns by the renowned playwright Birendra Krishna Bhadra and songs performed by prominent Bengali singers. Listening to this program on Mahalaya before and during the sunrise is is “a radio-induced culture – introduced in 1931 as a programme to give devout Hindus company as they made their way to the banks of River Ganga to perform rituals before sunrise” (Sen, 2022). Today, it has become a cherished tradition for most Hindu Bengali households. In contemporary times, Durga Puja relies heavily on the efforts of Hindu

upper-caste men, both for the successful execution of the grand event and the perpetuation of exclusionary practices that originate within the festival.

The Gender Question

While the central deity of Durga Puja is a goddess, and the festival is promoted as a 'feminist' occasion symbolizing women's empowerment, the most pervasive yet often unspoken form of social exclusion in Durga Puja pertains to women. Mythologically, even before the emergence of Durga as a deity, several other female deities existed in Hindu mythology. However, the myth of Durga's creation involves only male gods, who fashioned her solely as a vessel for bearing their powers and as a means to vanquish an individual threatening their power and status. Thus, gender-based exclusion finds its roots in the very foundation of the festival. This patriarchal basis, excluding other female deities and avoiding the representation of the gender the festival ostensibly celebrates, continues into contemporary practice. Women's involvement is restricted, either directly or indirectly, in various aspects of the Puja.

One notable aspect is the creative and construction work associated with the festival. The sculpting and painting of the Goddess Durga's idol is predominantly a male-dominated art, historically, and even today, “women, born or married into the families of these potters/artisans, are not encouraged to join the trade” (Chatterji, 2017). Traditional techniques, skills, and tools associated with idol-making are primarily passed down to male members of the family. The art of making idols remains exclusive primarily to men while “women who make idols of the goddess are rare and it is even more rare for their work to get acknowledged” (Banka, 2019). The orally-transmitted tradition that only the senior-most male artisan can draw the idol's eyes is evidence of the historical exclusion of women from this art. The barrier to training and entry into this profession effectively precludes women from participating in the ritual. The construction of pandals—temporary shelters made of bamboo and cloth that house the idol throughout the festival—as well as final decoration and illumination are predominantly the domain of men. That it is a fact in India that “there are 10 times more men than women employed in the construction sector” (ETHRWorld, 2021) further highlights the gender disparity.

Another crucial creative element of Durga Puja is the role of drummers, a profession traditionally dominated by men for centuries. While training spaces have recently been established to include more women in this profession (Lakhotia, 2020), gender disparity in

dhaak-playing remains a common sight in Puja pandals across Bengal. The entire planning process, which forms the foundation of the festival's execution, takes place in locality clubs. These committees are predominantly occupied by men, with women often relegated to activities associated with traditional gender roles, even when participating in public spaces. For instance, Bhattacharya (2019) provides a practical example of how, “while entering the Puja pandals, it is hard not to notice their names as exhibited on various hoardings – the benefactor, the chairperson, the president of the committee are all men.” While women assist the priests and perform tasks such as arranging flowers, cutting up fruits, cooking, and cleaning, they are barred from conducting the actual Puja, as this role is exclusively reserved for Brahmin men. The role of menstruation further compounds the exclusion, as people experiencing their menstrual cycles during the festival are prohibited from participating in any Hindu religious rituals, including Durga Puja, as is evident from the personal narratives of Talukdar (2018) and Gupta (2020). Even the association of menstruation with the Goddess or the Puja has led to an intense backlash. For instance, an artwork by Aniket Mitra, combining elements of Durga Puja and menstruation to highlight the exclusion faced by menstruating individuals, elicited a vehement response (Bansal, 2018). Additionally, “Sindoor Khela” (literally, playing with vermilion), a practice involving the smearing of vermilion on the idol of the Goddess and married women, results in the exclusion of unmarried, widowed women, sex workers, and others, leading to their social humiliation (Das, 2018). It is a heteronormative practice that excludes non-heterosexual couples, non-binary and gender non-conforming individuals, and transgender people.

A Hotbed of Casteism and Tribal Exclusion

The inherent casteism of Hindu religious festivals, which fosters caste-based prejudice and discrimination, is well-documented. However, caste emerges as an important aspect of social exclusion in Durga Puja particularly due to a perception widely held by elite Bengalis themselves that West Bengal is a 'casteless' state, free from caste-based discrimination (Mondal, 2015). While, on the surface, there appear to be no barriers to participation in the festival for people of all castes and religions, the occupation of a priest, a pivotal role in the festival's rituals, is reserved for the highest caste in the hierarchy – Brahmins. This caste-based occupation of the festival's ritual aspects is in stark contrast to the festival's professed egalitarian ethos. Historically, Durga Puja originated in upper-caste Zamindar households, with lower-caste individuals denied access to the celebrations. In contemporary times, while the festival has become more inclusive and accessible to the larger

public, “the rituals of performing Puja remains in the hand of Savarna men and women who actively participate in this grandeur event of Mahishasura killing” (Biswas, 2017). Token gestures, such as including female priests, are often used to portray the festival as inclusive and non-discriminatory. However, the intersectional aspect of exclusion is frequently overlooked, with women only from upper-caste Brahmin backgrounds being permitted to conduct rituals (Maitra, 2021).

Another dimension of exclusion revolves around the dominant narratives that shape Durga Puja, effectively silencing alternative perspectives. Indigenous tribal retellings of the Durga-Mahishasura story offer a different lens through which to view the festival. For instance, the Manjhi tribe in Jharkhand worships Durga as Vishari Devi during Navaratri (IANS, 2007). Similarly, the Santal people celebrate Dasain— “a four-day long celebration of the Santals that commences from the mahasaptami or the 7th lunar day of the Autumn Durga Puja” (Das, 2017)—as a non-Hindu alternative during the Durga Puja period, with their deity as Goddess Jaher. Even the myth behind Dasain follows a very different route of the hope of finding two Santal lovers kidnapped by the Aryans. These narratives diverge from the mainstream and are marginalized in discussions about Durga Puja.

The Asur tribe, based in eastern India, particularly Jharkhand, Bihar, and West Bengal, observes Mahishasur Dasain rather than Durga Puja (Pandey & Biswas, 2016). For them, the myth or story of this event is not one of revelry but of melancholy. According to Biswas (2016), the people of the Asur tribe “claim that Mahishasura was an aboriginal king, a great ruler of his people, who had been duped and murdered in ancient times, by Aryans usurpers.” They do not participate in any of the rituals in the Puja, and reportedly do not enter Puja pandals during this time (Varghese, 2016). They hold that Mahishasura was an aboriginal king, a great ruler, who was duped and murdered by Aryan usurpers. Their exclusion from Durga Puja is a clear reflection of their narrative being overshadowed by the dominant Hindu narrative. In 2016, then HRD Minister Smriti Irani labelled those who supported these narratives as 'anti-national' (Ghoshal, 2016), highlighting the resistance to alternative perspectives.

Conclusion

Contrary to the idealized image that some elite Bengalis project, West Bengal is not an 'egalitarian' state, and Durga Puja, a widely celebrated Hindu festival, falls short of being a symbol of equality. Social exclusion takes on various forms, spanning from gender to caste

and tribal exclusion. While some forms of exclusion are readily apparent, others occur unnoticed or in contexts where questioning is discouraged or avoided. Social exclusion persists beyond the glitz and glamour of Durga Puja, affecting a significant portion of the population. Durga Puja's brilliance and dazzle come and go each year, but the mechanisms of social exclusion continue to operate in society.

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