

Durga Puja Pandals of Kolkata 2016: The Heritage and the Design

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Abstract—Durga Puja [1] also known as Sharadotsav or Durgotsava is an annual festival of West Bengal, India, where artists, designers and architects use innovative themes to decorate unique pandals to impress the visitors each year. It involves planning and tedious hard work to give it virtual form. It was interesting that Kolkata (formerly Calcutta) is the capital of India's West Bengal state has an area of 185 km²; more than 4500 pandals [2] were erected in that area during the five - day of Durga Puja was from October 7 until October 11, 2016.

Each year there are unique themes which comprise art and design techniques at the single place, time and event. Pandals are distinctive from each other, also they deliver a meaningful message to the society. Those pandals are not only a matter of rituals, devotion and aesthetics, but it is a way to realise the ideologies that are dominating current society.

It needed to physically capture the event and document the designs, to understand it with soul, spirit and body. The author connected, visited, studied, captured and documented as a researcher of new media art and faculty of traditional, digital and modern installations. The author finds it was the biggest event which can tell so much about current practices, that no other event in the country can knowledge the variety in the context of art and design techniques then this one of a kind held in the country.

This paper will explain and acknowledge the art, and design techniques used in some of Durga Puja pandals where the author visited during 7th -11th October 2016 in Kolkata.

Index Terms—Durgapuja, pandals, kolkata, calcutta, design, multicultural, surrealist.

I. INTRODUCTION

Durga Puja is celebrated in Bengal [3] from 17th-18th century by Bengali [4] Zamindars [5] inform of annual Durga Puja in their family rajbaris (palaces). In early 20th century because of increasing large-scale celebrations which needed lots of money hence it became the Sarbojanin or community celebration of the festival which is sponsored and organised by the neighbourhood.

In the 21st century the family Durga Puja is instinct, but very few zamindar and merchant families continue to celebrate pujas in their palaces. Now Kolkata's popular Durga Puja celebration is group, community or neighbourhood activity. It is an occasion of experimentations by designer, artisans and craftsman in Kolkata both in the format of the idols [6] and decoration of the pandal (canopied bamboo structure) in which the idols are housed.

Manuscript received October 12, 2017; revised December 25, 2017.

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There is one theme all over which is to worship mother nature, through modern traditions have sub-themes. These sub-themes which are different in each Durga Puja pandals throughout the region. They display theme based artistically depicted sculptures of an idol of Maa Durga [7]. Puja organisers put a lot of time, thinking and a lot of means on these themed pandals. These pandals are works of art in their own right. The creativity stun, attract attention and praise of viewers. The artistic achievements are to attract the visitor. There are also token of appreciation through prizes of a different category to be won by the designer.

II. BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF MYTHOLOGY

It is believed that the Goddess Durga's victory over the demon Mahishasur [8] and also Lord Rama [9] had worshipped the goddess Durga to seek divine blessings before undertaking the battle against Ravana [10] in Ramayana.

A. Durga Puja Celebration Days

Durga Puja in Kolkata a festival which is a religious event, celebrated according to Bengali festival calendar [11], celebrated in autumn. It is a ten-day festival, which starts from Mahalaya [12], the inaugural day of the event. Mahalaya is celebrated by Agomoni (songs of welcome). Festivities start five days later with the observance of Shashti [13], Shaptami [14], Ashtami [15], and Nabami [16]. On the tenth day, or Bijoya Dashami [17], the goddess is borne away to the sounds of the dhak, or traditional drum for immersion in nearby rivers or water bodies.

B. Durga Puja Calendar 2016

Day as per Occasion Date:

Bodhon or Mahalaya, First Day, 1st October 2015

Panchmi, Fifth Day, 6th October 2016

Shashthi, Sixth day, 7th October 2016

Saptami, SeventhDay, 8th October 2016

Ashtami, Eight biggest day, 9th October 2016

Nabami/Dashami, Ninth & Tenth Day, 10th-11th October 2016

C. Durga Puja

The puja mandap or the main altar is a platform inside a bamboo structure called a pandal. Inside the pandal, rituals are performed by the priests in front of the deities. Offerings of fruits, flowers, sweetmeats, incense and sandalwood are placed in front of the deities while the congregation in the pandal repeat the mantras [18].

D. Durga Puja Pandals and Theme

The whole festival is based on the 'Neighbourhood'. Every neighbourhood builds it's 'pandal'. The

neighbourhood's uniqueness is articulated in the form of the symbolism of the pandal. The temporary pandal provides some moments of relief from the continuous engagement of people's daily fight for survival, it gives the opportunity to live a momentary phase for dreaming and imagining. This is an occasion to discover thoughts, ideas and community solidarity. As more than thousands of neighbourhoods engage in building their pandals, therefore, the entire city engaged in the frenzy of the festival and it transforms the city into a surreal world. When a traverses through these pandals, a distinctive landscape of the city emerges which unravels the dynamics of the various neighbourhoods. The interactions arise within and amongst their ethos, dreams and aspirations.

The act of building the pandal is an important link to the neighbourhood's life, it acts as a medium to stage, shape and transforms public opinion by stimulating confirmation, dialogue and debate. People of the neighbourhood involve with these stages, irrespective of gender, age, economic class, occupation, caste and religion gather to dream and debate.

Each year they have to face some questions e.g. "What will our theme of pandal into this year? How do we design the Pandal in the limited space? What will be portrayed to the world through the Pandal? How much means will be required? External resources? Professional assistance to design and create the pandal? And closely followed by, "How to make our pandal best in aesthetically this year? What will be the message that our neighbouring pandal is trying to convey?"

III. BUILDING MATERIALS OF PANDAL

The Pandal-in earlier times the pandal was the temporary abode, they were made of simple bamboo scaffolding with metres of cloth draped around it. Now-a-days the pandals are built in all conceivable forms and complex structure which replicas of famous temples, parliament houses, mansions, forts, etc. The materials used in the construction of these pandals are no longer the simple and cost effective but complicated and very costly.

Pandals created using lots of materials some are eco-friendly some are not. Some are waste material and some are specifically created, some materials are fragile and elegant, whereas some are strong. Some materials locally found and in some pandals these materials are imported. Some of this material are e.g. plastic, papers, soil, plaster-of-paris.

Designers decorate pandals in the most astonishing ways as they can, using different materials e.g. terracotta, old LP records, biscuits, coke bottles, matchboxes etc to name few.

The theme can be sea-shells, ancient temples, forts, ships, igloos and even the White House and some theme can be simply motivation, thoughts or ideas which can be in from fantasies, political conflicts, flaccid socio-economic condition and parenthood.

Pandal-making-is an extremely tactile method of building, it has a connection between materials and the craftsman's method of constructing. The soil in this region is suitable for bamboo to grow in abundance and also it is good for wattle and daub construction. Over centuries

craftsmen are using these techniques while working with bamboo and mud to build houses in this region. Most houses in villages of Bengal are built in this technique. Other locally sourced materials are straw, jute, rice-husk, paper and timber are used in pandals. These are most natural and ecological materials which can be used in construction. The festival ensures that most materials used can easily be dismantled and reused. A bamboo-framework attains form with crafted elements and finishes. Steel is also used, though sparingly, in some large pandals to make a framework. In recent times, some pandals also use disposed or waste products for construction. The rooted tradition, the craftsmen engage themselves in innovative ways to combine regional craft with technology and new tools.

Two months prior to Durga Puja, craftsmen start to prepare to build the pandal. It started with reverberates with energy, discussions and joyful anticipation of the unseen world that it is about to transform into.

Bamboo, clay, timber-posts, plaster and hay get collected at the corner of a street. A designer with her/his team of craftsmen takes responsibility to build a unique pandal s/he will have a conversation with neighbourhood people and then sets out the design and build the Pandal. The streetscape transforms into his/her studio. Tools mould materials; dreams become reality; the Pandal emerges gradually.

The Idol-The makeshift structures idols of the goddess are adorned with meticulous artwork and stylistic themes made with local craft materials such as shola or pith, woven brocades, coloured jute, clay and terracotta [20] ornamentation and imitation jewellery.

The festival has become the means of livelihood for innumerable local craftsmen. For example, an entire neighbourhood, 'Kumartuli' craftsmen are knowledge-bearers of the regional sculpting method of straw-bamboo armatures and clay, characteristically used for sculpting Durga idols.

The rituals of deities in which material are used as rice, dry flour, flower petals, turmeric (haldi), Vermillion (Sindoor) [20] and coloured sand.

IV. A SURREALISTIC WORLD -DURGA PUJA PANDAL IN KOLKATA

An overcrowded street and pandals with people, rickshaws [21] and taxis in hustled transit lead to one to another pandal visits.

The festival finally arrives. The neighbourhood transforms into a surrealistic world, with time and history indiscriminately collapse and an entirely new installation is born in form of pandal which was never seen before and will be never seen afterwards. The pandal becomes a public domain. It is open to being experienced, discussed and interpreted throughout day and night. Then it became no longer a single viewpoint or experience but the merging of collective experiences of people. It sensitises them and that it evokes their feelings.

At the far end of the pandal, a towering form, magnificently rising from the corner of a neighbourhood, magnetically draws the viewers towards it. It welcomes all, to make a relation to it, to solve the threshold of a large

symbolic gateway, it act as a trellis of creeper-like sculptural forms and to find sacred precinct.

The pandal seems to be an enclosure of intricately crafted, makeup of mud-bamboo walls on either side of a ramp, which holds the sacred space. It feels like a dramatic journey of ascent conditions in which the mind to a heightened state of rapture. The viewer feels the constant reversal of uniqueness from one pandal to another and from front to forth. The use of materials, colours, textures and shadows of decorated pandals make people respond child-like. Every detail, curvature and texture show the excellence of design and craftsmanship with the materials. The play of light and shadow reverberating with ritual-sounds make surfaces progressively reveal the hidden pleasure of the pandal.

TABLE I: SOME OF DURGA PUJA PANDALS AND THERE DECORATION

S.No	Name	Pandal	Idol	Details
1	Chakraberia Sarbojanin Durgotsab Committee, Triangular Park			
2	Ekdalia Evergreen			
3	Suruchi Sangha			
4	Tridhara Sammilani			
5	Suhrid Sangha, Rashbehari			
6	Haridevpur Ajeyo Sanghati			
7	95 Palli – Jodhpur Park			
8	Barisha Club			
9	Behala Natun Dal			

10	Behala Friends			
11	Nalin Sarkar Street			
12	Sikdar Bagan Sarbojanin			
13	Singhi Park Sarbojanin			
14	Palli, Ballygunj			
15	Hindustan Club (Hindustan Road)			
16	Dum Dum Park Yubak Brindo			
17	DumDum Park Bharat Chakra			
18	Dum Dum Park Sarbojanin			
19	Dum Dum Park Tarun Sangha			
20	Tala Barowari			

21	Hindusthan Park			
22	Deshapriya Park			
23	Ajeya Sanghati			
24	Ballygunj Cultural			
25	Mitra Sangha			
26	Adarsha Palli, Behala			
27	Buro Shib Tala			
28	Poddar Nagar			
29	Palli Mangal Samilty, Jodhpur Park			
30	Jodhpur Park			
31	Adi Lake Palli			
32	Lake Palli			
33	Lake Town Adhibashibri ndo Pandal			

34	Maddox Square			
35	Sreebhumi Sporting Club			

V. LAST DAY

On the last day of the festival, the Goddess idol is immersed into flowing water of the sea. The festival concludes, the pandal dismantled and space reverts back to the routine life. This festival keeps traditions alive through the annual rituals of constructing, participating, viewing and debating.

VI. CONCLUSION

The entire Kolkata city welcomes people from around the world with open arms and hearts filled with incomprehensible emotions of togetherness. The Kolkata streets from the northern points of Tala and Bagbazar to the swanky southern pandals of Naktala and Behala witness waves of darshanarthi or 'pandal-hopping pilgrims' dressed in the best possible way, visiting and mesmerising by the beauty of design, hard work and craftsmanship in the form of pandals.

However, the appearance of the puja (worship) may feel like religious activities which are filled with rituals when it comes to following the tradition. But apart from the religious rituals, Durga Puja in Kolkata has its own trademark features that make it all the more exclusive and distinct from any other celebration in the world.

It is felt that commercialisation of Durga Puja in the last quarter of the 20th century have become a major environmental concern as people want bigger and brighter sculptures. And the pandals and other the sculptures are often made from hazardous materials like cement, plastic, plaster of Paris, and toxic paints.

Through researcher feels there is a great need to document Durga Puja pandals each year as, the process, belief and socio-economic status is changing rapidly. It has been difficult to capture all more than 4000 Durga Puja pandals in Kolkata, as it needs a full team to capture the event. But researcher tried her level best to capture and documented as many as pandals possible in this paper. Some of the puja pandals are not included in this paper as it needs more space.

This paper can be a base of further research topics such as design, colours, theme and motifs used in Durga Puja pandals etc. Stories and experiences from designers, artist and craftsman of Creator of Durga Puja pandals will be valuable assets for research in the field of Art, Design and

Craft.

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Tripti Singh is an assistant professor, Design Discipline, IIITDM Jabalpur, M.P. India. She previously worked in India's premier Institutes e.g. IIT Mandi as Media Design Fellow and for IIT Kanpur as Scientist. She specialized in Communication Design, 6+ years career with extensive experience in education in Designing, Fashion Textiles, Multimedia, Web design and Print Design. 14 years' experience as Digital Medium Artist.

Extended expertise Designing in Info-graphics, Data & information collection in multimedia content, i.e. Photography, Animation, Audio Visual, Visualization, Site Design, Mobile page graphics, Logo Design, Animation, Painting and Sketching (Tablet).

Her research interest are:

1. To document festival of India. The documentation will be based on the places, uniqueness of celebration, connecting people as mass activities, and the changes in ritual and celebration of the past. This documentation is based on collecting images and information from different resources.
2. To develop curriculum and lab facilities for New media arts and Digital arts to meet different requirements of an institute. I feel it has lots of possibilities for all, such as scientists, researchers, engineering students more over for the institute as a whole. It is felt that visual documentation is required for all research areas and exposure of the institute. Why arts? well, I feel art is required to encourage students to experiment more those tools which are also used in developing serious visuals. We also need facilities to develop studios or lab for virtual classrooms is today's need. Both sophisticated and mobile phones can be used for fulfilling different requirements for developing multimedia contents.
3. Visual content repositories (Web Site development) on awareness based on topics such as women and children issues, animal human conflict and old age issues etc.