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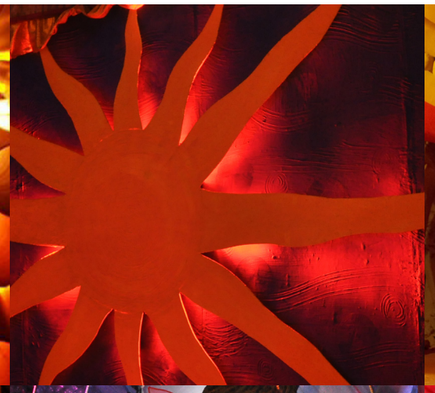










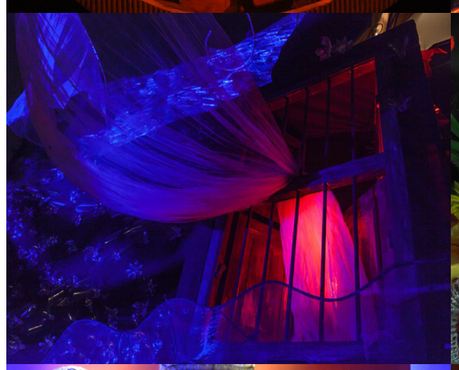









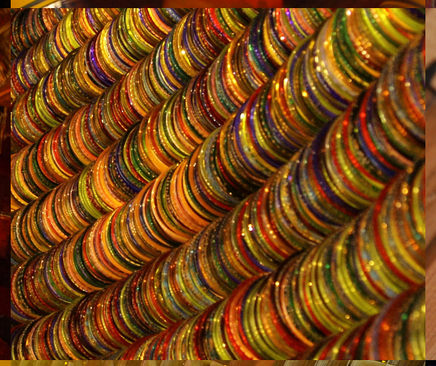






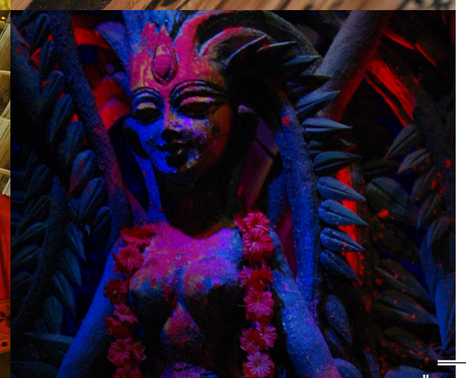

GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH

KOLKATA'S DURGA PUJO

THE PASSION THAT MAKES THIS FESTIVAL THE LARGEST PUBLIC ART INSTALLATION EXHIBITION IN THE WORLD

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PUJO INTRODUCTION

Badamtala Ashar Sangha

Badamtala Ashar Sangha, a multi-faceted institution and more than just a club, is led by Sri Mridul Kumar Pathak, the settler trustee of the International Foundation for Sustainable Development and the concept provider of the Kalighat Redevelopment Project. In its 75th year this year, the club decided to rope in famous artist Sushanto Pal who worked on the theme of Durga *pujo* in a dreamscape. The execution received many accolades and won various awards for the club.

66 Pally Sarbojonin Durgotsab

The *pujo* started way back in 1951. The founding members paved the way for making the 66 Pally *pujo* a success. For the first two years the *pujo* was held in the name of Chaitali Sangha and from 1953 onwards it has been named as 66 Palli Sarbojonin Durgotsab Commttiee after the name of 66th Ward.

In the year 1951, the whole *pujo* was completed for just Rs.1,000 approximately whereas the budget today is a staggering Rs 25 lakh. The club is associated with IFSD and regularly organising various charitable and social programmes like blood donation camps, health check-up camps, regular contribution to relief funds, running schools for street children among others. This year Mr Amar Sarkar was roped in as the artist and he created the *pandal* using cardboard boxes and pipes as major raw materials.

Barisha Club

Before Barisha Club came into existence, the club was known as Sahajatri which was founded in 1989. They used to organise Durga *pujo* every year. In 1999 few member came out of Sahajatri and formed a new club called Shristi. They started organising *pujos* separately and were into theme *pujo* from day one. Both *pujos* maintained high standards and were a visual treat for the visitors. In 2006 both the clubs got united and formed a new club called Barisha Club. From then onward they started organising one of the most acclaimed *pujos* in Kolkata. This year, the club roped in Sanatan Dinda as the artist.

Dum Dum Park Bharat Chakra

From a small club in fifties, Bharat Chakra club has made a long journey over the years to become one of the most well known clubs in Greater Kolkata which has touched the minds and hearts of thousands of people of this locality and beyond through its regular year long activities. The Durga *pujo* has become a prominent attraction for Kolkatans. The *pujo* has stepped into its thirteenth year in 2013 where the artist Debashis Bhattacharya chose to work with woodchips for designing the *pandal*.

Bosepukur Sitala Mandir

The committee started this *pujo* as any other *para pujo* in 1951. On their 25th anniversary they came up with the theme of Juddhangdehi, which earned the *pujo* its first brush with fame and today it is one of the most renowned progressive *pujos* of Kolkata. The theme for the 2013 *pujo* was 'Daser dik', depicting the story of Bali Raja and Lord Vishnu in his Baman Avatar. The theme carried the principal message of respecting elders irrespective of their socioeconomic standing.

Maniktala Chaltabagan Lohapatty Durga*pujo* Committee

The *pujo* of Maniktala Chaltabagan Lohapatty is situated near the house of the great reformer and educationist of the world, Raja Ram Mohan Roy. Mr. Lakhi Chand Jaiswal, Late Hiralal Jaiswal, Late Gulab Chand Jaiswal, Late Suraj Narayan Jaiswal and others took the initiative to start this *pujo* before India became independent (in the year 1943). Ever since, the celebrations have always been organised with great pomp and show. Earlier, the installations were housed in a community room, but as the association grew, they decided to celebrate the *pujo* on a larger scale. The *pandal* has been designed by Sutanu Maity for the last 18 years and this year the *pandal* was designed based on a lotus and aluminium sheets were used as the key raw material. The *pujo* stepped into the 71st year in 2013.

Behala Buroshibtala Janakalyan Sangha

It is a socio-cultural organisation which was initially started to unite and inspire young people in the noble cause of social service. The organisation is registered under the Societies Registration Act and has been instrumental in cultivating the spirit of culture among the members of the society and to encourage advancement of literacy, healthcare, culture and sports among others. In addition to its commendable presentation of Durga *pujo* has created its distinct identity. Since inception it has been arranging autumnal festivals, but it shot into fame in its fifth year in 2011 when Mr Subodh Roy became the club's creative-advisor. 2013 marked the seventh year of the club's *pujo* and Mr Subodh Roy created the *pandal* based on the Camel Festival of Rajasthan.

Chetla Agrani Club

Before 1959 the Chetla Agrani premises were famously known as the Imperial Ground. In those days it was mainly the football playground of the local boys. Some local players, most of them friends, while playing football decided to form a club. In 1970 the club was officially named Chetla Agrani Club. From the year 1990, the members of Agrani decided to organise Durga *pujo*. The organising committee named itself 'Families and Friends' keeping in mind the essence of the *pujo* celebration. Bhabotosh Sutar created the theme of 2013 and it was based on doorways. Inside the *pandal* you'll see arches that looked like doorways opening from one hall to the other.

Chakraberia Sarbojanin

In the aftermath of the Second World War there abounded an atmosphere of doom and gloom. Communal relations were at their worse. At this hour of crisis three gentlemen, Late Sri Rashbehari Ghosh, Late Dr. Kumarkanti Ghosh and Late Sri Mohit Mohon Ghosh came forward to celebrate and perform a Durga *pujo* to foster peace and harmony within the locality in 1946. Chakraberia Sarbajonin transformed from the traditional into theme-based *pujo* in the year 2003. Over the last decade Chakraberia has grown enormously garnering much success, recognition, popularity and fan following. In 2013, the theme was 'Naari Shakti', as Maa Durga is ultimate manifestation of feminine power in Hindu mythology.

Hindustan Park Sarbojonin

[]

Shibmandir

The *pujo* started from 1936 and was one of first *pujos* in the area of Mudiali. The history goes back around 200 hundred years back when these prominent South Kolkata localities were marshy lands without any sign of human habitation. Strangely in the midst of the wilderness there found was two shivalingas together. One can find reference of the shiva lingas in the archival maps at Fort William. These remained in the open for decades, only to be used by the bandits. The *pujo* used to happen at the natmandir in the temple premises. In the year 1961 for the first time the Durga *pujo* moved out from there to a nearby field due to the increasing inflow of devotees. The club ventured into theme *pujo* from the year 1999. Artist Subroto Bannerjee worked with AC duct pipes to create a unique *pandal* this year.

Dum Dum Park Tarun Sangha

Dum Dum Park Tarun Sangha was founded in 1957 with the aim of rendering services to the society particularly to the residents of Dum Dum Park Area. Dum Dum Park Tarun Sangha was one of those associations that celebrated festivals like Durga *pujo* with much fanfare and splendour. The credit goes to a group of four young gentlemen who took the initiative to bring it to the masses. It was in the year 1992 when the committee started afresh and it fetched them an award from the Dum Dum Development Council. The award gave them the push and in 1999, the *pujo* went in to the big league. This year, the club roped in Parimal Pal who chose to work on the theme of destruction of nature due emergence of real estate.

Tala Barowari

Tala barowari is one of the oldest sarbojanin *pujos* of Kolkata which celebrated its 91st year in 2013. This *pujo* has been bringing to the fore innovative ideas mixed with India's rich cultural and artistic legacy. And for the last few years they have been keeping the North Kolkata banner afloat with a sizeable number of awards in its kitty. The theme this year at Tala Barowari hinged around the sampan. Sampans are generally used for transportation in coastal areas or rivers, and are often used as traditional fishing boats. They are found all across South East Asian countries and are a part of the Bengali majhi heritage.

Samajsebi Sangha

Samajsebi Sangha was founded in 1946 to encourage communal harmony. In September, 1946, the elders of the locality decided to celebrate the festival. Over a very short period of time the club became one of the most revered *pujos* in Calcutta, people from different parts of the state used to visit the *pujo* for its traditional and dignified environment. This year Pradip Dutta, the artist hired by the club decided to work with books as people are forgetting them in this age of digitisation.

Santoshpur Lake Pally

Santoshpur Lake Pally was founded by Late Sukumar Singha Roy, Mr. Pulin Mondal, Late Priyonath Bhattacharya, Late Dhirendra Narayan Bagchi, Mr. Subal Bhattachaya, Late Nandalal Dutta, Late Prafulla Roy, and Late Sagar Singha Roy in 1958. The *pujo* celebrated its 56th year in 2013. Some years ago this *pujo* was not that famous in comparison to other more well-known *pujos* of Kolkata. But in 2003 the *pujo* committee embraced theme *pujo* and received an overwhelming response. Artist Purnendu Dey created a *pandal* in the shape of a hibiscus flower as the theme of the *pujo* this year.

Nalin Sarkar Street Sarbojonin Durgotsab

Started in 1933, this community *pujo* had taken its roots in a publicly organised event that was popularly known as Beltala mather *pujo*. This would take place outside a garage, which used to be a playground before. Due to certain inconveniences the *pujo* had to be shifted to this narrow lane, which has now become famous as Nalin Sarkar Street. Novelty was a premium factor that was missing here during the late 90's. However, it emerged like a phoenix from the ashes of its popularity in the year 2003, when Sanatan Dinda arrived at the helm. The *pujo* in 2013 was conceptualised by Sutanu Maity who used various colourful baskets to create the *pandal*.

Santosh Mitra Square

The Santosh Mitra Square *pujo* started way back in 1936 by eminent personalities like Sachindra Nath Sanyal, Dakshaja Nandi and Dr Tarak Poddar in a small piece of land in Serpentine Lane. As the *pujo* started growing, it was later shifted to St James Square (presently Santosh Mitra Square). The *pujo* changed its look from 1993 onwards when the Mr Pradip Ghosh taken the charge of the *pujo* as its president. In its 78th year in 2013, the *pandal* was made replicating the famous Trevi Fountain in Rome. The idol was created by Pradip Rudra Pal.

Dum Dum Tarun Dal

Dum Dum Tarun Dal is a club formed by the local people of Dum Dum Park and initiated *pujo* since 1977. At the beginning it used to organise traditional Durga *pujos*. But From the year 2008 it started theme *pujo*. This year the artist Anirban Das came up with the theme of Panchabhoota for the *pandal*.

Naktala Udayan Sangha

The club was established in the year 1950 by the local families as a place to get together. Initially, the club was famous for it Kali *pujo*. In 1986, the club started the Durga *pujo* in a traditional manner and moved into theme *pujo* from 2003 onwards. The club is also very active in the realm of social activities like of thalassemia patients. This year the club roped in Bhabotosh Sutar who carved out the idol out of an 11 tonne sandstone block.

Tridhara Sammilani

The club was founded in the year 1947. Initially there were about fifteen to twenty members and the Durga *pujo* then was done in a very homely manner. As the years went by then seniors handed over the management of the club to the next generation and they to the next. Along with the Durga *pujo* Tridhara maintains a free medical unit in 1986 which is still run successfully from the Club premises. The club roped in Gauranga Kuila as the artist who decided work with a howdah for the theme.

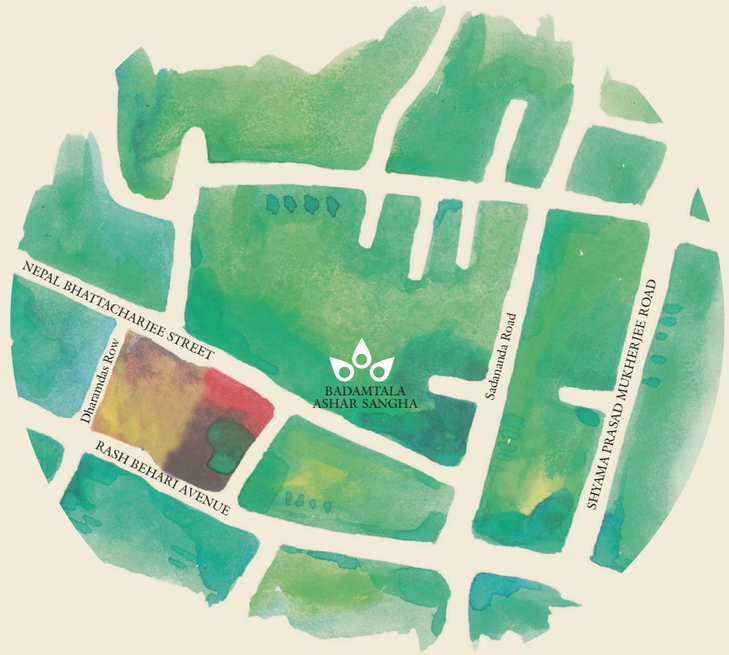
Kashi Bose Lane

In the year of 1937, the British Government stopped the *pujo* at Simla Bayam Samity in North Kolkata, which was mainly organised by some freedom fighters. They came to Kashi Bose Lane CIT Park along with some local enthusiastic residents and started the Durga *pujo* at the Kashi Bose Lane ground. Artist Shib Shankar Das chose to work with ceramic inductors and colourful coffee cups for this year's *pujo*.

FOREWORD

FOREWORD

BADAMTALA ASHAR SANGHA



Glossary

Jaanla - Window • *Kintu ei baar* Asian *peylaam na* - But, didn't receive an Asian (Paints Sharad Samman) this year • *Maahaul* - Ambience • *Chaakni* - Strainer • Asian Paints (Sharad) Samman *toh dorkar kintu* 66 Palli*r pujo theke better howa chaai. Eta kintu mone raakhbeyn!* Completely East Bengal-Mohun Bagan. - We want the Asian Paints Award but our *pujo* must be better than that of 66 Palli. Do keep this in mind! Just like the East Bengal and Mohun Bagan rivalry • *Jhaapiye podto* - Jumped into • *Khisti* - Profanity • *Ekhaaney porey thaake! Paaglaami na holey ki?* - They stay here only! Isn't this a kind of madness? • *Khoob-e-bhaalo laaglo* - Liked a lot • *Theek kore holo na kintu* - It was not done properly. • *Dekhlam, bhaalo laaglo kinto bujhlaam na* - Saw it, liked it but could not understand it. • *Na korlei bhaalo* - It's better if you don't do it • *Sesh* - End • *Koto boro* - So huge





Q&A

SUSANTO PAL

ARTIST, BADAMTALA ASHAR SANGHA

Q: You were a student of Government College of Art in Kolkata. How did you enter the space of *pandal* curation?

I lived in Kasba Uttarpara and grew up watching the Aurobinda Sporting Club *pujos* through my *jaanla* (window), so somewhere there was a subconscious desire of what it meant to create a *protima*. Besides, there was a relevant family background: Jitendra Pal, my mother's cousin, was a traditional idol maker and I drew from him as well. Also, I had been engaged as one of the preliminary judges to shortlist from a field of 50 *protimas* before the final jury appraised images at the ALPIC Sharad Samman. So I had seen a range and had something in my DNA; above all I was studying art…. So when I was in my second year of Masters in Textile Designing and chanced upon my first *protima* design opportunity for the Behala Sahajatri *pujo*, I was more than willing.

One of the *pujos* that left an impression was the Hatibagan Sarbojanin *pandal*, which used bamboo as a part of the overall design and not merely as supporting framework. The curation demonstrated that something simple could still be beautiful and innovative.

Q: What worked as your advantage?

If you have to ask me for the two triggers that made the transition from the *shabeki* to the thematic environment a reality, then it would be the institution of awards by Asian Paints, which in turn was responsible for getting art college students interested in *pandal* curation.

I worked with the prominent film director Rituporno Ghosh as his costume designer *(Bariwali, Choker Bali, Raincoat, Antarmahal, Khela, Dosar)* and interior designer *(The Last Lear, Shob Chitro Kalponik* and *Chitrangada)* and was able to borrow from my cinematic imagination that had perhaps never been used within the *pandal* genre.

Q: The *pujos* then have evolved over the last couple of decades…

In a most remarkable way. When I started my *pujo* curation career, one had to rely on the services of a few contractors who had improvised and grown within the system. And today, within the space of a decade and a half, you have an entire ecosystem – artisans of virtually all kinds, contractors with diverse competencies, junior artistes willing to collaborate for the hands-on experience and some for pocket money, professionals with specialised insights. For instance this year, I worked with welders who brought their machines on the sets; a few years ago, this would have been unthinkable.

I believe that a more radical change has transpired in the context of the Kolkata *pujos* over the last decade-and-a half than in Bengal's film industry. Just think…what used to be a Rs 50,000 *pujo* budget has nearly 80-folded to around Rs 40 lac, far outstripping the percentage increase in the scale and budgets of Bengali films. And yet, ironically, except for me and a few other film industry professionals, both creatively rich worlds virtually existed exclusive of each other.

This is the biggest industry in Bengal where land use is negligible and at best temporary. The result of this extension from aesthetic importance to commercial significance is that on a number of times I would politely excuse myself from working with Ritu*da* because I needed to focus exclusively on *pujo* curation. Today, I am booked up to 2016, I curate two *pujos* a year and they remunerate me well enough for me not to be tempted to do three *pujos* and make a hash of all three.

Q: The one criticism is that art college students have taken the *pujo* movement away from the *shabeki* to the thematic – they have graduated the movement away from the traditional.

I have a counter to that. The *pujos* that people are passing off as 'thematic' are possibly more *'shabeki'* than the conventional *shabeki pujos*. Let me explain: in the Baghbazar model of *shabeki*, where the dice for creating the *protima* is strictly used only for their *pujo*, you actually have a 'Fair & Lovely' advertisement in the vicinity of the *protima*. So what *shabeki* are people talking about, when the purity of the environment has been compromised? On the other hand, we don't commercially exploit any of the frontages near the *protima*, we retain the purity of the environment, we create a *maahaul* where visitors feel inspired towards the divine even as vendors in the vicinity are probably shouting or selling ice cream. So at the end of the day, who is more *shabeki*: us theme-based people or the so-called *shabeki* organisers?

Q: What have been introduced by the daring young school of *pujo* curators?

The one big transition over the last decade has been the role of light in *pandal* curation. Earlier, in the first phase, most *pujo pandals* were created like marriage *mandaps, kichu alo diye*. Gradually in the second phase, one saw the growing role of regional crafts. In the third phase, we entered the genre of site-specific installation. It is within this last dramatic evolution that one has seen a growing role for light and ambient music. *Pandals* have extended from the uni-dimensional to the experiential; a *pandal* is no longer about seeing, as much as it is about hearing as well.

My Rituparno experience has been an advantage; I could draw on his sensibilities and extend them to some of the *pandals* I curated; I could draw from Avik Mukherjee's understanding of lighting and the result is the subdued role of light that one saw in Badamtala 2013 for instance; I also drew from Ritu*da*'s strong sense of colour and fine eye for detail (he could interpret an empty glass on a table in five ways!). In fact, when he was alive, he would come see the *pujos* that I created followed by intense *addas* on what I could have done better.

Q: Any other ways in which the *pujo* movement has evolved?

In some ways the marketing of the *pujos* has become more professional; for instance, the marketing of the Badamtala *pujo* was outsourced to a



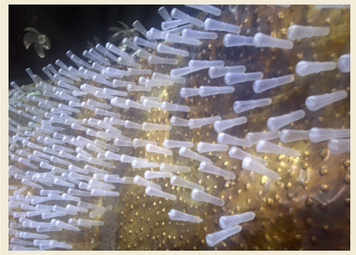








THE SCATTERING OF THE DURGA REALISM ACROSS THE *PARA* WAS A SURREAL LEGACY. TWO, DURGA'S HAIR FLYING IN THE AIR WAS BORROWED FROM KUROSAWA.



professional event organiser, which means that for a certain commission, the professional agency went out to market the *pujo*, mobilised sponsorship deals and engaged in the collection of the proceeds, which effectively liberated the organisers from expending their precious time towards this activity and also made it possible for the marketing agency to cast its net wider.

However, now that you have asked me this question, I must also state how the *pujos* have not got professionalised and are still stuck in a conventional groove. This 'awards obsession' is so large that most organisers have missed the bigger picture. They have failed to create great websites. They have failed to internationally market their *pujos*. They have failed to attract foreign tourists. They have failed to see the amazing potential of providing home-stays within their neighborhood. They have failed to graduate their *para* into a brand. They could lead Kolkata into the global festival community but all you hear is *'Kintu ei baar* Asian (Paints *Sharad Samman*) *peylaam na!'*

Over the last seven years, the Badamtala *pujo* committee raised the *pujo* budget from Rs 6 lacs to Rs 35 lacs. Yet, when on *saptami* morning the committee found that its *pujo* had not won the Asian Paints award – *pujo* equivalent of the Olympic gold – then it was like their festival had ended. *Shesh*. Everyone switched off. They had gone into the 'next year' mode. You couldn't find more than two committee members at the *pandal* site. Ironically, thousands of people streaming into the *pandal* continued to 'ooh' and 'aah' about their *pujo* experience but because of that one blip it was like a period of mourning.

The budget for the Haridevpur *pujo* has increase five-fold from Rs 6 lacs in 2009 to Rs 30 lacs as a result of the *paaglami* (craze) and real estate growth in that region. Interestingly, other *pujos* in the locality have reduced their budget from Rs 12 lacs to Rs 6 lacs, since I am working on the Haridevpur *pujo* and hence there would be no scope of now winning an award!

The result of this 'awards obsession' is that at the end of the day I have to carry the stress. It is almost an unsaid requirement that if I have been engaged, then I must deliver them an Asian Paints award. The footfalls and public appreciation are secondary. It is almost like letting the entire club down if their *pujo* has not been short-listed.

Q: What then was the theme of the Badamtala *pujo* 2013?

Dreams. That's right. Just one word: dreams. I was ready with this theme in 2011 but considering that the 75th year of the *pujo* was just a few years away, I literally saved this concept for the big occasion. The concept went with the occasion – dreamlike. Besides, it also gave me the precious two years to research on the celebrated Japanese film director Akira Kurosawa's *Dreams,* Rituparno's *Bariwali* dream sequence comprising a mosquito net, Salvador Dali's helical staircase at his home (taken to the next level, enveloping the entire *pujo* installation) and all these translating into a number of surreal nebulous manifestations across the neighbourhood.

Q: What did these ideas do for the installation?

One, the scattering of the Durga *pujo*-related motifs across the *para* was a nod to the Surreal legacy which I intended to tribute to. Two, Durga's hair flying in the air was borrowed from Kurosawa. Three, the installation was literally 360 degrees, so if you started looking at it in front, you would at some point be compelled to raise your head, turn to the left, then turn behind and then turn your body backwards to see how the thematic thread ran right round. Four, the installation was 150 feet in length and 80 feet in depth, so all that I am talking about was achieved with a sense of scale, which in turn transformed into a distinctive experience. Five, the 17 feet *protima* looked just 7 feet when seen from a distance which was an optical illusion; when the neighbourhood actually saw the deity being de-installed for the immersion and people gasped saying *'O baba! Koto boro!'*. Six, Dugra's children were scattered across the stairs as opposed to the conventional treatment of grounding them close to her idol.

Q: What were some of the other specialties of the installation?

The installation was deliberately subdued as far as lighting was concerned; here was a need to get by with as little light as one could get. So one made an unusual use of PET and white-surfaced material (dropper in this instance). We must have bought 20,000 PET bottles, 5,000 strainers *(chaakni)* and around 40,000 pen dropper. The PET bottles served a dual-purpose – they were easy to access, low-cost, easy to fabricate and their multi-dimensionality would reflect light across various angles; the droppers were unusually shaped and hence emphasised the arbitrariness of dreams; the mosquito net covered the rounds of the trees so that when you looked up you saw the tree disappear mysteriously into the night... A number of people asked me what each representation stood for and then tried to connect each component with the other as if trying to derive a larger meaning from them. However, the composition was faithful to the core meaning of a dream which at best remained arbitrary, indecipherable and inexplicable. The tragedy is that within a couple of days of *dashami* there was nothing left. What took us six months to create was destroyed in 72 hours.

Q: What were the challenges of working?

The first was finishing on schedule. For a country and region where inevitably almost everything is completed well behind schedule, the big challenge was engaging one's material, money and men with the objective of finishing on time. Somewere I have a sneaking suspicion that the institution of various awards has had a positive impact on the need to complete *pujos* on schedule across the line – organisers and labourers – which is a fantastic instance of how people can be driven by the vision of some idiot and Rs 25,000!

The second challenge was the rain. Whatever one created had to be rain-proof. When one works with things as fragile as the bottom-end of PET bottles and mosquito nets, I think our big achievement was not the ambience or

the experience as much as their weather-resistance. Never before in recent memory has October been as wet as the one in 2013; yet, I am pleased to say that our open installation stood up to the wind, rain and water-logging.

Q: You were next door – just 100m from the prominent artist Amar Sarkar's celebrated 66 Palli *pujo*. That must have been a stress, with your client asking you to do better than them.

The *pujos* of Badamtala Ashar Sangha and 66 Palli are really in one lane. Just 100-odd metres from each other. Same *para*. Same attitudes. Same people. Same everything. Yet the rivalry between the people of this lane (forget neighbourhood) is such that children going to the same distant school from the two ends of this lane will probably go by independent transport but not share the vehicle; families will not communicate with each other even though they live not more than 150 feet from each other; someone from this part of the lane passing through that part will be treated to some *khisti* – and vice versa - and the eventual brief for an independent artiste like me is 'Asian Paints (Sharad) Samman *toh dorkar kintu* 66 Palli*r pujo theke* better *chaai. Eta kintu mone raakhbeyn!*' Completely East Bengal-Mohun Bagan.

Q: What were some of your remarkable experiences?

One of the most remarkable experiences was when I was to begin on the painting of the eye of the *protima,* which is the last thing one does. The night I was to do this – a couple of nights leading to Mahalaya – some foreigners turned up at site, got interested, asked around and were told that the principal artist – myself – would start working on the eyes at midnight. I turned up at 1.30 am and they had waited patiently. I couldn't start immediately and it was 3 am by the time I could commence. Why I mention this is that most people like us would have left; the foreigners were there when I began and they patiently recorded the entire painting sequence on their video cameras. My understanding from this small instance is that most of us have missed the magic of the *pujos* and it is people like them – Norwegians – who have been able to recognise the niceties of detail. If only more foreigners were exposed to the drama of the *pujos*, *ora jhaapiye podto*.

Q: Curious question. Back again to Badamtala next year?

I will not be working on their Durga *pujo* 2014. A strategic decision. It is important for the memory of this year's work to live before one comes back to Badamtala a couple of years from now. So next year I would rather go to a North Kolkata location.

Q: How would you describe the entire craze around the *pujos*?

Paglaami. People give up their office to work for 30 days on the *pujos*… *ekhaaney porey thaake! Paaglaami na holey ki?*

Q: The one improvement we can make

At Badamtala 2013, I created a dream-like sequence after studying Freud and the film auteurs that I admire. I could not explain even a fraction of my concept to thousands of visitors. They came away saying *'khoob-e-bhaalo laaglo'* without understanding what I had done in the first place! If artists like us are investing rich concepts into *pujo* curation, then the time has come for organisers to put up explanatory boards somewhere inside the *pujo pandals* without affecting the traffic flow. We need to create an informed and cultured audience. We need to create connoisseurs…

Q: How does Kolkata take the *pujos* to the next level?

Not many are aware that the transformation of the conventional *shabeki pujo* to the thematic *pujo* was facilitated in the late Nineties by all those young art college students inducted as juniors to assist turnkey contractors. These youngsters pushed the creative envelope; they





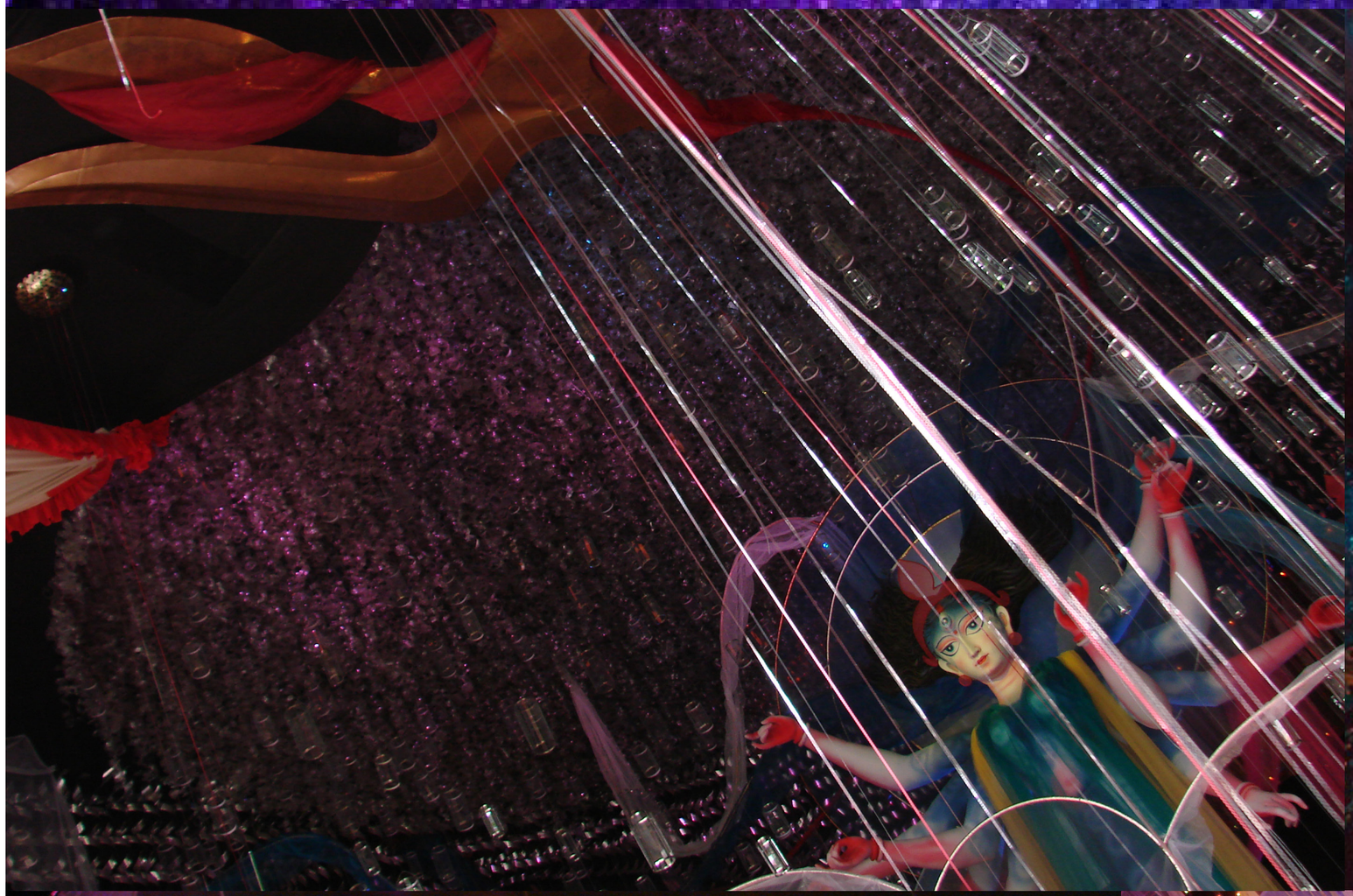
experimented; they challenged tradition. One would have expected the world to have capitalised on this. And yet, is there any single class dedicated to *pujo* installation at any of the art colleges? Any course? Any degree? Any workshop?

Now that we are talking about it, let me also add that a number of the clubs need to escape their limitations: they need to market the *pujos* outside the city and country, they need to work at the collective level to present a global face, they need to create world-class websites that are more than a simple pasting of pictures of the previous *pujo*, they need to think of merchandising products and how to transform their neighbourhood *pujos* into a brand. You find this kind of thing across second-rate tourist sites abroad. Clubs will create cupboards to house the awards they won over the years, but sadly clubs do not have the foresight to document or archive some of the great work they did a few years ago. It is quite an irony that prize givers get a bigger return (mileage) during the *pujos* than the prize recipients themselves!

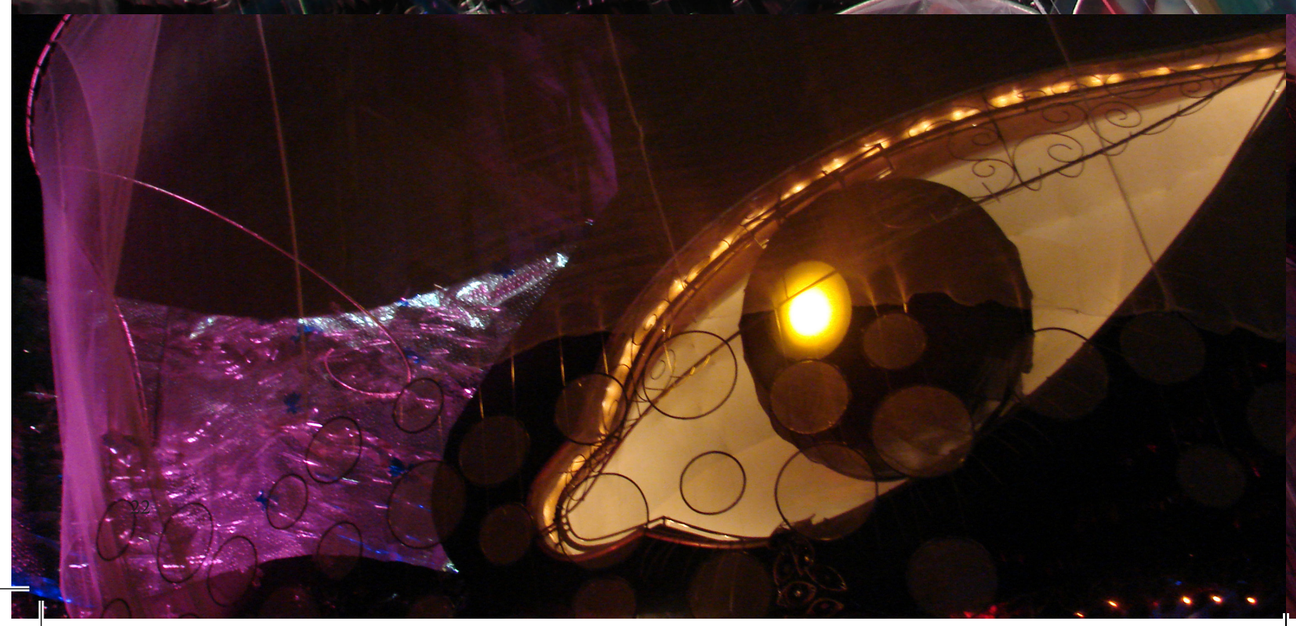
The only aspect in which this unprofessionalism is a blessing is that they agree to my assignment without seeing a physical mock-up; the day they corporatise and want to see three options, I will be finished!

Or take the media. Much of their reporting is plain, uninformed and cosmetic. There needs to be an appreciation of the finer aspects; there needs to be an effort to get into the mind of the artist. Most anyway are focused on capturing pictures of celebrities giving out awards. Where is the room for a specialised columnist to educate the public?

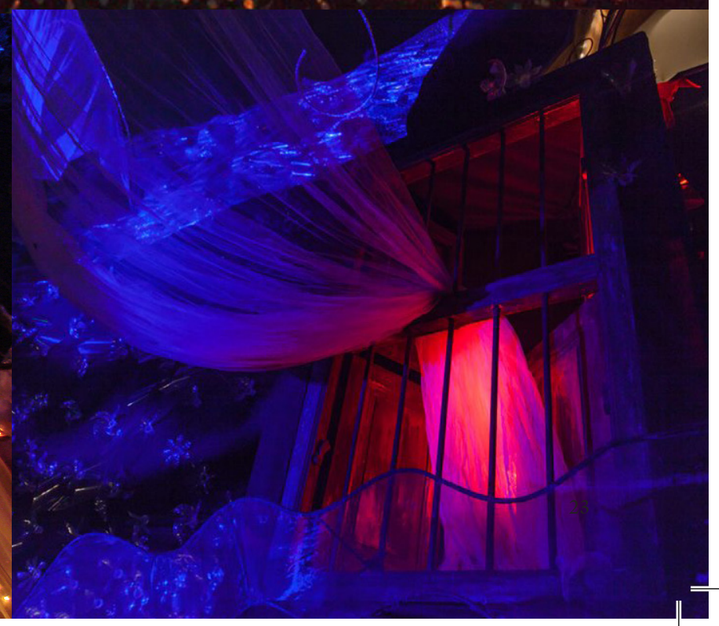
And then you come to the government's role. The Durga *pujo* is clearly the largest festival in India, period. And do you know how the government promotes this landmark event? With just two lines on the State Government tourism website!



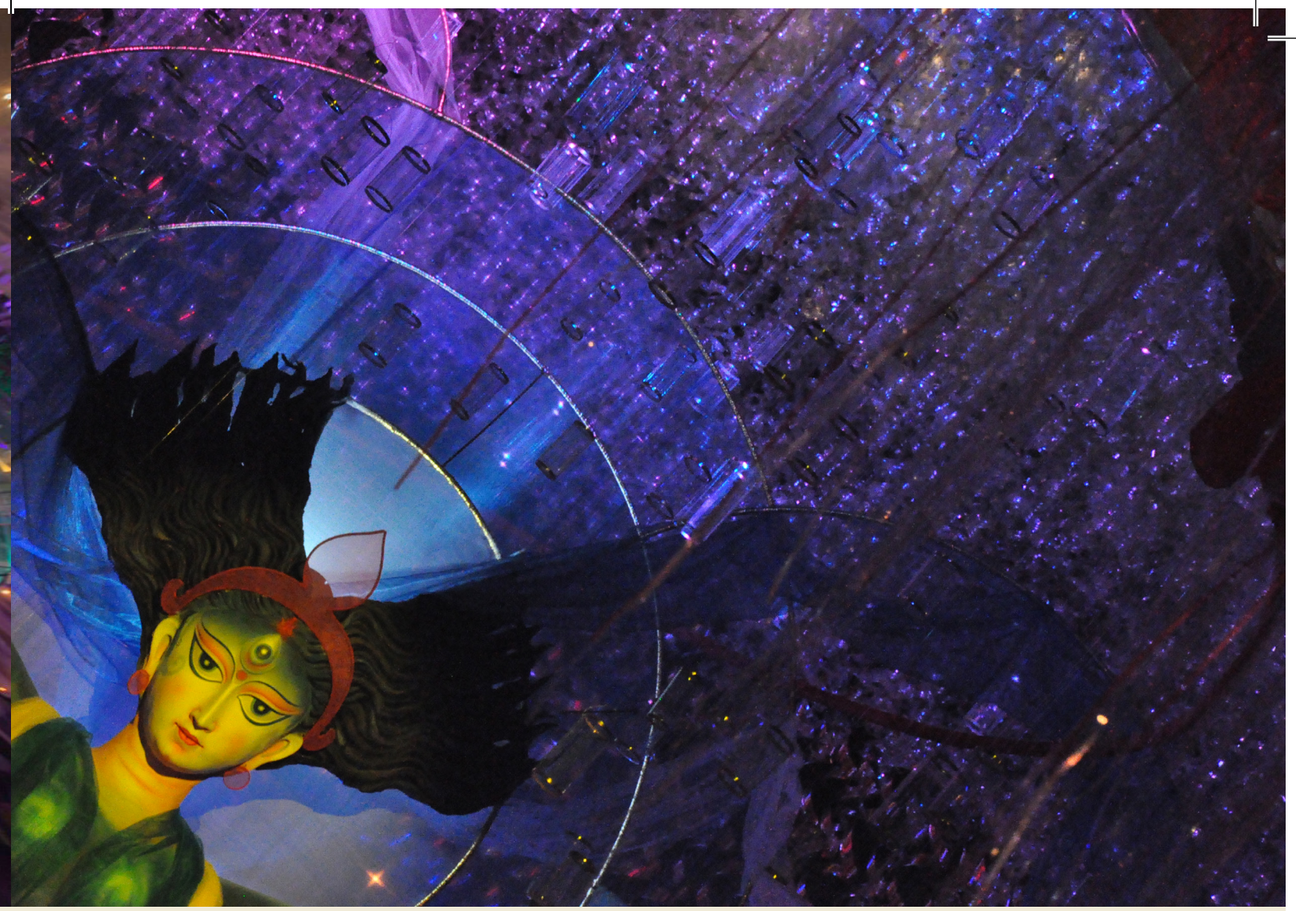












Q&A

DEEPAK LAROIA

ORGANISER, BADAMTALA ASHAR SANGHA

Q: Why did you select to work with Susanta Pal for the 2013 Badamtala *pujo*?

Susanta Paul worked with us for a few years ago and we felt that we needed someone who understood the topography of the *para*. A number of people make random choices when it comes to the selection of the installation artist; they forget that you need someone who shares the same philosophy as the organisers; that you need someone now can create something that blends into the fabric of the neighbourhood. You can't just get any artiste for any neighbourhood just as you can't position any theme around any neighborood.

Q: What was the brief given to him for the *pujo*?

With seasoned professionals, it is better to ask them for a 'memorable *pujo*' than dictate what you want. I mean, if we have to dictate then we would rather go to a contractor than a professional visualiser. So with Susanta, what he told us was that he would do something around the concept of 'dreaming with one's eyes open'. We didn't ask for specifics; we didn't ask for mock-ups; in fact, Susanta must have evolved the original brief as he went along. That brings us to an important point in the overall transaction – trust. We agreed on the remuneration; we agreed on the number of people who would work on the installation; we agreed on the location; we agreed on just about everything. The one thing that we did not agree upon was the 'what'. Even within the core committee we knew that Susanta would be delivering something, except that we did not know what. This could be considered downright unprofessional by some people but when you work with artists you can trust, then you are usually safe.

Q: What were the risks involved?

The biggest one: that we would not like it. Imagine, spending a fortune of public – *para* and sponsor – resources and then going back with a sheepish line *'Theek kore holo na kintu…'* There are so many complications that you hope the artist would have factored into the overall design - whether the installation would be rain-resistant, whether the materials used with be fire-retardant, whether the physically handicapped would enjoy an easy access, whether the *pandal* would impede footfall flow, whether the entry and exit points would be able to manage the throughput and finally whether people would enter and say 'Wow!'

Q: Let us come back to the theme…

Dreams have fascinated philosophers for centuries, but only recently have dreams been subjected to research and scientific study. So this year, we themed the *pujo* around delving into the collective subconscious; the artist focused on the multiple 'sub-consciousnesses'. In some ways, we see *pujos* like ours as a maturing of the entire *pujo* movement; we have graduated from the conventional *shabeki* treatment to the sophisticated; given this context, I would call our *pujo* daring. Daring because the installation was not something that one could have been understood at first glance *('dekhlam, bhaalo laaglo kinto bujhlaam na!')*. A few years ago, organisers like us would have said, *'Na korlei bhaalo'*. But this year, we said let us go ahead.

What was the budget?

In our 75th year we needed a *pujo* that would be memorable, so we increased our overall budget to Rs. 40 lakh. Thereafter, we embarked on the exercise to mobilise this amount from donors, sponsors and residents. What was different from the other years was that this year we actually engaged a professional agency to help us access a wider sponsorship audience and graduate from the *ad hoc* to the professional. We think that this represents the start of a new trend; over the next decade, we actually see a fair amount of outsourcing beginning to happen as residents find it increasingly difficult to excuse themselves from work for weeks leading to the main event.

How was the *pujo* received?

Let me answer this from a few perspectives. I saw a group of noisy youngsters entering our installation area and photographing with abandon. As soon as they entered our *pandal*, they went completely silent. Soundless. Then come to the footfalls; we reported 100,000 during each of ashtami, navami and dashami days.

And finally won awards from TTIS, TOI, KMC, Berger Paints, ETV and *Sangbad Protidin*.

BADAMTALA ASHAR SANGHA
5B, N. B Street, Calcutta - 700 026

Responsible material use

- Rs. 4.5 lakh worth of scrap metal
- Recycled mineral water bottles

BARISHA CLUB
SARBOJANIN
DURGA PUJO



Glossary

Lasya - The term lasya, in the context of Hindu mythology, describes the dance performed by Goddess Parvati and it expresses happiness and is filled with grace and beauty. She is believed to have danced the lasya in response to the male energy of the cosmic dance of Tandava performed by Lord Shiva. In a literal sense, lasya means beauty, happiness and grace. • *Tandava* - Tandava was the divine dance performed by Shiva. Shiva's tandava is described as a vigorous dance that is the source of the cycle of creation, preservation and dissolution. While the Rudra Tandava depicts his violent nature, first as the creator and later as the destroyer of the universe, even of death itself; the Ananda Tandava depicts his enjoyment. Shiva as presented here as Nataraja and is considered the supreme lord of dance. • *Banglar maati* - Bengal's soil • *Deblok* - Heavenly abode • *Thakur dekhte jachhi* - Going to see the idols • *Jokhon ami Hatibagan ar Nalin Sarkar Street-er patla goli te kaaj korchilam tokhon amake onno bhabe bhabte hocchilo* - When I worked in the narrow lanes of Hatibagan and Nalin Sarkar Street, then I had to think differently. • *Tokey eta kortei hobe* - You have to do this! • *Ami 20 lakh takar beshi pujo korte pari na; aamake jodi bole thakur ke shona-rupo te muriye ditey sheta ami parbo na* - I cannot do a *pujo* for more than worth Rs. 20 lakh, if someone asks me to wrap the idol with gold or silver I cannot do so • *Benarasi (saree)* - Benarasi saris are saris made in Varanasi and are historically considered to be among the finest saris in India and are known for their gold and silver brocade or zari, fine silk and opulent embroidery, and being highly sought after. These saris are an inevitable part of any Indian bride's trousseau. • *12 haath* -12 hands (here a measure of length, an average sari is 12 hands long • *Porikroma* - Orbital revolutions, here means going around the *pandal* • *I used to choreograph the pujo right down to the immersion - meyeder lal paar shada shari ar cheleder dhuti panjabi poriye niye jaoa* - I used to choreograph the *pujo* right down to the immersion - Girls should wear a white saree with a red border (iconic image of a Bengali women) and boys should wear panjabi (a traditional men's garment worn mainly in the indian subcontinent, dhoti is worn as a bottom wear whereas panjabi is worn on top, iconic image of a Bengali man). • *Jate ekta byaptir bodh jaage* - Which generatess a feeling of thoroughness and spread • *Jeta tola theke kata ar tarpor opore giye debi hoye geche* - Which was cut from bottom to take the form of the devi at the top • *Ashte-ashte idea ta prothito korchi* - Slowly and steadily I am embedding (planting, establishing) the idea in the mind's of people • *Bhoy peley cholbe na, sroddha korte hobe* - Don't be afraid, be respectful • *50 paisar* - Worth 50 paise • *Ghutey* - Dried cow dung given the shape of a round disk generally used as fuel • *Chaatai* - Multiutility traditional mat • *Taholey er probahomabota sheshi hobe na. Eto achey er moddhe.* - Then its relevance wouldn't have ended ever. It has so many things within itself. • *Lokder bhalo laga chai* - People should also like it. • *Shob kichur maaney hoye na or shob art-er maaney khonja tao murkhami* - Everything does not needs to have a meaning and finding meaning behind every art work is also a kind of foolishness • *'Theme'-namok dhop ta ditey* - Propagating something meaningless in the name of 'theme'; see dhop • *Pandal pujo hocche ekhane protima pujo hocche na!* - What is being done here is the *pujo* of the *pandal* and not the idol • *Nalin Sarkar Street-er saathe aamar shomporko jakey bole omlo-modhur* - My relationship with Nalin Sarkar Street has been bitter sweet. • *That I could spend this money was because theme pujo kora ta aamar bread and butter noye. Tokhono chilo na, ekhono na* - That I could spend this money was because doing theme *pujo* was not a bread butter earner for me. It was not then, not now also. • *Pathor shajiye chhaunir moto kore tar moddhe protima baniyechilam* - I arranged the stones around the idol in the form of a sort of shade • *Maati diye baniye chhilam* - Made it with clay • *Eta aamar nijer pujo hoye gechilo, aamar bari toh duto raasta periye* - It had become like my own *pujo* as my house was a couple of lanes away • *Arey ami toh poishar jonne pujo kori na* - I don't do *pujo* because of money • *Ora jaane ei lokta ache o shob kore nebe* - They know that this man is there and he would handle everything • *Ami chai na aamar kaajer bichar kono dorji koruk* - I don't want my work to be evaluated by any tailor • *Hori naam jop* - Murmurring the name of the god in prayer • *Shobar shob kichu janar dorkar nei kintu roshobodh ta toh thaka chai* - Everybody need not know everything but need to have the feel of good taste • *Khor-maati diye toiri hoy diye bishorjon hoye jaye* - Its made with straw and clay and eventually immersed in the water • *Tyaag* - Sacrifice • *Bah* - Amazing










Q&A

SANATAN DINDA

ARTIST, BARISHA CLUB

You are a professional painter of repute, possibly the only one of your kind to be associated as extensively with the Durga *pujo*?

After passing out of the Government Art College, I hit the ground running towards becoming a successful painter and sculptor. But what I gradually realised was the fact that I was doing nothing for the masses. I recognised that the Durga *pujo* would be the best platform to contribute artistically to the society on a wide scale and extended to the area of installation art or what I refer to as 'living' art. I could have always remained a famous painter or sculptor but with a major limitation – my inability to showcase site-specific installation art or synthetic art or 'plastic' art in a meaningful manner. Especially in the absence of galleries or museums with adequate infrastructure in India. Within the ambit of the Duga *pujo*, I found all three – infrastructural opportunity, mass audience and willing patrons. There were other 'pulls' as well; most people lived dull, insipid lives throughout the year ardently waiting for these five days when their lives would be enveloped by the aesthetic and the colourful, so this was an opportunity to don the role of a magician transforming the real to the surreal. Besides, the *pujo* gave me a chance to be a part of something quintessentially Indian and reverential.

You used an interesting term to describe the Durga *pujo* – site-specific installation art?

Because every locality warrants customised thought. What I did in Behala wouldn't be relevant in Mohammad Ali Park. Then the geography, *jokhon ami* Hatibagan *ar* Nalin Sarkar Street-*er patla goli te kaaj korchilam tokhon amake onno bhabe bhabte hocchilo.* A narrow space of eight-and-a-half feet was all that I had to work with; whatever I created had to be customised around the location. For instance, when I worked on the Nalin Sarkar Street *pujo* in 2011, I came up with a bizarre concept of a floating idol which seemed to protrude out of a block of stone which could have only been done using fibre-glass. When I worked on the Behala *pujo* this year, I asked myself what was the purpose that was being served here…the budget, the space, the overall ambience and the recyclability. Having said this, I must add that *ami* 20 lakh *takar beshi pujo korte pari na; aamake jodi bole thakur ke shona-rupo te muriye ditey sheta ami parbo na.*

What is the pain that goes into creating a *pujo* from scratch, literally?

At the 2004 Nalin Sarkar Street *pujo* I wanted the idol to be wrapped up in a Benarasi, so, I sent people to Varanasi to buy a 'double' Benarasi (12 *haath*). Then I felt that the idol needed a silver coronet, so I got hold of 10 kilos of silver which were melted to make ornaments - out of my own pocket! In 2007, I felt what if I could put gold leaves all along the idol? That would be nice. So I brought 97,000 gold leafs from Jaipur – out of my pocket again. Only for the reason that during the 10-15 minute *porikroma*, the visitor would say *'Bah!'* However at this point let me clarify that you cannot possibly encapsulate 42 years of experience into something that someone gets to see for ten odd minutes at the most.

So, what keeps you going?

See, it's a question of pride, question of ego, question of brand. I even dabbled in music because when we played music – even soft devotional instrumental pieces in the background - the chaotic crowd would sink into a respectful silence. Two elderly women at Nalin Sarkar Street were reduced to tears when they heard this music. Then the role that lighting plays; I used tube lights at Barisha Club without people even getting to know. I used to choreograph the *pujo* right down to the immersion - *meyeder lal paar shada shari ar cheleder dhuti panjabi poriye niye jaoa*- but this is a practice that I stopped only recently because I get too emotional when the idol is being immersed; quite like giving one's daughter away.

What was the thought that went behind what you did at Barisha Club?

I worked with three trucks full of *entel maati* (black clay) from Uluberia. Since I wanted to emphasise on environmental preservation, I didn't use any what I felt were 'artificial' materials. I used the entire available space *jate ekta byaptir bodh jaage*. I made a tree at Barisha *jeta tola theke kata ar tarpor opore giye debi hoye geche*, the idea being to nurture respect for Nature in one's heart. The lights were subdued to navigate the eyes to where I wanted them to be. The *pandal* had a tantric influence; tantric texts talk about the male and female entities intimately associated with nature. *Kumarsambhav* by Kalidas talks about this same intimacy between Shiva and Parvati; Kabikankan Mukundaram Chakraborty socialised Parvati in the form of a simple village girl or Uma to make her more acceptable to the 16th century Bengali; I see myself doing something similar. *Ashte-ashte* idea *ta prothito korchi. Bhoy peley cholbe na, sroddha korte hobe*. Besides, the theme focused on gender awareness. The *pandal* was based around a Sanskrit hymn that talks of a world devoid of evil, which is what heaven is, right?

You don't seem too comfortable with the word 'theme'.

The word 'theme' has been on people's lips for the past 15 years, arising out of a misinterpretation that happened





in 1998. I described my work as converting 'thematic art' into 'thematic craft'. What I meant was that if I was to use a 50 *paisar ghutey* as a part of an installation aesthetically and meaningfully, it added value. As was the case with a *chatai* or thermocol, when they became a part of the installation, they became part of something bigger. The press, unable to understand the significance of my words, began to use the word 'theme'. *Arre baba*, 'Durga' itself is a theme. If we were to work on basis of that *taholey er probahomabota sheshi hobe na. Eto achey er moddhe. Lokder bhalo laga chai. Shob kichur maaney hoye na or shob* art-*er maaney khonja tao murkhami*. There are a lot of people who start three months before the *pujo*, 'theme'-*namok dhop ta ditey*. They need to give something to the press. *Pandal pujo hocche ekhane protima pujo hocche na!*

One finds it curious that an artist and sculptor of your standing should work for a number of years with a *pujo* as small (when you did) as Nalin Sarkar Street?

Nalin Sarkar Street-*er saathe aamar shomporko jakey hole omlo-modhur.* But I must talk of Hatibagan Sarbojanin first here; in 1998, they approached me with a Rs. 70,000 paycheck, was not paid a paisa and ended up spending the entire amount from my pocket. The next year I did the *pujo* again. Why? Because there was this need to express myself creatively for the masses. That I could spend this money was because theme *pujo kora ta aamar* bread and butter *noye*. *Tokhono chilo na, ekhono na.* If I sell a painting for Rs. 16 lac I can do a standout *pujo* with that money myself. My best work was at Hatibagan in 2002; I made a 54 feet tree and below that *pathor shajiye chhaunir moto kore tar moddhe protima baniyechilam.* I didn't use actual stones, *maati diye baniye chhilam*. However it failed to win prizes and we had to part ways. But yes, you asked me about Nalin Sarkar Street. *Eta aamar nijer pujo hoye gechilo, aamar bari toh duto raasta periye.* I would get 45-odd children from the slums to work with me, bring me tea and biscuits, run errands, eat from the same plate, buy them *pujo* clothes and pay them a token amount. Why? *Arey ami toh poishar jonne pujo kori na.* If I were to do that I would have started calculating the money that I was supposed to receive on a per square feet basis. I sculpted the idols, designed the *pandal*, choreographed every detail, provided employment to a considerable number of people and hence the sense of attachment was stronger for me. The problem was that after a point all organisers started treating the artist like a grocer. *Ora jaane ei lokta ache o shob kore nebe.* Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that I have a nonchalant appearance. It just a got bit too taxing in the end.

Is there a wish-list?

Definitely. I want more knowledgeable people to appreciate *pujos*. Better crowd control would help. How much can you possibly grasp the subtleties when you have so many people pushing you around? Initially what I would do was to get down and explain things to visitors firsthand. I also feel that we have overdone the awards bit. There are so many awards now that even an average *pujo* is assured of a prize. And with so many awards almost everyone and everybody has become a judge. *Ami chai na aamar kaajer bichar kono dorji koruk.* I think *pujos* need to be ticketed; charging even one rupee from the general public and Rs.100 from VIPs would generate economic sustainability. Besides, the government could do its bit by enhancing visibility for the festival. When I showed *pujo* pictures to my artist friends in Vienna, they were amazed because no one had even heard of what I believe is that largest site-specific installation art festival in the world. Due to these reasons, I am in a good mind to stop doing *pujos* from 2015.

Why?

I started in this area 15 years ago with the objective to do something for the masses. I think I have done enough. I tried going about and explain everything on a one-on-one basis. I just can't do that anymore. Think about it when Chaitanya Mahaprabhu inspired people to do *hori naam jop*, everyone did that, and people still do that. But how many of them know why they raise their hands up in the air while taking the name of the lord. Because raising the hands puts the 'centre of gravity' at one's heart. *Shobar shob kichu janar dorkar nei kintu roshobodh ta toh thaka chai.* I can't go around explaining all this. Somewhere there is this frustration and angst that I couldn't communicate adequately enough. And there is the thing about plagiarism; each year I find more works of mine being altered and used by other artists. When asked, they say that they have been 'inspired' by me!

Moreover my body cannot take the labour any longer. In 2010, while working on a canopy I lost my balance, and while falling I grabbed a bamboo pole but tore my shoulder ligament in the process. I was required to take injections but I finished the work that I was doing. However I was unable to do solo shows since. Working on a *pujo* means working 24X7 for two months or so. This time doctors advised me bed rest but I have been working 14 hours a day for my solo show! The writing is on the wall: if I don't stop working on *pujos*, I will not be able to do any solo shows.

What is remarkable about the *pujos*?

We create what in our parlance is referred to as decadent art. *Khor-maati diye toiri hoy diye bishorjon hoye jaye.* We have learnt to let go, which is the concept of *tyaag*. In the West they are obsessed with hoarding in the name of preservation. Western artists were amazed when I told them that each year we immersed our creative works in a river! This is creative detachment and one of the central tenets of Hindu faith.



Q&A

PARTHO GANGULY

ORGANISER, BARISHA CLUB SARBOJANIN DURGA *PUJO*

Q: What inspired this year's *pujo* theme?

The line *'Amartya lokey debi vandana'* - veneration of the goddess in the realm of the gods. What gave us this idea were atrocities on women in our country, which inspired Sanatan Dinda to ideate and suggest solutions. Sanatan created a differentiated idol (form and appearance) depicting Parvati's *lasya*, *lasya* is often misinterpreted as 'lascivious' however in Hindu mythology it is described as Parvati's dance in response to the male energy of the cosmic *tandava* dance by Shiva. So *lasya* was perceived as creative as opposed to the destructive *tandava*. So when one saw the goddess, one felt a veneration for her creative force which breathes life into the universe. We achieved this clash of the spiritual and the physical, implying that when we rise above a strictly male gaze that is fixated on the body and reach out to the spiritual, gender crimes will decline.

Q: What folk traditions were imbibed?

Interestingly, Sanatan visualised the whole *pandal* as a canvas. We didn't focus on any folk art form, though our *pandal* reflected the Bengali ethos through its raw material-*Banglar maati*. We purchased three lorries of *maati* from Uluberia and the rest from Kumortuli and Kalighat. Sanatan used this extensively to create a piece of *deblok*. A distinctly 'Bengali' concept of heaven in sight, touch and smell. For this, Sanatan insisted on keeping the earthen soil colour intact to emphasise its life-giving nature and also to moderate costs at a time of economic slowdown. As with any great artwork, there were multiple facets. One, that our mundane world can be a heaven in itself. Two, we need to relinquish our evil impulses at the feet of the divine. Three, everything that we did culminated in the idol (emhasising the line *'thakur dekhte jachhi'*).

Q: What was the uniqueness of the *pujo*?

Sanatan Dinda himself. His hand was visible across each *pandal* element. Sanatan treated the *pandal* as a canvas. He transposed his painting motifs – cracks, bends and other distortions - onto the *pandal*. This also protected our brand of being an aesthetics-led *pujo*. You will not necessarily find scale here, you will not necessarily find the term 'mega *pujo*' applied to our *pujo*, but you will hear of Barisha Club's *pujo* being a must-see because of its design.











Q: What were the challenges?

The challenges were of two kinds, one over which one had no control (weather, principally) and the other over one had some control (finances). We were proactively prepared on both counts: we constructed a shed over the *pandal* during the construction period so that our deadline would not be affected. We were more bothered by the rains during the *pujo*, which kept the crowds home.

As far as the financial crisis is concerned, what can I say? We also bore the brunt of the slowdown, making it imperative to reduce our outlay by 10 per cent to Rs.45 lakh. Correspondingly, we curtailed our food and transportation expenses. Besides, in a *pujo* where 75 per cent of the outlay is funded by sponsorship, we leveraged our years of goodwill with sponsors so that they would continue to work again with us. This is when the strength of our 'brand' was reflected: each of the 20 corporate houses who supported our *pujo* in the past agreed to support in 2013 as well. Our biggest achievement: we broke even!

Q: What was the extent of your personal involvement with your *pujo*?

The conduct of a *pujo* works like any corporate project. There are various activities, there are various budgets, there are sequential deadlines, there are overall resources, there are checks and balances, there is marketing and promotions, there is a focus on receivables, there are cash flow issues, there are loan providing capabilities. With only one difference. In a corporate environment, people are paid to do this. In a *pujo* environment, all forms of neighbourhood engagement are voluntary.

This thing of *'Tokey eta kortei hobei'* does not work. Everything is voluntary and one needs to appeal to one's sense of emotional ownership. This is the biggest asset of any *pujo* committee and also its biggest challenge. What you can achieve through your team is really what the *pujo* comes down to. In business, they call it human resource development. It is no different here. It was my business to see that all sub-teams worked in a co-ordinated manner with each other, ensuring that we competed the *pujo* slightly ahead of schedule.

Q: How was the *pujo* recieved?

On the dry *saptami* day, the queue to enter our *pandal* stretched 700 metres. We won 30 awards. When the Chief Minister entered, she insisted that the idol be preserved. So after the *pujo*, the idol was transferred to an art gallery in Rabindra Sarobar.

BARISHA CLUB
5 & 8 Santosh Roy Road, Behala
Sakherbazar, Kolkata

66 PALLI
SARBOJONIN
DURGA UTSAV



Glossary

Bhaabtey somoy din - Give me some time to think… • *Loha* - Iron • *Mota shutor dori* - Thick thread rope • *Arre, aage bolen ni keno?* - Oh! why didn't you ask this before? • *Kaaj koraatey hoy* - We have to get the work done • *Porishromi* - Hardworking • *Parar dada* - Local goon • *Mod* - Alcohol/liquor • *Shuddho shuchi, Shushto ruchi* - The slogan for Asian Paints Sharad Samman is 'Shuddha suchi, sustha ruchi'r sera bachai' which means 'The best from the artistically efficient and culturally significant', as described by the late poet Subhash Mukhopadhay. • *Jeta key shorjjo korte hoy* - The things that one has to endure • *Khuti pujo* - Inaugural structure; the first bamboo pole is planted and the event is celebrated • *Ei re!* - Oh no! • *Protibaad* - Protest • *Bangaals* - Generally referred to people who had migrated to West Bengal from East Pakistan (now known as Bangladesh)





Q&A

AMAR SARKAR

ARTIST, 66 PALLI SARBOJONIN DURGA UTSAV

Q: What was inspiration for this year's 66 Palli *pujo*?

A: The theme was woven around the celebration of women's power. When the 66 Palli team came home last November, I told them *bhaabtey somoy din*. And then the Nirbhaya rape incident happened last December. It was just too evident for me to miss. So ironically, a number of *pujos* celebrated women's empowerment in 2013, though with differing treatments.

The dome-level *protibaad* against female foetecide was depicted through a foetus almost crying out 'Please don't!'; we showcased gender unity through women holding hands right around the circular *pandal*; we celebrated women achievement across various walks of life at the lowest *pandal* tier. Wherever you saw, you saw women… as winners! For instance, a Kalpana Sharma in space. A Mary Kom at the Olympics. A Chanda Gayen on top of Everest. Some 65 such compositions, no repeat.

Q: How did you treat the installation?

A: The trick was to do something award-worthy without bankrupting the *pujo* committee. So we used something most people dismiss as waste (kraft packaging board); we eliminated the use of paint; used knife-carving as opposed to laser cutting (generating sustained occupation for the knife-sharpener for weeks and cleaning out all of Kolkata's knife stock); drew inspiration from the church organ to create 40 feet cardboard pipes hung from the ceiling (aggregated weight of a tonne at least) as a metaphor for women's pleas reaching the Divine. And we created a *protima* combining feminity with strength (not easy!).

Q: How much of an effort went into this?

A: Over the last 60 days, the team of 20 worked 24X7 onsite – someone sleeping, someone eating, someone working – to create a combination of motor-driven lights playing percussions around static kraft board-carved images. People would need to turn their heads to see things happening all around them as per the moving light and sound. They would be initially bewildered but thereafter awed enough to say 'Wow!'

Q: How challenging was the installation?

A: From the ceiling, we hung some 10-40 feet board pipes, which when aggregated, would have been more than a tonne in weight. The challenge was not as much aesthetic as it was engineering. How do we hang board pipes from the ceiling? What if the fastening weakened and one of the pipes dropped on a passing visitor? What if the ceiling failed to support more than a tonne in weight? The challenge was to think the solution from an aesthetic-cum-engineering perspective, so one created a prototype at home, rolled ½ and ¾ inch pipes, hung them from a netted 'roof' and then extrapolate all the metrics to be able to arrive at an indicative load-bearing capacity. The result was the use of a *loha* net structure on top, pipe with curved ends, the use of *mota shutor dori,* not metal wires, to hold the pipe through holes, then tying the rope to a larger rope and then in turn to a really large consolidated rope. Some of the interesting stories would have never been told had you not had this conversation; each pipe had a knife carving and beneath the knife carving we pasted cellophane in different colours.

Oh, we could write a story on how we managed to fix those cellophane sheets against those carved images with the objective to create a glamorous atmosphere, which just goes to show the pains one needs to go through the *pujos* which goes completely unappreciated by visitors. What we did was that we selected one of our thinnest workers to get inside the 14 inch board pipe, stationed a fan from the other end so that at no stage would he feel suffocated and then he gradually slid himself in ten feet to the point where he had to place and paste the cellophane. By the time he had finished this exercise, he was declared our resident expert in this activity; what would have taken somebody at least a couple of hours, he would complete within minutes.

But yes, coming back to the fusion of engineering and aesthetics, when I showed the prominent architect Anjan Mitra what I had done, he brought eight of his architecture students to come and examine my *pandal*; they were more interested in the engineering side of what I had done; they felt that I had something precious to offer them – field-*er* experience.

Q: Most things in India do not finish on schedule. What was the management effort that went into completing the installation within schedule?

A: One of the things – at least this has worked well for me – that I remember is to provide a day-by-day schedule of the work to my team; one of the things that I don't do is to show the team the big picture which is there in my mind. I often hear after the structure is complete: *'Arre, aage boley ni keno?'* If I had, they would have got completely puzzled. So what one does at this stage is to observe who does what better than the others and keep rotating the duties. For weeks, we generally worked onsite after 10 pm so that we could get by without affecting traffic flow. And for all these weeks we lived with the mortal fear that our contractors would be poached by other *pujo* contractors desperate to complete their *pujos* on time. This can create some really crazy complications; when contractors suddenly abscond without paying the labourers, the laborers deliberately damage the installation so that the word reaches the contractors who hurried back to inspect, at which point the labourers press their demand for clearing their outstandings.

Then the sheer physical and temporal investment: the team of 30 invested 16 hours of work a day over the last











month leading to the event; a week before the event people were putting in almost 24 hours a day. As the principal ideator, I was required to visit the site every day over the last 30 days, visit twice in the last seven days and spent the last two days completely on site – no going home. And to top it all, the *pujo* inaugurations were pre-poned from shoshti to the third day; and yet, we were ready in time.

And then the last challenge of being able to complete the *pujo* within the budget. Over the last few years, there is an increasing pressure to moderate budgets even as material and labour costs (Rs 250-400 per day) have increased. We respond with an MBA on our feet; we have to sweat our labour efficiently, we have to budget 'x' days of waste due to rain, we have to devise intelligent value engineering initiatives and we have to ensure that the workflow linkages are absolutely right. Over the years, if there is one thing that the *pujos* have taught me, then it is that my preoccupation appears to be aesthetic; it actually is engineering and logistics management instead. *Kaaj koraatey hoy!*

Q. A curious question. Do theme artists like you focus largely on the remuneration as a criterion for working on a *pujo*?

Thank you for asking this question. It would seem that this is only what influences our decision-making. On the contrary, it is one of many things that we consider. We select a location on the basis of how relatively unknown it is and what our intervention can possibly do in enhancing its profile. We select a location on the basis of the theme that I have in mind; one can't fit a 66 Palli theme into a Tala Barowari location and vice versa, so much of the decision comes down to what I have in mind and where best it may be suited.

I select a location on the basis of the space that is available; a constrained space may or may not be ideal for the kind of theme I have in mind. The budget influences the decision, as does the reputation of the *pujo* organisers when it comes to giving the artist the freedom with which to work. And then there is the chemistry of the people one is going to work with: I have noticed how migrant *Bangaals* in Kolkata tend to live in clusters, have an unusual hunger to succeed *('porishromi')* and how this characteristic influences the scale of their *pujos*, the speed with which they get things done (tomorrow's work done by this evening) and the theme, colour and materials.

So even though one started out as a south Kolkata artist, one has over time extended one's influence to Salt Lake, North Kolkata and other locations of the city. The idea is not to extend one's influence across Kolkata as much there is a desire to absorb flavours from various parts and emerge as a more complete professional.

Q. What is the one thing that has changed for the better over the decades?

Until a couple of decades ago, there was a culture of *jor-julum* around the *pujos*. When there was a mike culture around the *pujo*. When *pujos* were dominated by a *parar dada*. When it was usual for *pujo* organisers to have *mod* (alcohol) behind the *pandal*, behave sober when award judges came and get back to their binge as soon as they left. When it was challenging for women to go unescorted from one *para's pujo* to another. And then came the awards, which laid down challenging and futuristic standards of how *pujos* should be. This started a cultural transformation through a single positioning line - *shuddho shuchi, shushto ruchi* – and the result is that Durga *pujos* are now positioned around responsibility and the Kali *pujo*, which largely used to be the preserve of the hoodlums, has evolved into a family *pujo*.

Q. What is the one thing that you would change if you were given a choice?

A: There are just two tragedies: one, what is created over 120 days is celebrated for seven days and eventually destroyed in two because this city has failed to develop an archival respect. Two, there are two Kolkatas that we inhabit – the aesthetic one that we build and destroy each year and the unaesthetic PWD-inspired Kolkata *jeta key shorjjyo korte hoy.* Even as we live in the unaesthetic, we need to create the aesthetic. This then is our tragedy – and our victory. Now if only we could connect the two, ah, what a city this could be!





Q&A

RAJAT SENGUPTA

ORGANISER, 66 PALLI SARBOJONIN DURGA UTSAV

Q. How was the 66 Palli 2013 *pujo* themed?

The modern woman stands shoulder to shoulder with men across the workplace. And yet, they are exploited at home. Our *pujo* was themed around this inequity. Our central message was that there is a Durga inside all our women and together, the women of the world are capable of destroying all evil. We extended this idea to the *protima* – made across two months by Sanatan Rudra Pal - whose idol was made completely of clay, sitting on half the earth to emphasise gender equality.

Q. What was the effort that went into the implementation?

Renowned artist Amar Sarkar began to conceptualise the *pujo* in January 2013, began to work at the workshop in May, embarked on the structurals in June (after *khuti pujo*) and 22 of his students worked around 14 hours a day to deliver the installation on-site in four months.

Q. What was the *pandal's* uniqueness?

The fact that it was made of card board! We carved thousands of images and designs out of the card board, we used around 400 cardboard pillars (longest 50 ft, heaviest 12 kgs) and we even used cardboard as a base for the synchronised rattle induced percussion.

Q. What was the size of your budget?

Around Rs 25 lakh, which was addressed through member donations, locality subscriptions and sponsors, which addressed the largest portion. This brings one to an important point – the need for marketing the *pujos*. Normally when you market a product, you have a prototype in hand; the customer knows what he or she is getting in return. When you market a *pujo* from January, you literally market 'blind'; you don't have a concept in hand. People are literally backing a track record for a prospective event! We present would-be sponsors with video CDs of the previous year's event; we provide indicative statistics of the media exposure that our *pujo* generated and the kind of footfalls that stretched across the neighbourhood. The entire idea is to carve out a brand for our 66 Palli *pujo* in the mind of the prospect. Earlier, it would have been adequate to have a running relationship with the sponsor; over the last few years, with competition coming in and most landing up at the doors of the same sponsors, the game has got more complex. It is not enough to weave a compelling story about how sophisticated our *pujos* were; it is also imperative to keep showing up. There have been a number of instances when sponsors have excused themselves saying, *'Ei re!* Just last week I committed a sizable portion of the budget to another *pujo* because you never turned up!' As a result, we visit no less than 100 corporates leading to the *pujos*; a strike rate of 25% is considered excellent!

Q. What are some of the challenges that you face as an organiser?

For years, we selected to commence work starting four months in advance, with all the corresponding challenges of managing on-site dynamics. Then if this wasn't a large complexity, we had the extended monsoons to deal with, making it imperative to have a comprehensive waterproofing strategy on hand. Remember, we were working with card board inside!

Q. What was the extent of neighbourhood involvement?

In one word… 'extensive'. There were number of challenges – since our *pujo* was right in the middle of the lane, we were literally required to 'wall up' buildings on either side for nearly three months, which means that for a quarter of the year some of the residents had to live without access to sunlight - literally losing the use of their verandahs. So if you ask about the sacrifices being made for the *pujos*, this would easily top the list. Besides, neighbourhood members have to manage a number of responsibilities while juggling their day jobs or professions or businesses. In the last fortnight, it was almost like the entire neighbourhood taking professional leave to attend to their social responsibility; in the last week, members literally stayed on site for 24 hours.


Photography / Website Design / Digital Social Marketing Call Raj : 9903150990

Q: There is a growing focus on responsibility.

This was relevant for us this year because our entire *pandal's* interiors were treated out of card board boxes, which were technically flammable. So we used fire-retardant spray on the back of the boxes. We eliminated the use of lead-based paints. We emphasised the use of environment-friendly LED lights. Over the years, we showed the foresight to create permanent underground piping for electric cables to minimise the risk of short circuits. All our electrical lines were linked to MCBs to prevent electrical trips arising from over-loading. Our electric meter room was equipped with adequate exhaust fans to minimise ambient temperature.

There is also a growing focus on responsible footfall-flow. This commitment was reflected in competent private security guards deployed 24X7 and the extensive use of CCTV cameras. Years ago, it would have been unthinkable for *pujo* organisers to commissioned toilet facilities; during our committee meetings we deliberated extensively and actually separate toilet facilities for men and women, first-aid facility, ambulance and drinking water, among others. This is how our *pujo* kept pace with changing times. The result was that during the five days of the *pujo*, we reported an attendance of no less than five million people – not a single untoward incident.

And of course, we won 23 awards in 2013 including the CESC-Telegraph True Spirit *pujo* Award.

Q. Your overriding observation…

It would be easy to classify the Durga *pujo* as a religious festival; it has evolved into a social and cultural phenomenon - a community binder and a brand-enhancer. Thanks to the spirit created by the *pujo*, we engage in year-round events including various camps (blood donation, health check-up and blanket distribution, among others). The result is what is evidently a five-day event translates into a bonding across the next 360!

66 PALLI SARBOJANIN DURGOTSAB
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DUM DUM PARK
BHARAT CHAKRA



Glossary

Lau - Calabash • *Tele bhaja* - An umbrella term for fried vegetable snacks, a local Bengali delicacy • Pratik *babu aamake bishwas korechhen* - Pratik *babu* has trusted me • *Ami gramer lok* - I have come from village









Q&A

DEBASHIS BHATTACHARJEE

ARTIST, DUM DUM PARK BHARAT CHAKRA

Q. Where was the theme for this year's *pujo* derived?

What I had in mind was to do something with waste material. Trees, for instance, serve when living and when dead (furniture). Except for one part - wood chips, which are wasted. So I resolved to do something with wood chips and give them an art form. I also used *lau-er khol* – the hardened shell of gourds - to create light brackets.

Lord Vishnu was my inspiration for the *pandal.* Lord Vishnu's ten avatars were depicted in the *pandal.* I used *shankha, chakra* and *padma* in various places in an upward direction to depict growth. I created *sheshnag* - mythical snake with five heads – at the entrance and a 14 feet Vishnu *murti* using wood chips. Beside, another *murti* was created replicating Tirupati (form of Vishnu). Since most Vishnu temples are in South India, I used a South Indian style while constructing the *pandal.*

I must mention Pratik Chowdhury (Bharat Chakra Club) for the trust he reposed on me. One year I had an ugly spat with some *pujo* organisers as they were not paying as per their commitment for which I had to leave the project halfway. Pratik *babu aamake bishwas korechhen.* He said whatever you do; we will accept.

Q. You worked with wood chips which are inflammable.

A fire retardant solution was sprayed on the wood chips but I could not use much as it would have discoloured the wood chips. Instead we created a solution of water, caustic soda and arrowroot which formed a protective layer on the wood chips to make them fire retardant. Besides, we decided to work with raw materials which otherwise get wasted. We decided to use LED bulbs for illumination which provided wider options (more colours, lower wattage and lower costs). Besides, the entire *pandal* was recycled and used for a Kali *pujo* in Barasat where it won five awards!

Q. How did enter this field?

I come from a village near Dankuni. I was admitted at an art college in Bhubaneswar but couldn't pursue the course as my family didn't have enough money. I got trained in stone cutting by a famous artist in Odisha. In 2002, I was approached by a Dankuni-based club to do a *pujo* where I was remunerated only Rs 4,000 but my work received wide appreciation. The following year I was invited to work on a *pujo* in Bangladesh and in 2006 did a stone-carved Durga idol which is preserved in Swabhumi. I learnt stone carving from a person who kept me in his house and bore all their expenses and fed me when I was training under him. I was a nobody when I started and couldn't have become anyone if he hadn't taught me. I also wanted to do something for the underprivileged in turn. So I got 20 unskilled boys from a village in Uluberia to work with me, trained them, paid them, supervised them and created a sustainable livelihood.

What needs to be done to take the movement ahead?

Whatever we create is destroyed in seven days; only some *pujos* are recycled. *Pujo* organisers are also to blame because they ask for exorbitant prices, scaring buyers away. If artists are given the freedom to sell their work, it would create an alternate source of earning. My wife died of cancer in 2008 and if I could get money by selling the installations, I would donate to NGOs working for cancer. The government should also come forward to create a space for preserving the installations. One more point. There should be a means to provide recognition to small artists who work with minuscule budgets keeping the tradition alive.

Q. Do you have a wish list?

Ami gramer lok, but because of my association with the *pujo* I got the opportunity to board an aircraft when I was flown to Tripura for curating a *pandal.* Maybe someday my work will be appreciated and I will get an opportunity to work abroad.





Q&A

GAUTAM BISWAS

ORGANISER, DUM DUM PARK BHARAT CHAKRA *PUJO*

Q: What was the theme for the Dum Dum Park Bharat Chakra 2013 *pujo*?

Our theme was encapsulated in a typical Bengali ditty: *'Kather songe kath miliye /Debo shobar chokh juriye/Chotto kather gaanth bendhe/Maayer mukh uthbe phute.'* We have been doing the *pujo* for 13 years with an emphasis on making it different each year. This year our *pujo* was conceptualised by artist Debasish Bhattacharya; the *pandal* was constructed primarily out of small wood pieces. There was a particular reason for this: normally, wood chunks are used and wood chips get wasted. We recognised the irony of talking about environmental preservation, talking highly of the need to plant trees and then wasting a precious resource that one would have taken years to nurture and grow. We extended the concept: we used *lau* (calabash), removed the contents, designed on the vegetable inside, installed lights within and on the ceiling. A number of people could have said that we merely encashed the flavour of the day – environmental consciousness – but the reality extended deeper. We planted trees every year during the monsoons. We discouraged the use of plastic bags in our locality.

While on the one hand, the *pandal* had an underlying environmental message, the *pandal* proper resembled a Vaishnav temple inspired by Deccan architecture. On entering the *pandal* one could see the Sheshnag - king of all serpent deities, one of the primal beings of creation and avatar of Narayana. To emphasise the environmental point, the 14-foot Vishnu statue was made out of wood chips. As one walked inside, one saw the ten avatars of Vishnu made of the same small pieces. In the anterior portion, we recreated the Tirupati Balaji idol from Chittor (Andhra Pradesh). What our artist did was introduce a three-dimensional feel by intelligently placing the wood pieces on top of each other.

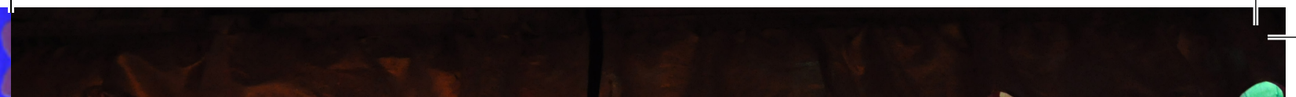
How was the concept triggered?

After the theme crossed Debasish's mind, we embarked on the challenging task of collecting the *lau*; getting all of the same size was the ordeal. In view of this, we began to collect 450-500 *laus* from February 2013 onwards for an event that would transpire in October! The theme was eventually frozen in May, work commenced in June – the material management was completed following which the actual construction could commence. Since we didn't want a confused blend of Bengal and South Indian influences, we selected to use more of the Southern influence customised around our structural requirements.

How people-friendly was your *pujo*?

Principally to provide a sense of safety and convenience to visitors. We made a provision for a baby care unit for mothers to feed their children, something you would not have found in any other *pujo*. We responded to these realities with various initiatives: outsourced security to 40 professionals in addition to security cameras; we placed smoke detectors inside the *pandal*; sprinklers were placed outside the *pandal* and if the temperature reached 60 degrees, the bulbs on the sprinklers would burst and the sprinklers would be instantaneously activated; metal pipes drained water from the site to a pond reinforced by submersible pumps and a silent back-up power generator; fire extinguishers of various sizes were placed everywhere (including foam and CO2-based). We were pleasantly surprised when the





West Bengal Government asked for a blueprint of our fire system for onward replication across other *pujos*.

Was it an expensive *pujo*?

Not really. We estimated a budget of around Rs. 25 lacs, funded by liberal donations from members and sponsorships. Our payback was in the form of thousands of people who came to see our *pujo*. We also won 10 awards.

What makes your *pujo* different?

The fact that we don't just come to life for one event in a year. The fact that we undertake community activities throughout the year. We encourage upcoming writers through the publication of various publications backed by the Prayas Sahitya Samman to recognise literary excellence (which went to Samir Chattopadhyay this year). We observe the Fire Brigade Day in collaboration with the West Bengal Government, educating people in fire management, which explains the emphasis on counter-fire initiatives in our *pujo*. Our cultural division is looked after completely by our women members. At the end of the day, no club can expect to have achieved meaningful work without making a grassroots difference. In view of this, we provided neighbourhood rickshawallahs with insurance and accident coverage up to Rs. 100,000. This year we helped a disabled boy start a *tele bhaja* shop.

How professional is the club's approach?

Our accounts are managed by one of our members; these are no less a problem than that of any bank. We finalise our *pujo* accounts within a month of the event's close and we get these accounts audited for enhanced transparency.

DUM DUM PARK BHARAT CHAKRA CLUB
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BOSEPUKUR SITALA MANDIR



Glossary

Aamra ekta boro pujo kortey paarbo! - We can do a big *pujo*! • *Thakur* - God; here means idol • *Dekha jaak!* - Lets see! • *Kichhu kortey pereche ay-ra* - They have done something • *Ei bhabe suru holo Bosepukur-er Durga pujor poth chola* - This is how Bosepukur started its journey of organising Durga *pujos* • *Khoob bhalo korli!* - Well done! • *Arre baba* - Oh father! • *Aamra ashwikar korchhi na* - We are not denying that • *Durdhorsho* - Terrific/awesome • *Tasher Desh* - The Land of Cards, a namesake play written by Rabindranath Tagore • *Golaam to badshah* - Jack to king • *Bharer pandal - Pandal* made of bhar. Bhar's are earthen pots generally used in the roadside tea stalls. For *pandal* refer to *pandal* in Hindustan park. • *Aami dashamir din ratri bela pandal bhenge dite baddho holam* - I was forced to break the *pandal* on the night of dashami. For dashami see dashami • *Rosh* - Juice • *Bosepukurer pujo mane protyek bochor aalada and natun kichu hobe and onno dike jabe* - Bosepukur's *pujo* means every year something different and new would happen and would go a different way • *Visitor ke thokaai na* - Never cheat on the visitors • *Neta-mantrir pujo* - Leader or minister's *pujo* • *Aashun! Aami aapna ke bojhaai!* - Here! Let me explain it to you • *Protima* - See protima • *Arre baba, raakhun na!* - It okay, please keep it! • *Shabeki* - Traditional or as per the custom • *Kintu pocket ta oh dekhte hobe* - But would also have to look into one's pocket i.e. budget • *Ei baar korbo na!* - This year we won't do it! • *Tri bhuban joyi* - Conquerer olf three world • *Paatal* - Underworld • *Paduka/kharam* - Paduka is the name of India's oldest, most quintessential footwear. It is little more than a sole with a post and knob, which is engaged between the big and second toe. • *Swarga* - Heaven • *Namabali* - A scroll or a piece of cloth with Lord Vishnu's name printed or written on it and it is being worn by the Brahmins • Ruby *more* - Ruby crossing • *Bhai phonta - Bhai Phonta* is a Bengali Hindu festival, usually celebrated two days after the Kali *pujo*, where the sisters mark the foreheads of their brothers with sandalwood paste and pray for their safety, well being and success • *Ashwamedh Yagna* - The *Ashvamedha (ashwamedhá;* "horse sacrifice") was one of the most important royal rituals of Vedic religion, described in detail in the *Yajurveda*. In Hinduism, *yajña* (also transliterated *yagya* or *yadnya)* or *yagam,* is a ritual of offerings accompanied by chanting of Vedic mantras derived from the practice in Vedic times.







Q&A

KAJAL SARKAR

ORGANISER, BOSEPUKUR SITALA MANDIR *PUJO*

How does one arrive at an understanding of the richness of the Bosepukur Sitala Mandir *pujo* legacy?

The story of our Bosepukur *pujo* goes back to the early Fifties when Kasba was on the outskirts of Calcutta, the vicinity was covered with thick overgrowth and this part of the city was generally dismissed as a 'ghost town'. At that time, the Ghoshpara Kali *pujo* used to be three times the scale of the Durja *pujo* – amazing! – and that was largely because the Kali *pujo* used to be organised by us youngsters while the Durga *pujo* used to be organised by the neighbourhood elders. We were kind of written off. People didn't know whether Bosepukur even existed on the map of this city.

But then something happened that transformed this neighbourhood forever. Our road got widened and formalised. Finally, we weren't just the back of beyond; we were on an important artery connecting Gariahat with the EM Bypass. So we came from two backgrounds: one, our Durga *pujo* had a paltry budget of Rs 33,000; two, if you traveled down the EM Bypass after Ultadanga, you would have to drive for nearly 13 kms before you came across any *pujo* of standing, which was ours.

So somewhere around the mid-Nineties, our young committee arrived at a decision: *aamra ekta boro pujo kortey paarbo!* Right place. Right time. Right passion.

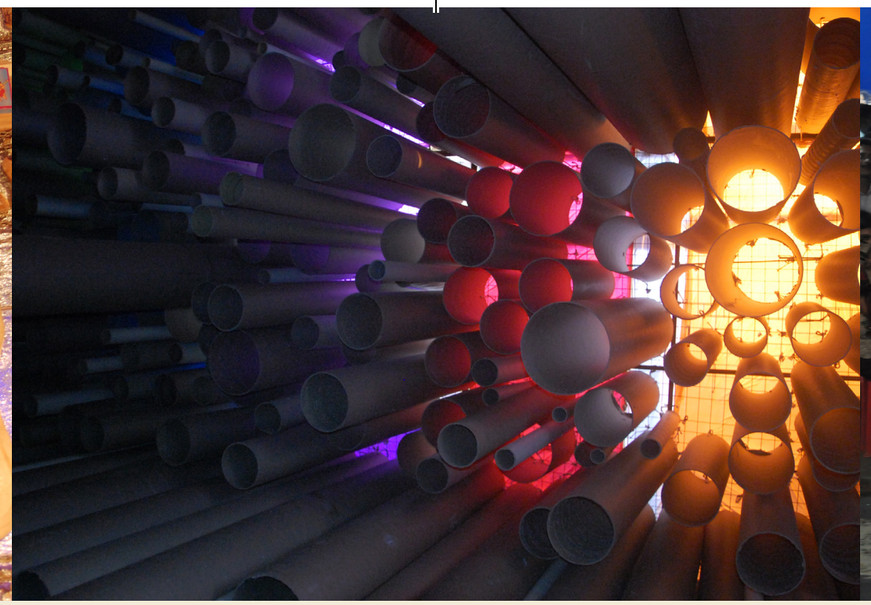
Q: How did Bosepukur break into the big league?

Interestingly, the secretary of the Telengabagan *pujo* was my colleague at work; he would often urge me to do a big *pujo*. So a few from our neighbourhood did something unthinkable; on the sly, we commissioned a Durga *thakur* for Rs 25,000 which was far higher than our financial standing *(*we said *"dekha jaak!")*. When we met on 15 August to announce our *pujo* plans to the committee, some members nearly fainted in shock: from the previous year's Rs 33,000 budget, we proposed an outlay of Rs 1,50,000 - no sponsorship, no advertisement, no industrialist backing. Then something else happened in the following two months - the budget climbed to Rs 3,33,000, ten times that of the previous year. The *pandal*-maker backed out and we ended spending twice that amount - Rs 1,50,000! So while people were willing to pounce on us for doing something absolutely foolhardy in terms of creating a budget deficit of Rs 1,40,000 (more than four times the total outlay of the previous year), there was actually someone saying: "Just think. We didn't think these boys would have been able to raise more than Rs 50,000. They raised nearly four times that amount!" We survived. More importantly, we were able to win three awards and were able to inspire the grudging respect among our people… *'kichhu kortey pereche ay-ra!'* Suddenly, there was this corner of Kolkata called Bosepukur that people were hearing of and trying to locate. *Ei bhabe suru holo Bosepukur-er Durga pujor poth chola.*

What happened thereafter?

This *pujo* appreciation is like a drug. Once someone tells you *'Khoob bhalo korli!'* its enough; we Bengalis are suckers for praise and want to do even better the following year. Since 'better' means 'bigger', the result was that in 1997, our budget increased to Rs 5 lac, we won five prizes, the Governor K. V. Raghunatha Reddy inaugurated our *pujo* and forgot about the fact that for all our troubles, we were able to collect only Rs. 2.25 lac, so the deficit needed to be plugged by one our members who also happened to be our *pandal* decorator. But as I said, we were young, had a point to prove, were bringing some familiarity to a part of Kolkata that people never even knew existed and the result was that just when the financial controllers ought to have been advising caution, we went ahead and signed Mithun Chakrabory to be our guest of honour ('We paid him!'), we won the Asian Paints Sharad Samman Award and, yes, by the way, now the deficit was Rs 5 lac. Once again, the burden of the debt fell on the decorator. *Arre baba*, we told him, *aamra ashwikar korchhi na* that we won't pay you. One year's deficit would be cleared the following year or perhaps in the third year. And that is how our *pujos* kept growing.







How did this movement evolve?

Our *'Epar Bangla, Opar Bangla'* theme *pujo* in 1999 was inaugurated by Jayaprada, the barricades broke following the crowd surge, we won 12 awards and the general conclusion was *'durdhorshyo'*. In 2000, our *Tasher Desh* theme (based on Rabindranath Tagore's dance drama) was built of playing cards (3 inch x 2 inch scaled to 6 feet in some cases) that were specially arranged from *golaam* to *badshah* so that there was no repetition and no abrupt ending.

But the *pujo* of 2001 created the legend of Bosepukur – still remembered as the *'bharer pandal'*. Our artist Bandan Raha created the *pandal* with earthen teacups of different sizes. Suburban visitors who alighted at Howrah station merely said *'Bharer pujo'* and the buses got them here; buses picked commuters from railway stations with cries of *'bhar bhar!'* The line started from Ruby *more* which was around 3 kms away. During peak hours, a visitor had to stand nearly seven hours to enter the *pandal*. There was such an unmanageable crowd that *aami dashamir din ratri bela pandal bhenge dite baddho holam.* And yet, until *Bhai Phonta*, visitors came to see a half-broken *pandal*. No member went home to sleep for more than two hours during those four days. The result was that the man selling water for Re 1 per glass reported an income of Rs 7 lac, not exaggerating! On the other hand, we reported a deficit of Rs 13 lac (recouped only eight years later)! But who cared…? We had won the Asian Paints Sharad Samman and that is all that mattered.

By this time, Bosepukur must have evolved into a legend…

In one word…showstopper. The first thing that this reputation translated into the change in the vehicular movement by the police. They banned all car entry into the road after 4 pm – unthinkable! In 2002, we just had to do something bigger and better than 2001, so we created a *pandal* out of sugar cane remains. We procured sugarcane from Haryana, crushed it on site, distributed the *rosh* (juice) to passers-by for free and realised later that we were driving other cane crushers out of business. So we arrived at a unique revenue-sharing arrangement – we would give them the cane, they would crush it, sell the juice for a low price and we would share the proceeds. Now we had another problem. Forget the line for the *pujo* that we anticipated would happen; we had an even longer line for the free juice even before the *pandal* had been completed! People actually brought 10-litre and 20-litre containers to collect the *rosh*! And yes, whatever we had collected from the sale of juice – a bonus, since we had not factored this into overall budget – was donated for a 10-bed children's hospital (Institute of Children's Health near Park Circus). The reality is that we were the victims of our own success. The police realised that our *pujo* was emerging as a traffic-deterrent, so a year later, the police dictated that no *pandal* be constructed on the arterial EM Bypass. We were compelled to shift to an adjacent plot without really taking our *pujo* into the interiors (which some others did). And yes, the internal whisper was that Bosepukur should not be given an Asian Paints award because that would attract large crowds and this would mean a bigger headache for the police.

What was the Bosepukur brand that had emerged by now?

A brand that whatever the rest of the city was doing, Bosepukur would do something completely different. That if you went to Bosepukur's *pujo*, you would come back with a positive take-home in terms of the aesthetic treatment. To the masses, *Bosepukur-er pujo mane protyek bochor aalada* and *natun kichu hobe* and *onno dike jabe*. The indication was that Bosepukur visitor *ke thokaai na*. Bosepukur became a 'crowd magnet' and one of the few with a fan club. At the end of the day, one thing kept this virtuous cycle in motion…the ability to market faithfully to prospective sponsors. For one thing, we were not a *neta-mantrir pujo* so the one defining trait that we built over time was that we gave our sponsors the impression that this was 'their *pujo*'. How? Simple. I would not only network with the marketing manager of a prospective sponsor but also with his family members. Each time they came to visit our *pujo*, I would go out and bring them in rather than leave it to junior committee members. And if someone gave me a contribution as small as Rs 5,000, I would say *'aashun! Aami aapna ke bojhaai!* and explain the idea to them' We became increasingly professional without giving up our personal touch. Now take this year's *pujo* for instance. We created a *protima* out of wood, so it was not destroyed. Normally one would have sold this to the highest bidder. We gave it to a prominent corporate in our area…we haven't talked money. All we have said is '*Arre baba, raakhun na!*'

A curious question. Every year since you moved from the *shabeki* to the thematic, the Bosepukur *pujo* reported a deficit. How did you balance your books?

We were down a cumulative Rs 9 lac about a decade ago and with deficits piling every year, there was a growing apprehension that we would not be able to make the *pujos* sustainable. Ego is one thing *kintu* pocket *ta oh dekhte hobe*. We recognised that we would not be able to liquidate the arrears in one shot. What we did was parcel away an amount every year towards the arrears account and pay off all those who were yet to be paid. Principally, it was our vice president who would always fund the *pandal* and since he was an insider he was not going to mutiny the following year and say *'Ei baar korbo na!'* So in retrospect his contribution was the most critical…not demanding his money back for years, despite inflation. When we had finally liquidated all the arrears by 2009, we began to balance our books at the end of each *pujo*. No profit. No loss. Except for an unforeseen problem in 2012. The traffic police department banned the use of overhead gates for reasons of safety and traffic flow. This used to be a large sponsorship revenue earner for us. Each gate would generate majority of the sponsorship and we would have three gates around our *pujo*. Since this order came not considerably ahead of the *pujo*, we could not re-strategise. We ran up a deficit of Rs 11 lac all over again. This is no different from business, see? So how do we manage? Our answer is simple. In two ways. You have to be a master in the art of buying; a *pujo* makes a profit only through the intelligent purchase of raw materials and never in the sale of the *pujo* artifacts (which are sold at breakdown value). Secondly, you don't talk about the theme of the *pujo* to anyone (including your missus), a precaution that goes down to the point that if I go with my family on vacation, I sneak out to make purchases of material while the family is asleep in the hotel room. The missus tries a lot to extract the gist of the theme; the first time we open our mouth is 15 August by which time it is too late for anyone to steal our concept and create a *pujo* out of it.

Coming to the 2013 *pujo*…

Our theme for the 2013 *pujo* was *'Daser dik'*, depicting the story of Bali Raja and Lord Vishnu in his Baman Avatar.

This is a fascinating story: The great devotee Prahlad had a grandson and his









name was Bali Raja. Bali Raja performed a *yagna* with his guru, Shukracharya. Pleased with the *yagna*, the *devas* (gods) became pleased with him and gave him a divine chariot, an endless supply of arrows and an impenetrable shield. With all these powers and strength, he attacked Devnagri, the city of *devas*! When they were attacked, the *devas* ran away from their home. Aditi, the mother of the devas, pleaded to her husband, "Our sons have become very unhappy, so would you please show them how to acquire wealth, fame and their positions back?" Her husband calmly told her, "Surrender to God and pray to Him because God accepts poor people's devotion like none else's."

After hearing her husband's words, Aditi fasted for 12 straight days on water. God gave her a boon and she gave birth to Baman, an incarnation of Vishnu. Baman was born a midget. Baman arrived on the banks of Narmada to meet Bali Raja. Baman Bhagwan's aim was to give the *devas* back their city. Bali was performing an *Ashwamedh Yagna* when Baman came to meet him. Everyone saw Baman and honoured him. He was a bright young celibate who caught the attention of Bali. Bali asked him, "Ask for anything from me, young celibate, and it shall be granted to you." At the time, Baman only had an umbrella, walking stick and a water pot. He told Bali, "Oh King of Demons, all I need is a little bit of land. I will take three steps and whenever I do, give me that land." Bali mocked him and said, "Little one, you are too simple. What good would three steps do you? You must ask for more land that will benefit you and let you live a happy life." But Baman replied, "One who has no control over his senses cannot be satisfied with even the whole universe."

Bali was pleased with this humility and decided to grant him his wish. As soon as Shukracharya heard this, he came running to Bali. Shukracharya warned him that Baman was an incarnation of Vishnu and therefore Bali should not grant him his wish. But Bali Raja was a man of his word and granted Baman's wish.

Suddenly Baman became like a giant! With the first step, Baman covered the earth. Everyone was shocked! In his next step he covered the universe. Before he took his last step, he asked Bali where he should step because there was no place left. Bali then, with utmost humility, offered his head the third step. Baman was pleased with Bali Raja's devotion and offered him a boon. He promised Bali Raja that he would guard his gates forever.

We picked on something central to this story…feet. That's right. Feet. For a specific reason. These days most youngsters don't know what it is to bend down and touch the feet of their elders. So at Bosepukur, we portrayed this story of Lord Vishnu's Baman Avatar and Bali Raja across our *pandal*. We carried the message that if the master of the three heavens *(tri bhuban joyi)* Bali Raja ccould bow to a dwarf (Vishnu's incarnation) then why should we not be doing this for our elders?

As the legend goes, Vishnu as Baman walked the three worlds over three steps - with one foot on heaven, one on earth and another on the great king's head. So when one entered the *pandal*, the first thing people saw was hell *(paatal)*, depicted by the huge *paduka* of Baman and the two hands of Bali Raja. Bali Raja was sent to hell by Vishnu when the king allowed him to step on his head. We dug a 10 feet deep hole to portray that hell. Next up was 'Earth', which was depicted as standing on the umbrella of Baman and on its surface was a 10 feet high *paduka* depicting Lord Krishna's Baman avatar towering presence. So this wasn't just a fascinating mythological story for us; it was something that we wanted to depict precisely.

What aspects of the depiction?

The central feature of the theme was the *khorom* (wooden slipper). We used 6,300 small *khoroms* of various sizes sourced from various artists of Bengal and Odisha. The globe was made of iron and tin and weighed nine tonnes and was supported by an umbrella. The globe was covered with a 60 X 40 feet *namabali* to depict the presence of the dwarf incarnation of Vishnu. The boundary wall of the *pandal* was covered with the 1,008 names of Vishnu. And the story of Bali Raja was carried on the inside *pandal* walls in the ancient Tamralipi script.

What is your kind of involvement with the *pujo*?

I am a Group D employee in a government office. Today I can walk into a minister's room or the Police Commissioner's room because of the *pujo* I represent. I am not a wealthy man… this identity is my biggest asset. I live for the Bosepukur *pujo*. My identity is the Bosepukur *pujo*.

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BEHALA BUROSHIBTALA JANAKALYAN SANGH



Behala Buroshibtala Janakalyan Sangh

Haan! Jaani toh! Pujo je hoy - Yes! I know! The *pujo* takes place • *Dekhun* - Please see • *Bhaalo loke ekhaaney thaakey* - Good people stay here • *Dokan/Dukaans* - shop/shops • *Parar chheley* - Local boy • *Montri pujo* - *Pujo* backed by ministers • *Paaglami* - Madness • *Maa* - Mother • *Manoosh korte hobey* - To bring someone up; rear; educate • *Jharoka* - A jharoka is a type of overhanging enclosed balcony used in Indian architecture, typically Rrajputana architecture, Mughal architecture, and Rajasthani architecture. One of the most important functions it served was to allow women in purdah to see the events outside without being seen themselves. Alternatively, these windows could also be used to position archers and spies. • *Naari ke mathai raakhtey hobey* - We have to honour women • *Attyachar* - tyranny • *Julum* - oppression • *Ekdom* - Absoloutely • *Chinta kora jaay na* - Can't even think about something like this • *Haapiye jaai ora* - They get tired • *Dhormo* - Religion • *Nesha* - Passion • *Mastaani hoto* - Criminal activities • *Cha-er dokaan* - Tea shop



Q&A

ROBIN MANDAL

ORGANISER



Q: You are a young *pujo* with not even five years of a thematic track record. What explains your significant transformation into one of the most attractive Durga *pujos* of the city in such a short duration?

Passion. Think of it this way: how many in Kolkata have even heard of Buroshibtala? Each time we have to explain our location, we have to explain it with reference to Alipore, Behala and Tollygunge. A few years ago, we recognised the danger that the world was passing us by. During this time, we recognised that the best way to gain visibility would be by organising a prominent Durga *pujo*. By this yardstick, we have achieved our objective: if you mention 'Buroshibtala' today, the first reaction of most is likely to be *'Haan! Jaani toh! Pujo je hoy…'* The area used to be better known as a place where *mastaani hoto*; today, it has emerged as a new residential destination. *Bhaalo loke ekhaaney thaakey…*

Q: What is your background?

That in itself is a story and perhaps one of the drivers of our *pujo*. *Dekhun*, I do not come from a prominent family background. I used to run a *cha-er dokaan,* in Buroshibtala until a decade ago. Because of being a *parar chheley*, I spotted an opportunity to enter the real estate business as one who oversaw the dismantling of old buildings in my locality. Thereafter, I became a supplier of material to new projects. And lastly, I extended my business one step further and started building myself. Once I made money, I did not move out but continued to be connected to the realities of my neighbourhood. Looking back, this has been the big difference: I lived the neighbourhood's pain, even as I became affluent – my son studies in Heritage School and daughter in Shri Shikshayatan – and felt a desire to pay back. The Durga *pujo* was the most evident way.

Q: How is your *pujo* different from the others?

We are not a *montri pujo*, we are a common man's *pujo*. I say this with some pride. It would be easy to stage a large *pujo*, draw in the crowds, earn public respect and enhance the locality's visibility with a minister by your side. We are underdogs; it is far harder to do all this when you have only your personal resources.

The other big way in which we are different is that the social consideration is woven into our *pujo* agenda. Consider this: 40% of the people who live in Buroshibtala live a hand-to-mouth existence and manage to save only Rs 20 per day. Our stated objective is to create a tiled roof for each homeowner in the area, remove illiteracy and eliminate hunger. In a *para* where this is the reality, it would be a crime to spend Rs 10 million on a public event that would last no more than a week. Come to think of this, for 51 weeks we live in poverty and in the 52nd week we have a great time. What *paaglami* is this? So in a *para* where 65 percent of the households fall into the category of lower middle-class, we resolved that we would create the best *pujo* around the lowest cost.

And lastly, we resolved to create a *pujo* with a heart.

Q: How?

Most people in this lower-middle class neighbourhood have never stepped outside Bengal. My father for instance never had the means to take me on a vacation. So one day I realised that if they have never gone out of this state, maybe I can get some other state to come here. Which is what we have been doing in the *pujos* of the last few years, organising these around a specific state so that the people of my neighbourhood can get a bird's eye-view into the magnificence of other states without even stepping out of our neighborhood. So during this year's *pujo*'s duration of six days, we arranged for Rajasthani dances, puppet shows and traditional percussion for around three hours each. So our *pujo* wasn't just come, see and leave. It was about being entertained, about being experiential and about doing something that people would not forget. Our *bustee pujo* had gone global!

Q: What are the other things that enhanced the social side of the *pujo*?

In today's media-hungry and celebrity-obssessed world, even *pujos* are inaugurated by starlets. We resolved that we would never engage in such disrespect for *maa*. So we had our *pujo* inaugurated by a KMC sweeper (Wards 115 and 116) instead! This was our way of getting the attention of the world to people who are otherwise never recognised. Come to think of it, if the sweeper disappeared for just three days, there would be chaos in our neighbourhood…

We also recognised that the *pujo* would attract a number of the elderly, who would have been tired by *pandal*-hopping the time they got to our place. In view of this, we created three air-conditioned rooms on the road leading to our *pujo* where they could rest and refresh themselves.

Q: A number of people can say that these considerations – laudable alright – would not have an impact beyond the tenure of the Durga *pujo*.

Good point. This is also what we recognised. So this year, we embarked on an unusual mission that would have a sustainable influence on our neighborhood: we laid the foundation stone for a 2,000 sq. ft correctional home for 40 children, which we hope will be inaugurated by the CM by next *shoshti*. This home will be for children that we see from across the city; we intend to get them here and look after them. *Manoosh korte hobey!* Gradually, we will create a small school only in English medium… that is the only way we can transform destinies.

Q: Coming back, what did you do for this year's *pujo*?

I was always fascinated by Rajasthan so this January, my wife, myself and Subodh *babu* (visualiser) went on a trip to Rajasthan to look for probable themes. We were there for 21 days and at the end of our trip, came across our breakthrough by chance. There was a camel festival at Bikaner where the best camel was sold for Rs 5.1 million. After the show, we casually went to the stable where the camels were housed. And what we saw there was shocking. During the course of the festival, the camels were paraded like





prized trophies, their skin was oiled and they were fed good food. But inside the stable, it was a completely different story; the camels were ill-treated and their wounds were not addressed. And then the threat began to dawn: the camel population is anyway declining and once this accelerated, desert life would be endangered. So to highlight this danger, we resolved that our 2013 *pujo* would be dedicated to the camel.

Q: How did you treat the *pujo*?

The shape of the *pandal* (105 feet high and 55 X 50 feet inside) was designed in the form of a camel sitting on the ground. The hump comprised the heart of the *pandal*. All around the hump, we carried Rajasthani motifs that were worked by craftsmen from rural Bengal. Inside, we carried Rajasthani architectural motifs – *jharoka* among others – and most people actually touched these creations to check if they were real. These motifs comprised 19 Rajasthani styles which were drawn from a 'bank' of 6,000 pictures (2,500 of which we clicked ourselves). The *protima* was actually in the form of Vishwapita made from glass fragments which is a typical Rajasthani tradition. At the top of the Vishwapita was the crown of the Maharana, usually worn at oath-taking and marriage. The idol was put inside the crown right at the top… *naari ke mathai raakhtey hobey!* The structure took around 36,000 person-days and provided employment to dozens of rural artisans across eight workshops (thermocole, fibre, iron, POP, bamboo and *jaali* etc.).

Q: The budget must have been high for this comprehensive work?

I have already made my point that to spend Rs 10 million in a *pujo* is a form of *attyachar* and to mobilise money from various sponsors and residents is another form of *julum*. So at our *pujo*, we decided on two things – one, the *pujo* would be relatively low cost and second, I would work with a team of 13 friends and fund the *pujo* ourselves. No going to residents for subscriptions and no going to sponsors for support. Not even taking money from sponsors for gate advertisements (they gave the flex and we created the structure for them). *Ekdom* different formula.

The one person who made this low cost *pujo* a reality was out artist Subodh Roy. He did not charge a single rupee because he lives in the neighborhood. He could have charged us Rs 15 lacs for his hard work (he worked more than six months to create this *pujo*). Because he did it free for us, we saved nearly 40 percent of our project cost in a single stroke. What is more amazing is that Subodh babu, who is a civil engineer at the KMC's water department, did not work on any other *pujo* this year, so his sacrifice *chinta kora jaay na!* This was a game-changer; now that we created a world-class *pujo* at a low cost, a number of residents want to contribute.

Q: How successful was the *pujo*?

The line from our *pandal* extended more than 400 m to the New Alipore auto stand; the autorickshawwalla from the 14 number bus stand at Behala made Rs 8,000 daily just by transporting commuters. Now you understand why we created a resting place for senior citizens – *haapiye jaai ora* – where they were provided with water and refreshments (around 4,000 coffee cups per day) for free.

Q: How responsible was the *pujo*?

A: We were high on safety. If any *pujo* invested in one fire extinguisher set, we had four! Besides, we made a negligible use of bamboo, so the risk of fire spreading was negligible.

Q: What next?

A: We need to start planning for next year's *pujo* by February 2014. Maa Durga's *dhormo* is my *nesha*!

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CHAKARABERIA SARBOJANIN DURGA UTSAB



Glossary

Kintu bhitor ta khali, khokla - But inside its empty and unsubstantial • *Roder alo jokhon bhitor diye porto tokhon odbhut ekta chik-chik korto* - When the sunlight fell inside then one could see wonderful shimmering lights • *Ami dekhlam maath tai* - I saw the park • *nari shakti* Female power • *Peeth / shakti peeth* - The shakti peeths are places of worship consecrated to the goddess Shakti or Sati, the female principal of Hinduism and the main deity of the Shakta sect. They are sprinkled throughout the Indian subcontinent • *Jhaar baati* - Chandelier • *Debi darshan* - Debi means goddess and darshan means a Sanskrit term meaning divine vision. Here seeing the idol • *Tai jodi paanch feet ba dosh feet-er murti banayi taholey toh cholbe na* - So if I make an idol which is 5 feet or 10 feet tall, that won't do. • *Kintu aamar architect hobar khub shokh chhilo jeta shesh porjonto hoye otheni. Tai ami dudher shwad gholey mitiye aschhi.* - I wanted to become an architect but in the end things did not go that way. Now I'm satisfying my thirst for milk with a yogurt-based drink. Bengali idiom meaning to compromise. • *Emon kichu ekta jeta dekhe lokey bolbe "Baah! Besh hoyeche." Maathar opor diye chole jaai ni* - I wanted to do something which people would see and say "Wow! Nice work!" rather than saying it went completely past their heads • *Dorshokder monograhi kaaj na korte parley toh ami byartho* - If I don't work as per or keeping in mind the spectators wish, then my is failure • *Je programme-er TRP nei shey programme-er toh cholari kono joggota nei* - A TV show which is unable to generate good TRP ratings, is not worth telecasting • *Lokjon elo, haan kore dekhlo diye chole gelo, monei rakhlo na* - People came, they saw, but forgot all about it • *Oh, apni eta korechhilen?* - Oh! So you have done this! • *Eto churi banabe ke?* - Who would make so many bangles? • *Paanch lakh churir moddhe ek lakh bhangbe ami jantami ar tai hoyecheo* - I knew that among five lakh bangles at least one lakh will break and that's what happened • *Swajatiya dharma* - One's own religion • *Shakha and pola* - A conch shell bangle, known as shakha in bengali, and a red wax/lac bangle, known as pola in Bengali, together signify a married Bengali woman. • *Bhakti rasa* - Bhakti refers to religious devotion in the form of active involvement of a devotee in worship of the divine. Rasa denotes an essential mental state and is the dominant emotional theme of a work of art or the primary feeling that is evoked in the person that views, reads or hears such a work. Thus, here its a state of religious fervour. • *Shantamurti* - the appearance of the idol is calm • *Padmashree* - Padmashree is the fourth highest civilian award in the Republic of India, after the Bharat Ratna, the Padma Vibhushan and the Padma Bhushan. It is awarded by the Government of India. • *Simhasana* - Throne; literally the 'lion pose' • *Churi* - bangles • *Er maaney ta ki?* - what is the meaning of this? • *Montrider pujo* - See montri *pujo* • *Ghabrachhis keno? Aamra aachi jey…* - Why are you afraid? We are here for you…. • *Pujor chaanp* - The pressure that *pujo* brings • *Maanav seva* - Service dedicated towards mankind



Q&A

SAUMYA BANERJEE

ARTIST, ORGANISER, CHAKRABERIA SARBOJANIN DURGA UTSAB

Where did you get the inspiration for the theme at Chakraberia?

Whenever a *pujo* committee approaches me the first thing that I take into consideration is the location (gully or field) as the *pandal* can't materialise out of thin air. When I went to Chakraberia *ami dekhlam maath tai* triangular which related seamlessly with the nari shakti concept I wanted to portray. So here I had a venue which symbolised the feminine as per Hindu iconography and also the process of spiritual ascent and liberation indicated in the scriptures. I made up my mind to do a site-specific work which also brought in something socially relevant, which being women being putting women on an equal footing as men.

What do you mean by 'site-specific work'?

The triangle was my spur in exploring the *nari shakti* concept, which was strengthened by introducing the *peeth concept*. *Peeths* are places of worship consecrated to the goddess Shakti or Sati, the female principal of Hinduism and the main deity of the Shakta sect. They are 51 of them across the Indian subcontinent. So I created a new deity at Chakraberia called *'Chakrapeeth'* as there was explicitly documented evidence regarding the sanctity of the *peeths*.

Why bangles?

I introduced bangles as my principal element to create a sense of ambiguity and mystery that surrounds all these *peeths;* that it was unmistakably feminine was a bonus. The bangles lent a sense of grandeur; the space within suggested a sense of vacuity. The outer solidity symbolised our own faith in religion *kintu bhitor ta khali, khokla* because of the absence of historical proof. Having said all that the structure did create a stunning visual impact, *roder alo jokhon bhitor diye porto tokhon odbhut ekta chik-chik korto.* Then there was the dome shape that can be seen at all the peeths. In a *peeth* this is where the deity resides. The bangles were used to create a *jhaar baati* inside the *pandal.* At night, Chakida's (Premendu Bikash Chaki) magical lighting took over.

What about the idol?

I insisted that the idol be bigger than usual to the mritshilpi Dipankar Pal from Kumartuli, again in accordance with the *peeth* concept. When people go to a *peeth* they travel long distances and brave the elements for a glimpse. *Debi darshan* is their one-point agenda. *Tai jodi paanch feet ba dosh feet-er murti banayi taholey toh cholbe na.* So, I had to make something that reminded people of Tarapeeth or Kalighat. The idol in its sitting position was 16 feet tall and if it were to stand up then its height would have gone up to 25 feet.

Tell us something about your background.

I completed my Baccalaureate from the Government Art College in 2000; I went to New Delhi to finish my Masters and thereafter worked with NDTV for nine years (involved with the political satire puppet show *The Great Indian Tamasha*). Presently I'm based in Greater Noida where I'm the Assistant Professor of Design the Sharda University.

My first *pujo* venture was at Kankurgachi Naboday Pallimangal in 2000 where I worked exclusively before I moved to Chakraberia and Bosepukur Talbagan. Over seven years I won virtually every prize on offer. I was always keen on erecting architectural structures; my dissertation paper was based on this idea. But I'm not an architect, right? *Kintu aamar architect hobar khub shokh chhilo jeta shesh porjonto hoye otheni. Tai ami dudher shwad gholey mitiye aschhi.* So what one had the end of the day at Chakraberia was a site-specific, Hindu ritualistic, non-permanent architectural structure. *Emon kichu ekta jeta dekhe lokey bolbe "Baah! Besh hoyeche." Maathar opor diye chole jaai ni.*

You were involved with a satirical puppet show on television. How did that have an impact on your *pujo* work?

Before a programme is aired on a national channel, substantial market research assesses audience preferences. Similarly when I work on a theme I evaluate the preferences of my target audience. *Dorshokder monograhi kaaj na korte parley toh ami byartho. Je* programme*-er* TRP *nei shey* programme*-er toh cholari kono joggota nei.* The fact that I'm an assistant professor at the university also has a bearing on my work. I try to do things that aim to strike a balance between intellectuality and acceptability. *Lokjon elo, haan kore dekhlo diye chole gelo, monei rakhlo na.* For the *pujos* this year, there was a three year-long background effort following which I could make designs on 3D MAX where one added all the textures and then submitted the design to the client. The result is that my works are featured as 'branded' with people coming and asking *"Oh, apni eta korechhilen?"*

What were the major challenges in doing so?

The foremost challenge was accessing the raw material…*eto churi banabe ke?* I lost count after 400,000 bangles. All these were accessed from Burrabazar. Then glass bangles are fragile, so there was an issue of safekeeping before could be installed. I made the installations hanging and out of the reach of people. *Paanch lakh churir moddhe ek lakh bhangbe ami jantami ar tai hoyecheo.* I made an honest attempt to create a proper team for the first time. A lot of the materials used were recyclable. In fact, even broken bangles could be melted and reused!





Q&A

SAIBAL ROYCHOUDHURY

ORGANISER, CHAKRABERIA SARBOJANIN DURGA UTSAB

Q: Another year of an outstanding *pujo* at Chakraberia. What went into making it so?

Chakraberia is the biggest *pujo* of Bhowanipore, now in its 67th year. One of the most obvious themes that we felt was the need for gender equality and women's safety following increasing atrocities. The artist Soumya Bannerjee's theme of *swajatiya dharma* was modified to *nari shakti*. We built on the theme which included a triangle used as a metaphor for a woman in ancient mythology; we extended it to the triangle in tantric texts and also because our park is essentially triangular in shape. Our theme artist conceptualised the location as a *peeth* (like one of the 51 *shakti peeths* in Hindu mythology). As a result, we named the *pujo* Chakra Peeth (after Chakraberia).

Q: How did you take the idea of gender respect and equality ahead?

Normally, we would have curated a *pujo* and that was it. This time, we decided that we would take the theme ahead. The idea was not just to do a creation; it was to build an opinion, a consensus. So for the first time, we engaged June Maliah to carry our message to the public; we created giant flexes of hers in the form of Maa Durga, emphasising the point that women are strong and divine. We established a number of flexes across the city, which not only relayed our message but enhanced visibility for our *pujo* as well, translating into high footfalls. Some *pujo* committees saw this as a gimmick; we feel that the magnitude of the problem deserved commensurate and distinctive visibility. We extended the treatment through the use of bangles, *shakha* and *pola*, which emphasise a woman's beauty and respect.

Q: Coming back to the Chakra Peeth positioning...

A key element of tantric philosophy is the Dashaavatar concept or ten incarnations of Vishnu. We showcased this belief through red vertical panels on either side of the *pujo* premises – 25 on each side, resulting in a total of 51 *peeths* if you count the *protima* – which revolved slowly driven by a motor. I must make one point here: a number of *pujo* committees propose complicated themes; we selected one so simple that even a child understood it. Our Chakra Peeth represented a place of worship and meditation; we balanced sound, silence, vibration and movement.

We also retained the traditional form of Maa Durga's idol (created by Dipankar Pal from Kumartuli) inside the core worship area to evoke *bhakti rasa*. This *protima* was an eye-catcher: it was an excellent instance of optical illusion. When viewed from a distance, it appeared to be about six feet; only when it was taken down and people stood beside it, one could see it in its full grandeur of 17 ft. Getting the idol from Kumartuli represented its own logistical complication: the wall of the studio where it was built had to be demolished for the *protima* to be taken out; the *protima* could not be installed on a lorry but had to be wheeled. The idol didn't bear an aggressive mien, instead it is *shantamurti*. We believe that somebody sitting has more power than someone standing and so had the idol sitting in a *padmashree* position. If one noticed, the idol sat on the lion to give the impression of sitting on a *simhasana*. Another unique aspect was that the idol and weapon sizes were inversely proportionate; while the idol was huge, the weapons were smaller to establish the point that at any time, she was bigger than her weapons. On the other hand, while her children were small, their weapons were larger. I wish we could have communicated these nuances to our visitors.

Q: How did you make the *pujo* visually compelling?

Bangles! They enhance a woman's attractiveness. So we curated this *pujo* largely out of bangles hung from the ceiling. We emphasised the shine on the bangles through an uplighter (a downlighter would have shone into visitors' eyes) and their glint really enhanced the ambience of the *pujo*. We bought some 36,000 dozen bangles, almost cleaning out the city's stock around that time. Then we created a teaser advertising campaign ('Chakraberia-r churi') with a pun on the word *churi*, which could mean both – 'Theft at Chakraberia' or 'Bangles at Chakraberia'. The first reaction of most people was *'Ei maaney ta ki?'* but gradually they began to figure it out. This campaign generated adequate curiosity that translated into excellent footfalls.

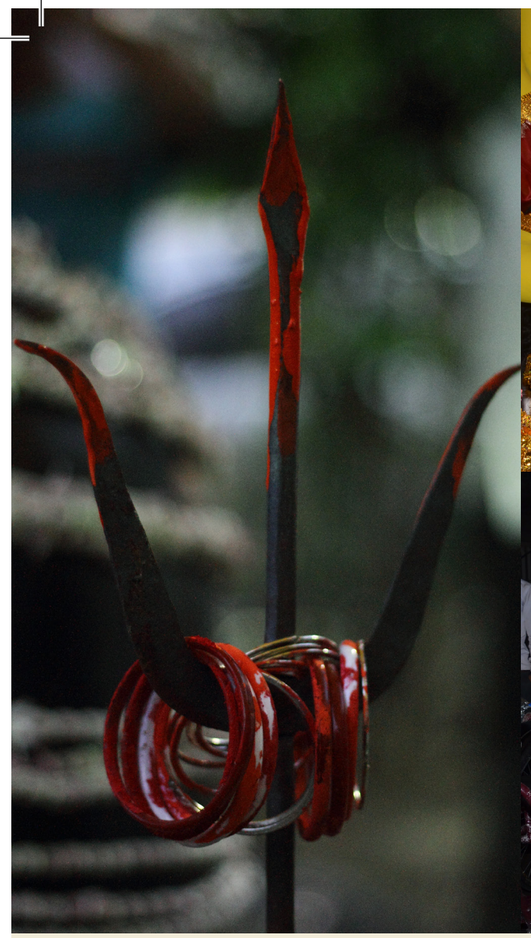
Besides, we supplemented this mood with a five-minute instrumental track running on a loop.

Q: What challenges did you face?

Funding, funding and funding. The mobilisation for this year's *pujo* transpired right in the middle of the economic slowdown. Most traditional spenders began to excuse themselves. Most corporates began to either restrict their spending or spent on *montrider pujo*. The entire business of *pujo* sponsorship is based on networks and contacts and so we had to rely on people who knew people who would be sponsorship decision-makers.

We responded to this reality by pruning our budget by a sizable 30 percent, representing the first such instance when we actually reduced our spending in years. To manage within this reduced outlay, we engaged two chartered accountant volunteers to identify ways of saving money. One of the spin-offs was that we effectively reduced our *pandal* circumference by 20 percent, which helped reduce material costs. The writing is on the wall: over the











foreseeable future, the key will be a term that we generally use in management jargon called, 'value engineering'. Also, *pujos* will need to be more 'sustainable'; we will have to figure out innovative ways of doing more with less.

Q: What other challenge did you face?

Manpower. Since we don't have unemployed people in our locality – touch wood – we have another problem: a difficulty in finding people who can give two months of a year to organise the *pujos*. The scale of our *pujos* warrants at least 20 active people, but the reality is that even as a number of people will tell you *'ghabrachhis keno? Aamra aachi jey…'* the reality is that not more than five people actually work. The result is that for these few people the *pujor chaanp* is significant; we have people who give 12 hours for a month before the *pujo*; I did not go to office for ten days leading to the festival. Even during the months leading to the *pujo*, I would return from office by 10 pm, and after dinner would eventually get to the laptop and start punching orders and writing messages to neighbours before crashing out after midnight. I could not take my wife to the other *pujos* as I was far too preoccupied at Chakraberia...

Q: What is the one aspect about which your *pujo* committee is fairly proud of?

A: We are a completely 'green' *pujo*; we don't cut trees to create our *pujo* but work around the trees as a part of our theme. The colours we use are non-toxic. Our LED lights help us reduce power consumption. We won six awards and were proud to have bagged a prestigious one from the KMC. One of the other things that we were proud of was how we kept the road facing our *pandal* open to traffic and crowds inspite of a permission from the police that we could close it. We created separate entry and exit points for the disabled with ramps for wheelchairs; we stationed an ambulance and conducted a medical camp at our premises across four days. You won't see a portable toilet at most *pujos*; we had one here!

Q. One hears that the Chakraberia *pujo* 2013 was also philanthropic.

A. We recognise that when we organise a *pujo* it is easy to get carried away with the pomp and revelry, forgetting that there is a world beyond our own that is under-resourced and underprivileged. This is why we arrived at the conclusion that we did not want a scenario where our homage to the deity became something meant for the exclusive few. So we resolved that though we would create aesthetic *pujos*, we would never become exclusive. In fact, becoming exclusive would expose us to the dangers of arrogance.

Q. What did you in this regard?

The first thing that we did was to respect the fact that we were not the only people paying homage to Durga in the Bhowanipore area. There were a number of *pujos* within our vicinity. We recognised that some of these *pujos* were older than ours; we also somewhere felt that it was due to these *pujos* that people like us retained an interest in doing our own Durga *pujo*. As a result, our committee took a fairly unusual decision: we resolved to quietly donate to these smaller *pujos*, encouraging them to sustain and continue.

Q. What else did you do from a philanthropic perspective?

We refused to invite a celebrity to inaugurate our *pujo*. We felt that it would have been improper to inaugurate the celebration of the divine with a celebrity. So we started 'inaugurating' our *pujo* with something relevant: We donated 40 tricycles to the disabled. In 2010, when we kick-started this trend, we commissioned a camp for the handicapped, donating wheelchairs, tricycles, crutches and hearing aids. We feel that *maanav seva* was the best way to commission a *pujo* and if there were a number of similar *pujos* in Kolkata, the underprivileged of the city would benefit significantly.

Q: A word about the artist who themed the *pujo*…

A: Soumya Banerjee was an unusual choice because he is based in Delhi. That would have normally worked against him but he gave us a compelling proposition – excellent theme treatment, good team who would deliver in Kolkata, attractive fees and the assurance that he would come down each weekend to check progress. So even an unusual artist engagement worked!

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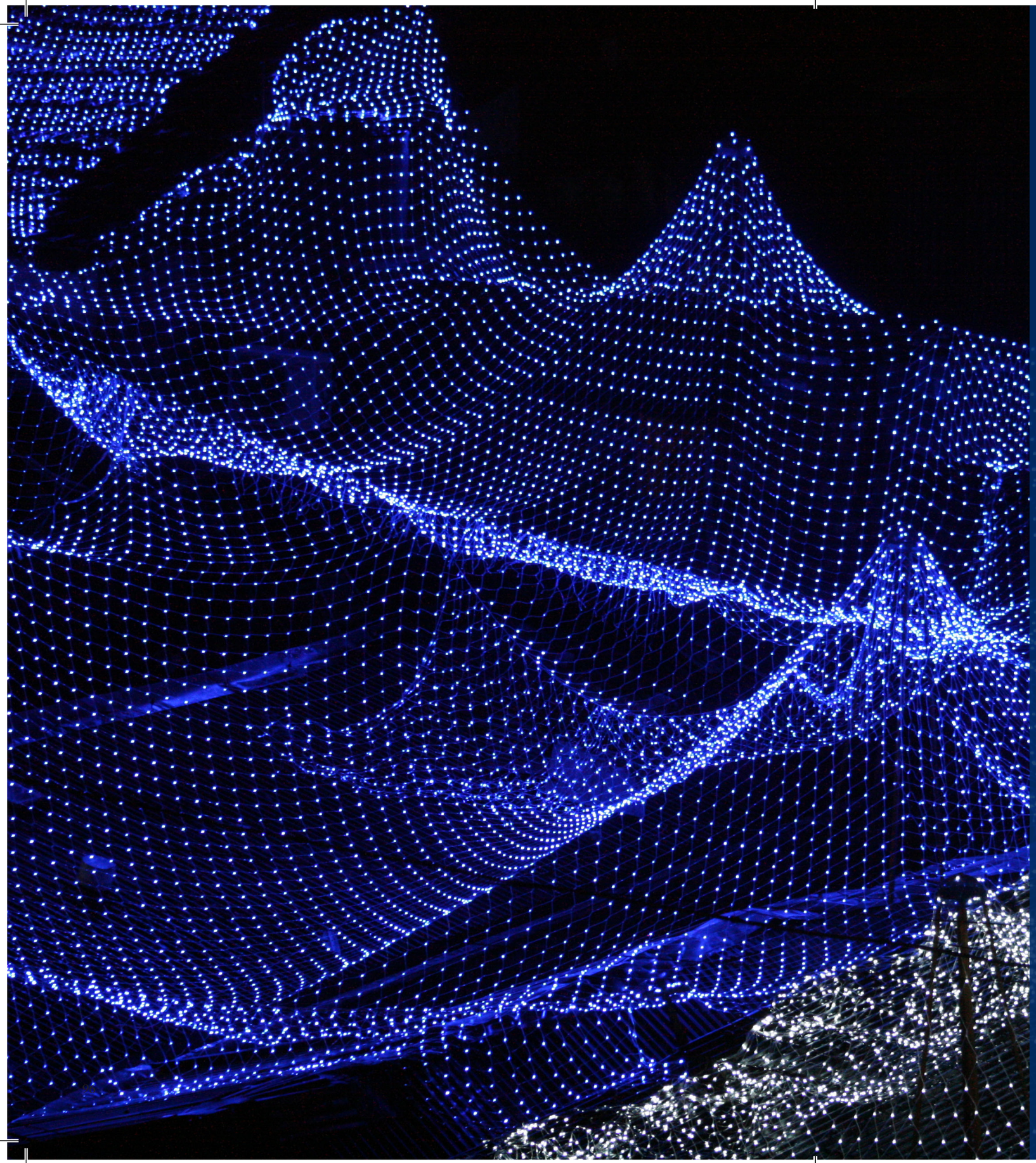
MANICKTALA CHALTABAGAN LOHAPATTY DURGA PUJO



Glossary

Jaali - Jaali is the term for a perforated stone or latticed screen, usually with an ornamental pattern constructed through the use of calligraphy and geometry. • *Raths* - Chariot • *Devi* - Goddess • *Dokan/Dukaans* - Shop/shops • *Bahut bawaal hua* - Bawaal is one of the most commonly used slang in India. Bawaal can be used for anything and everything that is out of the ordinary or some commotion or quarrel among people. Here it's the latter meaning. • *Dhaak utsav* - Here it is referred to a competition among the dhaak players . For dhaak refer Dhaak and for Dhaaki refer Dhaaki • *Sanskriti* - Cultural • *Uska moonh Calcutta ke jaisey artist jitna bada nahin hai* - His demands were not as much as that of a Calcutta-based artist • *Nigraani* - To keep an eye out for • *Protima* - Refer to protima • *Chhalaang* - Leap/jump • *Mandap* - A covered structure with pillar (generally of bamboo), temporarily ercted for the *pujo*'s





Q&A

SUTANU MAITY

ARTIST, MANICKTALA CHALTABAGAN LOHAPATTY DURGA *PUJO*

What was the Chaltabagan Lohapatty theme this year?

There was a shortage of space when constructing the Chaltabagan *pandal*. When I am given any such assignment, I usually think of the theme and design in advance; I do not arrive at the venue and decide the theme. And here one is talking of the ceiling, walls and panels everything. This year, the people at Chaltabagan wanted a design-heavy *pandal*, so I used aluminium sheets with holes to enhance a *jaali* effect. Even I was amazed when we delivered! I used aluminium sheets because this material had never been used before. The best thing about Chaltabagan is that if I needed anything - funds or materials – they would get it without delay. So even as other clients delay payments, the people at Chaltabagan trust a lot. This is the only reason why one has worked for them nearly 18 years – perhaps a record.

What is your background?

I got my first assignment at Agartala in 1995 where I decorated *raths* and my first break in Kolkata in 1996. At that time the decorators were invariably from Contai and lighting from Chandannagaore. My first theme *pujo* was based on the folk art of Rajasthan on a satin base. In 1997, I worked with Chaltabagan for the first time. I now show a number of concepts to them from which they select one. I repeat once again: the freedom with which Chaltabagan entertains artists has got me here.

How many *pujos* were you involved in this year?

Six! I have already started thinking of next year! Managing such a scale was a challenge because each theme needed to be unique. On-field work starts at least six months before the *pujo* so that there is ample amount of time and if anything goes wrong then we have time to rectify. We are able to address each assignment with competence because different groups work on different *pujos* – no conflict of interest. If there is one reason why the *pujos* have become stressful is because of the growing competition. Everyone wants to win a prize! Of the six clients I worked with this year, two were finicky and had their own ideas.

What were your major challenges?

Convincing the client. There have been instances when the construction is almost complete but the client has still not understood the theme! Getting one's payment is another problem. Besides, wages have increased. Managing innovation is another challenge. One needs a team to manage this scale and visit the workshop everyday.

What is the scope for an artist?

No *pujo* has become successful without someone possessing an artistic bent of mind! So there is a phenomenal scope…











Q&A

AK JAISWAL

ORGANISER, MANICKTALA CHALTABAGAN LOHAPATTY DURGA *PUJO*

Q: Yours is a different kind of *pujo*, in the sense that the organisers are not residents of a locality but traders…

That's one way of looking at us. In fact, to add to your differentiation, we are not strictly Bengalis but steel traders whose families hailed from Uttar Pradesh. Because we have been domiciled in this city for decades and generations – fourth to be precise in my case – we like to consider ourselves as Bengalis for all practical purposes. We may be different Hindu communities, but we worship one *devi*. So when one starts seeing things from this perspective, then it does not come as a surprise that we are engaged in the largest festival of the state.

Q: What is the history of your *pujo*?

Our *pujo* is more than seven decades old. We started during the Second World War. Earlier, our *pujo* used to be in one of our *dukaans*. The year when we bought it outside on the street for the first time, *bahut bawaal hua* but then gradually we got the relevant permissions and today, this is one of the most prominent North Kolkata *pujos*.

In fact, not just North Kolkata, but the *pujo* has set a standard across all *pujos* in the city. The *dhaak utsav* on the second day is traditionally inaugurated by the Governor of West Bengal and closed by the Governor's wife. It relates to our tradition of working throughout the year in the area of *sanskritik* or charitable purposes (blood donation camps, eye checkup camps or assistance provided to the families of underprivileged girls with their marriage expenses). It also relates to a new *shilp* or art being brought to the city through our Durga *pujo* every year. I think the Manicktala Chaltabagan Lohapatty *pujo* has emerged as a brand. People hear of us and expect something different.

Q: In what way did you strengthen the brand over the last few years?

In 2011, our *pujo* made an extensive use of cellophane paper that made the entire *pandal* appear as if it was made of glass. In 2012, we used wall putty on an iron net to give the impression of the sun. And this year, we made an interesting combination of lotus, mica, mosquito net and aluminum grills to create a differentiated design. Creating the extraordinary out of the ordinary… that is what we are known for. The best part is that the outstanding *pujos* delivered year after year have all been the work of one artist, Sutanu Maity. This is the eighteenth year he worked with us. Most people accustomed to seeing changes year after year ask just one question: why? The answer is that most people like to change their artists because they want a different flavour every year. We keep to one artist because he gives us a different flavour every year. He represents change and stability. Best of both worlds!

Q: How does a business community like yours respond to the growing year-on-year inflation on the one hand and the slowdown on the other?

Just as everybody else is doing, trying to stretch our rupee longer than ever. This year, our budget actually increased from Rs 16 lacs to Rs 20 lacs, which might surprise a number of people for several reasons. We increased the budget outlay at a time when the overall business sentiment declined. This was because we are nearly 200 traders who collectively do this *pujo*, the per person load is not high, so even if one has to increase the per person contribution in a difficult year, it is not a significant increase. Secondly, we use our business insights to run a tight *pujo*. We actually create a world-class showpiece for as low as Rs. 20 lacs, which might be one of the lowest cost high-value *pujos* in the city.

Q: The big question: what makes this happen?

We look into various areas of cost-cutting. Take the selection of the artist for instance. First, the man is from Contai, *so uska moonh Calcutta ke jaisey artist jitna bada nahin hai.* Second, he makes a concession for us since he has been working with us for nearly two decades. He knows that he will be paid on time and he will not have to worry about his outstandings, which is a big security. Third, we permit him to use



the material he has created for our *pujo* for his other outstation Kali and Jagadhatri *pujo* clients, so even if he does not make a profit on our *pujo*, he can continue to use the asset across the next two or three years, resulting in a handsome profit. Four, we live and work in the same locality so there is a 24-hour *nigraani* on the project implementation, which works as an effective cost-cutter. This is a win-win approach: we provide the ideas and encouragement to do something different and he charges us at cost or marginally higher. On the other hand, I re-sell the material back to him and he uses that to make a subsequent profit. Works for both! Like this year, he took our Durga *pujo* installation to Siliguri and he tells me that this has already been booked for the Durga *pujos* of the next two years. So if you understand our business model, it is all about getting a modestly priced artist, giving him the freedom to do world-class work and getting him to recycle our *pujo* installation thereafter.

Q: What brief did you give the artist?

Our brief is relatively simple. The *protima* has to be conventional and everything else can be unconventional. This has an interesting impact: the Kolkata location where we are present likes to see their *devi* maa the way she has been for decades – no change. Thereafter, whatever change we make is seen as pride-enhancing innovation. This combination is what makes our *pujo* stand out. And yes, the other brief we give him is to make the standard better step by step…no *chhalaang*!

Q: One noticed an interesting application this year… LED light net *(jaal)* that covered building after building across the neighbourhood.

We saw this on the Internet and then got a hundred pieces of a 30 ft x 30 ft net from China. It was also one way in which we highlighted our environmental commitment. We have been among the first *pujos* in Kolkata to use solar panels, which we started from 2006. This year, we deployed 10 panels which generated enough electricity to light 15 bulbs inside the *mandap*. Besides, we have a backup power facility, so if CESC supply fails for some reason, we will always have adequate reserve. This leads me to an interesting statistic: we would draw 100 kV from CESC some 15 years ago, which has now declined today to 50-55 kV!

The message is clear: If more *pujo* committees start using solar panels, then the aggregate savings across the 2,000-odd Durga *pujos* in Kolkata would be sizable. Besides, the use of these solar panels would be the best way to educate visitors about their benefits because what one has seen in one *pujo* is probably the equivalent of hundreds of advertisements. So maybe we are one of few who are using solar panels today, but we expect that over the next few years, there will be many more.

Q: In what other ways are you a responsible *pujo*?

Over the last few years, the throughput of visitors to our *pujo* – and actually almost every other *pujo* – has increased significantly. Following 6 pm until 2 am, there is a crowd of 5,000 at any given moment. This would mean that a few lakh visitors come and see our *pujo* every night. And if you aggregate the number of visitors across all days, then it would be 2-3 million people! This crowd comprises the old, the infirm and the young as well. It would be important to remember that a number of these visitors travel far from their residences to see *pujos* in the city.

What any responsible *pujo* committee needs to do is to treat them not as visitors but guests. If they can take the trouble to walk long distances to come and see our *pujos*, can we not take a bit of trouble and invest in amenities that make their stay at our *pujo* more comfortable? This is why we invested in a 24-hour ambulance-cum-dispensary (attended by four doctors) at our *pujo* site, which provides free treatment to visitors. There are so many people who run short of breath, there are some who suffer from cuts on their feet (a result of the shoulder to shoulder crowd), there are some who feel dizzy and need to sit. This is a welcome development over the last few years among Kolkata's *pujos*. This is a good way in which specific awards are actually navigating the way for our *pujos* to become more responsible.

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CHETLA
AGRANI CLUB



Glossary

Shabeki - Refer shabeki • *Para* - Refer *para* • *Boro pujo korte parley ki rokom hoto* - How it would have been to do a big *pujo* • *Ekhaaney ondhokaar!* - It's dark here! • *Dekha jaabe ki hoy* - We will see whatever happens • *Ek chaala thakur* - Traditional the idol of Durga is made of clay with all five gods and goddesses under one structure is known as 'ek chaala' ('ek' = one, 'chaala' = cover) • *Thela* - A type of hand pulled cart • *Gram Bangla* - Rural Bengal • *Parar chheley* - Local boys • *Bhaalo pujo dorkaar* - Someone needed to organise a good *pujo* • *Dhunoi* - Someone who cleans and beats cotton to make mattresses • *Ojanaar bodh* - A sense of the unknown • *Asura* - In Hinduism, the asuras are non-suras, a different group of power-seeking deities besides the suras, sometimes considered naturalists, or nature-beings, in constant battle with the devas • *Trishul* - The trishul is a type of South Asian trident also found in Southeast Asia. It is commonly used as a Hindu-Buddhist religious symbol. The word means 'three spear' in Sanskrit and Pali • *Toron* - Arcade or portal • *Tejaswini* - The aggressive form of the goddess • *Hridoy premer shishya* - Love is the disciple of heart • *Mutawalli* - A trustee of a religious body; in this case a masjid









Q&A

BHOBOTOSH SUTAR

ARTIST

Q: What was the brief that the Chetla Agrani organisers give you?

Their protima tagline was '*Aakash paney hath bariye toron rupey dibya gyaan*', which is essentially the need to aspire for the unknown and the divine *(ojanaar bodh)*. The treatment was partly inspired by the South Indian temple's goparam, whose architectural shape (spire) extends from the ground to the sky and from the mundane to the divine. Everything started from this idea. It is a tragedy that most people who came to admire the *pandal* could not translate the literal into the metaphorical!

Q: How did you treat the *protima*?

Before I explain what I did in 2013, let me tell you what I had done in the previous year. I had copied myself as *asura* through photorealism. The idea was to convey to visitors that there is an *asura* that we carry within ourselves. So if you had that in mind then one would immediately be able to make sense of what I did in 2013. The protima's trishul was directed towards the visitors, again an inference to the *asura* inside each one of us. For all those who didn't get this, there were *asuras* with masks on the panels inside the *pandal*.

Why did I do to this? Simple. With all the violence being perpetrated by us – rape, violence etc – who are we to accuse the *asura*? Last year, Chetla Agrani Club had a resistance to my photorealism but when they heard of the positive visitor response, they began to change. So this year when I spoke of the *trishul* being directed at visitors, they were more open and here again, I wish one could have explained this better to the visitors because almost 85 percent among them saw things literally and visually without going into the deeper meaning.

Q: How would you describe the 'toron' on the outside?

The *toron* or the spire was 80 percent of the overall message of the Chetla Agrani *pujo*. For those who like to read into the meaning and resemblance of things, let me state that my *toron* had a striking similarity with the Eiffel Tower (actually, vice versa). Quite like a pair of hands reaching out to the divine maker. To get the desired impact, it was imperative for the spire to be tall and made of iron. The result was that it took a team of 60 to create a 70 ft structure across several months.

Those who worked on the structure had no prior experience of having created something like this. Welding and working at a height was a risk. Besides, they worked with nominal amenities and resources. Given these realities, what the workers delivered was absolutely incredible. When you find untrained workers delivering feats of engineering excellence in a short period of time, you marvel at their spirit of wanting to achieve against the odds.

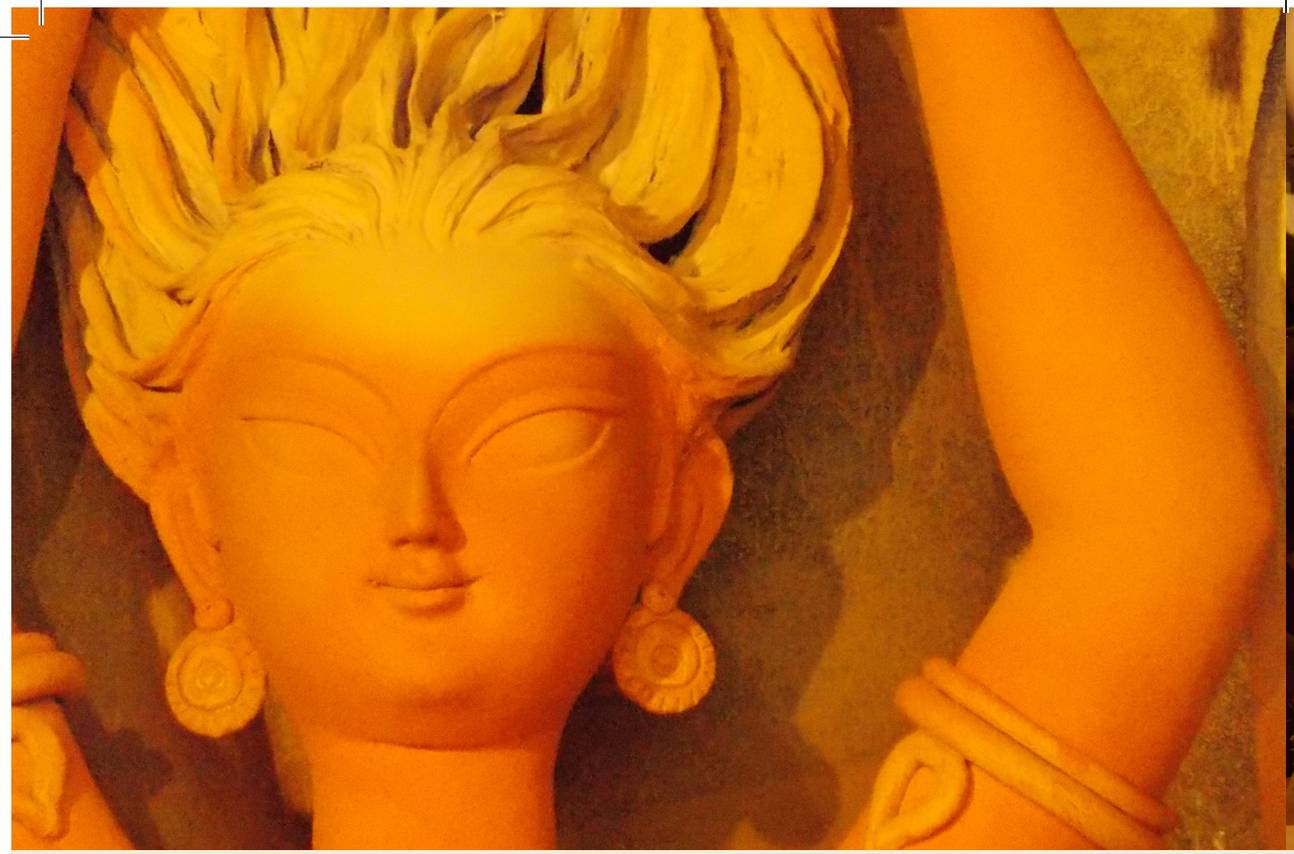
Q: Where did Bastar come into this?

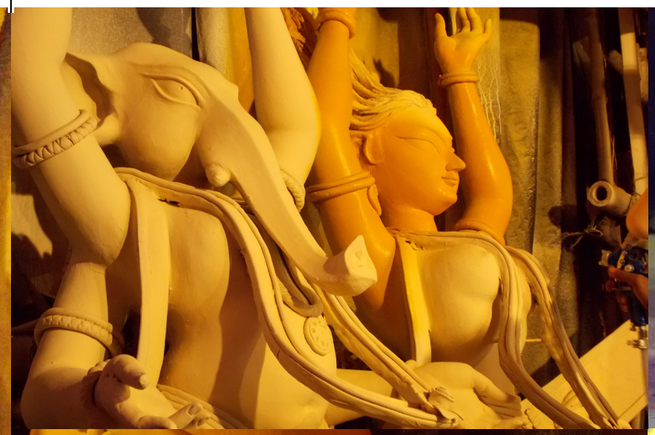
While designing the overall treatment, I came to the conclusion that we would not be able to achieve the refinement we were looking for without the use of metal. And when it came to metal, I realised that we did not have to look beyond the craftsmen of Bastar. These professionals are absolutely masters – PhDs, no less – in working with metal. The kind of expression that they can derive out of an animal or asura's face is unmatched. The result was that their work added considerable value to the peripheral adornment of the *pandal*. When people passed the asuras, they were tempted to touch it. When they did so, I knew I had achieved my objective!

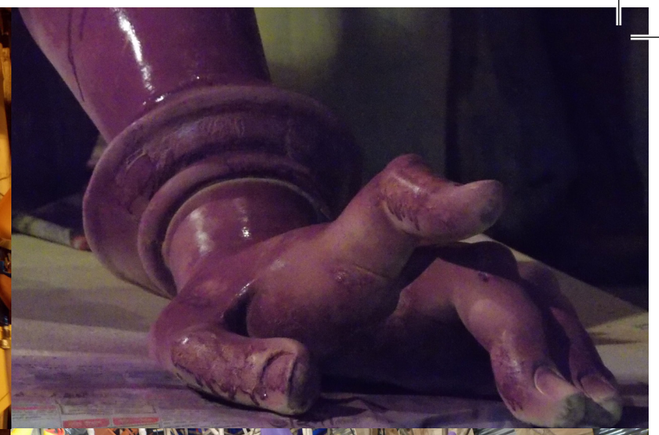
And remember that we would have liked to go higher but for engineering and foundation complications.

Q: What about the protima proper?

The tone of the entire presentation at Chetla Agrani was aggressive. It wasn't a soft and muted *pujo*. And the one place where this tone had to be clearly showcased was in the protima. So we created one that was 18 ft high, *tejaswini* in temperament (eyes, hairstyle), but hands had an influence of Chaitanya or Vaishnav and hands moved upwards into a lotus position) and with geometric precision, balance and proportion. And in her form you could see a triangle, circle and square, which was a subconscious tantric influence. The regret is that we need to learn the fine art of presentation. So sadly, the complexity of what went into the design could not be explained to the lay visitor. In some other places of the world, this thematic treatment would have been explained in different languages, *kintu aamra oi jaiga tey poichhoi ni.*











Q&A

SABYASACHI ROY CHOWDHURY

ORGANISER, CHETLA AGRANI CLUB

Q: Yours is an instance of a themed Durga *pujo* without a long track record.

You are right. We were just a bunch of boys who got into their heads that they wanted to assume control of the local Kali *pujo*. We resolved then that we needed to extend our efforts to Durga *pujo* and organised it in the *shabeki* way for more than a decade-and-a-half. Thereafter we made the last leap in our evolution: to the theme-styled Durga *pujo*.

Q: How did this idea evolve?

We were drawn from the middle-middle and lower-middle class from Chetla. Just boys from the *para*. More than a dozen. Arup Bhattacharya. Firhad Hakim. Sanjay Sen. Hrishikesh. Subhasis Sen. Manas and me. Hanging around from evening to late night. Generally looking for something to do in life. Must have been one of those days at our 'rock' of 1 Peary Mohan Road in the early Nineties when one of us must have asked *'boro pujo korte parley ki rokom hoto?'*

Q: Just a casual comment?

Yes and no. In those days, there used to be a large inflow of *pujo* visitors coming in from the suburbs and districts. This is what they would do: get off at Ballygunge Station, book an Ambassador, drop in at Ekdalia, then go to Singhi Park, then move to Ballygunge Cultural, hop off at Tridhara, move to Badamtala and 66 Palli… and now comes the fun part – they then would go off to Suruchi Sangha. They would skip Chetla completely. *Ekhaaney ondhokaar!*

Q: How did this change?

We decided to take control of our ongoing Chetla *pujo* in the early Nineties. Then we resolved to do a bigger one in 1993 *('dekha jaabe ki hoy'!),* which was funded with contributions of Rs 2,500 each from the 10 of us. The Rs 25,000 budget funded an *ek chaala thakur* and this is the way we ran our *pujo* for four years at 1 Peary Mohan Roy Road, which happened to be someone's residence. Completely *shabeki*. It was only in 2009 that we started hosting the *pujo* at the park where it is presently organised.

Q: When did you extend from the *shabeki* treatment to having a theme?

In 2007. In those days we had an in-house curator, Bobby Hakim. Even though he is a devout Muslim and now the *mutawalli* of the local Chetla *masjid*, Bobby was always a member of our *pujo* organising committee. He was the one who would always be seen pulling the rickshaw or *thela* that would get the *protima* to the *pandal*. As it turned out, Bobby did the 2007 *pujo* around the *gram baangla* concept followed by the global warming theme in 2008. Even this year, Bobby was generally at our club four days a week, en-route from his office to home, checking on the various aspects of implementation. His position in life may have changed for a lot of people but he is still a *parar chheley* for all of us.

Q: How did you make the thematic transition?

Initially since we were at a relatively small location, it was difficult to think of doing a big budget *pujo*. Only after 2009, when we shifted to a larger place – KMC leased the park to Chetla Agrani to protect it from land sharks – was the theming responsibility handed over to a professional. As it turned out, the 2009 theme of 'Under the sea' was done by Rupantar, 'Maa' in 2010 by Subodh Roy, 'Communal harmony' in 2011 by Rono Banerjee, *'Hridoy premer shishya'* in 2012 by Bhabatosh Sutar and *'Toron'* by Bhabatosh Sutar this year.

Q: In what way is your *pujo* different?

The *pujo* at Chetla Agrani is backed by the Chetla Agrani Club. This is a club that has grown significantly over the last few years: we have a 6 am -10 pm swimming pool, year-round cricket and football coaching, active modern gymnasium, bi-annual blood donation programmes, fund mobilisation schemes following natural disasters (as in Uttarakhand) and a focused health camp with CMRI. As a result, we don't just live for the Durga *pujo*; we are alive throughout the year and the *pujo* is only one – though the largest – of many activities that we are engaged in. We have a strong structure that makes our *pujo* a reality: Rs 5,000 for a membership which is open to all and nearly 600 members (400 active) who engage in all our *pujo* volunteering activities.

Q: What was the focus of your 2013 *pujo*?

The focus was 'Toron' (spire). We provided a detailed brief to Bhabatosh Sutar, our artist. We said *'Bhaalo pujo dorkaar'* and Bhabatosh executed the entire *pujo* with his team (except for the theme song, which was executed by Swagatalakshmi Dasgupta). The

complexity of the overall structure was such that we needed a lighting director and an electrical engineer. We deployed a lightning arrestor in view of the height of the iron rod. We got an insurance cover for our *pandal* and a third party cover for all visitors.

Q: How was the 2013 *pujo* received?

When you create something outstanding, the crowds will come. When the crowds come, the brand is built. When the brand is built, the sponsors come. When the sponsors come, the budget can be scaled. When the budget is scaled, you can give the artists the freedom to do something better and grander. When this happens, more crowds come. This is how a usual *pujo* becomes a mega *pujo* over time. The result was evident in our 2013 *pujo*: a queue of 150,000 on the fourth day; a queue of 200m between 1:30 and 2:30 am; 100 policemen, 24 security personnel and seven CCTVs at our site and 100 *para* people involved in day-to-day management. The result is that now we don't have to chase corporates for sponsorships or *tagada*. Because we are also able to bring in funds from our gym and swimming pool activities, our *pujo* expects to break even in 2013.

Q. What are the challenges of running a *pujo* like this?

Most of our challenges are derived from scale. Because there are so many things to coordinate, there is three months of solid work involved for people like us. The pressure mounts so much that in the run up, one has to take a month's leave from the office; during the days when we have to attend office, we usually go to the club first before going home and we don't reach home before 1 am!

Q&A

BOBBY HAKIM

ORGANISER

Q: You are an old resident of Chetla…

Most of us are fifth generation residents of Chetla; I am the sixth generation resident. My ancestor Ilahi Bux came from Gaya more than 150 years ago and the family had a background in *dhunoi* work (cleaning cotton). We were the only Muslims in the locality and the *mutawalli* of the local *masjid* was from the family. We were 80 of us at one time. Today, we are down to eight.

Q: How did a Muslim get involved in what is seen as completely Hindu festival?

My grandparents had known the grandparents of my friends. This is how deep roots go in Chetla. As a result, there was nothing that they would do that I would not – and vice versa. Which is why my getting involved in organising the *pujo* was a natural extension of all that we did together anyway. I may not bow my head or pray to the goddess, but I see no conflict in organising the event and no conflict in putting up what I think is a first-rate social event. Religion doesn't come into it. So I was one of the principal drivers of the *pujo* – right from where the *pandal* would be erected to what theme the *pujo* would be woven around. And this engagement has not changed one bit over the years. Even today, I stand at the *pandal* site on the last four days right up to 4 am. To this extent, I am still the same old *para* boy.

Q: There is a growing apprehension among the other *pujo* organisers that the *neta pujos* are drawing away a significant part of the sponsor outlay.

I have heard of this theory. All I can say is that at a time when sponsorship outlay is scarce due to an ongoing recession, no willing sponsor is going to put his money down for a *pujo* only because it is associated with a minister. At the end of the day, the sponsor is going to look at the *pujo* quality, design, crowds and responsibility. Everything else is going to be secondary. And so it is in our case. We have demonstrated our ability to grow the *pujo* every year; we provide excellent visibility to all those who advertise and we believe this is the only reason why they prefer to come back to us.

Q. What is next for you as a *pujo* organiser?

The time has come to look at the big picture. And the big picture is that we need to globally market our festival – the largest crafts festival in world. So going ahead, we will engage in a road show, market the event to a number of embassies, engage an international marketing company and increase the foreign tourist inflow manifold. One of the ways in which we intend to perpetuate the aura of the *pujos* is by preserving some of the best protimas at the Rabindra Sarobar Gallery, which is one way for all those who missed some of the best *pujos* to see them in one location.

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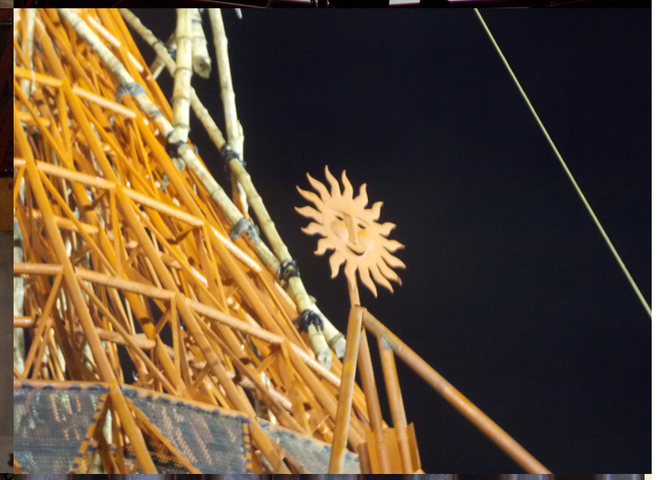
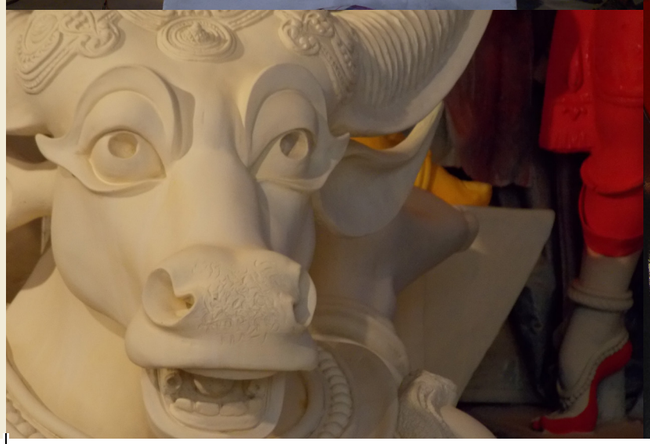
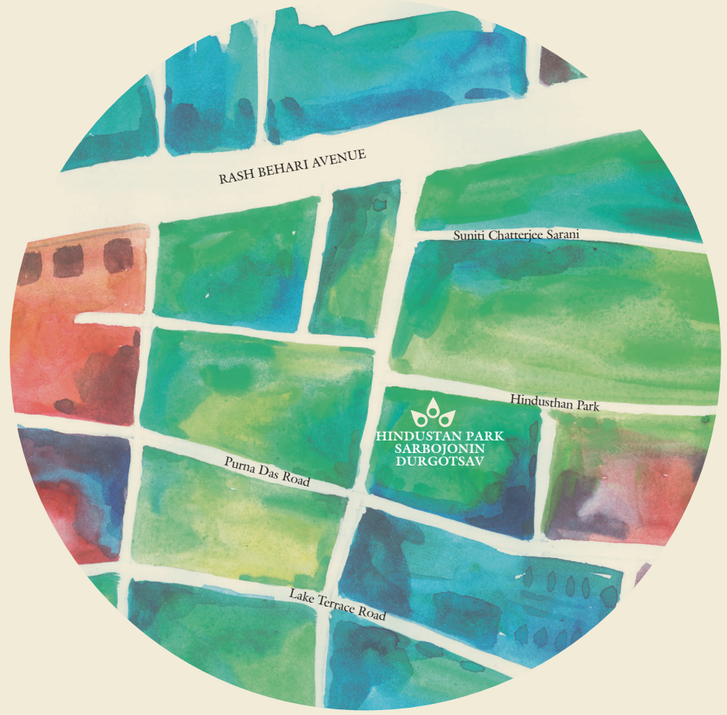
*Mr. Hakim also happens to be the Urban Development Minister, West Bengal



HINDUSTAN PARK
SARBOJONIN
DURGOTSAV



Glossary

Phire Dekha - Looking back (nostalgically) • *Bhanga dalan, tatey pujo hoche, chari pashe mati diye ekta gramer chitro tule dhore chhilam.* - Dilapitated courtyard where the Durga *pujo* is being done, I wanted to bring out the flavour of a Bengali village by using clay all around • *Rono da kono kaj jane na and tar kaj protek bochor ek hi hoy* - Rono da does not know any work and his work is all the same every year • *Biri* - A biri (a South Asian leaf-wrapped cigarette) is a thin, Indian cigarette filled with tobacco flake and wrapped in a tendu leaf tied with a string at one end. • *Ba* - Or • *Bhar* - Refer bhar in Bosepukur • *Theme maaney ekta bhabhna, theme maaney ekta golpo, theme kokhonoi 'art' dekhanor jayga noy* - Theme means a thought, theme means a story, theme is not a place where you show off your artistic knowledge • *Pandal* - A *pandal* is fabricated structure, either temporary or permanent, in a religious ceremony, for example a wedding. In Hinduism, it is a temporary structure set up to venerate the goddess Durga during Durga *pujo*, known as *pujo pandal* • *Ami mone kori pujo ta shilpo dekhanor jayga noy, shilpo dekhao giye installation art-er fair ba orom kono jaygaye giye* - I believe *pujo* is not the place where one should show off one's artistic flair, rather one should show it in installation fairs or in such kind of places. • *Dhoper kaj* - Dhop: A hollow sound; has multiple idomatic usages here something that is meaningless or work that is 'hollow'. • *Theme kake bole beshi bhag lokerai toh jane na karon tara konodin shohorer baire pa rakheni, ar eta Kolkata bolei shombhob.* - Majority of the people do not know what is meant by 'theme' because none of them have ever stepped outside Kolkata and this is only possible because it is Kolkata • *Maney* - Means • *Taal pata ba rickshaw diye kono decoration noy* - Doesn't mean a decoration that is done with leaves of palm tree or a rickshaw • *Puro jaygata ekdam choshey phelechilam, ar sekhaankar lokeder sathe kotha bola aar oder sombondhe khutinati jenechilam* - Scoured the entire region and also found out each and every minute detail about the people and the region after talking with the indigenous population • *Ekta bishaal pakhi baniye phellam, jaar kono relation nei pujor saathe* - Just make a huge bird, which has no relation with the *pujo* • *Ba onno je boi jetaar opor bhitti kore pujo hoy* - Or the other books based on which the Durga *pujo* is being done • *Doshobhuja* - Ten-handed • *Atherobhuja Durga-r kotha* - About the eighteen-handed goddess Durga • *Asurs jader Maa badh korechilan* - Asurs whom the goddess killed in various avatars • *Maha Saraswati merechilen Sumbho ar Nishumbho ke, Maha Kali marechilen aro dui asur ke ar Maha Lakkhi rupe merechilen Mahishasur ke* - In the form of Maha Saraswati mother Durga killed Sumbho and Nishumbho (two asurs that confronted, and were ultimately slain by the goddess), in the form of Maha Kali she killed two more asurs and in the form of Maha Lakhhi she killed Mahishasur (Mahishasura's father Rambha was king of the asurs, and he once fell in love with Princess Shyamala, who was cursed to be a water buffalo; Mahishasura was born out of this union. He is, therefore, able to change between human and buffalo form at will) • *Ekta kalponik dalan toiri korechilam* - Created a imaginary courtyard • *Jothariti bhanga, bot gach utheche, sheowla poreche chaar dike, shaanp kholosh chereche, deyale tiktiki aache* - As usual dilapidated, a banyan tree and moss have grown, snakes have sheded their skin, lizards are crawling on the walls • *Ekdom* - Absolutely • *Mandir* - Refer to mandir in Chaltabagan • *Protistha kora onek purono thakur* - Established an age-old idol • *Ashto-dhaatur protima* - Ashtadhatu is an alloy of eight metals namely, gold, silver, copper, zinc, lead, tin, iron and mercury. Ashtadhatu idols are made so as to be durable and last years without noticeable decay. The eight metals are mixed in roughly equal proportions and the idols that are created are initially of rough finish • *Shabeki* - Refer to shabeki in Bosepukur • *Protima* - Refer to protima Bosepukur • *Taal-mel* - Coordination • *Haath jor hoye jaai!* - In respect one's hands fold automatically • *Stotra* - Stotra is a Sanskrit word, for a hymn addressed to divinity. It can be a prayer, a description, or a conversation. These hymns praise aspects of the divine, such as Devi, Shiva, or Vishnu. Relating to word 'stuti', coming from the same verb, stu (to praise), and basically both mean 'praise' • *Azaan* - In Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Iran, Pakistan, Bangladesh and India, is the Islamic call to worship, recited by the muezzin at prescribed times of the day. The root of the word is adhina means 'to listen, to hear, be informed about' • *Maa* - Mother • *Para pujo* - Local *pujo* • *Baas!* - That's it • *Kintu* - But • *Ei baar* - This time • *Exam-er thekeo kharaap* - Worst than an exam • *Shei bichhanaye chhot-pot. Aar shei proshno* - Same fighting bed and the same question • *Aabir* - This is a kind of colourful powder with which people play holi and decorate their house • *Dochaala* - Type of roof with two curved eaves, derived from Bengali huts • *Boyeshko lok* - Elderly or aged people • *Ora ei rokom keno? Shudhu ki aamrai paagol?* - Why are they like this? Are we the only one's who are mad? • *Ijjot ta key to baanchiye raakhtey hobey!* - Have to keep alive the pride or honour • *Ei baar phaatiye dileyn!* - This time it was awesome • *Hatke* - Out of the box or different from the rest • *Kathi roll* - Kati roll is street-food originating from Kolkata, India. Its original form was a kati kabab enclosed in a paratha, but over the years many variants have evolved all of which now go under the generic name of kati roll • *Hisaab* - To keep a track of • *Mishti* - sweet • *Ki kheli* - What did you had as food? • *Nobomi* - 9th day of the paksha, here in this case it is refered to as the 9th day of the Devipaksha, paksha is a fortnight • *Ponchomi* - 5th day of the paksha, here in this case it is refered to as the 5th day of the Devipaksha, paksha is a fortnight • *Jey rokom hoy* - As it happens • *Thaakur* - Idol • *Daariye kaaj koriyechhey* - Had to stand there and make others work • *Mahalaya* - Mahalaya marks the start of the Devipaksha and the end of the Pitripaksha. The traditional six day countdown to Mahasaptami starts from Mahalaya. Goddess Durga visits the earth for only four days but seven days prior to the *pujos*, starts the Mahalaya • *Janlaar kaanch bhaanga* - Broken window pane







Q&A

RONO BANERJEE

ARTIST, HINDUSTAN PARK SARBOJONIN DURGOTSAV

What is your background?

I graduated from the Government Art College in 1983-84 with a specialisation in fine arts following which I worked in the field of advertising. I worked for Clarion in New Delhi, strengthening my expertise in dimensional display (pavilion design, now called 'theme'). My first *pujo* assignment was for a *Saraswati pujo* in my locality comprising a black and white TV with side shutters using paper with the *Saraswati* idol 'performing' inside. When I returned to Kolkata in 1999, I worked with Badamtala Ashar Sangha on the assurance of intellectual freedom. I worked on the theme of *'Phire Dekha'* which comprised a *bhanga dalan, tatey pujo hoche, chari pashe mati diye ekta gramer chitro tule dhore chhilam.* I developed a reputation among the *pujo* organising committees that *"Rono da kono kaj jane na* and *tar kaj protek bochor ek hi hoy"*. To me *pujo* never meant anything except *phire dekha* and if you see my work you will find it is a theme pavilion but not any work with *biri,* cigarette *ba bhar.* Thereafter, I worked with *pujos* like Beleghata Naba Milan, Salt Lake FD Block, Pally Mangal Samity, Jodhpur Park, Chetla Agrani, Hindustan Park and Behala Natun Dal.

What is your take on the Durga *pujo* then and now?

For me, *Durga pujo* is nothing but *'Phire dekha'. Phire dekha* is my perennial theme; theme *maaney ekta bhabhna,* theme *maaney ekta* golpo, theme *kokhonoi* 'art' *dekhanor jayga noy.* I believe in portraying a story through my *pandal* or theme rather than showing 'art' off in the name of a 'theme'. I believe *Durga pujo* itself is a theme so why complicate it any more? I doubt how many of the people who visit different *pandals* or people who organise these *pujos* understand what the artist is trying to portray. *Ami mone kori pujo ta shilpo dekhanor jayga noy, shilpo dekhao giye* installation *art-er* fair *ba orom kono jaygaye giye.* Today in Kolkata whatever is happening in the name of 'theme' is *dhoper kaj*, theme *kake bole beshi bhag lokerai toh jane na karon tara konodin shohorer baire pa rakheni, ar eta* Kolkata *bolei shombhob*.

So what is a theme *pujo* to you?

If you go to any international fair, you will find 'theme' *maney* actual theme, *taal pata ba* rickshaw *diye kono* decoration *noy.* I am probably the only one in Kolkata dead against this theme concept because I know what an actual theme is. If you say it is Brazil, then you have to bring about that thing the same way it would be done in Brazil. You just cannot say the theme is Brazil-*er* Amazon forest and plant half-dead mangrove trees there.

As a result, my work is research-intensive, like when I did *Jonglagor* then a few club members and I travelled to East and West Midnapore and *puro jaygata ekdam choshey phelechilam, ar sekhaankar lokeder sathe kotha bola aar oder sombondhe khutinati jenechilam.* This how I work rather than *ekta bishaal pakhi baniye phellam, jaar kono* relation *nei pujor saathe.*

Durga pujo from an extremely personal perspective is the ultimate epitome of surrealist thought, which came to us much before Salvador Dali brought this to the forefront. So I would rather tell my experience through it and do the actual *pujo* as it is there in the *Sree Sree Chandi* scripture. If you read the text and *ba onno je boi jetaar opor bhitti kore pujo hoy,* you would find so many different themes, so why attempt something which is downright outlandish?

Please take us through the theme of Hindustan Park.

As my themes are nothing but *phire dekha,* I reminisced about the past. In *Sree Sree Chandi*, you will not find any mention of *doshobhuja Durga;* rather you will find *atherobhuja Durga-r kotha.* You would also see there that there were three main *asurs jader Maa badh korechilan* in three different *avatars*. *Maha Saraswati merechilen Sumbho ar Nishumbho ke, Maha Kali marechilen aro dui asur ke ar Maha Lakkhi rupe merechilen Mahishasur ke*. Based on this story, *ekta kalponik dalan toiri korechilam*. I made three run-down terracotta temples based on this story. The first *mandir* was of *Maha Kali,* the second one of *Maha Lakshmi* (in the original form on which the modern representation of Durga is based) and the third one of *Maha Saraswati.* All these temples *jothariti bhanga, bot gach utheche, sheowla poreche chaar dike, shaanp kholosh chereche, deyale tiktiki aache* and lastly *ekdom* conventional idol as you see in that kind of a *mandir* like *protistha kora onek purono thakur.*

To get that look we chose to use an *ashto-dhaatur protima.* I never made a single thing myself; I just don't have that expertise. What I did was to explain what the work was about, how to go about it and how to do it, gave directions, provided the artistic vision and explained with references. The result was that no one felt that this was done only for the *pujo;* people said that it seemed that this was there for ages. My expertise lies in replicating something that is 500 years old and that is what I did at Hindustan Park.












Q&A

DR ARIJIT DAS

ORGANISER, HINDUSTAN PARK SARBOJONIN DURGOTSAV

Q: What is the background of the Hindustan Park Durga *pujo*?

The *pujo* on our street is now into its 83rd year. We evolved from the *shabeki* to the themed version in 2002 for an interesting reason – the cost of doing a *shabeki pujo* was getting to be three times the cost of a themed version. In 2001 for instance, the *shabeki pujo* cost us around Rs 8 lacs whereas if we had done it through the themed route, it would have cost us exactly half!

Q: Most *pujo* organisers one has spoken to have told us the opposite.

Let me work out the costs for you. When you do a full fledged *shabeki*, the *protima* is nothing less than 12-13 ft tall. The lighting has to be got from Chandannagore as a result of which 10-15 experts have to be provided food and stay for a month. So what we have arrived at is an interesting hybrid – the celebrated Jyotindranath Pal to do our *shabeki thakur* – same structure and face, maybe different colour, which is one area where we have held on to tradition without *taal-mel* with a singular objective: the protima must evoke divine feelings…*haath jor hoye jaai!*

Q: How smooth was the transition from the conventional to the modern treatment?

A: By the early part of the previous decade, the time was right for the new generation of *pujo* organisers from our neighbourhood to take over. Interestingly, mot many people were interested in how the *pujo* was being organised as long as it was being organised. That was the time when the Gujarat riots had happened and the entire incident created an unspoken fear within all of us. What if this happens all over the country? If you ask, the secular ethos of this country is really its backbone. No secularism. No India. So we organisers selected to do something about this in our *pujo* theme for 2002.

Q: In what way?

We selected to curate an entire *pujo* around communal harmony. The result is that we blended Jain and Mughal architecture. We extended the concept to create a conventional *protima* in Mughal clothes; the theme music by Pandit Tejendra Narayan Mazumdar had the *stotra* extending into an *azaan*! The old timers were shocked: why did the *stotra* have to extend into the *azaan*? Why *Maa* in Muslim clothes? The verdict in a certain section was that we had reduced a conventional *pujo* to the level of a street-side *tamasha* – and that too in the very first year. Anyway, the murmurs soon died down when the ex-chief minister Siddhartha Shankar Ray and Mrinal Sen spent an hour at our *pandal*. The *pujo* got considerable coverage on the Internet and a number of positive comments started to pour in. The *para pujo* went international! Besides, we won the Ananda Snowcem Award and the Anandabazar Patrika editor Suman Chattopadhyay, made just one comment: 'I appreciate their conviction!' *Baas*!

Q: How would you describe the 2013 *pujo* of Hindustan Park Sarbojanin?

Historic. That's the word. For the last 11 years, we have been doing themed *pujos* and each year, people would say 'Bhaalo' and 'Khoob-e-bhaalo' *kintu* we were like the actors who put up a great performance but never got the Oscar. *Ei baar*, the script changed. We finally won the Asian Paints Sharad Samman! Our stress increased dramatically once we were shortlisted. Exam-*er thekeo kharaap*. None of us in the team of organisers could sleep prior to the announcement. *Shei bechhanai chhot-pot. Aar shei proshno:* If we don't get an Oscar, then why do the *pujos* at all? So we started checking the Asian Paints Sharod Samman website every 30 minutes. Nervously accessed Facebook. Finally at 6:30 in the evening, we got a call from Asian Paints. *Baas!* The entire locality had already started spraying *aabir* on each other. Undisputed number one.

Q: The obvious question. What did you do this year that merited the award?

Our 2013 theme was *'Mahalokhir daalan jara, boikritik rahashye mora'* – *boikritik rahashye* which is a chapter from *Sri Sri Chandi*. We created ancient mandirs in the middle of the street and for this we embarked on a reconnaissance last December leading to an extensive study of reference pictures thereafter. Only in February did we freeze the style, scope and design and by June, we deployed 70 people to work on the basic bamboo structure, ply and platform, POP and fibre-glass material as well as the paintings, electrical support and audio system.

Q: How was the design treated?

We created three age-old *dochaala* mandirs made of terracotta, which were painstakingly worn down for enhanced authenticity. These *mandirs* blended the Bishnupur, Murshidabad and Hooghly

traditions on the outside. The insides gave the feeling that one had entered into a time-freeze: decaying wall finish, peeling plaster, wooden panels on the ceiling, old porcelain electrical switches (half-broken!), old *thaakur* pictures, *janlaar kaanch bhaanga*, lizards, cobwebs, snake skins on the outside, tree roots across the temple and live pigeons. To create the feel of old world rural Bengal, the street was completely blocked over the last fortnight in the run up. There were 7,000-8,000 to watch this *pujo* at any moment, the line was nearly 250-m long into the night upto Rashbehari Avenue and normally took half-an-hour from tail to head.

Q: What was the internal machinery that made this happen?

Largely one person. Sutapa Das. She has been responsible for 90 percent of the work in getting this *pujo* up and running. She is one of the few women *pujo* organisers in Calcutta with a track record that goes back eight years. She manages everything: from communication to co-ordination to meetings to fund raising to sponsor liaison to fighting with the local goons to interacting with the local police station. *Daariye kaaj koriyechhey* for months, which is why we had an award-winning *pujo* this year!

Q&A

SUTAPA DAS

ORGANISER, HINDUSTAN PARK SARBOJONIN DURGOTSAV

Q: You have been the principal hand behind the success of the Hindustan Park Sarbajonin *pujo*. What is the one factor that you attribute for your effectiveness?

Discipline. The biggest variable in a *pujo* is the *pandal* and the *protima*. These two items consume the largest time and cost. If one can make any improvement in their workflow, then the resulting spin-offs are usually planned and timely. There are two things that precisely translated into this reality for us in 2013: one, we continued to work with our contractor of eight years and did not have to reinvent any wheel for him in terms of terrain, locality and people. The result is that an installation that would have normally taken about three months took half the time.

Two, the artist was methodical to the point of providing us with a CAD mock-up in January with all precise measurements in place. The result was that the *pandal* was 100 percent done a day after *Mahalaya*. Thanks to the mock-up, everyone had an engineer's insight into what needed to be done.

Q: What are the various challenges that one has to address in managing a *pujo* like this?

A number of them starting with the lane dynamics. Since the wall-to-wall





width is just 35 ft, the *pandal* cannot be more than 20 ft. We have to position the *pandal* in a manner that no one's gate is blocked. The result is that we get only 1,800 ft in which to work.

Then there is the other challenge of involvement. A number of our older residents sold their properties and exited the neighbourhood. There are a number of residents whose children study or work abroad. There are a number of NRIs whose properties are usually locked through the year. There are some who usually travel during the holidays and have never been around to see their own *pujo* for years. There are some *boyeshko lok* whose moral support is more that their financial support. The result is that there are only a handful of people who keep the Hindustan Park flag flying. Would you believe that not more than a lac of rupees is mobilised from residents? That's less than 5 percent of the overall outlay!

One used to get agitated about this earlier – *ora ei rokom keno? Shudhu ki aamrai paagol?* – but gradually we have become stoic. We recognise that if we don't do it, next year not even a bamboo structure will be built! *Ijjot ta key to baanchiye raakhtey hobey!*

Besides, the other challenges are that our *pujos* are apolitical with all the attending disadvantages, we need to mobilise a significant 25% from sponsorships and then engage in the recovery of our outstandings across the next 11 months.

Q: A blunt question. Then why do the *pujos* at all?

For the payback to our neighbourhood for what it has given us. For our sense of identity in a world that suffers from an identity crisis. For playing some role in making the world look better even if it is for a few days. For the ego of hearing someone say *'Ei baar phaatiye dileyn!'* For doing at least something in our mundane lives that can be considered truly international. For the sheer pride in helping make the *pujos* the largest street-based installation art festival in the world. For the pressure of working for something that is only going to make one emotionally richer. For the sheer romance of neighborhood chaos where nothing gets cooked in our place for 30 days leading to the *pujos* and we need to snatch a bite wherever we may be during meal time. For the magic of living and dreaming a festival for months. For the pride of being able to do something aesthetically unique on a large scale in a commoditised world.

Q: The critical question. Surely such an event must be loss-making.

This will come as a surprise for you. We have never had a deficit for years even as our budgets have increased – Rs 2 million in 2012 and Rs 2.6 million in 2013. There is a science to this: we generally keep a buffer of Rs 300,000 in our budget for unforeseen events. Nearly 99 percent of the material that we need to buy is costed, which is a result of our learnings from the years. We get good rates from vendors because we pay on time. We don't encash the *pujo* account FD even when money is needed; we would rather lend from our pocket. The *pujo* budget is sacred; all the *kathi* rolls and taxi fares we pay from our pocket.

Q: What then is the brand of your *pujo*?

Over the last decade, we have established a reputation that if it is Hindustan Park Sarbojanin then it will be a *hatke pujo*. We believe in relationships, which explains why our vendors and artists have generally been the same over the years, which actually gets us to complete work faster, gets us attractive credit tenures and also enables us to get fair prices. We are recognised as underdogs who will work harder than most others. We are respected as credible; our accounts are audited, we provide *hisaab* down to the last 5 paise and our auditors are comfortable working with us because our balance sheet has no qualifications (clean accounting practices!). The result is that ours is not just a *pujo*; it is a transparent corporate event.

Q: In a city notorious for its deadlines, how do you get an event completed slightly ahead of schedule?

We pay our vendors for the overall project completion within a deadline (and not a 'per day' basis) as a result of which they recognise that their interest lies in working two-and-a-half shifts a day, finishing our project faster and moving on to other sites. We pay our vendors every week; if you don't manage their working capital, they will quote costs higher and make money in some other way. We clear 80 percent of vendor payments by the end of the *pujos* and the rest within a fortnight thereafter.

And lastly, nothing works better than courtesy: what is it that one glass of water and one *mishti* not achieve in Kolkata? Or what battle can a line like *ki kheli* not win for you in this part of the world?

Q: In what way are you a responsible *pujo*?

In so many ways! We invested in a CCTV network, we upgraded from an investment of Rs 5,000 in a fire extinguisher to a heat alarm plus fire alarm plus a 2,000 litre water tank with hose, burglar alarm, *pandal* insurance and fire retardant spray, which explains our getting the fourth rank in the Safety and Security Award.

And then there comes the socially responsible side of our *pujo*. This year we invited Shanti Dan's 250 residents to eat with us on *nobomi*. We provided five government-aided schools with educational stationery. We showed 50 Brindaban widows around our *pujo* on *ponchomi* and gave them sarees and medicines.

Q: How much does the *pujo* affect your personal life?

There is no personal life for the three months leading to the *pujo*. My husband is a doctor and gets a number of opportunities of sponsored travel – *jey rokom hoy* – but we have to refuse each time. We have never seen the world 30 days before the Durga *pujo* and 10 days after Kali *pujo*!

Q: Any last words?

This is probably the largest open air free art exhibition in the world, which needs to be promoted by the government. This is more than just another event; it is an economy driver, it is an emotion driver. It is time for the government to do something to take it to the next league!

HINDUSTAN PARK SARBOJONIN
DURGOTSAV COMMITTEE
51/1 Hindustan Park, Calcutta

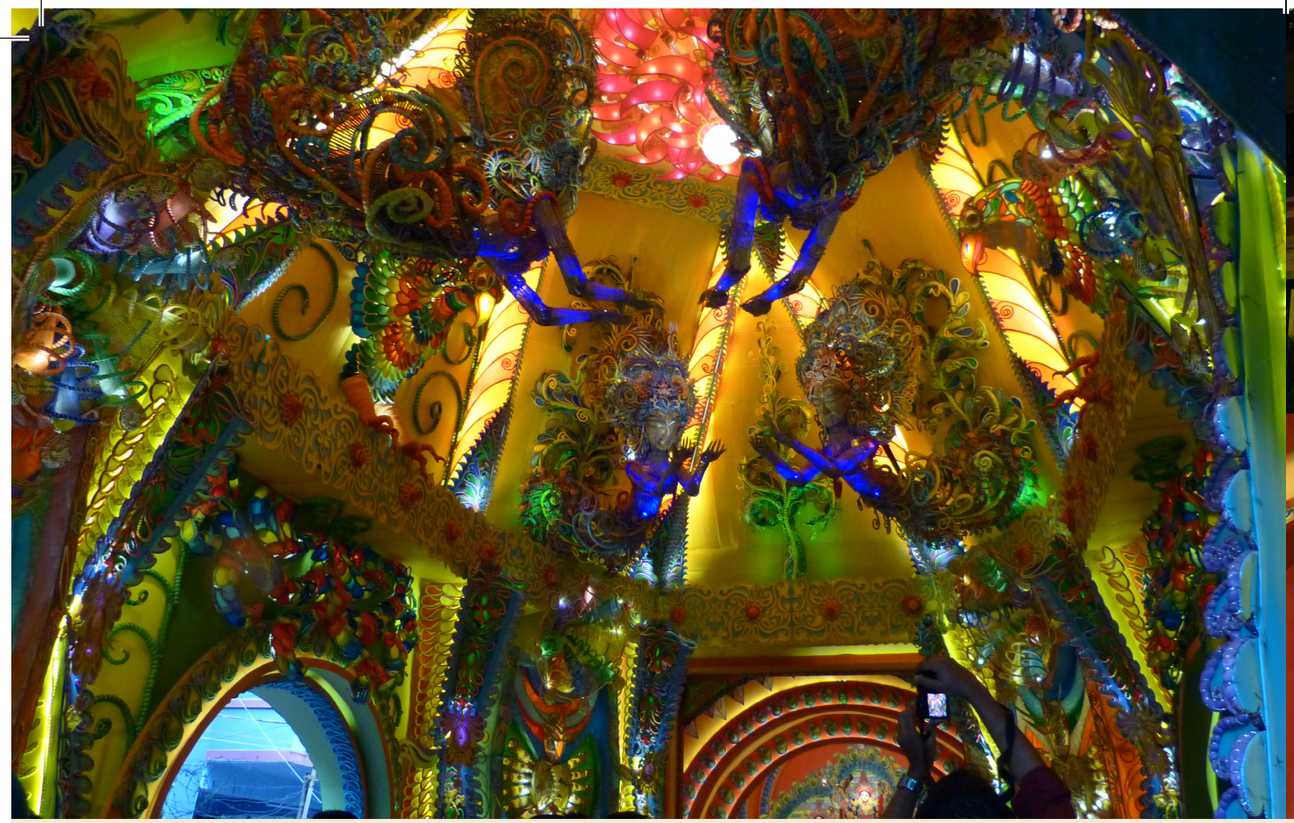
SHIV MANDIR
SARBOJANIN
DURGA UTSAV



Glossary

Hariya - Hooch, drink made from fermented rice • *Kala gacher khola/kala gacher chhal* - Banana tree leaf sheath or the outer most skin of the bananna tree trunk which is also known pseudostem (the tightly packed sheaths make up the pseudostem) • *khorer chaala* - Roof made of straw • *Mandir* - Temple • *Ektu aaghat laaglo* - Was hurt a bit • *Issue chhilo* - Some issues were there • *Patachitra* - Patachitra is a general term for traditional scroll painting in Odisha and Bengal. In Sanskrit pata means cloth, chitra means painting • *Ja hobey dekha jaabey* - We will see whatever happens… • *Nabami's* - 9th day of the paksha, here in this case it is referred to as the 9th day of the Devipaksha • *Kaada* - Mud • *Bhashaan* - The process of bidding farewell to Mother Durga on Dashami or the process of immersion of Mother Durga • *Adhunik* - Modern • *Bodhon* - The invocation of the deity is done during the evening of Shasthi (the 6th day of the Devipaksha) and as myth says, the deities thereafter comes alive • *Kichhu notun chhilo na* - Didn't have anything new • *Aapnader pujo kothaai dekheychii, ekhun mone prochey na* - I had seen your *pujo* somewhere, right at this moment I am not being able to remember • *Bhadrata* - Gentility • *Ei re, eibaar pelaam na* - Oh no! didn't get it this time • *Ektu aashben* - Will you please come? • *Bhog* - The food which is first offered to the deity and then divided among the followers • *Saptami* - 7th day of the paksha, here in this case it is refered to as the 7th day of the Devipaksha • *Uthey aashchey na* - Not coming up • *Oder boojhiye di* - Make them understand • *Shiblingo* - The lingam or Shiblingo (also, linga, ling, Shiva linga, Shiv ling, meaning "mark", "sign", "inference") is a representation of the Hindu deity Shiva used for worship in temples. In traditional Indian society, the linga is rather seen as a symbol of the energy and potentiality of the God.













Q&A

SUBROTO BANERJEE

ARTIST, SHIBMANDIR SARBOJANIN DURGA UTSAB

Q. What is your background?

I never went to art school or hold a degree in visual arts. I have a full-time job with the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprise (Government of India) as an economic investigator. I had engaged in displaying handicrafts from Bengal at the Handicrafts Fair and the ITTF at Delhi. My work gives me the opportunity to travel, promote handicraft and train rural Indians. This exposure has helped me provide artisans with an economic opportunity during the peak *pujo* time that is better than the 100 days' work programme initiated by the Government. Consider: a full-time skilled labourer can earn around Rs 1,000 per day (working across two shifts) for three months with no spending on food and accommodation. Contrast this with an average graduate student earning Rs. 7,000 per month. Despite this, there are thousands who would rather stay in villages, earn Rs. 100 a day, have *hariya* in the evening and pass out. Which is why I created the Handicrafts Directory to facilitate the interaction between artisans and prospective clients.

Q. How did you get involved with *pujos*?

In 2006, I was approached by a *para pujo* committee in Picnic Gardens, in 2007, by Tangra Gholapara and in 2008, won the Asian Paints Sharod Samman for the same client. In 2009, I worked at Shibmandir with *kola gacher khola* and the following year with jute and thereafter with bamboo poles. These designs went on to to be adapted at various exhibitions while being shortlisted by Asian Paints. In 2011, I was engaged by the Suruchi Sangha when I delivered a theme on Jammu & Kashmir. In 2012, I worked again with Tangra Gholapara and made history as that *pujo* was announced winner with Suruchi Sangha.

Q. Tell us about the *pujo* of Shibmandir…

I have been associated with the Shibmandir *pujo* since 2009. Shibmandir is a challenging geography; the area is densely populated and the *pujo* takes place on a winding lane. I focused on using materials that were low-cost, environment-friendly and never used anywhere. Which explains why I used AC duct pipes in 2013 – inexpensive, easy to source, easy to mould and easily adaptable to oil paint. I created hollow structures for the angles that adorned the main *mandap* ceiling with lights within to create a striking impact. My experience is that when the material used is inexpensive, the *pujo* committee is in a position to remunerate labourers better. Besides, if I work with new material, the artisans can create similar showpieces and sell in fairs leading to a sustainable livelihood.

Q. How is the *pujo* movement evolving in Kolkata?

First, it is an employment provider; I have 200 direct employees, of which around 25-30 work from January onwards at my workshop near Bondel Gate with 200 working during the last three months of the *pujo*. Second, the *pujo* has emerged as a source of alternative livelihood for artists previously restricted to their canvases. Third, it has raised the bar in terms of aesthetic standards. Fourth, it is increasing the pressure on all *pujo* committees especially the big ones who keep pinning hopes on winning awards and get depressed when they don't. Fifth, the festival has become progressively eco-friendly where we use resource-based items more than anyone else in the world whether it is the Rio Carnival or Oktoberfest.

Q. What makes you different?

I prefer to work with environment-friendly and recyclable material. I help artisans develop skills. I work with simple concepts; take the work I did for Shibmandir with *kola gacher chhal* which didn't win prizes but keeps doing the rounds of various *pujos* in Chandannagore, Bardhaman and Kalna. The work I did this year at Shibmandir has been assured an afterlife as well.

My workshop is in an economically backward area of Kolkata. I try to employ a number of youths – not art college students - from the locality, which keeps them off drugs and alcohol.

I keep experimenting with new materials, which allows my people to learn new skills, which gives them a chance to showcase their work in Delhi, Mumbai and Ahmedabad.

Q. If you had a wish list…

Look at the Goa Festival or the Rio Carnival, which are more popular but not half as creative as the Durga *pujo* in Kolkata. The government should promote the *pujo* across the world, offer customised tour packages and launch a museum along the lines of a Ramoji Film City to preserve our work.

Q&A

PARTHO GHOSH

ORGANISER, SHIBMANDIR SARBOJANIN DURGA UTSAB

Q: What is the legacy of the Shibmandir *pujo*?

Some decades ago, the Shibmandir was just a *'khorer chaala'* where dacoits from Charu Market area would come to offer their obeisance before they left for the 'business'. When the KIT took over this entire locality in the early 1920s, a *Shiblingo* was discovered here, which became the rationale for setting up a formal *mandir* and a formal *pujo*. So there are nearly eight decades of a *pujo* tradition in this locality. Traditionally, around 50 homes have been involved in the organisation down the decades; initially the *pujo* would be held inside the *mandir* premises but following a stampede in 1960, the *pujo* was shifted to a vacant ground alongside and once a real estate promoter built on that vacant plot, we had no alternative but to shift the *pujo* to the street. There is another index of where we come from; today, it is fashionable for some of the younger *pujos* to claim that they won the Asian Paints Sharad Samman in 2002 or 2003; we were shortlisted as early as 1986 (when frankly, we had not quite grasped the idea of the aesthetics of *pujo* curation).

Q: You are now respected as a consistent theme-driven *pujo*. When was your inflection point?

The year 1999. Asian Paints had given out guidelines on the basis of which all *pujos* would be judged. However we were not shortlisted in 1997 or 1998. *Ektu aaghat laaglo*. So as a preparatory for the 1999 *pujo*, I became a member of the Bongo Sahitya Parishad Library for Rs 8, xeroxed books about traditional architectural styles and went off to Bishnupur. *Ei baar* prestige issue *chhilo.* What I saw there was stunning; we stayed there for two days and came back with the concept of *patachitra*.

In 1998, our *pujo* budget was Rs 150,000; the following year it was raised to Rs 4,00,000; the outlay of 300 *bosta* plaster of paris was quadrupled. Tublu and I said *'ja hobey dekha jaabey!'*; we literally cashed our fixed deposits and at the end of the *pujo*, we were down by Rs 60,000 on our savings. The upside was that when painter Bikhash Bhattacharya came, the one thing he said was 'What are you doing to preserve this?'. Crazy *pujo*. Since there were two *nabamis* that year, the crowd was unmanageable to the point that we organisers simply abdicated and disappeared; worse, it rained and there was ankle-deep water through the lane, so we had to request for a powerful pump to evacuate the waterlogged areas, but each time we did so, the water would come back, so eventually we had to buy a longer pipe and for the next three hours, the water was discharged into Sarat Chatterjee Avenue. There was *kaada* all over, people couldn't walk steadily but when the Asian Paints judges came, they had a look and concluded with just one word: 'Fantastic!' Besides, when Mr Ranjit Pachnanda (then DC South) came in with his team to manage the crowds, he just hugged me and said, 'You have done your job, now the job is ours'. We won the Asian Paints award for Discovery of the Year. We had well and truely arrived.

Q: That was how the brand was created.

Those were formative years. It was important to remain consistent in terms of standards and varying as far as the treatment was concerned for a brand to emerge. So the following years, we wove our *pujo* theme around Mulutigram a Santhal village; we got nearly 150 visitors from that village to come and be our guests; we made a donation to them; we invited them to do a Santhal dance on the day of the *bhaashan*. The result was that years of their ineffective positioning were more than covered with one week of *pujo* exposure; we created tourist potential!

The result was until that point Shibmandir's *pujo* would always be dismissed with 'You are in a lane, how can we fund you?'. Now that we had something unusual to offer, we were able to break that trend.

The kind of research that we put into our *pujo* was intense; we would go to Barasat, Naihati, Behala and Nabadwip to research Kali *pujo* and we would go to Chandannangore to see how they curated their Jagadhatri *pujo*; we now have a well-dispersed network that feeds us with information on who in Bengal is doing a great *pujo* and we inevitably get pictures so this becomes an ongoing insight into what we can create. Besides, in the early days, we lived in the shadow of Mudiali's *pujo* and most of the South Kolkata *pujos* in contiguous pin codes were really standalone affairs. Because of our influence and that of a few others, the *pujo* cluster (66 Palli, Badamtala, Chelta, Shibmandir and Suruchi Sangha) began to emerge. This part of South Kolkata began to emerge as a prime destination.

Q: How have you protected your brand?

By essentially being consistent with what we believe we are. A lot of people can end up presenting *pujos* in a manner that they are intrinsically not – conventional people putting up *adhunik* themes and vice versa just because that is the flavour of the day or because some large *pujo* who did this is getting large footfalls. The key lies in doing what you are. For example, at Shibmandir, even though this is really the heart of the modern South Kolkata, you will still find 80-year-olds near the *pandal* area, you will still find 70-plus persons managing the *pujo* (oh, the CESC-True Spirit *pujo* people love this), our *bodhon* still happens in the mandir (we are lucky as it is next door), we feed 1,000 people on *ashtami* inside the *mandir*, we do not install promotional banners around the *pandal* and we have gone back to the *shabeki protima* even as our overall *pujo* continues to be themed. The result is reflected in our footfalls: during the *pujo* days it takes approximately 19 minutes to cover 400 feet, about 20 minutes to cross from one pavement of our street to another (would you believe?) and at any given moment during the peak hour we would be having some 20,000 people in the vicinity. And all because of one attribute: distinctive brand consistency.

Q: Can you elaborate on this?

We recognised that the *pujo* visitor is a demanding customer. While there is no financial transaction taking place between us, the visitor has a good memory. He or she remembers what we had done last year; if the visitor finds that there are similarities, he or she will quietly say *'Bhaalo chhilo, kintu…' Baas!* It is almost as if all our work has gone down the drain. So the one thing that we resolved to do – and achieved – was an ongoing change in our structure – what would be square in one year would be octagonal in the following year and round in the next. Ongoing variation.

The trick lies in being able to research subjects that are distinctive. If you catch a theme that just about everyone will end up doing, then the walk-in visitor is going to be feel shortchanged. *Kichhu notun chhilo na* is going to be the verdict. This is a game that Shibmandir has specialised in; multi-frame was unheard-of an idea for a *pujo*; when we did one on the DNA structure, the students could related to it and explain to their parents and grandparents, leaving a distinctive recall. No one could say *'Aapnader pujo kothaai dekheychii, ekhun mauney porchey na!'*

Q: A lot of the magic of the Shibmandir *pujo* comes from its ambience and environment.

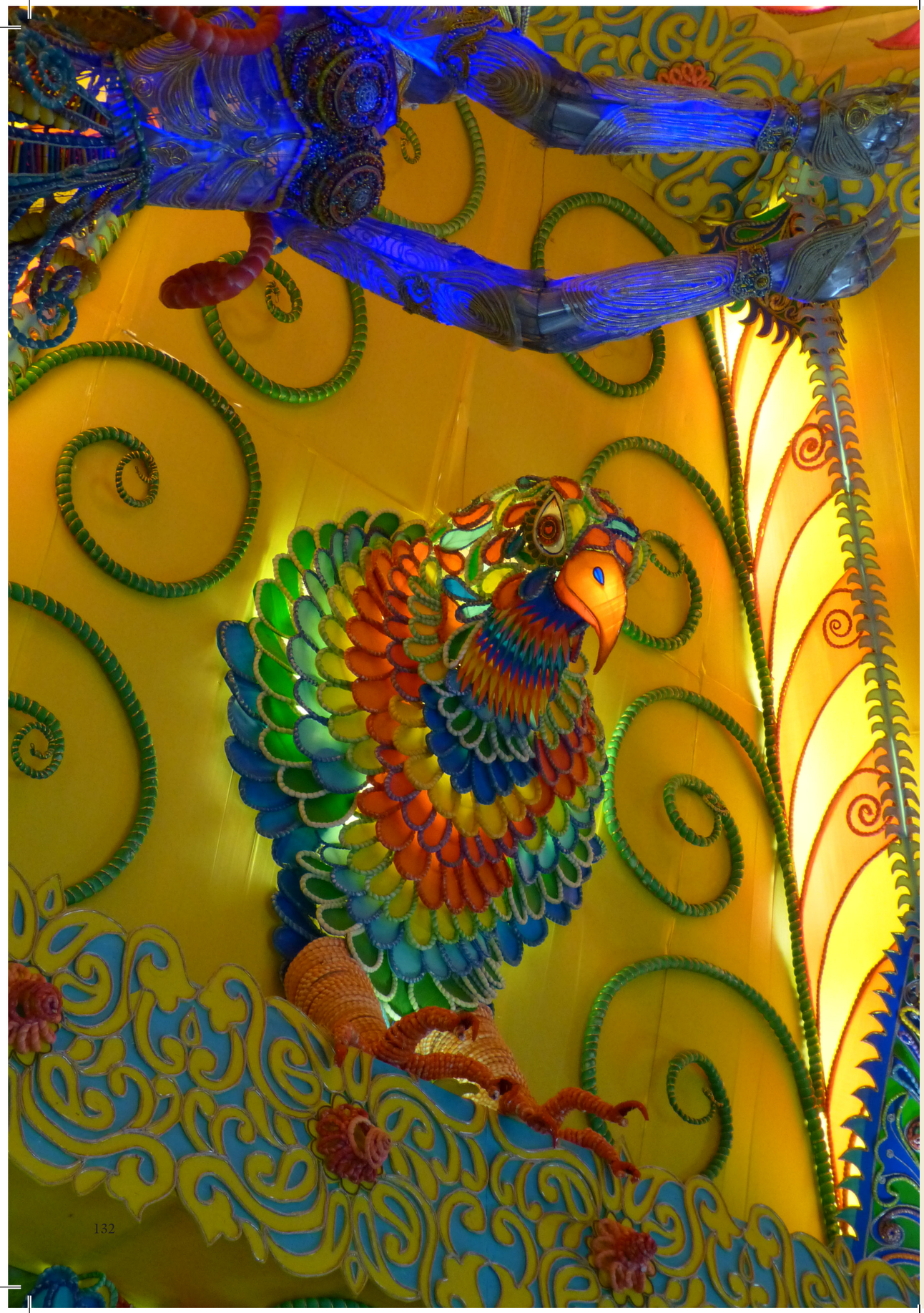
Agree. We are next to Southern Avenue, behind Menoka Cinema and literally a stone's throw from Rabindra Sarobar. A feel of the topography has crept into our *pujo*… the nature of the buildings, the quality of the residents and even the quality of the visitors. Because we have this distinctive customer – there is a certain *bhadrata* and etiquette among those who come here – we need to select compatible street side vendors (which is also one reason why we do not compromise when we market space to them). Until some time ago, the award was a big issue *('ei re, eibaar peylaam na!')* but over the years we have managed to get over this.

Q: What are some of the emerging challenges?

A number of them actually. What people don't realise is that the wall-to-wall width of our lane is 40 feet and we effectively get around 24 feet to showcase our work, which is a limitation. Besides, the sponsorship inflow does not come in immediately; it is usually staggered across months so we need to work with vendors who are understanding and give us a comfortable credit line (which is one reason why we select to work with the same team year after year). Besides, our lane curves, which can make crowd management challenging, which is one reason we don't keep barricades and let the crowd flow happen. The ideation and management of a five-day *pujo* effectively covers 360 days.

When a *pujo* like Naktala spends Rs 15 million or a *pujo* like Suruchi Sangha becomes big budget (irrespective of their official statement that the *pujo* cost them only Rs 1.8 million, which no one believes), it creates the kind of grandeur that puts a lot of pressure on the relatively smaller *pujos* to match up. So because a handful of *pujos* have raised their budgets, a number of others get sucked into the same high-spend mentality.

There is a growing recognition that *pujos* like ours – and why ours only, let me say virtually all – will not be able to compete with the *montri-der pujos*.



The usual corporate budgets for *pujo* spending are now being capped due to the economic slowdown, the *montrider pujos* are drawing away a larger share of the corporate outlays leaving less for the smaller *pujos*. Besides, artist costs are rising; there are only about 20 established artists across more than 2,000 *pujos*; the artists who would charge us Rs 50,000 in 2005 now charges us Rs 1.5 million!

There is also a growing feeling that with *pujos* getting more politicised there is a growing opacity with regard to the way prizes are being given out. This is not something that is only a personal view; ask most *pujo* committees or see the complaints that have come in on facebook and there is a growing feeling that 'prize politics' is now a key element of the *pujos* because this has financial implications – in terms of the next year's sponsorship inflow. Sad.

And then the other challenge is crowd management. The irony is that the better you make your *pujo*, the more difficult you make things for yourself – in terms of hiring more security and the risk you run of something going terribly wrong just because you couldn't control the crowd inflow 24x7 across that critical week. The result is that for years, we marketed our *pujo* ('Please *ektu aashbeyn*') but now we have started a cycle of de-marketing; we have deliberately reduced our media exposure and don't take a number of publicity calls. It is an interesting trend; our survival depends on enhanced visibility and we have actually come to a deliberate conclusion that beyond the publicity that we are getting, anything incremental could actually be harmful.

So what you are saying that the organisation of a single event draws on a number of diverse competencies.

Absolutely. This activity represents total management. This is an MBA course in itself. These are some of the things that the concept of Total *pujo* Management entails: police liasoning, food *(bhog)* management, artist co-ordination, material procurement, budget balancing, safety, mock-up creation, marketing, rituals, security and jury co-ordination. What is amazing is that over the years, a certain allocation of specialised responsibilities has taken place. One of us who looks after security management focuses largely on this area; for eleven months he is largely missing from the *pujo* organisation responsibility; suddenly in the last month he creeps out of the woodwork, nothing needs to be explained to him and he seamlessly takes over from the point he had left in the previous year. This is such an ideal learning environment for college or university students that I am surprised that working with *pujo* committees is not recommended by educational institutes as a compulsory form of social payback-cum-hands-on management learning.

How do you see the Durga *pujo* movement evolve?

I see a handful of *pujos* getting bigger, the middling *pujo* stagnating and the smaller *pujos* getting smaller. I see a growing politicisation of *pujos* and it might not be a bad idea to move some of the heavyweights to a Hall of Fame so that the others can get a level playing field in which to perform. I see the Durga *pujo* stretching into a ten-day festival; over the last couple of years, with the media closing down due to a refusal to work by newspaper distributors, there has been a pressure to conclude all the Durga *pujo* reporting by *saptami*, which has resulted in the completion of a number of *pujos* earlier than usual. I only see this trend extending, so effectively what was once a four-day festival could become a good ten-day one starting from *Mahalaya*. There is a bigger danger: next generation *uthey aashchey na* so we don't know in what form the Shibmandir *pujo* will survive. And lastly, the Durga *pujo* cycle is ready for the next phase in its evolution: movement from grand themes to muted themes and then onwards possibly to the conventional *shabeki* format that we saw decades ago.

You have been recognised as a responsible *pujo* as well.

Only because we made proactive investments that some people initially thought were a waste of money. For instance, our *pandal* has been earthed 10 feet into the ground, we invested in a sound limiter (65 decibels) and the right complement of miniature circuit breakers. The result is a robust electrical system; when the True Spirit *pujo* judges come, our electrician *oder boojhiye daai*, giving them a good technical insight into how safe our *pujo* really is.

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TALA BAROWARI DURGOTSAB



Glossary

Notun bishoy - New subject • *Notun bhabna* - New thought • *Sundari* - Mangrove species from which the Subderbans derive their name from • *Boltei prothome prakritik durjog* - Firstly there were natural calamities • *Shoru shuto* - Thin thread • *Dekho tomra toh engineer dekhe bolo kaj theek hoyeche ki na* - As an engineer, please see the work and tell whether it is right or not • *Lokey ghabre jaye ki kore korlo eta* - People could not figure out how could we do this • *Ekhon* - Now • *Ekta kaj kore shikriti peley porer bochor aro kichu korar utsaho barey* - If one's work is recognised and awarded, then it acts as an encouragement for the next year • *Mathaye ekta idea khele gelo* - An idea flashed in my mind • *Rock-er adda* - People of a *para* (*paras* in Kolkata signify a neighbourhood with a strong sense of community, and are usually sharply defined on the basis of loyalties) habitually indulge in adda or leisurely chat in 'rock's or 'rowacks' (porches) and teashops in the evenings after work • *Aamader* - Our • *Bhaat hojom hoy na* - Unable to digest the rice; idiomatic usage meaning unable to accept something • *Sindoor khela* - It is a ritual practised on Dashami, where married women's anoint each other's face with sindur (vermilion). Khela means play • *Pujo odbhoot nesha, jaaneyn to* - you know that *pujo* is a different kind of a passion • *Ki puroshkaar ki shob, kintu* - What prize and all, but • *Ei baar onek holo but dom pelei* - This time it was too much but need some breathing time now • *Ei baar je holo baas* - That's it • *Loraai* - Fight • *Uttorer uttor* - Wordplay using the two meanings of the word uttor, the first uttor means North the second means answer, so it means its North Calcutta answering back to the challenge thrown by the South Calcutta *pujos* • *Ki kortey choleychhey* - What they are going to do • *Baarowari pujo* - Community *pujo*. Barowari refers to the public organisation of a religious or other festival, mainly in West Bengal This is extensively used for Durga *pujo*. The word 'Barowari' came from the words 'baro', which means 12, and 'yari' (friendly rapport) • *Sampaner taaney* - The attraction of the Sampan. Taan means pull which ties with up the boat-imagery associated with sampans • *Dori* - Rope • *Aamrao aachi* - We are also there • *Aabir* - This ia a kind of colourful powder with which people play holi and decorate their house or in case of any ritual celebration • *Ekhane loko shilpor theke loko songoshkritir probhab beshi chhilo* - []



Q&A

AMAR SARKAR

ARTIST

How would you describe your ideation process at Tala Barowari?

Tala Barowari provided ample space! As a result, one could entertain the idea of *notun bishoy, notun* material and *notun bhabna*. Our theme hinged around the sampan, which are generally used in transportation (coastal areas and rivers) or traditional fishing boats. Sampans are large boats made of heavy timber (Burma teak or *Sundari*). Once upon a time, big-size sampans (14.5m in length and 5.20m in width) could be seen in the Kutubdia and Chittagong regions, but these are rare now (*ekhane loko shilpor theke loko songoshkritir probhab beshi chhilo*). We've been composing songs about these boats from time immemorial and the sad part is that they are largely now found opar bangla in the Cox's Bazaar area. Pity.

What were the major challenges in the execution?

Challenge *boltei prothome prakritik durjog* especially because the installation was in the open, the material comprised fragile multi-coloured threads, the threads needed to be customised, the plain white threads needed to be used on the *churo* of the *pandal* so that light could reflect, I was required to use *shoru shuto* and *mota shuto*, the threads were adapted into various shapes (star and flower) and then there was a hazard of working at heights. Loads of samples were procured from Shutopotti (Burrabazaar) which I sifted personally.

So this *pandal* was a marvel from an engineering standpoint?

I have heard people say that I should have been an engineer. *Kintu bhobitobbo.* It seems that my themes have as much to do with the 'science' of the trade along with the 'art' as it were. This opinion is shared by most art college students and a friend involved with the construction of Lake Kalibari and Akshardham Temple. When he came along I told him that *"Dekho tomra toh* engineer *dekhe bolo kaj ta theek hoyeche ki na?"* My previous works defied convention. *Lokey ghabre jaye je ki kore korlo eta?*

How did the structure resist the weather?

There were these two iron beams running at the top of the *pandal*, which held the structure in position. The creation of miniature models minimised errors. I used colour-fast material because otherwise the rain would have washed away the colours and extended into the next set.

What was it like working with a North Kolkata client like Tala Barowari?

I have been working with Tala Barowari for five years. Each year we have been able to capture the attention of the city. *Ekhon* Tala Barowari ke shobai shomiho kore. Now a lot of people eagerly look forward to what Tala Barowari will do next year. *Ekta kaj kore shikriti peley porer bochor aro bhalo kichu korar utshaho barey.* You see sometimes while working on a particular project you get this gut feeling that what you are doing is something that people will remember. That is why always urge my workers to push the limits. It's difficult describe because inspiration doesn't come easily. Sometimes thoughts overlap, say I'm painting a picture and the inspiration for another comes in and suddenly these two compositions combine to create something that is better than the original idea that I was working with. Similarly while working for a particular *pujo*, another idea comes in, *mathaye ekta khele gelo*. And the thing is that the more I work, the more ideas come in. Sometimes you have to make compromises as I may not have spatial liberty, so I would have to tailor-make the idea to suit the given conditions (space, environment and budget). Besides, there is a sense of competition among us fellow artists - some were classmates - and it does lay a strain on the relationships once in a while. But we keep moving on…







Q&A

T.N. BASU

ORGANISER

Q: What is the background of the Tala Barowari *pujo*?

In 2013, we entered the 93rd year at Tala Barowari. For years, ours was the only *pujo* in the vicinity, though we would like to think that because of our influence, the number of *pujos* in our locality has increased five-fold. More than a decade ago, it appeared that our *pujo* would be coming to an end, run as it was by a barowari (loose collection of friends) and not as a club. So we put up a humble confession in the form of a written statement some 25 days before the *pujo* in our neighbourhood that it would be 'difficult to continue with the *pujo*'.

Q: What happened thereafter?

A meeting was hurriedly convened at the *rock-er adda – aamadeyr* oxygen without which *bhaat hojom hoy na* – and it was decided that we would proceed with the *pujo* regardless of the realities. We boys took an accounts handover, took stock of the prevailing situation, gave our orders for all the *pujo* requirements – *protima*, *pandal* etc – and the first thing we realised was that our budget had jumped to Rs 250,000! We constructed a better *pandal*, bought a gorgeous *protima* and lit the entire *para*. Besides, we printed cards overnight, invited 1,200 people from the neighbourhood for a sit-down *bhog* on *Nobomi* for the first time, provided *sindoor khela* material on *Doshomi* and surprisingly, 400 ladies turned up. Remember that at one point, the whisper in the locality was that the *pujos* would be discontinued!

Q: How did the movement extend?

Next year, *ektu* budget *ta* increase *holo* to Rs 320,000 and the following year to Rs 400,000 and then moved towards Rs 500,000. During that time, the culture of our *para* had begun to change. There was a greater sense of pride, a bigger appetite for enhanced visibility and the natural extension was a theme *pujo*.

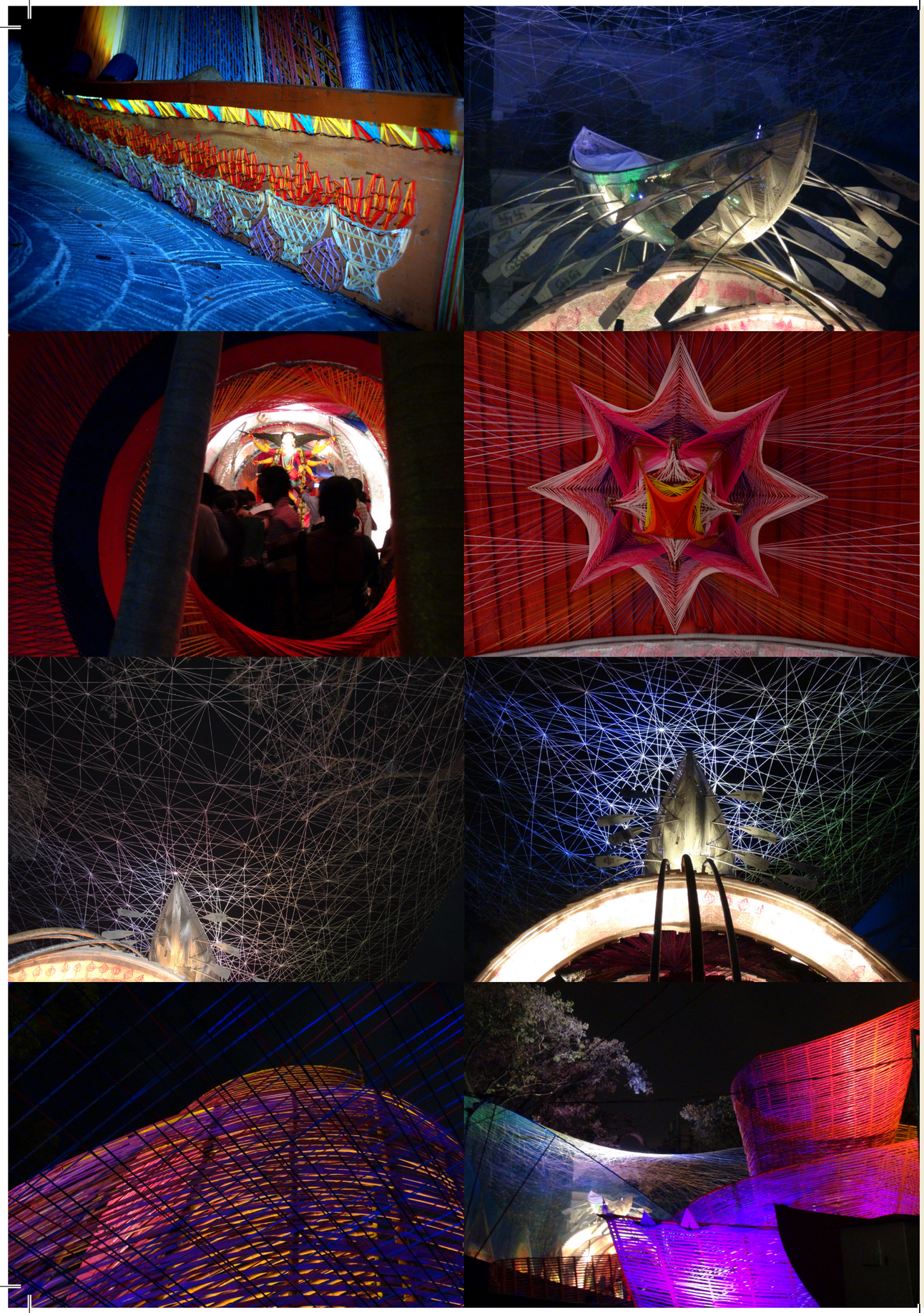
The 2004 *pujo* was an inflection point; over the years, we had been drinking in various ideas concerning the theme, taste, appreciation, prize and footfalls. The internal desire appeared to be larger than our financial standing. So the next logical thing was to reach the celebrated Amar Sarkar (through a source), which we felt would get us to a prominent position in terms of aesthetics and respectability. Finally, we got Amar babu to agree to curate our *pujo* in 2009. Our budget was double the level of the previous year – Rs 15,00,000!

Q: For a *pujo* that had been struggling to raise less than Rs 200,000, you actually seven-folded the budget in less than a decade?

Pujo odbhoot nesha, jaaneyn to? We often argue *ki puroshkaar ki shob, kintu* we agree that this plays the role of a catalyst. Each year, our deficit is increasing even as the financial slowdown is stressing everyone's capacity to raise resources and each *pujo* is bigger than the previous year's. Each year, we send our leaflets across the neighbourhood requesting for people to get involved and this year, only one person turned up for the meeting – and yet we continue to organise the *pujo*. Everyone keeps complaining that *ei baar je holo baas*, but the following year we produce a grander *pujo* alright. Each year, our lives get busier, but we end up dedicating nearly a quarter of a year to an event that does not even last a week. We live a quid pro quo existence – you do something for me and I do something for you in turn – and yet we invest everything in an exercise that generates no financial profit. We say that we are doing this for maa but eventually the Durga *pujo* game is all about ego and self-worth. Each year, we complain that *ei baar onek holo but dom pelei* we start discussing the following year's *pujo*.

Q: So why do it at all?

Ego. Ego. Ego. I am not just Kaushik and my colleague is not just Jumbo, *bas*. I am Tala Barowari-r Kaushik and he is Tala Barowari-r Jumbo. This is our identity. This identity makes me proud. In turn, this pride generates respect. And at the end of the day, everyone lives for respect. In our case, this is all the more critical because never forget that we are North Kolkatans and hence, there is always a possibility of being discounted. However, we North Kolkatans have a distinctive pride; we are not a *netar pujo*, we are not a mega *pujo*, we are not an industrialist's *pujo*. We do not even get a third of the sponsorship outlay of an equivalent South Kolkata *pujo*. But we are the underdog; we fight harder. Ours is a



clean *loraai*. Which is why this year, we branded our *pujo* around two simple words – *'Uttorer uttor!'*. Over the last few years, there is a growing curocity regarding Tala Barowari *ki kortey choleychhey*!

Q: What are some of your other challenges?

We are not a club where we could have got a larger number of members and hence been able to mobilise a larger amount. We are essentially a *baarowari pujo* and we are proud to have kept the flag flying. Over the last few years, we have come to recognise that a number of the politician-based *pujos* have been sucking the money out of the sponsorship pipeline, making us think harder in terms of reducing costs and organising funds from alternative sources. In this regard, we are disadvantageously placed because we need a number of references when we try and reach new sponsors. We also have an ongoing challenge in getting work out of our volunteers, especially when it comes to chasing sponsors for the promised funds after the *pujos*. On the other hand, our advantage is that since we are not accountable to a *neta*, there is a fair amount of operational freedom within the system.

Q: How do you manage the funds?

Sponsorship and subscriptions are the two evident fund sources. There is a growing tendency of prominent *pujos* to sell their installation and recover some expenses. However due to the high craftsmanship standards, it became difficult to uninstall the installation that we built inch by inch in 2013. The result was that we had to virtually destroy the *pujo* and I was in tears. I could recognise exactly what part of the *pandal* I had purchased from where; the installation was so attractive that even four days after *doshomi* there were people who came to the site to take pictures.

Q: What was the theme for this year's *pujo*?

The theme was *'Sampaner taaney'*, which means 'The pull of the boat'. We created a number of boats around the central *pandal*. Each of these were created out of *dori* (string) of different colours. We eventually bought *dori* worth Rs 300,000. The special *dori* used in the creation of the boat on top of the central *pandal* cost Rs. 800 per kg; the boat dazzled when the sun's rays fell on it. The crayons that were used to draw the waves cost Rs. 375 each and had to be refrigerated! What is amazing is that until 45 days before the festival, there was nothing onsite and there was a danger of the *pujo* falling through. Thereafter, we deployed 80 labourers, oversaw the site work out of a sense of *ijjot* and the result is that we figured in the top-five of Asian Paints. *Aamrao aachi!*

Q: What are some of the interesting perspectives of your *pujo*?

What amuses me is the high sense of secrecy before the *pujo* when it comes to the theme. Besides, since the artist holds the theme in his head, we never get to know what the eventual big idea is going to be. So even as we see the *pandal* growing, we are always clueless about its eventual shape, which is quite ironical because we are the clients. Photographs onsite are banned. Anyone putting a mention of what we are doing on Facebook would be finished. We keep a check on suspicious people sneaking around the neighborhood during the last couple of months leading to the *pujos*.

Q: I must come back to the awards…

Oh yes. We were shortlisted for the Asian Paints Sharod Samman in 2009, shortlisted in 2010, shortlisted again in 2012 and finally we won in 2013! In the first year, we were absolutely delighted that we had been shortlisted. Since we were coming in from the cold, our shortlisting was seen as an achievement. When we didn't win the following year, there was a feeling of shock and a whisper that perhaps we didn't have the clout. When we didn't win in the third year, there was an even bigger indignation that we were outdone by the clout and nothing else. And then, we won this year. For the two hours after the announcement came in, there was *aabir* across the entire neighbourhood!

Q: How is a North Kolkata *pujo* different from the others?

Togetherness. In a North Kolkata *para* such as ours, families have known each other for generations. My grandfather was the friend of the grandfather of another colleague. Take an instance: an old lady in our neighbourhood collapsed at home in the weeks leading to the Durga *pujo* this year. We were onsite; we rushed her to the hospital and only when was she comfortably settled, was her husband informed. In most other neighbourhoods, people would have informed the husband right away and probably expected him to take her to the hospital. But because this is a typical North Kolkata neighbourhood, it was a typically different response.

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SANTOSHPUR
LAKE PALLY



Glossary

Protima - Refer to protima in Bosepukur • *Marattok bhabe* - Hugely • *Tai tader kaaj korata ektu chaaper hoye jeto (pg - 143)* - So working for them became a little difficult • *Ekhonkar artist-ra lokder bhabaye* - Today's artists make people think • *Jaba phool* - Hibiscus • *Shakto aradhona* - Veneration of shakti (cosmic energy) and the related deities by the worshippers or the shakta cult • *Ekhon onek beshi swadhinota ache* - Now there is a lot more freedom • *Gyani byakti* - Knowledgeable people • *Jokhon aamar pujo pandal proshongsha paye shetai toh aro kaj korar tagid jogaye* - When someone praises my *pujo pandal*, this inspires to work more • *Chhau* - Chhau dance is a genre of Indian tribal martial dance which is popular in the Indian states of Odisha, Jharkhand and West Bengal • *Para* - Locality • *Bajra* - Bajra or budgerows (anglicisation) were large and commodious, but generally cumbrous and sluggish boats, used for journeys on the Ganges • *Pandal* - refer to *pandal* in Hindustan park • *Bochorer Bishhmoy* - Discovery of the Year, a category of award part of the Asian Paints Sharad Samman. Discovery of the Year was first introduced in 1994 as a means to introduce a previously unknown and undiscovered *pujo pandals* • *Shloka* - A sloka (also anglicized as shloka or sloka, meaning, 'song', from the root sru, 'hear') is a category of verse line developed from the Vedic Anustubh • *Raktojaba' theme* - Red Hibiscus (blood-red) theme • *Rath yatra* - Chariot festival • *Chanda* - Subscription • *Obishwasho* - Unbelieveable





Q&A

PURNENDU DEY

ARTIST, SANTOSHPUR LAKE PALLY

Since when have you been curating *Durga pujos?*

From our hometown *pujo*, I had acquired a first-hand experience in making the *protima*, since my father was a professional *mritshilpi*. I got my first break in 2003 thanks to classmate Amar Sarkar who provided me with the opportunity to work on the Ajeyo Sanghati *pujo*. Shibmandir came my way between 2005 and 2007 and my *pujos* received the Asian Paints Sharad Samman in 2005, 2007 and 2008.

Walk us through this year's theme at Santoshpur Lake Pally...

Jaba phool is an integral part of *shakto aradhona*. We created the whole *pandal* in the form of *jaba phool* so when people entered, it was like entering a giant *jaba phool* to see the idol. The major challenge was to pull the whole thing off on schedule, getting visitors to understand the concept, countering rain and being adaptable to change. The people appreciated my efforts and *jokhon aamar pujo pandal proshongsha paye shetai toh are kaj korar tagid jogaye*.

In the last few years how has the thematic treatment of the *pujos* changed?

Marattok bhabe. Nowadays I feel that the *pujos* have become more art-based. I'm a little hesitant using the word 'theme-based'. Earlier the decorators used to do everything and since they didn't come from an academic background *tai tatey tade-r ekta kaajer chhap theke jeto. Ekhonkar artist-ra lokder bhabaye*. Nowadays every year we see something different, the same theme isn't repeated and the artists and organisers feel liberated. *Ekhon onek beshi swadhinota ache*. We can see the influence of the art *pujo* even in small towns.

Pandit Ajay Chakrabarty composed your theme.

I was honoured to have got a chance to work with him. *Uni gyani byakti*. When we told him that the theme was *joba phool*, he looked up for shlokas on *joba phool* through so many books.

Recyclable material used

Baash, *Kaath*, *Kaapor, Tripol* and Iron beam []













Q&A

RANA DASGUPTA

ORGANISER, SANTOSHPUR LAKE PALLY

What is the background of the Santoshpur Lake Pally Durga *pujo*?

The Durga *pujo* commenced in our neighbourhood in 1958 and took 45 years to embrace the themed version. In 2003, we brought in *chhau* performers, live music and masks - the whole paraphernalia. Over the next decade we were twice adjudged Asian Paints Sharad Samman winners; we have now 130 prizes in our kitty.

Why did a traditional *pujo* switch to thematic treatment?

For a number of reasons. One, we weren't being able to draw large crowds; most bypassed us on their way to Behala or South Kolkata, which is when we started convincing our *para* residents that we needed a makeover. The result is that in the first year, our budget jumped from around Rs. 60,000 to Rs.165,000. We were fortunate; around that time the EM Bypass brought Santoshpur on the map and we came across something that was an absolute bonus - corporate sponsors.

What inspired you?

When we were young we would idolise *pujos* like Ballygunge Cultural and Samaj Sebi because of the crowds they attracted. We wanted people to come to see our *pujo* in large numbers as well. We designed a *bajra* made from 4,50,000 hand fans, which we felt would surprise a number of people. The concept took the city by storm; the theme was aesthetic and the paints used were lead-free. But our biggest leap was yet to come.

In 2007 – our fiftieth year - we roped in Rupchand Kundu and our budget climbed to Rs. 13 lakh, but this was still not good enough to win the Asian Paints Sharad Samman. We won the Asian Paints 'Bochorer Bishmoy' (Wonder of the Year) following the enlistment of the artist Susanta Paul.

What was your theme for 2013?

Purnendu Dey came up with the 'Raktojaba' theme. The whole *pandal* was shaped like a hibiscus; those who walked in felt like they were walking into a gigantic flower. Hibiscus has rich significance: it is intimately associated with Kali and Durga, the glory of the rising sun, the glowing complexion of the orange-skinned Hanuman, the glowing complexion of Mother Goddess Lalita. The radiance in the face of the idol was symbolised by the flower. The chandelier was shaped like these flowers, marking the arrival of autumn. The organic nature of the design was emphasised by materials (brushes, loofah, taffeta and straw). We focused on two words: value-for-money and eco-friendliness.

What was the ideation like?

Purnendu Dey is down-to-earth, taking even offhand remarks into his design consideration. He had AUTOCAD drawings ready beforehand; because of this head start, we were able to finish construction on time even though we began only after *rath yatra*.

The theme music composed by Pt. Ajoy Chakraborty was an experience as the man arrived with a large number of books dealing with scriptures and studied them for three hours to decide which *shloka* would suit the ambience – all for a five-minute track!

What sets the *pujo* apart?

Para pride. People from our *para* were sent as scouts to various *pandals* so that they could get a glimpse of what other *pujos* were doing in terms of amenities. Since 2005, Raymond's provided yellow jerseys to all our volunteers and members, which enhanced a sense of belonging (*para* women were vying for these jerseys!) At least 20 *para* people could have got everything ready on their own; we had people flying in from Bangalore to help; people from London would be constantly querying via Skype regarding construction status. We decided everything as democratically as possible. We enhanced a sense of hospitality for all visitors. We had boys shuttling to Burrabazar thrice amidst torrential downpours.

What were the challenges?

Funds! Due to the slowdown, we were compelled to prune our budget from Rs. 22 lakh to Rs. 16 lakh. The police's decision to ban overhead gates dented our revenues. So we went back to the 'old school' *chanda* collection and souvenir. The *para* support was moving and the artist worked with the same rate as in the previous year.

What was your proudest moment?

On *shasthi* night, the Model *pujo* award jury - Prosenjit, Tanusree, Srijit Mukherjee and members from the German Consulate - arrived. Most *pujo* committees let the jury in and keep the others out (which is unfair). We decided differently; we let people in, albeit in a controlled manner, so that everyone could see the *pandal* simultaneously - no segregation. We had people forming a human shield to prevent the celebrities from being mobbed. Before Prosenjit left, he whispered just one word *'Obishwasho'* (unbelievable). The next morning's call from the German Consulate reflected the same thing.



The fact that CESC gave us the Model *pujo* award is proof of how we looked after our guests. We had CCTV cameras installed all around the *pandal*. We tested the resistance and earthing of the electrical circuit, a first in Kolkata. We spared no expense in procuring the best materials. During peak hours, we had a queue of 300 metres on each end!

What keeps you going?

The sense of pride when the elderly of the *para* sit around till the wee hours discussing the *pujo*. All our youngsters are engaged in doing something constructive. The pride that one feels when we see youngsters bringing their five-year old badges out and no one throwing their yellow jerseys away. The pride that one feels when at 4am when we are falling asleep due to exhaustion, the elderly on their morning walks coming with flasks of tea for us. This is why Kolkata neighbourhoods bond better than most other cities!

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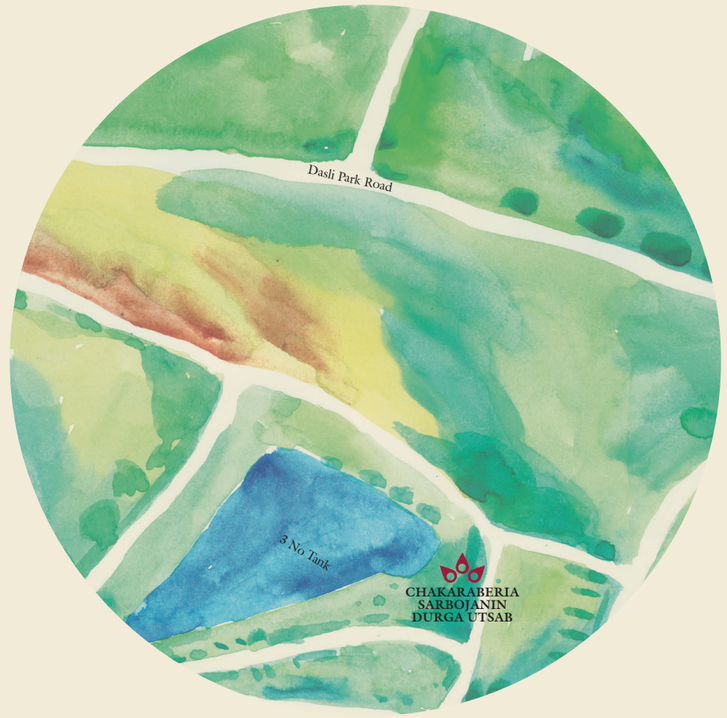
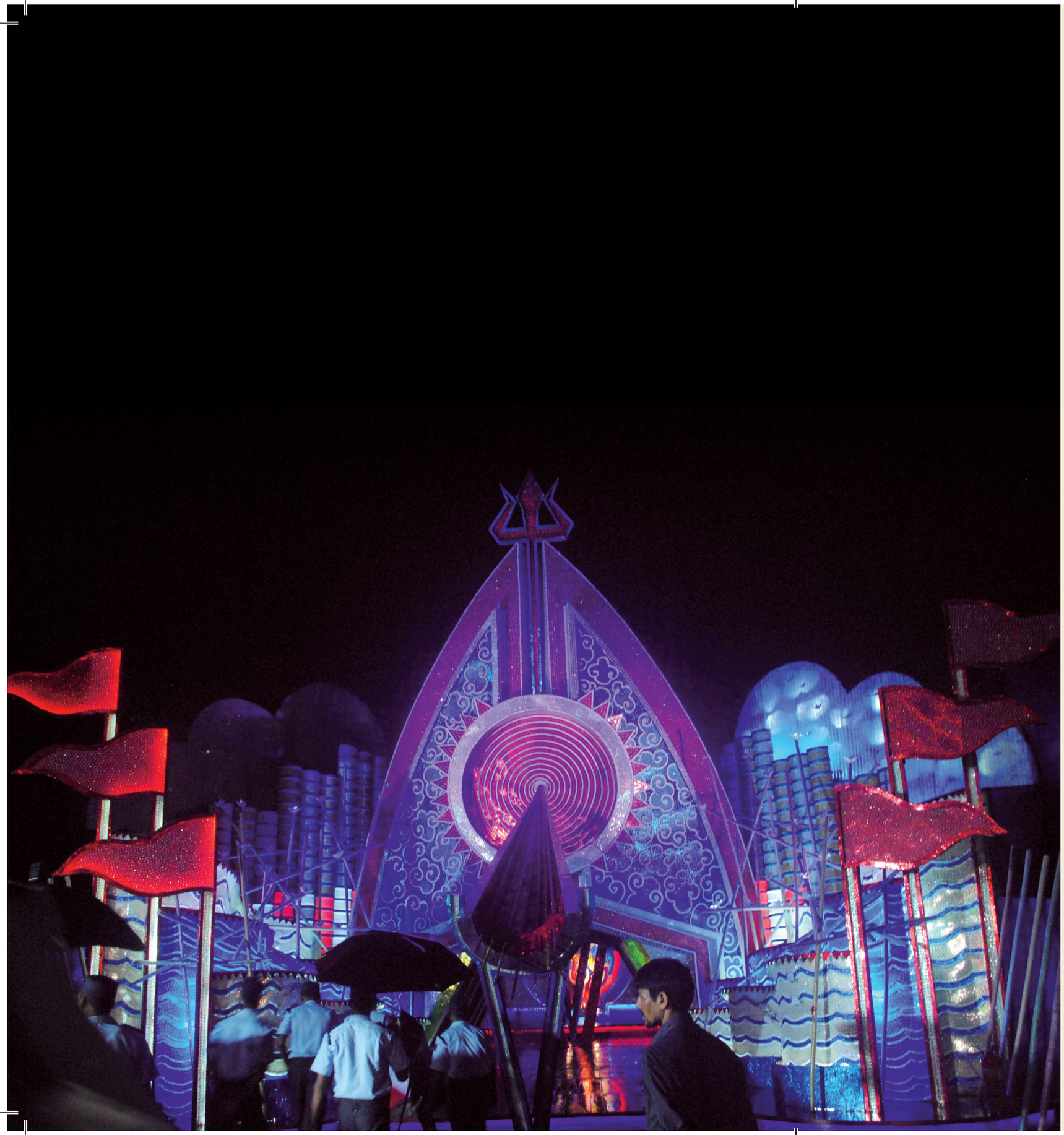
DUM DUM PARK
TARUN SANGHA



Glossary

Gyaan - Trivial knowledge (in the overbearing sense) • *Luchi aloodum* - Luchi is a deep-fried flatbread made of wheat flour that is typical of Bengali cuisine, Assamese, Maithili and Oriya tradiyionally served with a spicy potato curry called aloodum • *Pandal* refer to *pandal* in Hindustan park • *Para* - refer to *para* Santoshpur Lake Pally • *Nirbhejal adda* - Pure adda; refer to adda





Q&A

RABIN GANGULY

ORGANISER, DUM DUM PARK TARUN SANGHA

What was the theme of your *pujo* this time around?

At a basic level, the theme - *'Devi Garjan'* or the 'Roar of the Goddess' - was about the beauty of nature comprising a reservoir, fish, trees and birds, which was relevant in view of the continuous destruction of natural habitat and resources. We made this relevant to the *pujo* by depicting the goddess as being annoyed with this thoughtless destruction, which is were the *'garjan'* came in. Why this was relevant to the Dum Dum Park is that we are surrounded by natural water bodies which are constantly under threat.

What role did the sound and lighting play?

There were three phases or types of sounds played in the background during the four days of *pujo* - sound of welding or cutting steel, sound of flowing water and birds chirping, a roar from the goddess – along with this lights were made to move up and down. The entire ambience revolved around sending out the message that something dangerous is transpiring in our world, in fact in our very neighbourhood. The biggest challenge was escaping the uni-dimensional treatment. The theme was in the form of a fable with a moral; we needed to do this without giving *gyaan* but through entertainment. A lot of brainstorming helped achieve this balance.

What materials were used?

The structure was made of bamboo poles, over which we laid a layer of plastic pipes; we then cut the pipes in various decorative shapes and sizes. We used tin sheets to make the fish and birds. The whole structure was sprayed with fire retardant material. The pipes were small, each around an inch long, bisected to mould them into different shapes. The glamour came from LED lights; when they fell on the structures they took the shape of the birds and fish. The best part is all the materials were affordable and available. The total amount of pipes that we needed amounted to around 2,000 feet; we used almost 7,000 small balls, around 2,200 pieces of gift wrapping paper and glitter and around 200 kg of plastic.

What makes your *pujo* unique?

We embarked on theme *pujos* in 1999 with concepts that were easy to understand for the benefit of 150,000-200,000 visitors. What set us apart is our unity. We have volunteers – across income profiles - who slog day and night and snatch a meal of *luchi aloo-dum* while continuing to work. The *pujo* is a great leveler. The *para* people sit around the *pandal* till 3am, talking and joking. It's not *nirbhejal adda*; we get significant work done. It's more like a family get-together under the pretext of a *pujo*. It is this community bonding that infuses life into the *pandal*, *protima*, panels and decorations!



















You have established a reputation for a safe *pujo*…

The fact that CESC awarded us a prize for safety and security is indicative of our extensive planning. In addition to fire retardant material, we invested in CCTV cameras, state-of-the-art smoke detectors, fire extinguishers, guards and *para* volunteers. This is one of the most amazing changes that has taken place over the last few years. Earlier, there was virtually no concept of these things; thanks to media awareness, safety is now a core *pujo* issue.

Besides, we didn't use lead-based toxic paints. All the plastic used in constructing the *pandal* was disposed responsibly. Whenever someone says that Indians don't care about safety issues, the transformation that has been achieved during the Durga *pujos* in Kolkata should always be highlighted as an instance of how an award helped a generation evolve.

How do you fund the *pujo*?

We usually start seeking corporate sponsorships from June, a segment that accounts for more than 65% of our budget. The rest comes from private contributions and stall rent. Over the years, we have generated a surplus which want to invest in an air conditioned ambulance service.

How have Durga *pujos* evolved over the decade?

Earlier a *pujo* would be based around a great idea with a low emphasis on finances. Today, the *pujo* is more holistic and more complex. Nowadays funds are most important and success is influenced by how creatively one uses the funds. You can consider a *pujo* as a medium-sized project undertaken by a company.

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SAMAJ SEBI SANGHA



Glossary

Thakur ghar - The room where idols are kept and worshipped (a sanctum) • *Sharodiya shonkha* - The issue of a magazine released during the time of the *pujo* (see *pujo*) • *Aar ami ekta khub shocchol jiban jatra dharon korte pari* - And I could make both ends meet • *Charbar eshe dekhe jacchen* - People has even come nultiple times to see the *pandal* • *Ratri bela bhir boley bhalo kore dekhte paini boley deener bela aaber eschen* - As because there was a lot of crowd gathering in the night, people have come back in the day to see the *pandal* again • *Na, ami theme pujo korbo* - No, I would do theme *pujo* • *Golper boi ar keu porey na* - No one reads story books • *Swapner Library* - A library of one's dreams • *Ekjon boi premik kokhono eka bichanaye jaye na* - A bibliophile never goes to bed alone • *Boi tomake kichu korte baddho kore na, bou-er moto* - A book never forces you to do anything like wife, wordplay using two almost similar sounding words-boi which means book and bou which means wife • *Oshitipor briddha* - An octogenarian woman • *"Eibhabe pandal hoye? Eto boi!"* - Can someone make a *pandal* like this? So many books! • *Boi porun o boi poran* - Read books and inspire others to read • *Ei Somoy* - A Bengali daily newspaper • *Dhunuchi naach* - Dhunuchi is an Indian incense burner used for one of the stages during arati, or ritualised dance worship. It is often used following the arati with the pradip (a lamp with an odd number of wicks). During the Durga *pujo* , it is common to have dhunuchi nritya, or a frenzied dance with the censer, to the accompaniment of feverish dhak rolls. Many *pujo* traditions also organise contests for the best dance, where some performers may go with as many as three dhunuchis - the third one held between the teeth • *Amra boi er aaborte achi* - We are in a vortex of books



Q&A

PRADEEP DUTTA

ARTIST, SAMAJ SEBI SANGHA

What is your background?

I am an interior designer by profession who extended into *pujo* theme designing and execution. My first brush with the 'theme *pujo*' occurred in the 70s in Kadamtala (Howrah) where one recreated a village setting. Professionally, I made my debut in 2004, encountered success in 2006 and got involved seriously thereafter.

What is theme *pujo* to you?

The concept of 'theme' was first introduced to me when I saw my mother and my grandmother putting alpona in front of the *thakur ghar* before a *Lakshmi pujo* or *Satyanarayan pujo*. Each time it was a simple new design. Now only the means have changed but the ends have remained the same.

What was the turning point in your career?

In 2010, I worked at this small *pujo* in Rupchand Mukherjee Lane (Bhowanipore). The *sharodiya shonkha* remains an integral part of the Bengali cultural ethos, so I designed the *pandal* using magazine covers of their *sharodiya* editions - some 800 of them from my collection. Even the idol was fashioned out of these magazine covers.

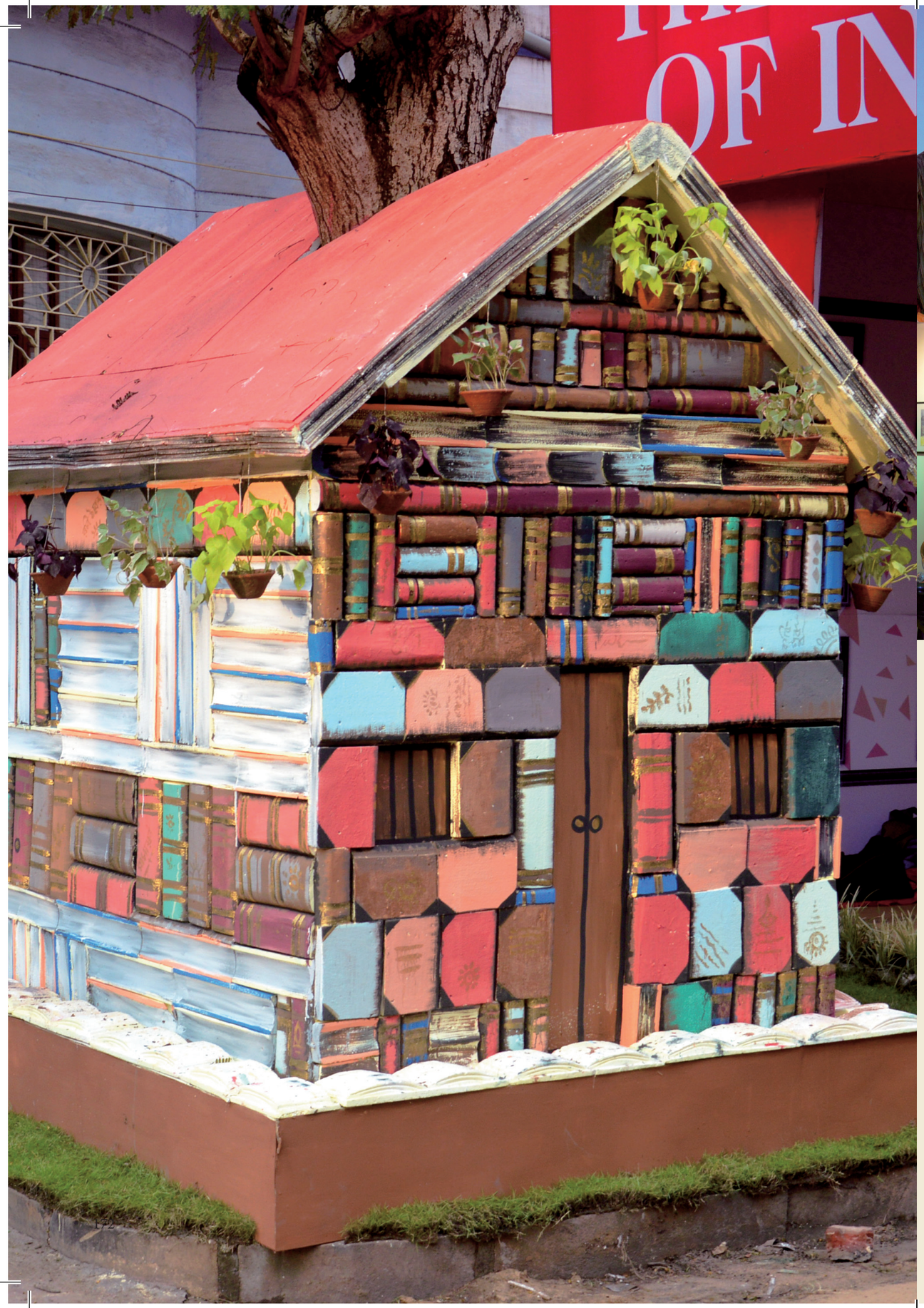
My next break came through a *Jagadhatri pujo* (Chandannagore) which was themed around the Green School (Indonesia) built from renewable resources (bamboo, local grass and traditional mud walls) and using bamboo artwork design by North Bengal folk artists. The work swept all major Chandannagore awards and based on this *pujo*, Samajsebi approached me to work for them.

What were the challenges?

My frail health, which was the reason I couldn't do the theme for Dum Dum Park Bharat Chakra. Besides, the Samajsebi *pujo* took place on a narrow street. I had to convince the organisers regarding the viability of my designs.

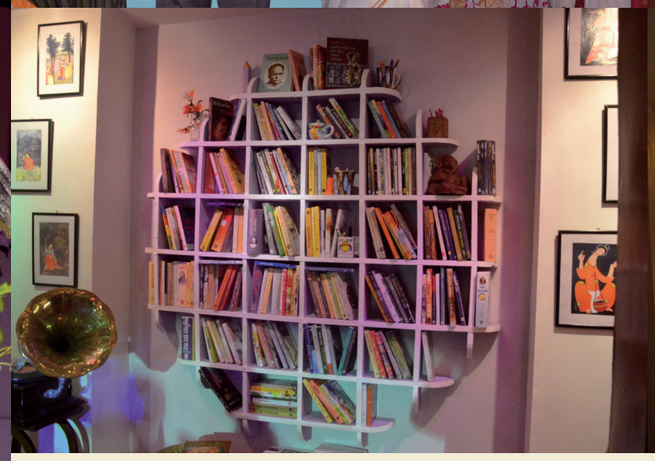
What is the upside in being a theme *pujo* artist?

It's a lot more fun. Earlier, my world revolved around exhibiting waxworks, paintings, origami and etchings once - maybe twice - a year. In those exhibitions at the Academy, a few hundreds would come to watch. At the *pujo*, a lakh come every day! Secondly, at those exhibitions, how many paintings or sculptures were we able to sell? The reality is that one couldn't make both ends meet. Coming from a lower middle-class background, a couple of theme *pujos* annually *aar ami ekta khub shocchol jiban jatra dharon korte pari.* I











also get the chance to collaborate with people like Pradip Rudra Pal, who are at the top of their profession. People come not once or twice, but *charbar eshe dekhe jacchen. Ratri bela bhir boley bhalo kore dekhte paini boley deener bela aabar eschen.* So when someone asks me to do an art exhibition, I unhesitatingly say *"Na, ami theme pujo korbo".*

What was theme at Samajsebi this year?

This year's Samajsebi theme had a lot to do with the theme at Rupchand Mukherjee Lane 2010. No one had done anything with books in a world of iPads and Kindles. *Golper boi ar keu porey na.* I am different; as I'm speaking I have on my lap Atin Bandopadhyay's *Nilkontho Paakhir Khonje.* I can't sleep without books; my thoughts were voiced via numerous quotes across the *pandal. Ekjon boi premik kokhono eka bichanaye jaye na.* This was my message to the viewers, love books and books will love you back… *boi tomake kichu korte baddho kore na, bou-er moto.* Moreover as an interior designer I felt book covers represented an excellent artistic media. I named this section *'Swapner* Library'. A considerable amount of thought went behind selecting book covers which led to interesting results - beside the Ramayana got placed the yellow cover of Atin Bandopadhyay's *Aloukik Janla* or beside the white cover of Samaresh Basu's *Dekhi Nai Phire* got placed a brownish cover. And so on and so forth. I discussed with Pradip Rudra Pal to give the idol a form described in the *Sree Sree Chandi* text.

What effort went into the theme?

A lot. We had to make these spines out of flex, which went up 11 feet in height. Some 4,500 dummy books were made out of thermocol. Some 70 people worked for five months. Local carpenters were hired to make bookshelves under my inspection. The covers inside the *pandal* were printed on used and offset paper.

Any remarkable experiences?

There's this one person who came with his aged mother. *Oshitipor briddha.* She couldn't *pandal*-hop in the evenings but, being a bibliophile, she insisted on coming down in the early hours of the morning. I met her; she was like my mother. She held my hands and asked innocently, *"Eibhabe pandal hoye? Eto boi!"* I had to explain that all of them were not real books, most of them were dummies and she was dumbfounded. Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay had a similar reaction as did the wife of late Sunil Gangopadhyay!

Q&A

BHASWATI SARKAR

ORGANISER, SAMAJ SEBI SANGHA



What is the history related to your *pujo*?

Meghnad Saha, Anil Roy, Sarat Bose, Anil Ghosh and others started the *pujo* in 1946 to create an atmosphere of peace, which was named Samaj Sebi by Lila Roy. During those days, the treatment was primarily pictorial. Since we started working on theme *pujos*, our uniqueness was derived from in the showcasing of Bengal's cultural heritage. Interestingly, 'theme' was never the priority; 'tradition' became our USP.

What was your theme this year?

Boi porun o boi poran. Artist Pradip Dutta came up with the theme; the idol was made by Pradip Rudra Pal. We selected to go with Pradip Dutta who proposed books as a theme because no one ever had used this subject earlier. The other reason for this theme was that due to a generation steadily going 'digital' with iPads but no connection with books. Books have been our first friends. Books were considered an ointment for the pain in our lives.

What was the *pujo*'s USP?

This year, since our theme was based on books, we felicitated three novelists. Following the passing away of Sunil Gangopadhyay we decided to create a section in his honour. The other two novelists we honoured were Shirshendu Mukhopaday and Dibyendu Palit. We had the covers of books bought from different publication houses by end of March. Different works and genres were printed on flex to cover the *pandal*. The covers of the books were pasted on thermocol so that they looked authentic. We recreated a library inside the *pandal* using 2,000 titles.

What were your challenges?

The *pandal* was spread across 1200 square feet; three portions which had to be joined. The conversion of the artistic thought into the actual physical structure proved difficult. There was also the logistical problem of handling large crowds. We had CCTV cameras installed everywhere. Weather was a challenge. The top sheet was made of tin and the flex had a synthetic waterproof cover. We had two fire safety measures, one liquid and the other one powder. We invested in best-in-class fire extinguishers. We had a soundless generator van for power cuts. We had a medical support system through a tie-up with Medica. We had our own wheelchairs. We also invested in our own water reservoir.

What was the budget?

Every year our budget increases by 10-15% and yet we keep aside a part of our budget for social causes. This year, our budget was around Rs. 32 lakh and extracted money from many corporate houses; we got funding from *Times of India*; they loved our theme. We also got support from *Ei Somoy,* who sponsored our *dhunuchi naach*.

What was the feedback that you received?

Someone said: *'Amra boi er aaborte achi'*. We had created something for an adults, youth and senior citizens.

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NALIN SARKAR STREET SARBOJANIN DURGOTSAB



Glossary

Jhuri - Basket (hemisphere shaped) • *Dorir pandal* - *Pandal* made with ropes • *Bhakti* - See bhakti • *Bustee* - Slum • *Shabeki protima* - Traditional idol • *Ora gaari ta key raakhey ei deek-o-deek giye* - They would keep the cars here and there • *Khaatni* - Labour • *Family-r saahos thaakey na ei byaparaey kotha boltey* - Family members do not dare speak on this topic • *Nirdeshika meney cholte hobey* - Have to follow the guidelines • *Jara pujo bhaalobashey* - Those who love *pujo* • *Pai-pai ka hisaab* - Keep an account of every penny • *Chanda* - Refer to chanda in Santoshpur Lake Pally • *Shottor mm thekey TV serial kortey hochhey* - From 70 mm (70 mm film) one had to do serial • *Kharap lagchey kintu reality key meney niye choltey hobey* - Feels bad but keeping in mind the reality one has to move ahead • *Dilli ka laddoo* - A popular adage, which goes, 'regrets he who has eaten it and also he who hasn't', especially used in the context of marriage though other uses abound • *Orey baba, boi dekhtey hobey* - Oh my god! Have to see the book • *Ei Nalin Sarkar ta kothaai* - Where is this Nalin Sarkar? • *Oscar chhara ki bola jaai* - What can we say other than Oscar? •

Aabir - Refer to abir in Hindustan Park • *Joto cheeni dhaalbeyn- toto mishti paabeyn* - A popular bengali adage, which goes 'the more sugar you put in, the more sweeter it gets' in this it means 'the more money you put in, the better it would become' • *Baari thekey taka jaaoar chance eshey giye chhilo* - There was a possibilty that we had to get money from our own homes • *Upaay chhilo na* - There was no other option • *Buddhi* - Intelligence • *Jaah! Deri korey eleyn* - Oh! You came late • *Mapey thaaktey hobey!* - Need to be on the map • *Domkol gaari* - Fire engine • *Mantris* - See mantri • *Aagey* - Previously • *Shokto chilo* - It was tough • *Ekhun* - Now • *Jhamela* - Problem • *Bheerer chhobi* - Pictures of the crowd that had gathered • *Baari* - House • *Baari-r lok* - Family members • *Ekhon mejaaj theek nei* - My head is not at the right place at the moment • *Raastay* chowmien *khacchhi* - Having chowmien at the roadside eateries • *Takaar chaanp* - Financial problems • *Dekhiye dilam* - We showed them • *Jaadeyr* Vivekananda *aar* Rabindranath *ache, taadeyr tradition toh thaakbei!* - Those who have Vivekananda and Rabindranath to look up to they would also believe in tradition • *Mahalaya* - Refer to Mahalaya in Hindustan Park • *Taar* - Wire • *Ja* tension - Oh what tension





Q&A

SUTANU MAITY

ARTIST, NALIN SARKAR STREET

Q: What did you create at the *pujo* of Nalin Sarkar Street this year?

I used colourful *jhuris* made of cane, plastic and metal, which are a part of almost every Bengali household. I thought: why not use these? Nalin Sarkar Street is a narrow lane with a width of around 21 feet, so I had to leave some space and build a *pandal* within 18 feet. As soon as I knew that the *pandal* had to be built within restrictions, I knew that *jhuris* would serve my purpose. The first thing I had to keep in mind was how we could protect the material from being destroyed by fire or from collision.

You stay in Contai. How did you manage to work on a North Kolkata *pujo*?

I would come to Kolkata once a fortnight. I would have my sister, brother and uncle from Kolkata visit the location frequently to provide me with updates. Whenever I would come I would stay for a couple of days. Thereafter, from July I would stay in Kolkata and try to catch up on lost time.

What is your speciality?

I work on materials, not on the theme. A few years ago, I worked with plywood and made a design on that; only the design could be seen, not the planks. The budget depends on the area covered and materials used. To select a *pujo* I do a bit of due diligence these days based on parameters such as budget, material, area, client credibility regarding payments among others.

Has the theme *pujo* destroyed the simplicity of the *shabeki pujo?*

Yes. I am against people altering their *protima*. I want this sense of purity to be retained. I also don't like the fact that the idol size is increasing; the small idols brought out a different flavour. The sense of *bhakti* appears lost these days.

What are the challenges?

My business model is unusual. I price my *pandals* low enough for me to work at a large number of *pujo*, which can then be recycled. The challenge lies in being able to recycle without material damage. I made a *dorir pandal* which we reused around 25 times - for *Durga pujo, Kali pujo* and *Saraswati pujo* for some years. The labour cost has quadrupled in a couple of years. The one complaint that I have is that Asian Paints and other organisations give prizes to organisers and themes but not to the artists. Unfair. If someone were to be given award for a song, would you give it to the actor who lip syncs, the producer, the director or the singer?





Q&A

JAYANTA CHATTERJEE

ORGANISER, NALIN SARKAR STREET

Q: How would you describe the background of your *pujo*?

We have a *Durga pujo* tradition extending across eight decades. Around the year 2000, we moved over to the thematic treatment of the *pujo* while keeping the *shabeki protima* intact, which is an extension beyond the Baghbazar *pujo's* rigidity where they have still retained the same treatment as existed decades ago – no change. Some of the interesting ways in which the aura of this *para pujo* has been retained is that none of the families who started this neighbourhood *pujo* have left the locality. There are no less than 113 families who are engaged in the *pujo* (in addition to around 80 from the neighbouring *bustee*). The bedrock of our cooperation is multi-generational cohesiveness; each one has known practically each other's family for decades. In 1970, the Aurobindo Sarani Vibgyor Club assumed management of the *pujo* and this resulted in a number of youngsters being drawn into the exercise.

Q: What makes this *pujo* fascinating?

Our constraints. Nalin Sarkar Street is no wider than 21 feet. Just *21 feet*. In the preparation of the *pujo*, we occupy the entire street for a month, as a result of which garages are closed *(ora gaari ta key raakhey ei deek-o-deek giye)*, residents accommodate their daily lives around the cacophony of *pandal* workers and there is a general inconvenience that most residents have to live with. Those who do not do direct *khaatni* also contribute to the event. Can you believe that people like us have never ever been on vacations during the *pujos*? Family-*r saahos thaakey na ei byaparaey kotha boltey!* There is a sense of deep pride around 'our *pujo*' in this neighbourhood, which explains that despite not being large, affluent or strategically located, the Nalin Sarkar Street *pujo* stands for a certain respect within the *pujo* community of the city. It's a good case study.

Q: Obvious question. What makes you different?

We got over the usual disadvantages associated with informal *pujo* committees some years ago, which in retrospect was probably our biggest achievement. The result is that even as we go retail (house-to-house) in mobilising collections, we are professional to the point of welcoming any contribution – people pay from Rs 5 to Rs 100,000 – and providing a receipt; even as we are a relatively small club, we produce an annual Balance Sheet that provides a *pai-pai ka hisaab*; even though we may be just a cultural club, we have a PAN number which enhances stakeholder respect.

Q: What are some of the challenges encountered over the years?

Over the last decade, the entire mechanics of funding a *pujo* has evolved. For decades, our *pujo* was subscription-driven; we went around collecting *chanda* from the neighbourhood and that decided what kind of a *pujo* we would create. Interestingly, the country's liberalisation brought to the fore a new funding pipeline – sponsorship via flexes and vinyls placed at strategic locations which we could used to market to larger corporates. As this route began to be progressively exploited, our *pujo* committee began to depend less and less on neighbourhood funding, which declined from 100% to just 10% of our overall outlay today.

The way this sponsorship game works is challenging in itself for some good reasons. **One,** since we are a North Kolkata lane (not even a street), there was a funding resistance. The same money deployed elsewhere promised the sponsor a larger visibility. **Two,** few people had even heard of us. **Three,** we did not possess the contacts and clout to access the large corporates, which was not the case in a South Kolkata neighbourhood. **Four,** the police changed rules that forbade overhead gates – *nirdeshika meney cholte hobey* – as

a result of which we lost sponsorship of Rs 40,000 per gate and the same corporate support was transferred to *pujos* in Salt Lake where the provisions remained relaxed. The result is that last year we ran up an unforeseen deficit of Rs 350,000, which was temporarily funded by short-term loans by prominent *pujo* committee members and *jara pujo bhaalobashey* and only this year was that deficit got plugged as we moderated our budget from Rs 24 lac to Rs 16.50 lac (even as material and labour costs increased). *Shottor* mm *thekey* TV serial *kortey hochhey… kharap lagchey kintu* reality *key meney niye choltey hobey.*

But coming back to the question. We escaped the disadvantages of being a small and relatively under-exposed *pujo* through periodic investments in aesthetics. We may be small but we could still create the best *pujo* in the city. We may be a bit far from the large South Kolkata population but if we put up a good show, we believe people will take the trouble to come and watch our *pujo.* And this is how we patiently invested in aesthetics for four years. Finally in 2004, we won the Asian Paints Sharad Samman for the first time. It was like an upset. Our small *pujo* had prevailed over some of the bigger ones! Nalin Sarkar Street had arrived. Most people who read of us in the newspapers asked *'Ei* Nalin Sarkar *ta kothaai?'* Then we won again in 2006. Then again in 2010. And again in 2011. If you see the way the budgets, largeness and grandeur of most *pujos* are rising and then see how we ended up winning four 'Oscars' – Oscar *chhara ki bola jaai?* – in the space of nine years, then you can understand how we created a niche for ourselves and inspired a number of small *pujos* to dream big. 'If Nalin Sarkar can do it, so can we' kind of a message got propagated. And this Asian Paints award accelerated the virtuous cycle… we finally started getting more sponsorships, we started doing better *pujos*, we started getting even more awards and that led to even more sponsorships. By 2011, which was probably our best year, we won some 37 awards, or was it more? *Orey baba, boi dekhtey hobey!*

Q: That was an interesting mention of the awards.

The time spent before the award announcement is like an exam. We don't tell the others in our locality that we have been shortlisted out of superstition. We remember all the sequences that happened in the locality the last time we won an award… who had tea, who didn't and who sat where. The result is that we sit in the same place without moving. When the call comes through from Asian Paints, people are watching the face of the person taking the call. The moment he says "Yeaaaah!" a wave breaks out across the *para – aabir,* hugs, crackers – within minutes! And if we don't win, then this is like *Dilli ka laddoo.* Even if we don't win, we have to do the *pujo* the next year anyway!

Q: You actually reduced the budget of your *pujo* by more than 30 percent this year?

For various reasons. *Joto cheeni dhaalbeyn, toto mishti paabeyn!* At one point a couple of years ago, we realised that the game was getting increasingly challenging and *baari thekey taka jaaoar* chance *eshey giye chhilo.* We took stock of the situation: if we could only manage our egos and move towards lower-budget *pujos,* the entire movement would become more sustainable. The way we were going, we would have been a Rs 3.5 million *pujo* by 2013. We wouldn't have been able to afford it. We would have had to pay out of our pockets and that would have taken



some of our families back.

So we sat around to discuss how we would proceed. And one of the things we concluded was that the trick did not lie as much in building more expensive *pujos* as much as in investing in low-cost ideas with excellent potential; the trick lay in seeing beauty at a low cost in everyday items that would not cost a fortune to buy. So this is precisely what we did in 2013. We bought something as mundane as vegetable trays used in most middle-class homes. We spent Rs 9 lac for the trays, got Rs 130,000 back when this was resold to another *pujo* and the cost of dismantling was borne by the contractor. *Upaay chhilo na!* Besides, the turnkey assignment for the *pujo* was given to Sutanu Maity with a staggered payment provision (85 percent now and 15 percent later).

Q. Did this translate into lower footfalls?

Quite the contrary. The crowd line went right beyond Khanna Cinema in 2013 and my estimate is that we had 30,000–35,000 people standing at some points to get in. We would release 550 visitors per batch in one shot; each batch would take a few minutes and the length of the queue from head to tail would take 40 minutes. One person got only one minute in front of the *protima*. This was like Tirupati! And there were two such queues. Sounds unbelievable but when you do the numbers, then it starts making sense. But of course, managing this is stressful; even if one child falls and there is a stampede, the media and the DC Traffic will be here within minutes and that would be the end of our *pujo.* We would be blacklisted with no sponsorships the following year. Which is why we are extremely scared about inviting a celebrity. We have to keep the public at bay or the celebrity gets mobbed; if we keep the crowds at bay then the crowd creates a roar and keeps building by the minute so each minute we delay, there is an even bigger chance of a stampede when we let the crowd enter. *Ja* tension!

Q: What are the other challenges in responding to the evolving *pujo* requirements?

There is a lot more *buddhi* needed now. Earlier, we used to sit idle for six months and then suddenly one day decide to go and meet sponsors. Things have changed since; the smarter ones keep in regular touch with sponsors; transactions have evolved into relationships to minimise the incidence of sponsors telling us *'Jaah! Deri korey eleyn*. We have disbursed the sponsorship allocation elsewhere.' Map-*ey thaaktey hobey!*

Sadly over the last few years, the concept of the 'mega *pujo*' has emerged. This is an un-level playing field. Some of the politician-influenced *pujos* are out-spending the others. Maybe Asian Paints can come in with some provisions whereby the smaller *pujos* continue to thrive or soon we will see the death of the festival in the city because the smaller committees will have lost the motivation to continue. And then we will have a scenario where millions go to watch ten *pujos* in Kolkata and only hundreds go to watch the rest. This will affect the entire movement.

Over the years, we have also evolved our concept of what an inauguration should mean. In the old days, we would invite celebrities or *mantris* and buy a memento for them which would cost Rs 15,000. We have changed our priorities; we would rather fund an orphanage or buy dresses for the underprivileged as a part of our inauguration!

Do you know that 10 percent of our prize money goes into social service (medicines for the poor in government hospitals and for those with no money for medicines) to people who are not necessarily from our own locality?

Q: There is a growing investment in *pujo* responsibility.

One of the most responsible things to have happened is the creation of a *pujo* committee forum and today, we have 170 members. We have a sense of unity; we have a voice. Some of the other positive things to have happened over the last few years is the use of fire retardant spray on the *pandal* material, the use of closed wires (no open *taar*), access from the *pandal* rear to the *domkol gaari,* creation of a dedicated fire management room, third-party public and *pandal* insurances, substitution of bulbs with LEDs and the facility of a single window clearance – *domkol,* KMC, CESC and the police – which has helped reduce the time from seven days to about three or four hours across two days combined. *Aagey,* coordinating with CESC *shokto chilo; ekhun* you get an SMS alert of the amount payable, you pay and you move on!

The result of the mix of responsibilities is that our *pujo* committee office rarely remains shut during the year. There is always some problem – *tagada* or vendor payments *jhamela* – to resolve. Of course, the pressure of the last quarter is something different; since corporates plan their outlays in June, we have a four-person marketing team to visit no less than 50-60 offices with our brochures, CDs, pen drives, list of achievements and *bheerer chhobi.* We focus on the *pujo* management after 6 pm each evening until midnight. The family suffers, but what to do? During the last month leading to the *pujo,* there is no surety of when one is likely to get back home – the *baari* is like a hotel, *baari-r lok* don't speak to us *('Ekhon mejaaj theek nei')*, *raastay* chowmein *khacchhi* and except for sleeping at home, almost everything is done in the club room or on the pavement. The moment the *protima* leaves, we feel sad but the following morning, we are back to the war room to start planning for the next year.



Q: Where does the role of Nalin Sarkar Street come in as the preserver of a North Kolkata tradition?

We North Kolkata *pujos* are the preservers of the rich *pujo* heritage. There is no gimmick or glamour in our *pujo*; in our *pujo*, the *protima* is the hero. We are the ones with a perpetual *takaar chaanp* because no new buildings are coming up in our neighbourhood so access to funding is relatively limited. Besides, if they contribute handsomely in the first year, we can't keep going back to them year after year. So if we can win the Asian Paints despite these disadvantages, then you can understand where we come from. *Dekhiye dilam!* There was one year – 2003 or 2004 – when North Kolkata made a clean sweep of all Asian Paints prizes. *Jaadeyr* Vivekananda *aar* Rabindranath *ache, taadeyr* tradition *toh thaakbei!*

Q: What are some of the threats to the *pujo* movement?

I won't call it a threat but the incidence of one artist working on three *pujos* concurrently and using the same material is now happening more often than ever. Some artists cheat the concepts of others. What people see in our *pujo* they photograph, modify and replicate. Which is why we do not show the *protima* to anyone before *Mahalaya*. There is an entire community of Kumartuli artists who thrive on making copies!

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SANTOSH MITRA SQUARE



Glossary

Bijaya sammilani - Cultural programme where people meet after the *pujo* gets over • *Rudraksh er mala* - A large evergreen broad-leaved tree whose seed is traditionally used for prayer beads in Hinduism • *Chaturthi* - 4th day of the paksha, here in this case it is refered to as the 4th day of the devipaksha • *Naba Durga* - Navadurga or Nabadurga, which literally means nine Goddess Durgas, constitute, according to Hindu mythology, the manifestation of Durga in nine different forms. These nine forms of manifestation are Shailaputri, Brahmacharini, Chandraghanta, Kushmmanda, Skandamata, Kartyayani, Kalaratri, Mahagauri and Siddhidatri; together worshipped during the Navratri (Nine Divine Nights) celebration in Autumn each year.

















Q&A

PRADIP GHOSH

ORGANISER, SANTOSH MITRA SQUARE

Q. How has this *pujo* evolved?

The Santosh Mitra Square *pujo* was started in 1936 by stalwarts like Sachindra Nath Sanyal, Dakshaja Nandi, Dr. Tarak Poddar, Raichand Boral, Gyan Prakash Ghosh, V Balsara, Himanshu Biswas and Surendranath Ghosh. The *bijaya sammilani* organised by them would be unmatched in terms of fanfare; stars from the Indian musical fraternity would perform for free. When we took over the *pujo* - I have been involved as a president since 1993 - we realised we had to do something that emulated this grandeur.

Q: What were the challenges in doing so?

Unlinke the yesteryears no one would perform for free for my *pujo*. So we decided to change the look of our *pujo*. Until the point we took over, all the big *pujos* of Kolkata were traditional. We thought we would create something in tune with contemporary events. The year 1993 was the centenary year of Swami Vivekananda's speech in Chicago, so we created a *pandal* based on the Art Institute of Chicago where the Parliament of Religions was held. The treatment was a hit. Next year, we created a *pandal* based on around the Senate Hall of Calcutta University. In 1995 we recreated the Lotus Temple to celebrate communal harmony (and donated an ambulance for public use). In 1996, the crowd was so large that the police had to deploy Rapid Action Force for the first time in a Kolkata *pujo*. The next year we replicated the infamous rail accident in Bilaspur; again, the police had to use the RAF and we deployed payloaders to lift lost shoes from the *pandal* area.

What happened this year?

This year we recreated a Trevi fountain of Rome to give the festival a global positioning. We used plywood, thermocol and fibreglass. On the inside, we used Jamini Roy's styled *Naba Durga* made of mirror paintings by engaging around 15 students from Government Art College. We selected to represent the idol as *Himalaya Kanya* (daughter of the Himalayas) without deviating from the traditional. We dressed the idol in clothes that resembled tiger skin and *rudraksh er mala*. And we used a 30ftX30ft chandelier designed in-house. We started during the first week of August and decided on the theme just 20 days before the *pujo*. Just 20 days! The heavy rains tilted our structure. We had to get cranes and chain pulleys to re-erect it and thankfully it stayed intact across the *pujo*.

Q: How was the *pujo* received?

Personnel from various foreign consulate expressed an interest in preserving a part of the *pandal*. The Italian Consulate is expected to take a part of it! The Governor told his wife that he would take her to Rome and surprised her by bringing her to our *pandal*! Starting from *chaturthi*, no less than 2.5 crore people visited our *pandal*! No exaggeration.

Q. What makes this *pujo* special?

We carry out a number of social service-related activities. We have taken up the responsibility of a child in a home called The Refuge. We procured 17 cottahs in BB Ganguly Street where we intend to start an old age home. We donated money to buy the school building of Bangabashi Collegiate School. We also donated money towards the Thakurpukur Cancer Hospital. We built a full statue of freedom fighter B. B. Ganguly.

Q. What was the budget?

We don't believe in making a budget. Whatever is required, we spend. Simple. The subscriptions from adjacent to Santosh Mitra Square is nominal. Interestingly, a lot of sponsors approach us for advertisement opportunities. The result is that we have never faced a deficit.

SANTOSH MITRA SQUARE
Near Muchipara Police Station
Kolkata 700 012

NAKTALA
UDAYAN SANGHA



Glossary

Manusher mone jodi proti bochor daag katte hoy ar manusher sorone thakte gele - If we have to be in the mind of people every year and influence them • *Paathor boley diyechhilo ki korte hobey!* - The stone had told me what needed to be done • *Aamader ek onno porichiti hoye toiri jete paarey* - We can get a different identity • *Apni jodi dekhen* Bosepukur*er bharer pandal, ki asadharon chinta bhabna and shotti ota ekta* world-class *kaaj chilo* - If you have seen the *bhaarer pandal* at Bosepukur, it was an extraordinary piece of thinking and a world-class work • *Bhaar ke ei* scale-*ey bhabai* genius! - Thinking with bhaar at this large a scale is in itself a sheer genius • *Asaadharon pujo korun* - Do an outstanding *pujo* • *Bheed laagiye deen* - Get a lot of people to come here


CENTURYPLY
CENTURY
ADAM
NO SMOK





Q&A

BHOBOTOSH SUTAR

ARTIST, NAKTALA UDAYAN SANGHA

Please walk us through the Naktala Udayan Sangha theme.

In 2011, I worked with brass and mahogany; in 2012 I made an iron butterfly 80 feet high; in 2013 I worked with sandstone. I wanted to infuse life into stone, probably the first time in the history of *Durga pujo* in Kolkata that a single stone block - 16 tonnes (11 tonnes for the idol and 5 tonnes for the rest) and 14 feet in height from Jodhpur - was carved into an idol (theme entitled *'Pathore Pran'*). We believe *manusher mone jodi proti bochor daag katte hoy ar manusher sorone thakte gele,* we need to push frontiers in terms of size, scale and the use of innovative material, which is what I did in 2013.

What were the challenges faced?

It started with finding the right kind of stone, visiting 20 quarries and checking miles for the right block – the right colour, veins, shape, size, grain and cost. Finally, when I got hold of the right sandstone block – yellow ochre - it seemed the block had been waiting for me for a thousand years. I saw it being extracted out of the mountain and from that point began my journey to breathe life into it. We booked a 10-wheeled truck to bring the block to Kolkata, which broke down midway, so we had to send another 12-wheeled truck to help. To get the block through the narrow Behala lanes to my studio we deployed a crane, which promptly collapsed. We then got a hydraulic crane to do the job but could not lift for long. That was one time when I became really scared; one wrong move and it would have been the end. So finally we sent in two hydraulic cranes to do the job coupled with two four-wheeled trucks. The road leading to my studio cracked due to the weight!

How did you work on the block?

I had never earlier worked with stone, so we got Rajasthani artists to engage in the first cutting round, progressively replaced by seven Purulia artists. Since these artists do not work with drawings, one was compelled to create a clay model. They would see the model, take measurements with string, apply that to the stone block and then happily chip away. Absolutely foolproof. One kept fearing that perhaps they would make a judgmental error; they just didn't! They could have worked blindfolded. In fact, the fine dust that they generated, affected their health, as a result of which they could work only five hours a day.

Following the completion of the initial cutting, the stone idol weighed six tonnes, was shifted to the *pandal* and thereafter I began the exercise to make embellishments that would infuse some life into the block. That is when one began to 'communicate' with the block. The stone literally demanded a serene treatment; it literally spoke to me saying 'Do this, don't do that!' *Paathor boley diyechhilo ki korte hobey!*

This is interesting…

You need life within to give life without. This affected me in various ways. For instance, there a number of stone chips that came off while the block was being chipped. The normal response would have been to throw these chips away as waste. I felt that this would have been ironical since I was essentially engaged in giving life to the block. So I used these chips too in the overall curation, literally giving them 'life' as well.

What were some of the risks that you took?

The scale, the material, the weight, the deadline, the number of contractors, labourers and artisans. All risks. One needed to keep learning to work with new materials. One needed to understand the interplay between the ambient light on the one hand and surface, bounce, diffusion, tint and contrasts on the other. One needed to live and die a number of times to succeed.

How do you see the future of Durga *pujos?*

There is perhaps no public art installation event of this scale anywhere in the world. It is an amazing event where even a *rickshawwallah* becomes an art critic; one of them actually told













me that what I had done better work in the previous year. If we keep at it, *aamader ek onno porichiti hoye toiri jete paarey.* I saw a Dynamo Exhibition Centenary show (1913 to 2013) in France and if I compare their installations with ours, then some Durga *pujo* work would definitely be rated as world-class. *Apni jodi dekhen* Bosepukur*er bharer pandal, ki asadharon chinta bhabna and shotti ota ekta* world-class *kaaj chilo* and that too more than 10 years ago! *Bhaar ke ei* scale-*ey bhabai* genius!

How do you set yourself up for the Durga *pujo*?

I keep aside five months for working on the *pujos;* in the other eight months I focus on art, family and myself. Interestingly, a part of our proceeds go into our Chander Haat movement which conducts seminars, infrastructure and lifting the art movement. This is the kind of idealism that we have been engaged with for the last 20 years.

During the four *pujo* months I have to live through a number of demands – the brief of *'asaadharon pujo korun!'* and *'bheed laagiye deen'*. I get out of my house at 8 am, finish much of my work while in the car and there is no fixed time for returning home. By the end of the *pujos*, I am so drained that I go blank for the next two months. Every year I resolve that I won't work on any more *pujos* but I would fall ill if I didn't, so the stress of doing a *pujo* is probably better!

NAKTALA UDAYAN SANGHA
1/250 Krishanu Dey Sarani, Kolkata – 700047

DUM DUM PARK
TARUN DAL



Glossary

Aaschhe bochhor aabar hobe - Will happen next year again • Chillums - A chillum is a straight conical pipe with end-to-end channel, traditionally made of clay and used since at least the 18th century by wandering Hindu monks, known as sadhus • *Kolker pandal* - *Pandal* made out of chillums • *Aamara keno pichhiye thakbo?* - Why should we stay behind? • *Bangalir sreshtho utshob boley kotha* - It is the greatest festival of the Bengali's after all





Q&A

ANIRBAN DAS

ARTIST, DUM DUM PARK TARUN DAL

Q. How did you come up with the idea for this year's *pujo* at Dum Dum Park Tarun Dal?

I had an idea of doing something based on the *Panchabhoota* concept. I realised that the hookah has all the elements of the *panchabhoota* – it has *apa* (water) in the middle chamber, *teja* (fire) when we light it, *kshiti* (earth) in terms of clay and *marut* (wind) when one inhales and *byom* (sky) which is the state after smoking. Besides, *panchbhoota* is related to Shiva (consort of Durga). We used large hookahs to depict different gods and goddesses. The hookahs were enlarged to show the vastness and all-encompassing nature of the *panchabhoota*.

Q. How did you refine your concept?

I studied texts; I sought assistance from my brother with a Masters in Sanskrit and from my father who studied Hindu mythology. Since I am a trained dancer (Bharat Natyam), we start with a prayer to Shiva which was also served as an inspiration. My insight into dance helped in visualising the *pandal* as the lighting arrangement was arranged like a visual frame.

Q. Tell us about your background…

I never went to art college, did a graphic designing course from a multimedia institute and worked as a website visualiser. My parents wanted me to study engineering and law but I wanted a career in arts. I almost ran away from home, trained in a multimedia centre and took up a job as a digital photo editor on a meagre salary at a prominent photo studio. What soothed me was listening to Tagore songs. One day, I presented a metallic Durga to a customer who told me that I should start working professionally. *Aamaye to aar keu chinto na.* Around that time our dance troupe was to perform at the Chittaranjan Park; I sent my profile through them to the Delhi *pujo* organisers. They liked my work and wanted to hire me as a *pandal* decorator.















One day I was negotiating with them at a phone booth, some people heard me talking about *pujo* design. They offered me work for Rs 29,000. So I did the *protima* and some *pandal* parts. Next year I worked for Shyama Palli where I was shortlisted for Asian Paints Sharad Samman. The *pujos* are my bread and butter. I have worked on a cumulative 35 *pujos* until now and four this year. The biggest boon which the *pujos* has provided is a platform for ideas. There is hardly any space available to create an artistic marvel like the Konark Temple. But year after year, an artist can express his art through the *pujo*.

Q. What is your wish list?

It would be impossible to preserve installations. I believe that *aaschhe bochhor aabar hobe*. The cycle ends with the *bhashaan* and paves way for something new. However, I think there is need for the creation of a digitised archive of all installations. One more point: a large number of *pujo* organisers don't pay artists as per their commitment, largely affecting junior artists who are unable to protest. I was cheated of Rs 1.7 million in this manner, and I had to pay this amount to my decorators. If the award organisers can take a certificate from the previous year's artist on whether dues were cleared would be a big step ahead towards financial integrity.











Q&A

SUBHAJIT SAHA

ORGANISER, DUM DUM PARK TARUN DAL

What was your theme for 2013?

The theme was *panchabhoot* (five elements), namely *khiti* (earth), *opo* (water), *tej* (fire), *morut* (wind) and *byom* (sky) as visualised by our artist Anirban Das. We actually commissioned 18 hookahs inside the *pandal* to create a smoky ambience, procuring 650,000 chillums (clay pipes); we procured 50 bags of stone chips.

What were the challenges faced?

Our lane is narrow. However, since the *para* is peopled mostly by club members, no one really got fussy about the noise or lack of space. There were about 10 'action' members available 24X7 for the two months leading to the festival. We are a youth-driven group; our secretary is just 32. Managing the massive crowds, then the rain and finally the need to stay vigilant against theft were challenges. At the eleventh hour, we fell short of chillums and thankfully the last shipment arrived in the nick of time. Besides, Dum Dum Park was once notorious for waterlogging but thankfully the sewage system has improved and the water drains away faster now.

What was your budget?

We had a budget of Rs 1.8 million, which was a result of last year's publicity and increased sponsorship. We raised 60% of our funds through sponsorships, relieving us from the pressure to mobilise funds from within the locality. The danger is that sometimes the sponsors commit and back away.

What was the *pujo's* uniqueness?

Our idol! Even the chillums and the back lighting were different from most other *pujos*. We were widely known as the '*kolker pandal*'. If in 2012, there were around 70,000 people visiting our *pujo* everyday, we had 100,000 visiting this year. We had to hold onto the ropes till early morning!

How is your *pujo* different?

Ours is more than just a once-in-a-year *pujo* club. Across the year, we conduct blood donation camps, eye care camps, and medical camps – free. We organise sit-and-draw, carrom and football tournaments. Best of all, we organise training in adventure sports. Tushi Das who climbed Mount Everest this year is an active member of our club and mountaineering unit.

Our contribution to the locality is much more significant than the other clubs who are more popular by virtue of doing big *Durga pujos* in the locality. We thought *aamara keno pichhiye thakbo*? We transformed our *pujo* in 2008 and did the first theme-based *pujo* in the history of the club. We never looked back since. When we proposed to do a theme-based *pujo,* all residents joined hands. *Bangalir sreshtho utshoh boley kotha*. Our core group of 40, comprised businessmen, office-goers, students and housewives. All would complete their daily work and find time to devote to the *pujo*. Just imagine: we have a meagre 1,400 square feet place to do the *pujo* and yet we were able to create a grand spectacle.

DUM DUM TARUNDAL
60, Shyamnagar Road, Kolkata 700055

TRIDHARA SAMMILANI



Glossary

Bhaarer pandal - see bhaarer *pandal* • *Saptami* - 7th day of the paksha, here in this case it is refered to as the 7th day of the devipaksha • *Bhag chashis* - sharecropper • *Mon-pran chokh- er shanti* - Something soothing for the heart, the eyes and the soul • *Dhakka-dhakki* - Pushing and shoving • *Pujarini* - A poem written by Rabindranath Tagore in 1899 which was later recast into a dance drama called Natir *pujo* in 1926 • *Dorshon* - Visit (visiting the *pandal*/idol)

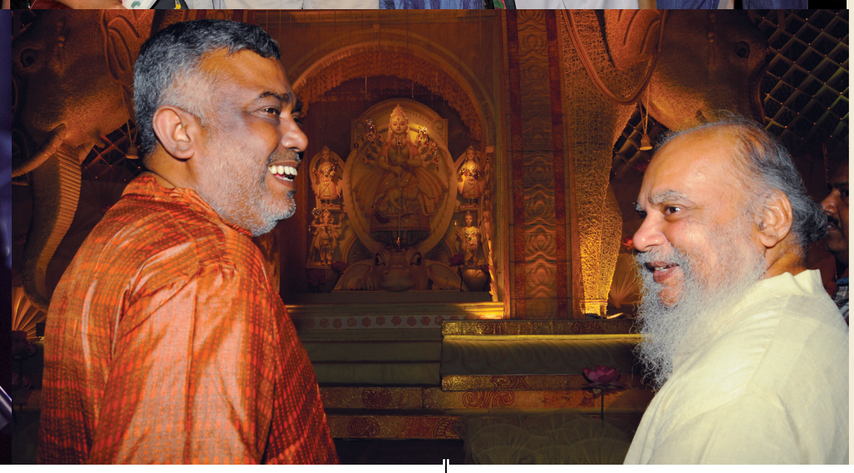












Q&A

GAURANGA KUILA

ARTIST, TRIDHARA SAMMILANI

Q. Can you tell us about the theme of Tridhara Sammilani?

Our theme of Anondo: 2013 underlined the central theme of not just ours but all *pujos*. I visualised *Maa Durga* sitting on a howdah on the back of an elephant. We created a soothing environment through a cream tint and gentle LED glow.

Q. How did you enter the world of theme *pujos?*

In the Nineties, corporates used hand-drawn posters, graffiti and banners for outdoor promotions. Since I had some experience in this field, I got an opportunity to work with a small *pujo* in Tamluk, following which a *pujo* in Tatanagar approached me and based on this exposure I graduated to a larger *pujo* in Tatatnagar. This *pujo* received such appreciation that Bondon Raha got me to work for his *bhaarer pandal* Bosepukur *pujo*, which went on to create history. A time came when Ekdalia Evergreen selected me as their sole artist, thereafter I moved to Suruchi Sangha and Ahiritola Sarnojanin. Interestingly, I suffered a loss of Rs 8 lakh during that time; I was an inexperienced 23, couldn't balance my budget, wouldn't compromise on quality and the result was that I had to repay Rs 40,000 a month for three years without anyone in the family coming to know about it. Finally, it was the Pathuriaghata *pujo* that reestablished me as this low profile *pujo* swept the prizes that year.











Q. What is your speciality?

The ability to work with different materials - dry leaves, jute and other things. The Tatanagar *pandal* was replicated using jute at the Babubagan *pujo*, graduating it from a material used in the manufacture of ropes or sacks. Some government officials asked me to participate in a national handicraft competition in Delhi. I submitted my work but needed a government recommendation for the entry. The local DM refused to recommend my work as I was a nobody. Another government official agreed, I sent my work but didn't win. The following year I won and that started the trend of using handicrafts for *pujos* made from jute.

Q. A number of organisers say that artists keep them in the dark regarding the theme till the end.

This is intentional and a part of my agreement. A lot of so-called experts from the organisers side keep poking their noses in the design, which creates problems.

Q. How can the *pujo* movement be strengthened?

One thing damaging the *pujo* movement is awards. Someone winning an award also means a loss for hundreds, which defeats the *pujo* spirit. Since the award organisers announce them on *saptami*, those not winning get depressed and spend the *pujo* mourning rather than rejoicing. So awards should be announced at the end of the *pujo*. The other damaging point is political leaders influencing corporates to divert funds to their *pujos*. This trend could one day destroy the smaller clubs.

Q. How many people work for you?

I have 25 permanent employees; at the time of *pujo*, I work with more than 200 people. I work with some women artisans from home who deliver their work on time. I work with low cost materials which helps me remunerate labourers (who otherwise work as *bhag chashis*) better.











Q&A

GARGI MUKHERJEE

ORGANISER, TRIDHARA SAMMILANI

Q. Walk us through the theme of your 2013 *pujo?*

In view of the growing violence in society, we focused on a relevant theme: *Anondo 2013* (Happiness, 2013). Our message was to invite *Maa Durga* to usher in a period of happiness. The theme was represented by the howdah, a carriage positioned on the back of an elephant, used in the past to carry the wealthy and also used to depict triumph. We showcased all this through the usage of rich colours and faux stones. We created a soothing effect through the use of nylon cords which were of muted colour. We used wool and stone elements to decorate the idol (using lead-free paint).

Q. What does the Tridhara Sammilani *pujo* brand stand for?

Differentiation. Based on the theme, we usually create a pavilion and conduct cultural programmes leading to a unique *pujo* ambience. This year was no exception. The theme was socially relevant; we also distributed more than 2,000 clothes to 800 people from an old age home who visited our *pujo* for lunch. It would not be out of place to mention here that we run a permanent medical unit comprising doctors with a provision for medicines and diagnostic services. We run a medical camp for the impoverished in association with major hospitals.

This year, we operated on 150 patients at a cataract operation camp organised by us. We held a sit-and-draw competition for more than 2,500 children (covering private schools, corporation schools and disabled homes). We donated a machine where a dead body can be preserved for 72 hours without the use of formaldehyde or other harmful chemicals. The whole idea was to send out a message that while it would be good to create a lavish *pujo* over a week, it would perhaps be even better to conduct sustainable beneficial activities for the larger society all across the year.

Q. How has the *pujo* evolved?

Earlier, we were engaged in the *shabeki* form of the *pujo.* In 2008, we embarked on a crossover – in terms of scale and theme. There were challenges in terms of funds and infrastructure. It was left to Laltu *babu* (Mukherjee) to bring in large corporate sponsors and engage the ladies wing of our club.

Q. What was the impact of your *pujo* this time?

People were dazzled by the lights of the other *pandals*. But when they came to our *pujo* they were calmed. *Mon-pran-chokh-er shanti.* We used cream as a base colour. We also kept three exits for our *pujo* open which led to a hassle-free *dorshon*. No *dhakka-dhakki*.

The unique thing about our *pujo* was











the cultural programme that went on simultaneously based on the particular theme. As the theme this year was related to happiness, we created song and dance programmes including *Pujarini,* the famous dance-drama of Rabindranath Tagore. A programme on 100 years of Indian Cinema was performed by our youth wing. The youth wing also performed a dance item woven around our theme song.

We have a number of events across the year involving a sizeable number of people. We have a ladies wing and youth wing, which helps our different age groups know each other better and create a distinctive neighbourhood bond.

Q. What challenges did you face?

The monsoon! It just kept raining and raining. The artist kept us in the dark on the theme but he finished it on time (he had created a workshop in his village employing more than 400 people).This is one thing that needs to be articulated. The entire work of the *pujo* generally happened during the monsoons. As a result, we had to fend off the rain, waterlogging, humidity and all the attending challenges. The scale was in proportion with inflation. Thankfully the artist kept his remuneration the same level as the previous year.

Q. What was your budget?

We increased our budget from Rs 25 lac last year to Rs 30 lac. Around 80% of the budget was accessed through sponsorships. We focused on large corporates with minimal funding defaults. We were relatively unaffected by the chit fund scam that had bogged a lot of *pujos* down. We reported a surplus that was used for other social activities. We consider the installation as the property of the artist and give him the liberty to recycle, helping the artist to strengthen his livelihood. So this year our *pandal* was transported to Chandannagore for onward use.

Q. How did you ensure crowd safety?

We hired 150 volunteers, installed CCTVs, and invested in metal detectors and standing ambulance, health desk and a 10,000 litre water body. We used environment-friendly lead-free colours for the idol, environment-friendly bio-toilets and a battery-run car for garbage disposal.

TRIDHARA SAMMILANI
33Y Monoher Pukur Road
Kolkata – 700029

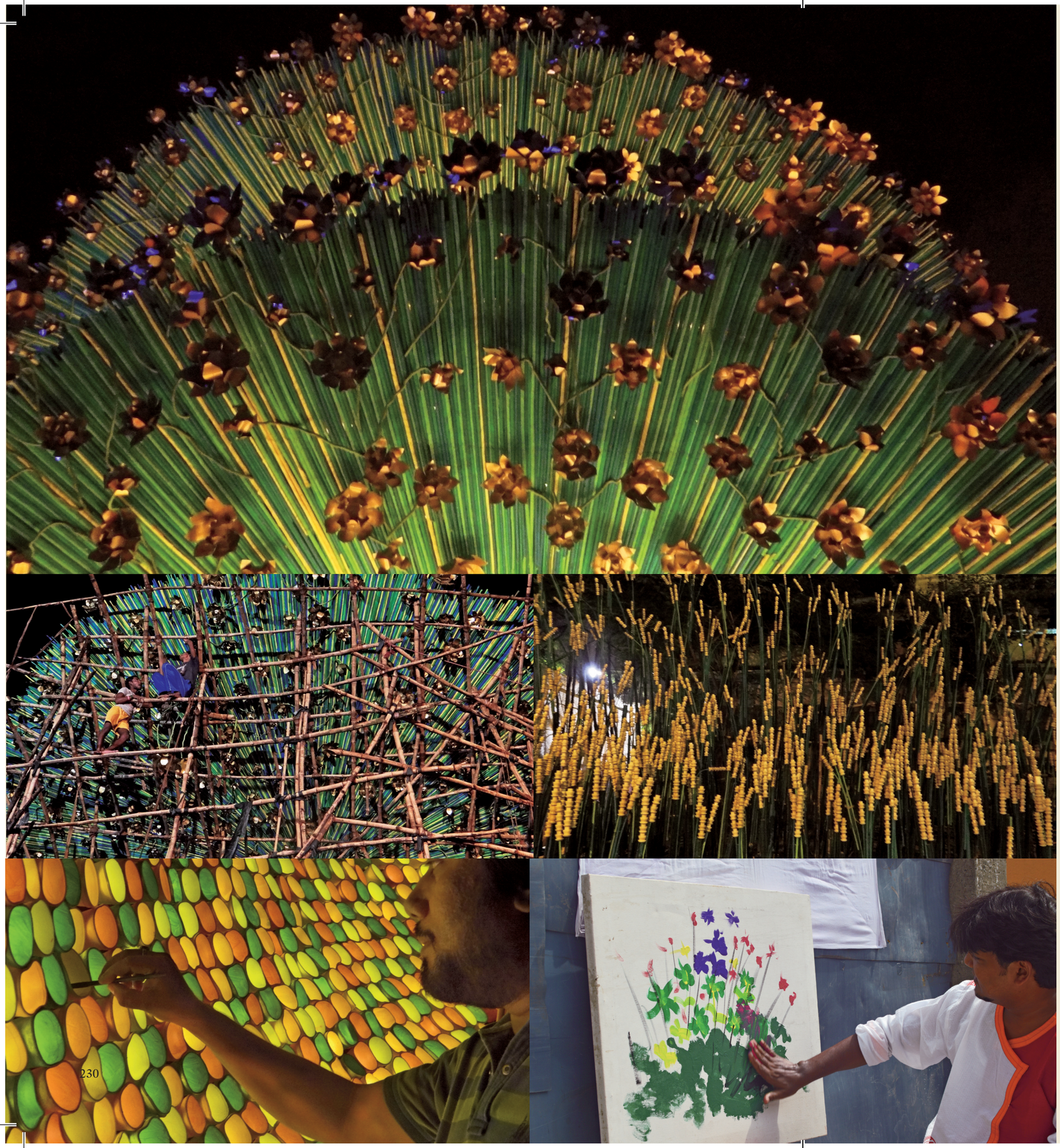
KASHI BOSE LANE
DURGA PUJO



Glossary

Tai ami prothom kaaj shuru korlam Amar Sarkar-er under-ey - That's why I started working under Amar Sarkar • *Ami ja kaaj kori ami cheshta kori sheta jeno drishtinandan hoye* - Whatever work I do, I try to make it visually pleasing • *Manusher bhalo laga ta shob cheye joruri* - What is most important is the appreciation of the public • *Kaash phool* - Kans grass (*Saccharum spontaneum*) is a grass native to South Asia. It is a perennial grass, growing up to three meters in height, with spreading rhizomatous roots • *Chaa-er dokan* - Tea shop • *Asholey lokjon jokhon dekhe tokhon lokkho kore na* - Actually when people see, they don't notice • *Byaparta ki jaanen toh, eta na nijer sathe nijer lorai* - The thing is that it's a fight with one's fight with himself • *Dekhun, ekhon onek lokera toh onek puroshkar deye* - See, a number of people give out a number of awards • *Jodi boli* prize-*er jonne pujo na taholey bhul bola hobe* - If I say that the *pujo* is not about prizes, it will be a lie • *Aamar mone hoye pujo ekhon ekta shompurno onno matra niyeche* - I think the *pujo* has graduated to a completely different level now • *Jaa-taa kichu ekta korlei cholbe na* - I just can't go ahead and make anything at all • *Pujo ke kendro kore je* level-*ey kaj hocche ar shei kaj ta jebhabe lok* appreciate *korche sheta shotti ekta bhalo lagar jayega* - The level of work that has been happening around the Durga *pujo* as a central point and the way people are appreciating those works makes me truly happy • *Etai toh shob cheye boro pawa* - That's the biggest achievement • *Eder shob oshadharon chinta bhabna dekhe mone korechilam amio kaaj shuru korte pari* - Having seen their outstanding work, I thought that I could start working as well • *Sadharon manush ei niyei nimogno thakey* - People remain occupied with this • *Rang-er bhela* - Colourful bhela (bhela - a traditional boat made with bannana tree) • But despite that pressure *toh ekta thakei* - But despite that there is always a sense of pressure





Q&A

SHIVSHANKAR DAS

ARTIST, KASHI BOSE LANE DURGA *PUJO* COMMITTEE

What has been your background?

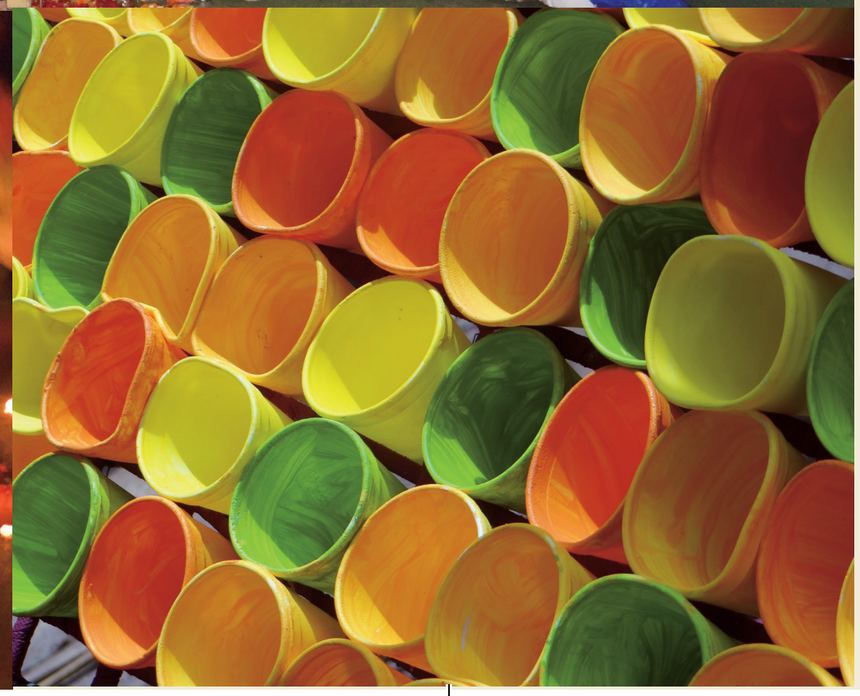
I was studying at the Academy of Fine Arts, was drafted in the Bombay Art College, did art direction projects for films and TV serials and then was involved with the Tollywood film industry. The first *pujo* I worked for was a small-scale *para* affair at Gangulybagan (Patuli) for a club called Baisakhi. I used to do exhibitions where a handful came to see my work. Now I had the chance to showcase my skill in front of thousands. I wanted to do bigger things but needed skills. T*ai ami prothom kaaj shuru korlam* Amar Sarkar-*er under-ey.* This was in 2004 at Haridevpur Ajeya Sanghati when the Nagaland-based theme was made. I went solo in 2006 for Bosepukur Sitalamandir where I worked with the concept of a *paat kuyo* (underground well). I used portions of these and threw them in a random but artistic manner. For the first time I had people from distant villages standing patiently in a queue to see my work, which would have never been possible in an art gallery.

Tell us about the theme at Kashi Bose Lane 2013.

The theme was to recreate the seasonal beauty of autumn. Nature is in its fullest bounty at this time with the fields of *kaash* swaying in gentle wind. This is perhaps the most indelible image associated with *pujo. Ami ja kaaj kori ami cheshta kori sheta jeno drishtinandan hoye. Sadharon manush ei niyei nimogno thakey.* It's called public art for a reason. *Manusher bhalo laga ta shob cheye joruri.* So, when I was asked to recreate the autumnal beauty I could have done two things: I could have resorted to something that was difficult to comprehend or present it in a way the average Bengali sees it. I chose to do the latter. But where does the creativity come in? Through the usage of innovative material. For instance, the use of porcelain insulators to create *kaash phool*. Coffee cups to create *rang-er bhela*. The idea to use coffee cups came about in an interesting way. I was having tea at my local *chaa-er dokan,* saw the tray and thought that if it could be used in some way (unfortunately couldn't). So, I







thought of using the coffee cups instead. *Asholey lokjon jokhon dekhe tokhon lokkho kore na.* I try to present all these things that people fail to notice and present them in an imaginative manner.

What were the biggest challenges?

The primary raw material was difficult to access. The production of ceramic insulators has declined. We fell short of our requirement midway; we needed to tap all probable places; the material was not cheap; it rained profusely. That we got the *pandal* completed on schedule was an achievement…what we will not do for the *pujos*! The funding was another challenge. Budgets are always rising because we have to do something new every year. *Byaparta ki jaanen toh, eta na nijer sathe nijer lorai.* You have to keep aspiring to better your previous effort otherwise you risk stagnating. In that frantic bid to do something better, some artists use fancy materials, which enhances budgets.

How important are prizes?

Dekhun, ekhon onek lokera toh onek purushkar deye. A decent enough *pujo* is more or less assured of winning some prize or the other. But despite that pressure *toh ekta thakei*. The organisers are keen on winning the best of the best prizes. In such a scenario *jodi boli* prize-*er jonne pujo na taholey bhul bola hobe*. So, the fact that you have to win a prize is always there at the back of your head.

How has the theme *pujo* evolved?

Aamar mone hoye pujo ekhon ekta shompurno onno matra niyeche. We, who have passed out of the art college, had to really study it to get a good grasp of it. So, I believe that we have a commitment to the public to not do just about anything – *jaa-taa kichu ekta korlei cholbe na.* We all work based on certain theories and a fair amount of research goes behind it. This desire has strengthened the overall standard of the Kolkata *Durga pujo.* A *pandal* now is a blend of painting, sculpture and design. *Pujo ke kendro kore je* level-*ey kaj hocche ar shei kaj ta jebhabe lok* appreciate *korche sheta shotti ekta bhalo lagar jayega.* Besides, most visitors would earlier be keen to see the protima but now it is the *mandap* they are more excited about. Over the years, people have to come to appreciate good art, artists and original thought. See, 70 per cent of the people who go *pandal*-hopping do not have any knowledge of installation art but still appreciate what we are making. *Etai toh shob cheye boro pawa.*

Are there any artists in particular whose works inspire you?

Clearly Bhobo*da* (Bhobotosh Sutar), Partho*da* (Partho Dasgupta) and Sanatan*da* (Dinda). *Eder shob oshadharon chinta bhabna dekhe mone korechilam amio kaaj shuru korte pari.* These people have changed the way people used to view *pujos.*






Q&A

SOUMEN MITRA

SPECIAL COMMISSIONER OF POLICE (TRAFFIC)

How challenging is the Kolkata's Durga *pujo* from a traffic administrative perspective?

A. Definitely the most challenging traffic assignment for the Kolkata Police, which is not surprising considering that it, is easily the biggest five day-long urban street festival in India. During peak hours, we need to manage more than a million cars on the streets and more than five million people – simultaneously! The fact that we can do this year after year without an administrative collapse is a reflection of our terrain knowledge and competence.

Q. What is the planning that goes into *pujo* management?

A. Once a *pujo* is over; we immediately start preparing for the next, which would give you an indication of the homework that goes into this exercise. The first step towards the smooth execution of this extensive mega event is something as seemingly simple as a feedback form - 10 questions – that goes to all officers-in-charge of the traffic guards because they have a first hand insight into street realities. Based on their feedback, we adopt our strategic blueprint. Besides, we completed our 100-member meeting of police officers on what they observed this year and how we should collectively respond. We started these initiatives two years ago when I assumed charge of the traffic department.

We also speak extensively to the CESC, KMC, Fire Department, KMDA, KPT, Tourism Department, Transport Department and the Irrigation Department to stay abreast of various infrastructural activities. So if I have to bring our competence down to one word, it would be 'preparedness'.

Q. What are some of the challenges that you face?

A. Logistics. Kolkata adds 100,000 vehicles annually even as its road coverage remains constant. On the other hand, 2,500 *pujos* take place annually in the city (40-50 of them are big ticket *pujos*), entailing large peak hour footfalls and traffic. It is not a question of whether we have the competence to manage the overall flow, which we obviously do; the challenge is really to rise to meet unpredictable demand because there is no saying what kind of crowd will turn up at what hour.

Then it is not only a question of quantity. There are lacs – not thousands – of people from the suburbs and villages who have poor understanding of traffic signages and hence will walk onto the road when they are not expected to, or sitting somewhere it can be dangerous for them. Besides, a large number of suburban vehicles do not know of the prevailing street discipline; finally there are reckless bikers who hit the streets after midnight add to the chaos. We have to deploy our personnel in a manner that their presence acts as deterrent and if something unfortunate does happen, we have to be quick on our feet to apprehend the miscreants and get the affected to safety.

Besides, there is the challenge of managing one's own force of 14,000 policemen – their deployment, their fatigue, their communication, their refreshment and their accessibility.

Q. What responsiveness did the traffic police demonstrate?

A. Earlier, we observed that our workload would be stiffest between 4 pm and early morning due to excessive traffic and illegal parking. Interestingly, it would take us a good two hours to clear the day-time traffic backlog by the time it was 4 pm and even while we were doing this, the evening traffic would mount, leading to a very complicated situation. So we made a change this year: we increased our day traffic police deployment at the cost of the night with the objective of liquidating traffic issues – wrong parking and other similar issues – on a real-time basis so that we could enter the pressured evening hours with no backlog. We altered the personnel deployment split from 85:15 to 60:40. Sure there was an internal resistance but this meant that we were overhauling the system. The result was phenomenal. We smoothed the traffic flow during the day and night. Innovation worked!

Q. What other kinds of innovation were carried out?

A. Every year the Joint Commissioner (Headquarters) creates a law and order force, drawing members from different units of the Kolkata Police including traffic. This combined force of different units worked with the traffic police at various prominent intersections as well as inside the *pandals* regulating pedestrians. However, over the years, our effectiveness was affected for a curious reason: our colleagues from other departments found it difficult to understand the various signals being used by the traffic management team during the internal communication. Besides, they were unable to take discretionary decisions related to traffic movement. So we embarked on a different approach this year: we decided not to send our traffic personnel to the central law and order pool of Joint CP Headquarters and used them for pedestrian flow regulation and to maintain law and order function at 22 major intersections under our traffic department. The intra-departmental seamlessness translated into superior vehicular and pedestrian management.

We commissioned 400 CCTV cameras across various city points for enhanced monitoring. The result is that our Traffic Control Room in Lalbazar worked as war rooms during the *pujo* with a real-time insight into ground realities. We also accessed much of public feedback from our Facebook page. The key to better management is the ability to access information from your own people and the public and this openness translated into informed decision-making.

Q. At what point during the *pujo* did you encounter the biggest challenge?

A. The immersion! Simply because it represented the coming together of all the protimas at about the same time and at the same location. The Kingsway access addresses the South and Central Kolkata *pujos* while the Beadon Street corridor addresses the North Kolkata *pujos*. One small error and the result could be chaos stretching across kilometres and hours. In Beadon Street, we have bumper-to-bumper traffic stretching across three kilometres. The trick lies in being able to coordinate with the KMC to commission coolies to unload protimas at ghats with speed and turn them around faster. If you can manage this batch wise with competence, you realise the effect is felt in the traffic flow kilometres away. Correspondingly, there is also a pressure to regulate the exit of idols coming out of Kumartuli, which, given the narrowness of the street, can create extensive traffic bottlenecks. So this is one activity restricted to the night when the streets were relatively empty.

Q. Did the Police lay down guidelines for *pujo* committees?

A. Absolutely. Joint CP Headquarters lays down clear guidelines. The exits of the *pandals* needed to be bigger than the entrances. The height of the idol could not exceed 17 feet. Adequate fire fighting equipment was a must. Restricted the use of mobile cameras in front of the protima as it adversely affects 'visitors' flow. Don't forget, sometimes *pujo* committees deliberately wanted a long queue to build up as they could go back to their sponsors and claim this as a sign of their success, ensuring that they get more sponsorship the following year. There was an internal conflict of interest!

Q. How do you expect to strengthen your coverage?

A. Commission underground parking at various parks as well as multi-level car parking at the tram and bus depots. We intend to utilise the central business district as a hub for car parking with onward connections to hop-on, hop-off buses does a complete circuit of *pandals* across dedicated corridors. This will reduce vehicular presence and make our *pujos* more enjoyable!

Q&A

KHOKON DAS

TRADITIONAL DRUMMER (DHAAKI)

Q: How long have you been playing?

We are have been professional *dhak* players for generations. When people say that they have done a Masters degree in 'xyz' subject, I like to think that our ancestors did a Masters degree in playing *dhak*. My ancestors belonged to Bangladesh (Dhaka and Bikrampur) and continued with this profession when they came over to India.

Ami prothom dhak hathe tuli jokhon amar boyesh chilo 10 *bachar* and now I am 42 years old. I would travel with my father to various *pujos*. *Amar poribarer mota moti sobai jara amar boyeshi ki tar theke boro, amra sobai dhak bajai* – at all the *pujo*, wedding ceremonies, *annaprasans* and *sraadhs*. For the past six years I have been playing at Shibmandir. I have also played *dhak* for Bappi Lahiri.

Durga *pujo*. How important is it for you from a financial aspect?

Durga *pujo* has become critical because you don't see *dhakis* during *Viswakarma pujo* or *Laxmi pujo*; we get to play for one day during *Kali pujo* and rarely at *Kartik pujo*. We get to earn a major chunk in those five days of the *Durga pujo* but not good enough to sustain through the year. Our team of five members gets to earn around Rs. 50,000 to Rs. 60,000 in those five days. In the present scenario this is not good enough to sustain a family. *Pujos* outside Bengal generate a decent pay; each member gets to earn around Rs. 20,000 to 25,000 in those five days along with food and other facilities. During *Kali pujo* a good *dhaki* stands to earn around Rs. 2,500 to Rs 3,000 a day depending on the *pujo* size and budget..

About 15 years ago, by only playing *dhak* one could have survived the year. In my locality there were around 100 traditional *dhaki* families generations but 50% left the profession because it did not pay well any longer. I shifted to making cane furniture which was balanced by the love for *dhak*. This was necessary; I have a daughter studying B.Com and a son studying in an English medium school, so managing their expenses got tough.

What is the difference between playing within Bengal and outside?

Ghar ki murgi dal barabar. We are paid more outside Kolkata; we get more respect there. People there are interested in listening to *dhak* and dancing to it, which we rarely see in Kolkata. Earlier, *pujo* committees organised competitions among *dhakis*. We won the Asian Paints award for the best *dhaki* in 2006 (representing Shibmandir). Sadly things have changed drastically here since.

How has the quality of *dhakis* evolved?

The quality has declined considerably even as the number of players has increased. Nowadays you will rarely find a *dhaki* who plays *dhak* for a living, because *pujo* committees aren't bothered about the quality of *dhakis* but would rather concentrate on the theme and idol.

Do you see a future?

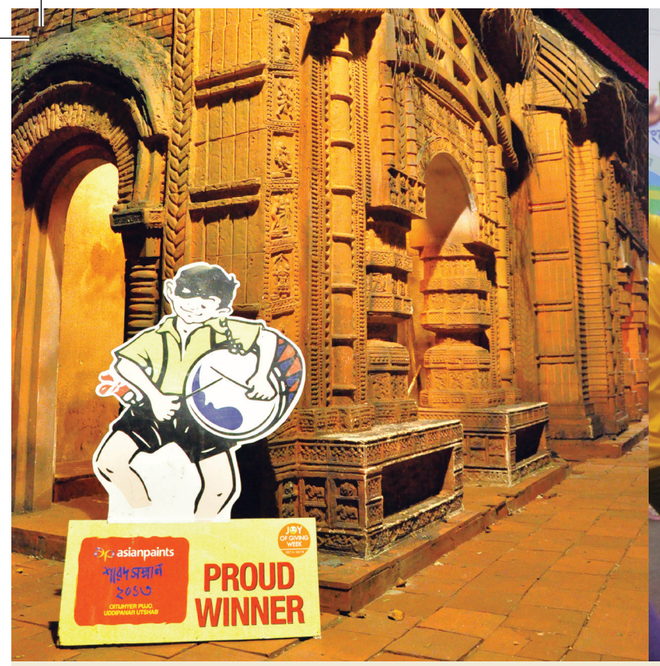
The future is not bright for traditional *bajanchis*. With more seasonal *dhakis* coming in, the traditional *dhakis* are dying out. *Dhak hoyto thakbe jotodin pujo hobe kintu bhalo rewaj kora bajanchir obhab kromosho barbe, jotodin na jara pujo* organise *kore eta bojhe je bhalo thakurer moto bhalo dhaki kotota proyojon ekta pujoke* complete *korar jonno.*













A background note on the Asian Paints Sharad Shamman

Over a century ago, 12 friends organised the first Baroari ('***baaro yaar***' or 'twelve friends') Durga ***pujo*** in Calcutta.

Today, neighbourhoods (***paras***), clubs and local committees organise about 3,700 ***sarbajanin*** ('for all people') ***pujo*** celebrations in ***pandals*** (temporary structures that house the idols) across Kolkata.

From the exclusive, this is now a common man's festival.

In the mid-Eighties, the Asian Paints Sharad Shamman Awards were instituted to honour the three best ***pujos*** (***Shreshtho pujos***), which subsequently extended to Discovery of the Year (***Bauchorer Bismoy***), Innovative Excellence (***Nobo Nakshi***) and Best Idol Maker (Best ***Pratima Shilpi***).

The awards, facilitated by Asian Paints, sought to create a reputable platform of expression. The result is that gradually, ***pujos*** started becoming more culture-conscious; ***Rabindrasangeet*** and Vedic mantras replaced Bollywood music; traditional idols made a comeback; musical forms, traditional arts and community celebrations successfully countered commercialism; traditional art forms became more innovative; ***pandal*** illuminations transformed from the conventional Chandannagar style to spectacular theme-based lighting; restrictions on the ***protima*** size shifted creativity to ***pandal*** design.

The result is that India's largest festival transforms Kolkata into an art gallery and somewhere Asian Paints Sharad Shamman has helped in the transformation.

Q&A

ASIAN PAINTS SHARAD SAMMAN

Mr Kaushik Dutta, MD & CEO of Splash*

Q. How did the idea of the Asian Paints award emerge?

Asian Paints was organising Shiromoni Awards to felicitate Bengali achievers from different fields. At one of the award lunches, poet Subhash Mukhopadhyay asked why we were not doing something for the masses and gradually the discussion moved towards the *Durga pujo.* We were quick to respond. The poet himself created the tagline: *'Suddho shuchi, Sushtho ruchi'*.

Q. How has Asian Paints grown the *Durga pujo* movement in Kolkata?

We perceived a disturbing trend in the Eighties. The *para* youth would drink and dance inside the *pandal*, which resulted in a decline in families visiting *pandals* at night. There was little dignity or divinity left in the *maahaul*. The Asian Paints awards recognised an opportunity to make a difference, which is why 'healthy environment' was one of the criteria in judging *pujos*. Around that time, we would go to a *pandal* at midnight when the organisers would be drinking and dancing to raunchy numbers but as soon as they would see us, they would evict the drunkards and switch to *rabindrasangeet*. On a larger level, this is what Asian Paints Sharod Samman achieved. A positive transformation.

Q. How else did Asian Paints evolve the movement?

There were fewer *pujos* - but no recognition for the outstanding gems. Through our awards, we increased the desire to create better *pujos*, and attracted art college students, which in turn resulted in the creation of theme-based *pujos*. So in some way, if Kolkata's *Durga pujo* has grown into the largest site-specific installation art festival in the world, then we at Asian Paints can claim a rightful share in making that transition a reality.

Q. How do you go about judging?

There are more than 3,000 Durga *pujos* in Kolkata. Till last year we would visit 1,600-1,700 *pujos* voluntarily. We would divided the city into various zones and commissioned shortlisters; the shortlisted *pujos* would be judged by our panel. Till the early Nineties we gave awards for the best *pandal*, best lighting and best idol; over time, we introduced the concept of compatibility between these attributes. Similarly, when committees began to experiment with the *pandal* and idol forms and the basic form of the idol started getting lost, we began to judge the idol creation from a reverence perspective. Thereafter, in 1997, the Kolkata Police focused on fire safety guidelines, so we adopted fire safety as a criterion. In the next stage, we extended to Discovery of the Year. We started a '*Nijer Dhak Nije Petao*' category (literally beat your own drum but metaphorically something akin to blow your own trumpet) where we invited the youth to design *pujo* banners, gradually encouraging youngsters to get involved in community activities.

Q. What are the parameters for judging the *pujos*?

Four major parameters – creativity, tradition, execution and idol – with a number of sub-parameters. We were the first to start an award for the *pujos*; gradually, our award emerged as an Oscar. Over the years, dozens of awards have emerged but they are largely doing it for their visibility than for the core purpose of taking the movement ahead. For instance, if a corporate wants to display banners across 200 *pujos*, it would need to spend a significant amount (each *pujo* charging at least Rs 10,000 per banner) but by instituting an award, they get visibility without paying anything.

At Asian Paints, we are different. We do not put our banners at *pujo* sites because we feel that we would be depriving the *pujo* committees an opportunity to generate revenue from that location. Instead, we erect standees at the shortlisted *pujos*. Besides, Asian Paints never commercialises the Sharad Samman branding in its product promotional activities, which is why *pujo* committees prefer Asian Paints over others. We keep the appraisal process transparent around predefined criteria, engage passionate people and receive ample support from our corporate wing.

Q. How do you see the festival evolving?

I see the passion growing, reflected in a number of small *pujos* that have grown into attractive *pujos* over the last few years. I know a person in Tala Barowari who resigned because he was transferred to Bhubaneswar and his employer would not give him a month's leave before the *pujo*. Besides, the *pujo* has itself become a huge industry. Consider this: there are more than 3,000 *pujos* happening in Kolkata; if we assume that the average budget for each *pujo* is Rs 10 lakh, then that is equivalent to an industry worth Rs 300 crore without counting purchases for clothes and food.

Q. There is an allegation of bias towards the large *pujos* and politician-controlled *pujos* from certain sections...

Baseless. We have a number of parameters for judging a *pujo*; only those that score the highest in each criteria is awarded. We have given awards to a number of *pujos* without political backing. Besides, we invited all *pujo* committees to express their grievances regarding this but hardly anyone turned up.

Q. What is your overview on the festival?

You will come across a number of instances where a festival has influenced an award but seldom an instance where an award has influenced a festival! In turn, the award has helped catalyse a movement towards the aesthetic; this has generated jobs for art college graduates. When we began to work with the *Durga pujo* in the mid-Eighties, ours was only an engagement; this has now evolved into a movement.

** (The agency handles the Asian Paints Sharad Samman Awards)*

Q&A

TAPATI GUHA THAKURTA

DIRECTOR AND PROFESSOR IN HISTORY,
CENTRE FOR STUDIES IN SOCIAL SCIENCES, CALCUTTA

Is this is the most pride-enhancing event of global quality coming out of West Bengal?

Easily so. The Kolkata Book Fair or the Kolkata International Film Festival come a distant second or third when compared with the Durga *pujo* in terms of scale, corporate sponsorships and spur to artistic creativity. What is unique about the Durga *pujos* is the way it encompasses the entire city, radically transforms its topography and turns all of Kolkata into a vast venue for art and craft viewing. In this context, the *pujos* of Kolkata can be seen as a distinctive master event.

Over the past decade and a half, the artistic and commercial profile of the festival has grown exponentially, transforming the festival into a one-of-a-kind art and cultural movement in Bengal. Neighbourhood pride in the festival is on the rise; budget outlays have spiraled upwards; event-management companies and promotional websites have mushroomed; political patronage for the event has risen too; *pujo* publicity and *pujo*-themed advertising grows every year as does the scale of media coverage and awards. In 1985, the Asian Paints Sharad Shamman set the ball rolling. Now, it is impossible to keep track of the number of awards!

What is the aspect of the contemporary *pujos* that you find most interesting?

What I find most interesting is the way the new touring maps laid out by 'theme' and 'art' *pujos* have led us to discover areas of the city we would otherwise have never visited. Growing art productions and designer installations have brought new social classes, taste layers and visual interest into the realm of mass spectatorship. In recent times, a large number of obscure, non-affluent *paras* have come into festival limelight on account of their artistic *pujos*; they have taken on a 'brand' identity that lingers well after the *pujos* even as streets and neighbourhoods return to their drab everyday appearances after these five days. A classic instance is Nalin Sarkar Street in Hatibagan in North Kolkata – a narrow dingy alley typical of that neighbourhood. Nalin Sarkar Street shot to festival fame for just one reason: for hosting over several years the *pujo* productions of the artist Sanatan Dinda, where everything from the idol to the full pavilion would be created and designed by the artist and his team. It was the street that exclusively brandished Sanatan as it's USP as a part of the city's festive topography for a number of years following his exit from the next-door rivals Hatibagan. And even though Sanatan Dinda is not working in this *pujo* site anymore, there has been a considerable rub-off from the 'Dinda' brand on the Nalin Sarkar Street *pujo*, as a result of which they still get 400m-long queues at 3am. If you look closely, you will also notice the reverberation of this single *pujo* across the larger zone of Hatibagan, including the Hatibagan Sarbojanin *pujo* and other almost-century old *pujos* like those of Hatibagan Nabin Pally or Sikdar Bagan. This has enabled the of Hatibagan to showcase itself as an 'art' *pujo* venue.

What is true for Hatibagan has also been true for several middle or lower-middle class neighbourhoods across Kolkata – whether Khidirpur in the South West, Haridevpur deeper South, in the interiors connecting Tollygunge with Behala, Bosepukur or Rajdanga in the East, Dumdum Park in the North East, or the single alley of Badamtala at Kalighat. In each case, the art profile and the prestige of their *pujos* have produced a new upgraded image for these *paras*. The *pujo* reputation of these places remains curiously embedded in post-festival urban memory, to be reactivated every season. In these areas too, the success and limelight of a single *pujo*, like the Bosepukur Sitala Mandir *pujo*, have transformed the profile of several surrounding *pujos* and the festival-centric fame of the larger locality. And even as the Bosepukur *pujo* has slipped out of the prime designer circuits, it continues to thrive on its crowd-pulling capacity. Amazing!

So what impels a lower-middle class neighbourhood to take on the more affluent?

Intense collective neighbourhood pride. The local *pujo* committee, with its growing network of political and commercial contacts, comes to stand as the main representative of the aspirations and social mobility of the *para*. In fact, the less affluent the *para*, the greater is the availability of young and middle-aged residents, and the greater the time and efforts that they are willing to invest in this central cultural event. When you speak to the organisers of the Nalin Sarkar Street *pujo*, for instance, they give a palpable impression of being in full battle gear against the elite South Kolkata *pujos*.

Perhaps the biggest evolution over the last decade has been in the thematic treatment of the *pujos*.

The 'theme' *pujo* has become now a catch-all term, signifying any novelty in the iconography of the goddess or in terms of design and conception of the pavilion. It's most important innovation lies in bringing into this sphere of work a new body of creative personnel (amateur and art school-trained artists and designers). It has paved the way for *pujo* designing to emerge as a lucrative profession. It has created a new and now rapidly proliferating category of the Durga *pujo* 'artist'. What is most important to note is that some of today's most successful *pujo* 'artists' have come out of extremely humble artisanal backgrounds. They had to struggle to acquire an art college degree, and having arrived at their current artistic eminence and affluence mainly through their successful careers in *pujo* designing they feel a constant need to push the envelope. There are also examples of individuals from entirely rural, craft-making backgrounds. *Pujo* has created a mean to earn a livelihood and a chance to build a name as *pujo* designers side by side with a different league of trained professional artists. This is probably one of the biggest gains to have come out of the period's spreading trend of 'theme' and 'art' *pujos*.

I would say that the notions of 'art' and 'theme' *pujos* have begun to pull in opposite directions. The 'art' *pujos* have now come to be associated with the signature productions of select artists and designers as against the loose and indiscriminate proliferation of 'theme' *pujos* by all and sundry. There is this keen tussle now going on within the internal field of 'art' and 'theme' *pujos*, where quality is losing out to quantity and an overkill of publicity…

How would you then assess the present scenario of the Durga *pujos*?

Firstly, I feel the 'theme' *pujo* trends have reached a point of overproduction and saturation - to a point that just the loose predominance of 'themes' is obliterating the names of artists and designers. There continues to be a huge influx of older and younger artists into this area of *pujo* designing, alongside a larger workforce who are emerging out of the ranks of idol-makers, *pandal*-constructors, interior decorators or set designers. This has, on the one hand, thrown open and democratised this field of work, but, on the other hand, created new hierarchies between different layers of artists and their productions and the quality of work. The more negative fallout (particularly noticeable this year) is the way the names of artists and designers are no longer being featured at the *pujo* sites, because *pujo* committees feel there is no need to publicise them for their names will carry no marketing or promotional value. This was the case, for instance, with this year's elegant production at Nalin Sarkar Street (which nowhere featured the name of the designer Sutanu Maity, nor the name of the *mritshilpi*). Or the striking bookstore pavilion at Samaj Sebi Sangha *pujo* on Lake Road or another theme installation also on books and reading at Rupchand Mukherjee Lane at

Bhowanipore (beside the Seagull office) where no one at these sites was able to tell us who conceived and executed the theme. This is in striking contrast to the past decade, when the display of concept notes and credit lines to artists (and often the larger creative team) became the defining trend of the new genre of 'art' and 'theme' *pujos*.

This brings me to my second point - the intense politicisation of the *pujos* under the new government in West Bengal, and the overriding wave of political patronage that have taken over a group of big-league, big-budget *pujos* in and around the city. Many of these *pujos* and their artists were already riding high in the 'themes' and awards league, but have now been inducted into a different order of political promotion. At one level, this has given its additional fillip to *pujo* budgets, publicities and to the commissioning of artists and designers. At another level, though, this increasing prominence of names and faces of political patrons on festival hoardings has caused a further sidelining and displacement of artists and idol-makers. *Pujo* clubs are now known more for their political patrons than for their artists and the artworks they have created. This is another point of contrast from the career of 'art' *pujos* and *pujo* artists of the prior decade - when the Left Front government had neither this kind of an investment or involvement in the festival, nor was artists and *pujo* clubs dependent on such direct political backing…

My third point is about the excessive nature of publicities, competitions and commercial signage that have invaded the festival. The crush of crowds that begins from *chaturthi* or *panchami* is of an order that makes it less and less possible to savour the fabulous art and craft displays. Inside the *pandals*, one is constantly pushed along by a wall of people and by guards who keep telling you to move and not stand watching or photographing. In any case, spectators now obsessively photograph more than they ever see… given that they have only a few seconds to catch a few glimpses. This is what makes the *pujos* quite unique as a popular art event. However, the paradox now is that the more the *pujos* have turned into a space of exhibition, the less they can be viewed with any leisure or pleasure!

Big changes have happened in the last decade…

Earlier, the emphasis was on showcasing creativity, craftsmanship and industriousness with inexpensive organic material, with modest budgets, in small spaces. The epitome of this trend was the small, exquisitely designed folk art forms, different tribal art forms, which grew out of tiny grounds of the erstwhile Barisha Shrishti, Barisha Tapoban, or the Behala Agradoot Club *pujos*. But all this began to rapidly change from the mid-2000s – as award funds rose, so did designer fees, club aspirations, publicity and budgets. Sadly, today, the 'theme' *pujos* seem to have turned full cycle, with a return to sensationalism, celebrity endorsements and a vulgar display of money and clout.

What about post-*pujo* preservation?

There has been no concerted, well-thought out endeavour – coming either from the municipal authorities or from the corporate and art microcosms of the city – concerning the collecting and preservation of the vast output of public art that is produced for the festival. Unfortunately, all the publicity and excitement (whether it may be stemming from the media, the corporate sponsors or for that matter the public) begins and ends with the festival. In the early 2000s, the Barisha Shrishti (which later combined with Sahajatri to become Barisha Club) *pujo* made news when, over three consecutive years, its Durga idols made in preservable material by Bhobotosh Sutar found post-*pujo* homes - in hotels lawns, private residences and govenment museums. Bhobotosh's 2002 terracotta Durga ensemble, which Mrs. Deveshwar (I am told) took a personal initiative in acquiring for the ITC Sonar Bangla lawns, lay neglected and hidden at an outer corner behind wedding pavilions for a while – and now it is nowhere to be found, with that portion of the hotel grounds having been sold off to another estate! Then in 2007, Bhobotosh had made this outstanding installation, with a vast radial sun in wood and bamboo, at the 25 Pally *pujo* at Khidirpur, which was typically sold off piecemeal by the club to a suburban *pujo*. I was amazed that there weren't any corporate buyers for this work. The artist had later offered to remake this sun installation for a private buyer for a public office space for around Rs. 8 lakh, but with no success.

Thereafter the KMDA and KIT initiative of bringing a selection of Durga images into the Warehouse Gallery at Rabindra Sarovar in 2012 was an important move. But there was no proper curatorial team working on the display, no long-term planning on the future of this space and these objects, and no later maintenance being undertaken for the open air displays. More than museums, I feel there should be ventures that think about the creative reuse of these festival productions as a part of the décor of large corporate spaces, like malls, office lobbies, or open grounds of hotels, apartments or state-run cultural centres. For instance, the superb Pakistani truck art pavilion that was set up this year at the Hatibagan Nabin Pally *pujo*, in collaboration with ICCR, could have been imaginatively reused within an open-air *dhaba*!

Where is the failing?

The problem with the Durga *pujos* is its constitutively local and in-house character - which is also its special quality. All the publicity and promotion occur at the local level, and are intended for primarily for local sponsors and publics. And everything centres on the organising unit of *pujo* committees, which look on designer productions as their 'property' to sell, recycle or dispose. For these *pujo* committees, it is all about the immediate gratifications in terms of sponsors and awards, and the breaking-even of the larger and larger funds that they put into each year's festival. A consortium of *pujo* clubs called the Forum for Durgotsav was formed in Kolkata in 2010 to coordinate a year-round planning of the event. But there is no larger vision of marketing and promoting the festival outside this local circuit thus far.

Sumit Roy, the mastermind behind the Asian Paints Sharad Samman campaign in the 1980s, who was instrumental in bringing a novel corporate interest in the cultural upgradation of the *pujos*, talked of precisely this problem – of how everything about the festival began and ended with the *pujo* clubs. Promotional initiatives must come from other quarters and must take the event outside the limited interests of the *pujo* clubs. For some time now, many advertising professionals have been talking about the need for a different order of corporate branding and national and international marketing of what they see as a world-class festival. For instance, adman Kaustav Bhadra told me that the Durga *pujos* of Kolkata are a classic instance of a good product for which we have failed to create an adequate brand identity - nationally and internationally. This is Kolkata's best-managed event – the city's police and municipal authorities rightly take great pride in the efficient handling of this mass event - and we don't even publicise this to the rest of India and the world. The number of tourists you get to come and watch the event from outside the city is not more than a couple of thousand. That is the kind of crowd that passes through a *pandal* in about five minutes! A lot of coordinated and big-scale planning is needed to turn this unique local celebration into a national Pan-India and global tourist attraction.

So, what can one take away at the end of the day?

The fact that this is a truly mass and communitarian event. The affective sprit of the festival does not leave untouched the many non-Hindu, non-Bengali communities of the city. Over the years, they have been involved in the *pujos* in varying capacities as organisers, artisanal labour, artists and as spectators. Let us recall here the instance of the artist Isha Mohammed designing the Durga idol for the 'artists' *pujo* at Bakulbagan as a special anti-communal gesture in 1992, the year of the mounting *Ramjanmabhoomi* agitation. Or reflect on the great M.F.Hussain's passion for imaging a quintenentially 'Bengali' Durga. Or, in the more current context, think of how a political figure like Firhad Hakim has from the 1990s been the driving force behind the Chetla Agrani *pujo*.





Q&A

LEENA KEJRIWAL

Prominent photographer

Q: How would you describe your interest in Kolkata's Durga *pujo*?

I have been photographing the *pujo* crowds for more than a decade; 2013 was the first year when I focused on the *protima* and the *pandal* as well. Over the years I fell in love with the *pujos* due to the rich opportunities in photographing people and their social behaviour, which could be something as simple as a child in a tea shop or a *boudi* buying sandesh. Every action is linked to a social background, which is why a photograph becomes a document of the workings of a person's mind or connection to a larger story. Besides, the *pujo* represents an excellent convergence of scale, history, passion, ambience, age range, interests, colours and lighting. There is a compelling foreground and attractive background- a rich depth of field.

Where in the world can one get this opportunity across more than 10 milion people across a week? Besides, Kolkata represents a fascinating convergence of the old and the new; this is not a Dubai with glass and stainless steel. Most locations provide a 200-year canvas on which to 'paint' with a camera. So when you come across one of the largest festivals of the world on a rich centuries-old canvas, you get the makings of a rare pictorial opportunity. Which explains why I have shot more than 50,000 *pujo* pictures over the last decade.

Q: How did you extend from the *protima* to the *pandal* this year?

The trigger was in the form of an assignment for a client. The result was that I connected to a number of *pujo* organisers, who, in turn, led me to artists. I read, read and read. I spoke to Tapati Guha Thakurta, one of the city's leading authorities on the subject; I read Sudeshna Banerjee's book on the festival; I engaged with my longstanding Bengali guide who is an encyclopedia on the subject.

Q: For how many days were you involved?

For nearly 12 days and nights. I must have shot more than 10,000 pictures and the irony is that I am not sure if I have enough pictures of the right quality. One of the things I feel I need to 'capture' is the thought process of the artists…or maybe I am thinking more about what I haven't got than what needs to be shot.

Q: Which were the three high points?

The *aarti* in Dutta *bari* (North Kolkata) where there were perhaps more photographers than ladies of the household (*mela!*); the *aarti* in Laha *bari* where I was the only photographer permitted; the sophisticated detailing of the Badamtala *pujo*; the cloudy afternoon at Tala Barowari where the installation quite literally 'burst out' of the quiet neighbourhood; this Tala work was so sophisticated that I wonder why people bother go on vacations to places like Bangkok etcetera during the *pujos* when they can see something comparable to a Las Vegas set right here in Kolkata!

I actually feel that we should have a '*pujo* Biennale' in Kolkata every year. The organisers are simply unaware of the value of what they are getting. Besides, I am amazed with the creative freedom that artists get in Kolkata. Even the celebrated Anish Kapoor needs to get 'approval' from LN Mittal for his work!

Q: What does it take to be a good *pujo* photographer?

The power of observation. There is so much happening all the time and so fast. You don't only capture a picture; there are often pictures within pictures. When you put your eye to the eyepiece there is a danger of missing something outside the frame. There could be an old lady being assisted into the *pandal*. There could be a child in her mother's arms. There could be someone bowing – body extended – to the *protima*. What one needs to recognise is that this is an amazing blend of devotion and art appreciation on a scale that is mind boggling. The Louvre is just one location; here there are more than 2,000 locations! And remember, this is not just visual art; you have sound, light and visual – truly experiential!

Q: What then are the challenges?

Let me explain this from a qualitative perspective. Today, thanks to the smart phone revolution, everyone has a camera. This is an advantage and also a disadvantage. The advantage is that one can potentially capture a wider range of emotions because the camera is handy. The disadvantage is that everyone usually has the same story – in case the camera is a DSLR, all you need to do is put the cameras in the 'P' mode, point, shoot and the work is done. What I find is that given the pace of the festival, most photographers come, shoot and are off to the next location because they need to complete their 'quota' of *pandal* visits for the night. In doing so, most photographers become 'recorders'; they are merely filling in the numbers; they would rather tell people back at the office that 'you know, I went to 13 *pujos* last night' rather than say 'I was in just one *pandal* but captured three hours of life'. The trick lies in melting into the crowd, hanging around until people don't even notice that you exist and only after you have got to this point will you start seeing things that most people would easily miss. From two variables – you and the speed of the ambient environment – you have to bring it down to one constant (you) and one variable (environment) for the magic to start happening inside your camera and for you to let life happen inside your frame. You have to turn meditative. You have to come into the moment.

Q: What about the quantitative challenges?

The number of photographers! On one particular day, the Kumartuli *pujo* attracted more than 2,000 photographers (not the smartphone type!). I actually saw this year how



amateur smart phone photographers affect crowd traffic flow inside *pandals*, as a result of which some *pujos* banned the use of smart phone photography inside their *pandals*. Besides, for the first time I noticed a visible hostility against even some serious photographers who otherwise were welcomed a few years ago. Photographers are now considered a nuisance because they can be disturbing, cannot be discreet and with no respect for public etiquette.

Q: Obvious question. Considerably more pictures are being shot than are being displayed. Maybe the ratio is really 10,000:1.

Facebook is obviously a powerful gallery where one can showcase one's pictures. In fact, it is the world's most powerful gallery – quick, universal, accessible. Besides, these pictures can be taken to the city walls. These pictures can catalyse a movement. What a great festival – possibly the greatest show on earth – and once it's over, it's completely over. One needs a longer window to appreciate the festival. A week is too short a period. In any other city of the world, the *pujos* and their appreciation would have been on for all 365 days. We've missed the big picture (pun!).



SOME COMMON WORDS

Protima	Idol
Pujo	Worship
Shabeki	Traditional
addas	An adda is a form of intellectual exchange among members, who were originally of the same socio-economic strata, but the process has democratised in modern times. It is most popular among the youths belonging to the so-called "middle-class intelligentsia".
mandap	A covered structure with pillar (generally of bamboo), temporarily erected for the *pujo*'s
Para	Locality
Shuddho shuchi, Shushto ruchi	
montri pujo	
Chaturthi	4th day of the paksha, here in this case it is refered to as the 4th day of the Devipaksha
Panchami	5th day of the paksha, here in this case it is refered to as the 5th day of the Devipaksha
Shashti	6th day of the paksha, here in this case it is refered to as the 6th day of the Devipaksha
Saptami	7th day of the paksha, here in this case it is refered to as the 7th day of the Devipaksha
Ashtami	8th day of the paksha, here in this case it is refered to as the 8th day of the Devipaksha
Navami	9th day of the paksha, here in this case it is refered to as the 9th day of the Devipaksha
Dashami	10th day of the paksha, here in this case it is refered to as the 10th day of the Devipaksha
Bharer pandal	*Pandal* made of bhar. Bhar's are earthen pots generally used in the roadside tea stalls.
Pandal	A *pandal* is fabricated structure, either temporary or permanent, in a religious ceremony, for example a wedding. In Hinduism, it is a temporary structure set up to venerate the goddess Durga during Durga *pujo*, known as *pujo pandal*
Babu	The term babu, also spelled baboo, is used in modern-day South Asia as a sign of respect towards men.
Tagada	Pester or follow up for payment
Mritshilpi	Idolmaker specifically who works with clay

"AASCHHEY BOCHHOR AABAR HOBEY!"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