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The Economics of the Sacred: Religious Economy and Transformation of Kolkata's Durga Puja.

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Abstract

The iconic Goddess Celebration of Hindu Pantheon, the magnum opus of Durga Puja in Kolkata is much more than a religious performance and social practice. Acknowledged by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (2021), Durga Puja, with its wide cultural diaspora has galvanized over time as an economic juggernaut. Possibly the world's largest public arts festival, the given Deity Worship has now attained the stature of being a 'meta-festival', that involves digital and virtual platform. The ancient rituals, customs, traditions, and collective memory of Puja thereby get sculpted into new folds of market and digital economy. Set in the shifting conditions of governance, capital, and social change, how religious festival becomes a space for endless economic positions and possibilities forms one of the cardinal themes of the paper. The other objective, somewhat divergent to this core idea is to critique the long-term productivity, sustainability, and universality of the said festival economy. Methodologically speaking it orbits around the given research questions. How the festival's magnitude is creating a profoundly measurable impact on the economy of Bengal, contributing to its GSDP (Gross State Domestic Product)? In what manner the religious historicity of puja has navigated, contested, and transformed itself as a dynamic terrain of mediation by surviving the traditional crafts and labour wedded with it? And finally, it raises an antithetical debate on whether the festival economy of Puja happen to be consumption based, urban-centric, sporadic, short term or otherwise? Drawing heavily from the meta-analysis of secondary literature both empirical as well as epistemic the paper maps the crossover between faith and festivity, tradition and artistic expression, rituals and its secular spectatorship, and most significantly between religious historicity and political economy.

Keywords: Religious Economy, Durga Puja, Market, Labour, Livelihood, Kolkata.

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Introduction

Every autumn, streets of Kolkata transform into a living canvas. From intricately designed pandals¹ to larger-than-life idols, Durga Puja is more than just a religious celebration. It's a cultural and economic juggernaut. The grandeur, pomp and magnum opus of the festival has a chequered interface of art, heritage, and myriad economic profile. Possibly the world's largest public arts festival, Puja over the past few decades has attained the stature of being a 'meta-festival' and 'high-culture' event, where rituals, customs, traditions get sculpted into new folds of market economics. Moving beyond the trichotomy of Rituals, Iconography, and Cultural narrative of Festival, the said paper, aims to discourse its underlying economic matrix. With the shifting conditions of governance, capital, social and digital change, how religious practise becomes a space for endless economic positions and possibilities forms its key interest. Methodologically speaking the paper orbits around the given research questions. How the festival's magnitude is creating a profoundly measurable impact on the economy of Bengal, cutting across multiple axis of livelihoods? In what manner the religious historicity of puja has navigated, contested, and transformed itself as a dynamic terrain of mediation by surviving the traditional artisans and crafts associated with it. Are the economic derivatives of Puja pertinent in sustainable livelihood generation or remain seasonal and sporadic in nature? To what degree the festival along with its fluidities, specificities and variations is reshaping capital and consumer production? How is heritage getting co-opted and repurposed with the immediate and wider forces? Drawing from the meta-analysis of secondary literature both empirical as well as epistemic, the said work delineates these pluralities of the cultural economy of Puja.

Theorising the Economic Ecology of Durga Puja

The given paper is epistemically located at the interdisciplinary intersection of the Sociology, Economics and Heritage Studies. Much more than being a sacred ritual or a cultural spectacle, Puja happens to be a dynamic space where religion, culture, labour, polity, and market forces happen to negotiate and contest one another.

The present work, draws upon the Religious Economic Theory developed by Williams Sims Bainbridge, Rodney Stark and Roger Finke (Stark & Bainbridge, 1987; Finke & Stark, 2005). Moving beyond Secularization thesis, the Religious Economy Theory argues that religious institutions, rituals, practices and believes produces demands, determines supply of goods and services thereby creating a vivid market space. In this lieu, Durga Puja has generated an evolving religious market which col-

1 Makeshift Bamboo structures.

lectively engages organisers, corporate sponsors, state, media, artisans, retail, hospitality, tourism industry etc. Emile Durkheim has theorised religious ritual as moments of ‘Collective effervescence’ (Durkheim, 1912) that is based on holistic identity. The shared history, collective memory, customs, traditions and festivity cement the social bonding that has decisive role to play in the economic matrix of Durga Puja. Elaborating further, Pierre Bourdieu’s (Bourdieu, 1986) concept of cultural and symbolic capital gets reverberated in every aspect of Durga Puja. The artisan and craftsperson-ship, artistic production, heritage reproduction, which happens to be the intrinsic cultural capital of Puja gets converted into economic capital, also known as Cultural Economy. Scholars like Paul du Gay, Keith Negus, Nigel Thrift (du Gay, 1997; Negus, 1999; Thrift, 2005) have elaborated how the ritualistic and festival consumption creates an ecosystem of labour and livelihood production. It is not about autonomous or segregated market space, but about an inherent cultural meaning of market. In this discourse, all aspects related to Puja starting from idols, pandals, illumination, ritualistic goods and services, artistic performances, cuisine, fashion, retail, tourism, media production happen to be not only testaments of commodification of religion, but a viable part of cultural symbolism. This is analogous to Karl Polanyi’s (Polanyi, 1944, 2001) concept of Embedded Economy which argues that economic relations cannot be contested independently from social and cultural backdrop.

Taken together, this epistemic analogy has helped to reconceptualise the economics of Durga Puja in myriad ways ranging from cultural and symbolic capital, to political economy, to collective identity, to labour market variables. The festival’s recognition by UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2021² has amplified its global profile, attracting both domestic and foreign visitors. United Nations has elucidated Durga Puja as ‘an immersive blend of worship, art, and social messaging’³ (United Nations, UN News Global Perspectives Human Stories). With more than 10 million people hopping different pandals in Kolkata alone, on any one of the four days of the festivity, Durga Puja is undoubtedly one of the biggest carnivals in earth. In 2024 alone, Bengal welcomed over 18.5 crore visitors. (Economic Times, 30th September 2025) From retail and tourism to artisanship and employment, Durga Puja has become an indispensable contributor to the

Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP), cutting across multiple sectors by direct or indirect means.

2 Other UNESCO intangible Cultural Heritage from India are Garba of Gujarat (2023), Kumbh Mela (2017), Yoga (2016), Traditional brass and copper craft of utensil making (Thatheras of Punjab, 2014), Sankirtana (Manipur, 2013), Buddhist Chanting of Ladakh (2012), Chau Dance (2010), Kalbela folk songs and dances Rajasthan (2010), Mudi yettu of Kerala (2010), Ramman of Garhwal Himalayas (2009), Kuttiyattam (Sanskrit Theatre, 2008), Tradition of Vedic Chanting (2008), Ramlila (Traditional Performance of Ramayana, 2008).

3 United Nations, UN News, Global Perspective Human Stories, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/10/1166032>

(BCL, 2019). In this regard, puja can be epistemically related to the Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD) proposed by Laurajane Smith (2006). Smith (2009) argues that Heritage is more than a static collection of artifacts or physicality. It is a fluid process. More than being a fixed inheritance, Durga Puja is transcending its ritualistic boundaries, building identities, itself as a socially constructed process generating economic indices in myriad ways.

Before we delve into direct economic matrix of Puja, let us map its trajectories, (Religious, Socio-Political and economic) over time. The given section delineates how Durga Puja, is getting mediated from being Barir Puja (Household Puja) to Barwari Puja (Community Puja) to Brand Puja (Corporate sponsored Puja) and galvanizing to State Puja (State Sponsored Puja). It is a living testament to the fluidity of tradition and cultural commerce

A Discursive analysis on the Historical, Religious, and Politico Economic Transition of Durga Puja.

Goddess Worship is the longest standing religious tradition of India. The concept of Prakriti (Female principle) and Purusha (Male principle) are esteemed as the dyadic force of creation in Hindu philosophy. Shiva and Shakti the primordial masculine and feminine forces symbolises one of supreme Consciousness and of creation and nurturance. According to Arthur Basham (1989), the well-known historian, the notion of shakti was eminent as a powerful matriarchal culture that existed in ancient India long before the Aryan migrations (2500, B.C.E.) and their androcentric cultural invasion. The reverence of worshipping Mother Goddess gradually changed from the Harappan Culture (2500-1500 B.C) to the Gupta Period (ca. 300-500) attaining a new stature in the Middle Ages (Basham, 1989). However, notwithstanding the tide of time, Hinduism's pantheon continued to be adorned with numerous Goddesses, archetypical of unique qualities and powers. From Folktales to festivals, to epics, rituals, customs, and daily practices, the divine feminine has been depicted in varied forms, worshipped in myriad ways, each symbolical to different facets of life, such as love, fertility, power, wisdom, prosperity, purity as well as destruction, and creation. (Saha, 2022) The Feminine Energy of Devi has been venerated in Goddess worship as Durga (The formidable enigmatic warrior Goddess, depicted as the slayer of buffalo demon Mahishasura, symbolizes the triumph of good over evil, the epitome of empowerment), Laxmi (Goddess of Wealth and prosperity), Kali (Goddess of Strength and Power), Jagaddhatri (Goddess of Prosperity and universal boon), Annapurna (Goddess of Food and abundance), Saraswati (Goddess of Wisdom and creativity). These forms of devi worship are mostly seen in the Eastern part of India like Bengal, Orissa, Bihar, and Assam. In the Southern region of India, along with the worship of Goddess Durga, Parvati, Lakshmi and Saraswati, other forms of Devi like Mariamman, Gram devata, Saptamatrikas are revered (McDermott, 2011).

In this hermeneutical backdrop of Devi worship, let us delve into the changing politics and genesis of Durga Puja from the primitive to its post-modern (more specifically metamodern) era. The earliest syncretic account of Goddess Durga can be located from the Puranas dating approximately 5th Century, where she was worshipped as Fierce Tribal Goddess, named Chamundeshwari, (B.C Mazumdar, 1906). The iconography of Goddess shifted from being the dark virgin warrior to a benevolent idealised image of fair skinned Devi (Gauri) by the 8th Century. (Bhattacharya, 2011). Feminist scholars like Uma Chakravarti and Tanika Sarkar have accounted his archetypical construction of Idealised Devi iconography within the rising Brahminical Patriarchy. (Backelin-Harrison, 2018; Chakraborty, 2003).

Along with the changing imagery, the other poignant change occurred in the timing of Puja. The present-day form of festival is known as Akal Bodhan⁴ (untimely worship) as it is observed in the untimely month of October (Bengali calendar of Aswin) over riding the historical timing of Spring. The commencement of Autumnal Durga Puja can be traced back to the post- Battle of Plassey days when Raja Nabakrishna Deb, of Shobha bazar Rajbari.⁵

The other seismic shift occurred when the locus and modus operandi of Puja changed from the private domain to the public area i.e. from Barir Puja to Barowari ^{1/} Sarbojonin⁶ Puja. Owing to the gradual diminishing wealth of Zamindari households, in 1790, twelve Brahmins in Hooghly District of Bengal started the Community Puja by collections of public donations. (Ghosh, 2000; Bhaduri 2004). This collective form of puja gained immense popularity over time bolstering the unique identity of Bengali Bhadrolok⁷, as an antithesis to the overriding anglicised identity. (Chatterjee, 2020). In the latter half of twentieth Century, there has been a robust increase in the number of Community Durga Puja in Bengal galloping from three hundred to more than thousand between 1954 and 1995. (Ghosh, 2000). Today more than 40,000 Barowari Pujas are celebrated in and around Bengal. (Hindu, 2022).

This sheer increase in the number of community Durga Puja concurred with a new artistic nomenclature. The nature of the festival went through a literal facelift during the 2000s with the emergence of

4 The tradition of Durga Puja in Bengal is believed to belong back in the twelfth century when the provincial King of Bolpur (Shantiniketan) Raja Surath commenced Basanti Puja as a mean of celebrating and reviving Hinduism since mass conversions led to the gradual declination of the ancient religion under the Islamic rule of the then Bengal Sultanate. With passage of time, the glamour of Basanti Puja from Bolpur was eclipsed by the Akal Bodhan of Calcutta. However, there are many aristocratic, old Bengali families like the Halder family of Baghbazar, Adhikaris of Hatibagan, etc., who still continue celebrating the original Basanti Puja with all the traditional rituals.

5 Nabakrishna Deb upheld Durga Puja as a token celebration of Lord Clive's victory over Nawab Siraj- ud-Daula .

6 Sarbojonin is the Bengali word meaning Sarbo i.e every and Jon meaning individual. It means community worship.

7 Bhadrolok means gentlemen. The concept has been aptly theorised by Partha Chatterjee, the noted Historian. A common term in the historiography of modern India, 'bhadralok' refers to a category in colonial Bengal that represents a hybrid constellation of upper caste, English-educated, salaried, leftist, intellectual class.

Art/ Theme Puja⁸. The involvement of well-known artist, art college graduates, artisans, craftsmen, folk-art and the quintessential Bengali taste has elevated the puja to a grand degree of aesthetic, and opulence. The exemplary work of Tapati Guha Thakurta 'In the Name of the Goddess: The Durga Pujas of Contemporary Kolkata' (2015)⁹ navigates on 'the ephemeral art production' and 'spectatorship' of Puja crossing the ambit of its religiosity. Thakurta (2015) re-counts Puja as the 'carnavalesque space' and recounts for the lack of attention and acknowledgement received on the visual culture of the festival. Extending Tapati Guha Thakurta's work, Pradip Bose (2008) reads Durga Puja akin to Foucault's heterotopic¹⁰ space where make belief world gets convoluted with reality.

As a site of being significant cultural production and consumption, the festival has become a fusion point of diverse identities, religious, linguistic, and regional. (Ghosh, 2000). People of disparate caste, class and gender take part in the revelry for more than five days. Thakurta (2015) thereby defines Durga Puja as a 'giant factory of secular mass identity'. Manas Roy (2017) accords the increasing grandeur of puja as a secular and hybrid space with its unique cosmopolitan hue due to the 'inherent openness and humanistic dimension' of the festival's narrative.

Echoing these manifold changes, from the shifting iconography of the Goddess to its timing and modus operandi, a large part of the festival has incorporated corporate branding and state sponsorship in recent decades. In this backdrop, the following section will map the economic footprints of puja, in the chronicle of Bengal's political and labour history.

Mapping Durga Puja in the saga of Political and Labour History of Bengal.

Durga Puja, with its all-pervading pomp, magnitude and carnivalesque has bequeathed a novel chronicle of cultural commerce. Both in terms of capital investment and output, the festival forms a veritable economic lifeline of the State. From the early 1990s with the liberalization of economy, the advent of corporate capital in Kolkata's Puja has augmented its commercial narrative to a manifold extent. Advertising and Marketing has marked out puja as the big bonanza. As essayed earlier, the festival got revamped with the advent of Art/ Theme puja, opening its doors to myriad types of art, craft, folk industry, both contemporary as well as traditional.

With this came the newly adopted trend for giving awards in several categories ranging from idol making to decoration, to art work, lighting and sustainability. The incorporation of famous commer-

8 Art/Theme puja means the edifice to the pandal to décor is made with a specific concept.

9 This very popular work of Guha Thakurta has garnered an international reputation.

10 The Concept of Heterotopia has been primarily postulated by Foucault. Foucault's elaborations on heterotopias were published in an article entitled *Des espaces autres* (Of Other Spaces). Foucault calls for a society with many heterotopias, not only as a space with several places of or for the affirmation of difference, but also as a means of escape from all forms of repression.

cial brands and media houses has aligned the corporate economy of Puja with its cultural production. In recent years there has been brand building of some popular pujas in Kolkata, where capital investment and footfalls crosses over few crores.

One of the seismic shifts of Community Durga Puja came with the involvement of State sponsorship. The festival because of its undeniable economic metric has garnered West Bengal Government's active involvement in varied part of the programme. Former CM of State Smt. Banerjee has promoted "festival-led growth," a narrative portraying state subsidies for religious festivals and cash transfers as visionary economic policy. (Goswami, 2025) In 2025, a grant of ₹1 lakh 10 thousand was announced for each Durga Puja committees, increasing it from ₹85,000 of last year. The other incentives to the Puja organisers include an 80% rebate on the electricity bill to the clubs organising Puja¹¹.

To further amp up the festivity since 2016 the State has been ushering carnival where a number of acclaimed Puja committees showcase their Idol before immersion. Extravagant road shows, street performances, giant screens, and a separate compound of foreign delegates make the carnivalesque a magnum opus. In 2025, 113 pujas of repute have participated in the carnival. As a part of the grand show, over 35,000 people watched it on site and a larger multitude from the broadcasted show. For harnessing the immense tourism potential, the Tourism Department of West Bengal Government had curated three days of packaged tour of famous Durga Pujas in and around Kolkata.

Durga Puja as the Panacea to Bengal's Economic Despondency.

Durga Puja have sheered to be an exclusive religious festival long ago. It's presently been an industry, a gateway to myriad livelihood and a panacea to economic pitfalls of the state. With withering industrial growth, depleting capital investment, and ever evading job opportunity, West Bengal's average GSDP growth has hovered around 4.3 %, below India's 5.6% average. (NITI Aayog summary 2025). The State's share in national GDP has slipped to about 5.6% roughly half of what was in the 1960s. (EAC-PM's Statement on GDP Working Paper, 2024). Its per capita income now is around 84% of the National Average. In this vacuum, the festival stands as the route to economic rescue. The season of puja acts as Bengal's buoyancy, keeping a huge number of unorganised sectors and MSMEs afloat. A substantial number of artisans, tailor, lightmap, soundman, florist, dhaki (drummer), decorator, cook, small scale vendors in the blue-collar economy earns their years' worth during the festive month.

¹¹ The Durga Puja honorarium to community pujas was introduced by the Chief Minister of the State in 2018. As per the data, in 2018, each registered committee received Rs 10,000. By 2020, this was hiked to Rs 50,000, and remained at that level through 2021. Since then, the grant has been revised annually, touching Rs 85,000 in 2024 and now Rs 1.1 lakh in 2025, marking a 30 per cent jump in the latest revision. In seven years, the grant has increased by 11 times. The total estimated cost of these grants is close to ₹500 crore for the nearly 45,000 registered puja committees across the state.

The Benchmark Research commissioned by British Council on behalf of the Department of Tourism, Government of West Bengal, (2019) has been the only breakthrough work on the economic indices of Puja. The report estimates economic worth of the creative industries around Durga Puja in West Bengal at Rs 32,377 crore (GBP 3.29 billion, USD 4.53 billion), which is the size of the economy of many smaller countries across the world. Puja contributes approximately 2.58% of the state GDP. The Report furthers that Puja supports roughly 700,000 people directly or indirectly. The Economic Times (2025) estimate places if we add the spill over of retail, transport, hotels, food, and media the figure Durga Puja economy will expand to around Rs 46,000-50,000 crore. (The Economic Times, 30th September 2025)

Estimating the Fiscal Benefits of Puja

As briefed earlier, Durga Puja acts as financial windfall to a wide portfolio of Livelihoods. A figurative depiction of the economic metrics of Puja on ten key sectors as figured by British Council on behalf of The Department of Tourism, Government of West Bengal 2019 are briefed below.

Table -1 The Economic value of Ten Key sectors as part of creative industry of Puja. (Source- Research Commissioned by The British Council on behalf of The Department of Tourism, Government of West Bengal 2019).

Sl. No	Sectors	Economic Value
1	Installation Art	860 Crores
2	Idol Making	260-280 Crores
3	Lighting and Illumination	205 Crores
4	Literature and Publishing	260-270 Crores
5	Sponsorships	318 Crores
6	Retailing	27,364 Crores
7	Crafts	2.1 Crore
8	Films and Entertainment	53.2 Crore.
9	Food and Beverages	2854 crores
10	Advertisements	504 Crores

The Religious Economy of Puja- Relooking the discursive terrain of labour and livelihood production.

Durga Puja is the epicenter of myriad employment to a wide spectrum of labour forces belonging to

various tiers of unorganized and MSME sectors. As report by Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry of India (ASSOCHAM, 2013) essayed that over 2 million people are directly or indirectly employed during the festival season including both temporary and seasonal jobs¹². These include idol makers, Dhakis (drummers), artists, florist, photographers, videographers shola artisans, artificial Jewellery makers, Tress-makers of idols, patachitra artists, decorators, Dhakis, sweet makers, porters, illumination workers, caterers, cooks, helpers come from the length and breadth of Bengal for their year-long sustenance. Districts like South 24-Parganas, North 24-Parganas, Burdwan, Birbhum, Purulia, Murshidabad, Nadia, Coochbehar, Howrah, Hooghly, Murshidabad, Malda, Sunderban, Bankura, Jalpaiguri, Chandernagore, Midnapore provide the given portfolio of variedly skilled work force for Puja in Kolkata. Approximate ₹50,000 crore is the economic worth of creative industries in Bengal. (The Times of India, 07 October, 2022)

One of the very fascinating aspects of livelihood generation during puja is that it encompasses labour force across all religion, caste, and creed. The very emblematical realm of community engagement of Durga Puja happens to be the ritual of taking mud from the house of Prostitutes.

The creation of idols is the cornerstone of the festival's creative economy. It garners year-round livelihoods for artisan communities, colloquially called 'kumors'. Months before Puja, workshops in areas like Kumartuli¹³ in Kolkata hum with activity as sculptors make grand idols of Durga, her children—Lord Ganesha, Lakshmi, Saraswati, and Kartikeya along with respective 'Bahonas'¹⁴. These idols, ranges from modest ones for Household Pujas to Grand theme-based artistic creations. Prices varies from thousands to crores of rupees, depending on the grandiose and intricacy of Deities made. Nearly 50,000 artisans across the state depend on Durga Puja for their livelihoods.

This sector not only employs sculptors but also stimulates demand for raw materials such as clay, bamboo, paints, and jute, creating backward linkages to suppliers and transporters. In the year 2023, the festival reportedly generated over 3 lakh jobs, associated with idol-making and allied crafts. (NDTV, 2023, November 1, 2023).

Durga Puja is a fertile time of livelihood for priests. Priesthood is part of the unorganised, creative tied to specific caste dynamics with Brahmin men being the eligible ones. Though as rare exceptions women are emerging in the foray of priesthood challenging the archetypical Brahminical Patriarchy. (Telegraph Online, 06.10.2024). Multitude of priests travel from rural and peri urban peripheries of Kolkata to perform the five-day rituals for various committee and household Pujas.

¹² <https://www.ey.com/content/dam/ey-unified-site/ey-com/en-in/insights/media-entertainment/documents/ey-ficci-report.pdf>

¹³ The term Kumartali is made up of Kumar meaning potters and Tuli meaning colony. Therefore Kumartuli means colony of potters. It is located in Kolkata across the bank of Hooghly river. Its is a colony of potters.

¹⁴ Bahonas in Hindu Mythology refers to the animals which serves as vehicles/ ally of deities. E.g Lion for Goddess Durga, White Swan for Ma Saraswati, White owl for Goddess Laxmi, Peacock for Lord Kartikeya and Rat for Lord Ganesha.

The festival is the booming time for Supporting sectors working behind the scenes. Rental businesses for pandal making, bamboos, logs, chairs, music systems, and stages see spikes. Miscellaneous labour force like waste management, security services, electricians are engaged in diverse levels

No Durga Puja is complete without pandals which are temporary pavilions that house idols and acts as artistic spectacles. Pandals, often theme-based employ plethora of designers, carpenters, painters, artists, and project managers. Expenditure for large pandals can run into crores, generating seasonal employment for welders, artists, and others.

The British Council (2019) has accorded installation art as a distinct sector with substantial economic input, highlighting its role in the festival's creative industries. All across Bengal there are around 45,000 Puja committees, the construction of pandals drives demand for materials such as plywood, scaffolding and fabrics, which involves logistics firms for transportation and setup.

The dazzling lights that adorn pandals and streets during the week-long festivity are a hallmark of Bengal's Durga Puja. Chandan Nagar, a hub for specialised illumination art supplies the wide range of light décor across the city. Artisans here produce animated LED panels and numerous illumination displays that are rented out across the state, employing electricians, technicians, and rental services in the seasonal industry.

Electricity demand spikes dramatically during Puja, projected to hit 12,050 MW in 2025, up from 9,912 MW the previous year. (Telegraph Online, 10th December, 2025). This not only boosts revenue for power companies but also supports power backups, generator rentals and infrastructure aids. The illumination trade, with its artisanal cottage-industry status, makes a viable contribution by blending tradition with modern technology.

At the heart of Durga Puja's economy lies a robust growth in retail. The *Indian Chamber of Commerce* (ICC, 2013) highlighted that sales during the Puja season contribute up to 25-30% of annual revenue for many businesses. In Kolkata and other districts, traditional markets like *New Market*, *Gariahat*, *Hatibagan*, as well as modern shopping malls, and e-commerce witnesses a spree in consumer purchase on clothing, cosmetics, electronics, jewelry, footwear, home décor etc. According to industry experts (ICC) the average family expenditure during Durga Puja ranges from ₹10,000 to ₹50,000, depending on income levels. E-commerce platforms have accelerated growth varying between 23-25% growth in early festive sales for 2025. Moving beyond sale bonanza of big brands, the Puja season serves as financial windfall to thousands of small shops and street vendors, who set up temporary stalls selling everything from imitation jewellery to puja essentials. For many, this 2-3month window provides the bulk of their annual income. (Economic Times, 30th September 2025) Tourism magnifies in the festive season drawing both domestic and international visitors. The Bengali Diaspora from far and near come to their home land as mandatory visit. With UNESCO's rec-

ognition, Kolkata has emerged as a global tourism hotspot, with pandal hopping now considered a unique cultural experience. The BCL study (2019) accounts that there has been 120 % increase in bus passengers, coming from nearby states and around 11% upsurge in flight, the very significant marker for inflow of tourists in Kolkata. In 2024, Bengal welcomed over 18.5 crore visitors, thereby generating revenue into the hospitality and allied services sector. Hotels, homestays, and transport services, app-based cabs and intercity buses all experiencing significant profit. The number of foreign tourists in Kolkata in the year 2025 went up by 20%, more than the previous one, a significant number of them are from the US, Europe, Australia and UAE. (Times of India, 8th October, 2025)

The festival economy generates numerous ad hoc works in the hospitality and allied sectors like catering, event management, guest services, security for hotels and restaurants, event managements, logistics and other customer care services. With hotels and guest houses booked much in advance, the hospitality sector alone generates multi crore revenues during Durga Puja, driven by special packages, events, and collaborations with airlines and travel agencies.

Durga Puja is booming time for media and advertising. There is spurt of marketing during the festival, with outdoor hoarding, television commercials, and digital campaigns, dominating the cityscape of Kolkata and beyond. The *Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry* (FICCI)¹⁵ outlines that the annual advertising expenditure during Puja approximates around ₹400-500 crores. Companies ranging from small, medium to large, selling consumer goods to automobiles, to heavy metals, build on their brand by capitalizing on the mass pool of Puja. The festival serves as the launching time for a plethora of small-scale business ventures across city. Brand Sponsorship of Pujas adds to the commercial profile of the festival.

Durga Puja transforms West Bengal into a gastronomic paradise, with street food stalls, kiosks, restaurants, cafes experiencing a massive surge in business. The time of culinary indulgences, creates a substantial pool of demand for catering and food industry, with both established restaurants as well as temporary food kiosks. Reports indicate earnings of food and beverage industry exceeding ₹1,100 crore in just six days of the festival, a significant increase compared to previous year of 2024. (The Economic Times, 30th September, 2025)

Debating the Effectiveness of Festival Economy

The given narrative of the mammoth multi-crore festival economy essayed so forth is however beset with scepticism. One of the veritable grounds of argument against the ‘demand boost’ of the festival, is that it is purely consumption oriented and not based on large scale domestic production.

¹⁵ https://ficci.in/public/storage/SPDocument/20230/FICCI_Deloitte_MEBC_East_%20Report_2012.pdf

The ₹32,377 crore “economy” as the BCL report claims is not a measure of gross value addition within Bengal. It is largely a measure of consumption. Undoubtedly the festival creates a hike in demand, but without a corresponding boost in productive capacity and stable employment, it fails to cater to sustainable economic growth and long-term job creation. (Goswami, 2025)

The other argument against the economic gravity is that the hiked consumption during puja is primarily concentrated in urban Kolkata. This creates a spatial division of economic model where cultural production is rural and poorly paid, while cultural consumption is urban and illustrious. The distribution of income generation thus happens to be skewed, keeping a larger section of subaltern population out of its fiscal ambit. The Festival's Creative Economy depicts a deep paradox- despite its spectacular grandeur, the festival rests on precarious labour, informal work, and a diversion of public funds from long term productive investment. (Goswami, 2025). The British Council Report (2021) statistically ratifies Puja as a sole source of livelihood for myriad informal section, however fails to highlight the precarities and vulnerabilities associated with it. The qualitative report led by Queen Mary University of London, in the BCL study has shown the human cost of this boom. The most pejorative finding is that 35% of the surveyed respondents earn 81-100% of their annual income from the Durga Puja festival. The fact remains that this annual income earned is way below the minimum wage rate required for a basic standard of living. Artisans and labour force associated with Puja are thus living on the edge of a vulnerability, signifying a hyper-precarious life. In the idol-making hub of Kumartuli, around 40% of studios are older than 60 years and younger generation are unwilling to join the vocation and pursue the craft because of its economic marginality.

Thus, the other face of creative economy remains a system where the creators of the festival's core spectacle, live amidst gruelling poverty, their annual survival dependent on a few weeks of intense, informal work. Poverty reduces them to have the least of bargaining power and entitlement.

As a veritable argument to this sporadic, seasonal nature of the festival economy that is entirely consumption based, what is needed is long term strategic planning that charts sustainable roadmap of livelihood generation. The mammoth creative industry wedded with Puja should not cease to be seasonal, sporadic, and subaltern. Generating safety nets, fostering social securities, and charting a permanent market base with digital expansion for artists, craftspeople, and huge pool of variedly skilled labour pool embedded in puja is the need of the hour. More attention should be garnered on festival tourism, for increasing both National and international footfalls. As West Bengal's consumer economy is projected to grow to ₹18.74 lakh crore in the year 2025, the festival remains a resilient force, adapting to challenges such as climatic erraticism or economic downturns.

Conclusion- Puja as the Medley of Culture, Commerce, and Collective emotion\

Beyond numbers, Durga Puja reclaims the collective emotions and identity of Bengal and beyond¹⁶. The labour history of artisans and the wide spectrum of work force embedded with the festivity essays its integral economic twining. Beyond this bolstering of the economic fabric of labour pool, Puja rewrites the cultural heritage in the doxa¹⁷ and habitus¹⁸ of Bengal. Amidst its social historicity and religiosity, the festival has redefined itself as a dynamic terrain of mediation. The trajectory of the festival depicts the journey from ritual to enterprise, from devotional sentiment to soft power, from cultural heritage to global market. In essence, the festival remains a resilient force to the inclusive growth of the state by adapting challenges like economic downturns or natural calamities. It is because of these multiplier impact that it is turned as a State backed event¹⁹ over recent years. The British Council as essayed earlier, has likened its creative economy to that of small nations, punctuating its role in livelihoods generation and sustenance. Puja's economic revitalisation is a living testament to how culture and commerce intertwine creating a vibrant, multi-sector ecosystem that sustains millions annually. (Bourdieu 1986, Polyani, 2001) As narrated earlier, its seismic shift from Barir puja to Barwari puja, to being the Brand and State Puja, its economic reckoning opens a discourse to intervene. The myriad labour forces, their social histories and concomitant producing value has reshaped the materialities of the festival over the last decade. The crossover between faith and festivity, between tradition and artistic expression, between rituals and its secular spectatorship, and most significantly between religious historicity and political economy, Durga Puja remains an enigma. One of the poignant markers of Bengali Identity, the collective emotion, along with long etched religious sentiment, the festival is now a fluid space for lives and livelihoods of millions.

16 Beyond connotes the Bengali Diaspora as well as population who resides in Bengal belonging to other Non-Bengali linguistic group.

17 In the work of Pierre Bourdieu, doxa refers to a set of taken-for-granted, unquestioned beliefs and values that are perceived as self-evident "common sense" within a particular society or social field. These beliefs are deeply ingrained through socialization, leading people to accept the existing social order as natural. Doxa is closely connected to Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and cultural capital, as it shapes an individual's way of thinking and acting, and those who understand and can manipulate it hold an advantage.

18 Habitus is a concept from sociology, particularly associated with [Pierre Bourdieu](#), which describes a system of shared perceptions, actions, and norms that is internalized by individuals within a social group. Habitus is not about individual choice or pure structural determinism but an interplay between past structures and current practice that unconsciously guides behavior and thinking.

19 In recent years there has been an impetus for State backed cultural event. Dev Deepavali in Varanasi has been formally recognised in the year 2024 by Yogi Adityanath Administration which organised Prantiyamela. According to official estimates in the year 2024, Dev Deepavali generated nearly Rs 2000 crore in local economic activity. Another glaring example is Maha Kumbh Mela of Uttar Pradesh Government.

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