

Performative Aesthetics and the Cultural Turn of Religion in India

Saayan Chattopadhyay¹

Introduction

The increasing commercialization and liberalization of the media has given rise to new forms of popular culture that involve a repositioning of both the state and the religion they represent.¹ This paper specifically refers to the neo-liberal public sphere in India that emerged after the deregulation of the market in the late 1980s. Within that context, this paper will discuss in what way the evident expressions of religion in the public sphere resist the narrative of modernity as defined by the supposed decay of religion's significance in public. This evident resistance demands that we reconsider the role of spectacular religious performances, as they serve a performative function involving the public sphere, the modern citizen-state, and the neo-liberal market – in other words, the basic components of the social imaginary of modernity.

Focusing particularly on the elaborate and grand public worship of goddess *Dūrgā*, popularly known as *Dūrgā Pūjā* in Bengal, this paper seeks to understand the ways in which religious performances in India merge into modern urban spaces, utilize global communication networks, follow consumption patterns, employ market rules, operate in secular time, and deploy principles of professionalism and consumerism within neo-liberal conditions. How can one conceptualize the obscure line between public religion and popular culture? What are the implications of this blurring for the relationship between the “secular” and the “religious,” a contradiction that reveals the ways in which the public sphere may be understood in a more nuanced way? How are media and religion involved in changing the politics of representation and visibility, for instance, implying an increased interest in aesthetics instead of ritual efficacy? What forms of mediation are involved in these performative processes, and what are the specific effects on public religious performances when they are deliberately associated with mass culture?

Shifting Practices of the Public Worship of *Dūrgā*

The *Dūrgā Pūjā* (the Bengali word ‘*pūjā*’ means ‘worship’) is the most important religious festival among Bengali Hindus. Several thousands of large community *pūjās* are organized every year in the city of Kolkata, and hundreds of old family *pūjās* are also celebrated. If one takes into consideration the total number of *pūjās* organized in all the districts of West Bengal then the number would run to hundreds of thousands. In addition, *Dūrgā Pūjā* is celebrated in other states, as well as in other countries by diasporic communities of Hindus. *Dūrgā Pūjā*, celebrated at the beginning of autumn, is the worship of the mythological *Dūrgā*, the ten-armed goddess of fertility. The *pūjā* continues for more than a week; the rituals are elaborate and the preparations start long before.²

¹Research Scholar, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India.