

## Performing Identity: “Asomiya” Durga Puja in Delhi

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the significance of a Durga Puja in the collective consciousness of the Assamese community in Delhi. The organisers try to construct an “imagined” Assamese homeland in the national capital by projecting the Durga Puja as a marker of Assamese cultural identity. In the process, Assamese identity comes across as a homogenous entity. This paper argues that Assameseness is a contested formation due to the pluralistic nature of the Assamese society, and hence, the desire to assert an Assamese identity by organising an “Asomiya” Durga Puja is not sustainable. Moreover, the process of identity formation through the Puja is fraught with contradictions, and the organisers themselves seem to be aware of the fact that the assertion of a local identity is very often challenged by economic factors.

**Key Words:** Durga Puja, Assamese, identity, construct, assertion.

Durga Puja is a Hindu festival, celebrated with much fanfare across South Asia, especially in India. During this festival, people worship the mighty Hindu goddess, Durga. The festival marks the victory of Goddess Durga over the demon Mahishasura, and thus, it epitomises the victory of Good over Evil. Apart from Bihu, Durga Puja is the other major festival which is celebrated every year across Assam, one of the North Eastern States of India. Durga Puja, though a sacred event, is mostly seen as an avenue for secular expressions, and hence, it is more of a socio-cultural event. Apart from the usual rituals associated with the worship of the deity, various cultural programmes are also organised during the Puja. However, my focus in this paper is not on Durga Puja in general but on a particular Puja, organised by an Assamese Society in Delhi. In this paper, I critically examine a Durga Puja, organised by the Assamese Society, called *Samannay* (meaning “harmony” in English) at a place called Rohini in West Delhi. Informal conversations with the organisers of the Puja, personal observations and interviews with performers and audience of various cultural events during the festival have helped me in understanding how attempts are made to construct identities through a religious and cultural festival.

Before going into the details of various events performed during the Puja and discussing the related implications, I start with the one-page invitation letter, printed in the Assamese

language and distributed among people while collecting subscriptions. The letter says, “With the intention to preserve and spread Assamese culture”, this Society is going to organise Durga Puja in Delhi, “by following Assamese rituals”. The festival was celebrated as a five-day affair in a Community Hall at Rohini from 19<sup>th</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup> October, 2015. The rituals related to the Puja were performed in the large open space outside the Hall, and most of the cultural programmes were held inside the Hall. The Society which organised this Puja was a newly established one, and was registered as a Society in the year 2015 itself. Almost all the members of this Society have been settled in Delhi for last fifteen to twenty years. Most of them are either professionals like doctors and lawyers or university and college teachers, and people employed in various service sectors. Since most of them are known to me, I can safely say that they are caste-Hindu middle-class Assamese. The class and caste identity of the members is very important as the Society has tried to project itself as an organisation which has been established for the “welfare of the Assamese” in Delhi. In fact, the name of the Society itself was carefully chosen as the founding members wanted to give an impression that the Society would represent the entire Assamese community in Delhi. This introduction about the Society and its professed objectives are important as the subsequent discussion of the events, witnessed during the festival, will problematise the process of identity formation through indigenization of a religious and cultural event.

*Samannay's* Durga Puja has been projected as a marker of Assamese identity in Delhi, as the organisers consider it as an opportunity to stay rooted to the traditions as well as to make the next generation Assamese, born and brought up in Delhi, familiar with those traditions. The desire to create an “imagined community” in a metropolitan city outside the home state is visible in the setting of the Puja itself. The main entrance was made of bamboo, straws and leaves of banana trees as these items are easily available in the native state, and hence remind one of home. *Japis* (traditional Assamese hats) and *gamochas* (Assamese towel) were also used as ornaments at the entrance. A large banner with the picture of Dr. Bhupen Hazarika, the famous Assamese singer and considered by most Assamese as the last torchbearer of the Assamese *jati*, was kept just in front of the Community Hall where most of the cultural programmes took place. To give a feeling of an Assamese or “Asomiya” Durga Puja, the organisers brought the priests and an *Ojapali* group from Assam. In the evening of the *Ashtami* Puja, a *nagara nam* party was also invited to perform. *Ojapali* and *nagara nam* are popular traditional religious performing arts in Assam, especially lower Assam. An *Ojapali* performance combines narrative singing and

dancing interspersed with dramatic dialogue and action. The main narrator-singer of the group is called the Oja and the other assistant singers are called Palis. The Oja stands at the front and the Palis stand and dance in a symmetrical order. *Ojapali* focuses on the stories from the epics and Puranas. The songs sung by the singers are basically in the Sanskrit language, and the members of the group are all males. *Nagara nam* is another major performing art form of Assam. It is a kind of choral singing, and normally the nagara nam is performed in religious functions. In a nagara nam, the participants take their seats in a circle keeping the *pathak*, the lead singer in the middle. Apart from the performances of the *Ojapali* and *Nagara Nam groups*, every evening, various cultural programmes such as Bihu dance and dance drama by children, and performances by guest artists were also organised.

Food habits are an important part of a community's cultural identity. During the Puja, the organisers arranged food for around five hundred people every day. Though food was cooked and served by local caterers, the organisers wanted to give an "Assamese touch" to the food, and that is why, *khichri*, *tarkari* (mixed vegetables) and fried brinjals, popular dishes on religious occasions in Assam, were cooked under the strict supervision of a few Assamese women. However, to call these food items or dishes "Assamese" is problematic, considering the fact that there are so many tribes and religious communities in Assam, and the food habits of all these communities are not necessarily same. So, this tendency to project food as a marker of cultural difference reflects a bias on the part of the caste Hindu Assamese.

In the morning of the *Saptami* Puja, I got an opportunity to talk to Dr. Chandan Deka, a medical practitioner by profession and the Secretary of *Samannay*, and during our brief conversation, he mentioned how deliberate efforts were made to organise the Puja as a secular one instead of giving too much emphasis on the ritualistic aspects since the latter could act as divisive forces many a times. The statement made by the Secretary seems to be a logical and well-intentioned one, considering the fact that the home state has been continuously ravaged by communal and ethnic conflicts for years. The Secretary added, "This Puja is for all. We have got subscriptions from Assamese Muslims as well". It is true that due to the transformation of the Durga Puja from family Puja to *sarbanjanin* Puja, and the consequent public nature of the Puja, the religious, ritualistic aspects and the accompanying class and caste rigidities have got undermined. However, to argue that the festive atmosphere of Durga Puja is akin to that of

Bakhtinian carnivalesque would lead to a total overturning of the realities. In his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929) and *Rabelais and His World* (1965), Mikhail Bakhtin, the Russian literary theorist and critic compares the carnivalesque in literature with the type of activity that often takes place in the carnivals of popular culture. In the carnival, social hierarchies of everyday life—their solemnities and etiquettes, as well as all ready-made truths—are profaned and overturned by normally suppressed voices and energies. In his essay, “Spaces of Recognition: Puja and Power in Contemporary Calcutta”, Anjan Ghosh writes, Durga Puja “is the time of festivity and consumption, which transgresses religious bounds. Public spaces are taken over by people who enjoy a temporary licence to transform the mundane into spectacular. Yet this does not invest the populace with subjecthood, but rather enables the masses to inhabit the public domain without being its determinant.

Durga Puja has retained its imprint of middle-class religiosity and of imposing cultural hegemony upon the population” (Ghosh, 2000: 299). In the case of Assam, it is the culture of the caste Hindu Assamese which has been hegemonic for years. This hegemony became visible during this particular Durga Puja as well. Though the Puja was open to all castes in the sense that everyone could participate in the prayers and offer flowers to the goddess, it was the members of a Brahmin family who fasted during the Puja and performed the main rituals. Though food was served for all, the priests did not eat in the community kitchen, instead took their meals, cooked by the woman of the Brahmin family only. Hence, the seemingly secular festival is not free from *Brahmanization*. It is true that a few Muslim and tribal such as Bodo and Missing Assamese young people came to see the Puja, but their numbers were very limited, and they were present only as passive onlookers. The lower castes or people from other religions are not excluded either from Devi’s benediction or public merriment, but they are merely accorded their place in a carefully balanced social order (Bhattacharya, 2007: 943). Thus, the organisers’ projection of the Durga Puja as an inclusive event is questionable.

The organisers’ projection of the Puja is also fraught with contradictions. When one resident of a nearby locality came to see the Puja, she, out of curiosity, asked one of the organisers, “Is it an Asomiya Durga Puja?” The organiser promptly replied, “No, it is a Durga Puja, organised by a few Assamese people”. This reply bears significance in the sense that the assertion of a local identity is challenged by the economic factor. Since organising a Durga Puja

involves huge expenditure, the organisers cannot rely only on the subscriptions from the Assamese community. Funds are collected from cross sections irrespective of their caste, religious and regional identities. *Samannay* collected subscriptions from many local Delhites who are mostly clients of the organisers themselves. That is why, despite the desire and the claim to organise the Puja “by following Assamese rituals”, the organisers could not represent the Puja explicitly as a signifier of Assamese identity. It appeared that the rituals and the traditional elements had been imported from Assam for passive consumption of the spectators.

“Assamese” as a homogenous category is a contested one, though very often most caste Hindu Assamese people use it uncritically. This uncritical categorisation of the Assamese as a homogenous category was visible during the Puja as well. One female artist from Assam was invited to sing during the cultural programme. The artist initially sang a few Assamese songs, and to make the non-Assamese audience understand the songs, she gave a brief introduction in the English language before singing each song. Though the audience was mostly Assamese speaking, the artist sang a few Hindi songs as well to keep the few non-Assamese audience engaged and involved. However, one young man from the audience got irritated and shouted, “We do not want Hindi songs. Please sing Assamese songs only. Bihu would be even better!” This remark reflects the common sentiment shared by most of the Assamese speaking audience. So, there seems to be a complete indifference towards the pluralistic traditions existing in Assam in terms of language and culture, and this indifference can be considered as the root cause of most of the socio-cultural tensions in Assam.

Since its inception in 2014, the founding members of *Samannay* have made it clear that one of the objectives of the Society is to keep the next generation Assamese culturally rooted. That is why, during the Durga Puja, extempore speech in Assamese language on topics like my home state and Bihu, and Bihu dance competitions were organised. One performance by a group of around eight children in the age group of eight to twelve attired in traditional Assamese dresses was repeated every evening, and the performance received loud cheers from the audience each time. The performance was a dance drama where the children danced to the songs of a few Assamese nationalist writers and artists. The children who represent the next generation Assamese, born and brought up in Delhi, are actually the sons and daughters of the organisers themselves. The children’s performance was choreographed by a few Assamese women. Though

the songs celebrate the diverse cultures of Assam, the language of the songs and the dress worn by the children undermine that diversity. So, the “risks of politically indoctrinating the young into unthinkingly imbibing national ideologies” get visible in the performance of the children (Menon, 2013: 40).

However, it is the *nagara nam* group which successfully goes beyond the hegemonic cultural practices. The group comprises of a few Assamese people between the age group of fifty and sixty, and most of them work in various government offices in Delhi, and have been settled in Delhi for around thirty to thirty-five years. Though they are not a professional group with profit motive, they perform quite regularly at the Assamese households in Delhi on invitation. The members of the group are originally from different parts of Assam, and they perform various kinds of traditional religious songs, and not just *nagara nam*. The group is called *nagara nam* group because of the popularity of this performing art form in Assam. One of the singers told me, “We perform *tokari geet* as well (a kind of folk religious song, mainly popular in upper Assam) along with *nagara nam* since we perform for a diverse audience. Just as our members are from different parts of Assam, our audience also belong to various constituencies, so we have to take that into account”. Considering the fact that there are certain socio-cultural and linguistic differences between upper and lower Assam, the *nagara nam* group’s performance constitutes those “micro-moments” (Gilbert, 2013: 9) which successfully question the uncritical formation of a cultural identity and the consequent imposition of cultural hegemony of a particular community. Moreover, this practice of performing various folk forms is similar to, in Rustom Bharucha’s words, invented traditions “with a consciousness rooted in the immediacies of people’s lives” (Bharucha, 1996: 205). The *nagara nam* group strengthens the energies of the “folk” by allowing the audience to participate in the performance.

Though the organisers tried to indigenize the Durga Puja by inviting the *Ojapali* and *nagaranam* groups, the former managed to evoke only a lukewarm response among the audience. *Ojapali* performances are very popular in Assam, especially in the rural areas of the state. But it appeared that the Assamese who have been settled in Delhi for quite a long period, and consequently, used to the fast life of the metropolitan city could not appreciate the relatively slow pace of the *Ojapali* performance during the Puja. In the process, the *Ojapali* performance gets reduced to an exoticized folk tradition in the name of searching for roots. According to

Shanta Gokhale, the well-known writer and theatre critic from Maharashtra, folk needs to be assimilated into the lives of people, and it should not be used for adornment only. However, it appeared that the *Ojapali* group was present merely as an adornment in the “Asomiya” Durga Puja.

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