

Tracing Goddess Durga in Bangladesh

By

Ms. Sreemati Sen

sreemati123p@gmail.com

Abstract

Very few are aware that Durga Puja in Bangladesh was also equally grand like its counterparts in West Bengal. Backed by a solid historical base, ancient folklore and myths, Devi Durga's worship in Bangladesh is steeped in the play of power and politics. When the country was partitioned, Devi Durga and her devotees faced a challenging choice. Either flee or die. The article traces the origin of Durga Puja in Bangladesh, the journey to its peak followed by a steady decline.

Keywords

Partition. Refugee. Mythology. Zamindari system. *Bonedi* Pujo. *Baroari* Pujo.

Prologue

My husband's family fled Sirajganj, Bangladesh when the riots broke out and started a new chapter in Assam. There are many stories of the partition and its impact on our family. One such story is about *Pishi*, a distant cousin of my father-in-law who faced a strange situation. She lived all her life in Satkhira, a small town in Bangladesh. But a matrimonial alliance from the town of Taki across River Ichhamati changed her fate. Both Taki and Satkhira are towns located opposite to each other on the banks of the river. 'No, not across the river,' *Pishi* rebelled. After much persuasion, she agreed. For it was just a boat ride whenever she wished to come home. Soon after, the river was declared as the boundary between Bangladesh and India, thus putting an end to free traffic across the waterbody. On Vijaya Dashami (the tenth day of the Durga Puja celebrations) every year, the borders are opened up for a few hours. No one is allowed to enter the other country but boats can traverse freely. Idols of Durga placed

on boats cross each other. These boats loaded with people are said to exchange pleasantries, even share food and gifts. But soon it's time to return home and the boats withdraw. *Pishi*, lived year after year hoping that someday like Durga, she would return home. Every Dashami, a lone woman stood on the terrace, the cries of immersion muting her sobs. For between her marital home and her birthland was a boundary which she would never cross.

The Escape

Pishi came to West Bengal by choice. But there were many who were forced to flee.

It was the year 1948, the year of partition. The country was devastated with riots and widespread violence. People were fleeing in large numbers. On one such day, a carefully packed suitcase, shrouded in secrecy, arrived from Dhaka in Kolkata. It found its abode in the house of Shri Debendra Chowdhury, a wealthy industrialist. Guess what was in it?

Wrapped in cloth, lay the idol of Maa Dhakeshwari, the much-revered deity of Dhaka. Later, Debendra Choudhury donated some land to build a temple in Kumartuli, Kolkata. Today, the Dhakeshwari Mandir stands in Kumartuli, Kolkata and is a testimony to the catastrophic decision of partition. The Devi herself, along with hundreds and thousands of others became a refugee having fled the land where she was first discovered and given her due respect.

The Legend of Dhakeshwari

Legends say that Raja Ballal Sen, in the twelfth century AD, found this idol hidden in the forest. Since she was found hiding, her name became Dhakeshwari. *Dhaak* in Bengali means to hide while *Eshwari* connotes the Devi. Later the Raja built a temple in the place where he was born and installed the idol there. Dhakeshwari Devi is an avatar of Durga and is flanked by Lakshmi and Saraswati, Ganesh and Kartik on both her sides.

Today, a newly built idol, which is more contemporary in design stands in her place in the Dhakeshwari temple in Dhaka. Many say that Dhaka got its name from the Devi.

How Durga Puja Began in Bangladesh

Kolkata is well-known for some of the famous Durga Pujas which have a rich history behind them. But very few are aware that Durga Puja in Bangladesh has much folklore behind it.

In the 16th century, during the reign of Akbar, King Kangsa Narayan of Tahirpur in Rajshahi district became the Dewan of Bengal. Elated, the King wished to perform a grand ritual to commemorate his success. He decided to perform an *yajna* (a ritual involving the holy fire). But the head priest advised him against it. 'Instead of an Yajna, worship Devi Durga.' Pleased with the decision, the King went ahead with the worshipping of the Goddess. Almost Nine Lakhs rupees was spent in those times to organize the Puja.

It is said that when the Mughal army came to Bengal to set up their capital, their visit coincided with Durga Puja. Subedar Islam Khan was given the task of ascertaining the boundaries of Dhaka. As the beats of *dhaak* reverberated around and the devotees danced to the frenzied beats, an idea came to him. He ordered three *dhaakis* (drum-beaters) to spread out and beat the *dhaak* from three different corners of the city. The perimeter of the city would then be decided depending on the area covered by the sound of the *dhaak*. That day the army set the boundaries on the basis of the beats of the *dhaak* that reached afar. Some say that this is how the city Dhaka got its name from *dhaak*, the popular musical instrument. Many of us have heard this story while growing up. There is no way its veracity can be proved.



Image 1: Statue Making

The other school of thought believes that Krishnachandra Roy, the Raja of Nadia established the custom of celebrating Durga Puja.

Rise of ‘Bonedi Pujo’

Initially, Durga Puja did not gain much prominence as it involved huge expenditure. Slowly, the affluent Zamindars started celebrating as it was a way to establish one’s dominance and control. Since these Hindu businessmen and Zamindars reported to the British, invitations were sent out to the latter. Various documents dating back to the eighteenth century show that even the Europeans joined these Zamindars in their celebrations. Grandeur and splendour became the key essence of Durga Puja. Thus, began the era of ‘Bonedi pujo’. Bonedi refers to the affluent Zamindars. Their Pujo was steeped in tradition, money and power.

Durga Puja in those days was culturally rich as they were characterized by *Jatra, Paala Gaan, Sankirtan, Kobigaan, Panchali*. These were various forms of folk theatre and folk songs. Renowned artists were brought in. Even famous *Baijees* (professional singers and dancers) performed during the celebration. People from far and wide thronged to catch a glimpse. One such famous Durga Puja was Babu Nandalal’s Moisundi Puja at Sutrapur, Dhaka. There were other notable Pujo at Srihatto, Rajnagar, Panchgaon.



Image 2: Statue Ready for Painting

The Decline

The scenario underwent a drastic change after the communal riots in Noakhali in 1946 and the partition of the country in 1947. Fearing their safety, the feudal lords fled Bangladesh and set up their new residences in West Bengal. 'Bonedi pujo' lost its fervour. It was impossible to organize a Pujo of such grand stature. Much later, the *barowari/sarbojonin* or the collective Pujo, organised from generous donations and subscriptions came into vogue. Today, Pujo is celebrated in Dhakeshwari temple, Dhaka. The idol that stands there is a replica of the original. While the original has no weapons in the ten arms, the idol in Dhaka has weapons in each of her hands and is worshipped in the traditional style. Durga Pujo is also celebrated in Ramkrishna Mission, Dhaka, and Jagannath Hall, University of Dhaka. Ramna Kali Mandir, built during the Mughal times is also known for the Durga Puja held there. Faridpur, Netrakona, Khulna and Mirzapur are popular areas where Durga is venerated.

All that remains in various parts of Bangladesh are the ruins of the havelis or the residence of the Zamindars. A walk through these areas harps about the rich legacy of the Durga Puja that existed in the distant past.

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About the Author

Ms. Sreemati Sen holds a Masters in Social Work from Shantiniketan. A Development Professional, she has specialized in Psychiatric Care of Differently-abled children. Years of experience in Social and Consumer Research are also a part of her portfolio. Her stories have been featured in various anthologies. She made it to the Top Fifty Indian Horror Writers Contest organized by Half-Baked Beans. She was the second runner up for the Asian Literary Society's Wordsmith Award, 2020, 2021 and 2022 for the Short Stories segment. She has also won the Orange Flower Award, organized by Women's Web for her blog on Parenting in the year 2021 followed by the first runner-up award for the same category in 2022. She is also one of the top twenty-five bloggers on Momspresso. Writing for her, is Catharsis. It is the magic pill that has helped her cope with the various challenges that life has thrown her way.

