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Pandal Makers – The Great Artesian of Bengal

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Abstract

Pandal maker is one of the cultural communities of Bengal. They have been seen during the festive season of early autumn especially. They are skilled labor of rural Bengal. A pandal makers group consist of different professionals like mason, carpenter, electrician, porter, painters etc. They have been hired by puja organizing committees. According to the spatial location of Barawari puja, the Demography, Work environment and problems of them varies from one space to another. This paper has been studied to understand the present condition of this community. Pandal makers of Kolkata and greater Kolkata are different from each other. As pandal makers of Kolkata barawari puja pandals are economically and politically more powerful, they have faced fewer problems. This research paper is based on primary data, collected from different puja pandals of Kolkata and kalipuja pandals of Madhyamgram Municipality. Data have been analysed qualitatively. This paper is nothing but a tribute to the great artisan community of Bengal- 'The Pandal Makers'.

Key Words: Pandal, Barawari, Urban, Suburban, Artisans.

Introduction: Culture and Economy are interconnected to each other, especially; in modern industrial society both has taken complimentary role to each other. The pattern of production system(Economy) is dependent on social norms, beliefs, perception, and livelihood practice of people who live in that particular society(Non material Culture),as a result the final product of the production system(Material Culture) is nothing but the reflection of the culture, persist in that particular society. In West Bengal, Durga puja is the biggest festival for Hindu. This festival is the small replica of Bengali culture. In ancient time it was merely a religious festival which was celebrated in the royal families. In 20th century, with the emergence of Barawari Puja, it has become more public and commercialized. For this commercialization, many people find job opportunities, mainly the rural artisans is the benefitted group (Like Dhaki, Malakar, Pandal Makers, Potter).Pandal makers are quite different from others cultural groups involved in this religious event. In religious rituals or religious customs of Durga puja, necessity of pandal makers has not been mentioned by the religious teachers rather they are employed by industrial entrepreneurs in indirect way. They have promoted their cultural skill through the decoration of pandals



Photo: 1 Pandal makers of Babubagan



Photo: 2 Pandal maker of Jodhpur park



Photo: 3 Pandal of Kali puja (Theme: Sarite nari)



Photo: 4 Pandal of Kali puja (Theme: Nature)

Source: Authors

The Pandal creators: If you drive around Kolkata now, you will see men at work on towering structures of bamboo and cloth, as tall (and sometimes taller) as the surrounding apartment buildings. These are the pandals which are considered as the houses of the idols. The pandals are the center of the festivities throughout the puja period – on an average, the big pandals get more than 150,000 visitors every day. It is now almost mandatory for pandals to have a theme, with a local artist coordinating the design. The themes range from regional aesthetic folk art forms to bordering-on-corny Jurassic Park (with dinosaurs), pandals shaped like the Titanic, Harry Potter-Hogwarts, etc. Sometimes the contemporary social issues or international events such as the death of Princess Diana, 9/11, and natural disasters like tsunamis, floods etc. are used as a theme. For analyzing the life of Pandal makers, the survey is done in the urban region as well as in the sub-urban region of North and South 24 Parganas.

Background of the study area: Kolkata is famous for Durga puja and for this reason it is chosen as a study area for this paper. It is the eastern part of India and located 22.34' N to 88.22'E. In the ancient time this festival was celebrated in zamindars house and the whole celebration was restricted

into the four walls of the house. Outsiders were not allowed in the programs. In the year 1790, twelve bramhins started barwari puja at Guptipara in Hooghly collecting money from neighbors. It was the starting period of barawari puja. As Barawari puja committees did not have their chandi mandap, they set up temporary mandap which was called Pandal. In twentieth century, barwari puja took its new shape. As globalization and commercialization entered into Indian market, Durga puja celebration became a commercial rather a religious festival. There was no doubt that this change offered new job opportunities for the talented labor class of the society. Pandal makers was one of that fortunate group. New decorators were set up who employed potential artist and labors in their project. Now, in almost every district they have their own association. Unlike other social groups like dhaki, malakar, priest who were involved in Durga puja from ancient period, pandal makers are not affected by caste discrimination. As this profession was introduced in open industrialist society on the demand of commercial world-skill has become the main factor for their selection. Villages are the core of craft, art and painting, villagers got new opportunity to promote their skill and talent in this way. Day by day, artisans started to apply new techniques, new ideas in their creation. They have used communication medias like internet, phone to expand their business.

The proposed study area for this paper is Madhyamgram Municipality (22.42’N-22.70’N, 88.27’E-88.45’E). It is a newly founded municipality area of Barasat sub division of North 24 Parganas, West Bengal. It is surrounded by jashohore road, sodepur road and connected with sealdah through railway. It is at few kilometer distances from Kolkata airport. In ancient time this area was connected with Kolkata and Bangladesh through a river named labanyabati. During Mughal regime, Madhyamgram was known as Majher Gaon situated in Anwarpur Parganas on the bank of Labanyabati River, in the kingdom of Raja Pratapaditya Roy, ruler of Jessore, one of the twelve feudal Lords of Bengal. After partition (1947) this area evolved as the rehabilitation hub for the refugees from East Pakistan. Now it is considered as ‘Fortune city’.

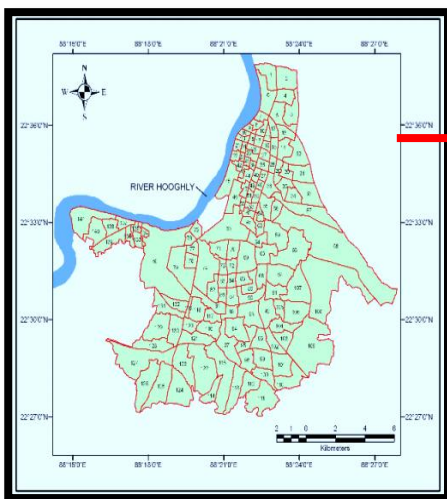


Fig: 1 Ward map of Kolkata

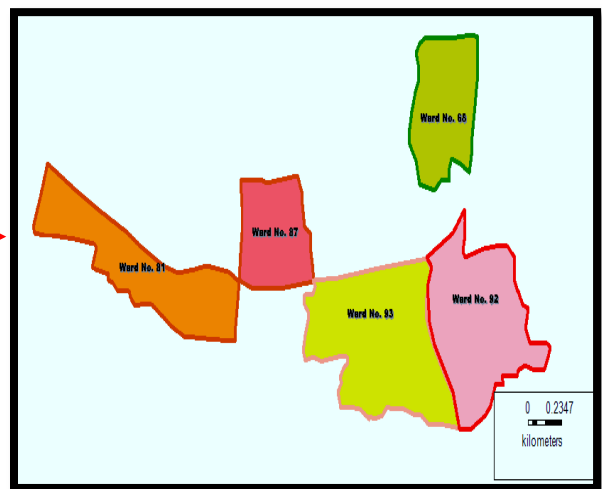


Fig: 2 Study area

Source: Cad Centre, Jadavpur University, 2015

History of kalipuja in Madhyamgaram was unique and interesting. In different colonies of this area, people have celebrated Durga puja in traditional and simple way. Besides this, it was true that middle class suburban people were not able to celebrate Durga puja in the way it was celebrated in the posh colonies of Kolkata. In the starting period of twenty first century, this area has witnessed a huge change in its social and economic structure due to rapid urbanization in this area. That period has given birth to a higher middle class group (mainly promoters, political leaders) who are economically and politically powerful. Emergence of this class has become the reason of the emergence of today gala celebration of kalipuja in Madhyamgram. Most of the puja committees have powerful patrons like councilor Businessman, MLA in their advisory board. The budget of this puja is comparatively lower than Kolkata oriented Durga puja committee. It is the main reason that they have targeted the decorators in other districts of West Bengal who are able to give their pandal attractive look in low budget. Sometimes they buy the Durga puja pandals of other districts. As people are unknown to the theme, they applied this method to reduce their budget. The theme of the pandals are mainly village oriented like old mandirs, a small village, burial ground, haunted house, pandal made by different natural ingredients like paddy, Tanter sari, trees, fruits, hand fan etc. Most of big budget pujas are held in the ancient neighborhood of this area. Data has been collected from three renowned puja of this area-Yubogoshti ,Nabarun Sangha and Kanon Kali puja pandal. First two puja have completed fifty three years and last one is twenty six years old. All these pujas are celebrated at ward no 24 (Bidhanpally).

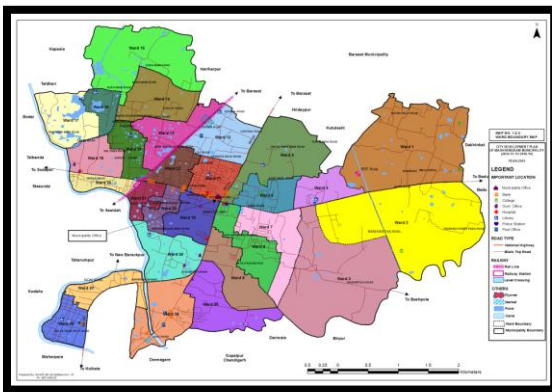


Fig:3 Municipality ward map

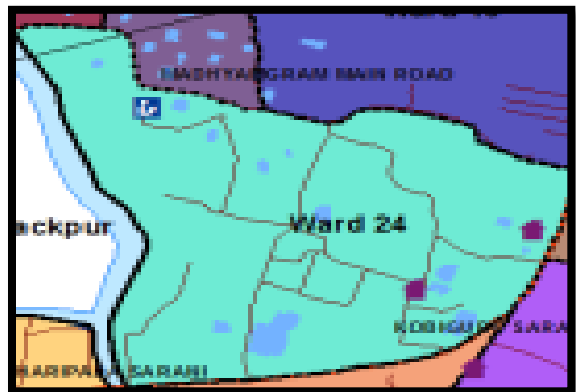


Fig:4 Map of Ward No. 24

Source: Urban Planning Department, Madhyamgram Municipality (2015)

Aims and Objectives: The main aim of this paper is to highlight the lifestyle of the pandal makers, to show the differences between urban as well as sub-urban pandal makers and find out the problems of this group of people.

Methodology: In South Kolkata numerous high budget Durga puja are held which are Shuruchi Sangha, Chetla Agroni Club, Badamtala Ashar Saangha, Tridhara Sammilini, Desho Priyo Park, Ekdalia Evergreen, Shinggi Park, Boshpukur Shitola Mandir, Jodhpur Park, Babubagan, Selimpur, Nagtala Udayan Sangha. Among these eleven famous Durga puja, the primary survey is done in Babubagan (ward no. 92), Ekdalia Evergreen (ward no.68), Deshopriya Park (ward no. 87), Jodhpur Park (ward no. 93), and Shuruchi Sangha (ward no.81). As these pujas are situated in different five wards of South Kolkata and are shown through the GIS software in one map (Fig: 2). On the other

hand, among thirteen kali puja pandals in Madhyamgram, data are collected from three different kali puja pandals which are Yubogoshti ,Nabarun sangha and Kanon kalipuja.

The whole work is done through observation, primary data collection as well as analysis of the primary data. For this paper the size of the sample is thirty and purposive sampling method is used with the help of questionnaire. Focus group discussion and interview method are also used to collect the data. Then data are analyzed qualitatively only.

Analysis:

Demographic characteristics of pandal makers: Pandal makers of urban area belong to Hindu religion and very few are from general caste. Bengali is their mother tongue. Some people are migrated from Bangladesh, Ranaghat and Hoduganj. They have come from different parts of the state like, Madhyamgram, Dumdum, Kalyani, Pailan, Purba Midnapore, Shubhashgram etc. It is observed that the type of their family is basically nuclear, maximum five members are there and their educational background is not so strong as only two percent people have completed madhyamik level of education but they are trying best to provide their children a good education. It is found that they have more than two children and one of them is boy child. So there is a preference of having boy child. They live with their parents and sometimes with their younger brother too alone renting a house. The wives are generally ten years younger from them. So the family structure is normal like other families in Bengal but the women or the girls are not moving forward.

In case of pandal makers of suburban area, eighty percent of them belong to middle caste like kayashtha where as 5% of them are Bramhin and rest of them are scheduled caste. As this profession was started just 20-40 years ago and the efficiency of the artesian is the main criteria of selection, caste has not played any important role in selection process. All the artesian belong to hindu religion and lower class as well as middle lower class families. They have mainly come from Medinipur District which is famous for handicraft and cottage industry. They live at Egra,kanthi and other blocks of this district. They live in a joint family and 90% of them are married at an early age. Their wives are younger from them for 6-7 years. They all have more than two children and one of them is son. This tendency shows the traditional expectation of boy in their rural society.10% have studied upto class 10 and rest of them have not completed their education upto madhyamik level. They have spoken in the dialect of Medinipur district which is slightly different from the rarhi dialect. It creates a communication problem when they go at different parts of Kolkata and greater Kolkata area for professional reason. Few pandal makers come from different parts of North 24 Parganas also their families are nuclear in type though their educational qualification and class are similar to their peer group of Medinipore district. Their family structures are common to them though their approach towards girl child is different.

Work environment of pandal makers: The pandal makers of urban area have come from different parts of the state. They are basically hired by the members of the puja committee and sometime they have come there getting the information from other artists, friends, relatives etc. A large number of respondents (pandal makers) are engaged in a particular puja committee for a long time and very few have found as a new comer. The pandal makers work almost 10-12 hours and they are specialized in different sectors of pandals like painting, electric and some other are experts giving the structure of the idol as well as the whole pandal. They basically reach their destinations almost 6-8 months ago of the puja and before the puja (1-2 months ago) they work almost 24 hours. They hardly get any time for refreshment. They have learnt their work basically from their gurus or masters. So, the pandal makers stay at a particular puja pandal for almost 6 months and there they

stay with other workers and they cook, sleep together in a tent. Maximum respondents keep themselves busy in agricultural fields and very few continue their work at different places after the celebration of puja returning at their own places. They are happy with the payments what they get from the puja committee. The level of income is average as it ranges from 10000-30000 rupees in every month but they cannot save it properly as the whole family is depended on them.

All the decorators of different districts have their association where they have sent their project for the year and it was published in a souvenir. They also have their own site in internet where they display the small model of their project. The organizers can contact with them through it. After sending the picture of the allotted plot for making the pandal, organizers and head of the decorators fix a rate after negotiation. Then the owner of the decorators contact the other workers according to the demand of the project. In Medinipur district, there are nearly about 100 decorators who are famous in this field. The whole group are divided into different categories like some people are involved in making the structure of pandal; some members do the painting, some are best in cover up the pandal with different clothes, there are few electricians in the group who look arrange the colourful light inside the pandal. In this group, middle aged persons are appointed also as this is a strenuous job and they have to stay 10 -12 days at a stretch in a different places far away from their locality. A good pandal costs 10-12 lakhs. The money is divided between the members as a per day agreement. If the organizers deny to pay the full amount, the decorators have to face a huge amount of loss. Every day they work for 8-10 hours in a day mainly in the night after the sunset as the weather seems comfortable at that time. At that time, they stay at the club. They cook their own food and sleep at the floor on mats. They can watch programmes in the T.V. They go to the open field or in any jungle for latrine and toilet. After completing the whole pandal, they go back to their locality and spend the puja holidays. In the meantime, they make another contact with other organizers of Saraswati puja, Ras purnima, and event management company for next session. Rest of the year, these workers work as agricultural laborer and mason or they involve different event management companies in different parts of India. They earn about 12000 rupees per year which is not at all a profitable amount in respect to their hard work.

Home environment of pandal makers: The pandal makers of urban area live their own houses and only one person has found who does not live at his own house. The type of their house is basically pacca, kaccha and semi pacca with 1-2 stores having 3-6 rooms. They stay in a nuclear family. The drinking water, electricity etc are all available at their place. The source of drinking water is tube well and the street lights are present at every road side. The type of sewage is open as the wastages are thrown in the drains and sometimes at the roadside. The problem of waterlogging is present at their places during monsoon. On the other hand, women of their house basically involve in every sorts of work and they use stoves, LPG gas as a fuel. As a personal asset, pandal makers have cycle, bike, refrigerator, television etc at their houses.

They have their own houses and land in their localities. They live in a joint or extended family. In their villages, electricity connection is available though they have to face transport and communication problem during rainy season as the roads become muddy at this time. They have the toilet and latrine facilities in their houses. They use coal and wood as source of fuel though few of them have gas in their house. They use tube well for drinking water. They live in kaccha houses and some of them have pakka houses which have built under Indira Gandhi Awas Yojna. They use the domestic waste as fertilizers or throw it in the open field. They have cleared their house properly. Women in the family do each and every work of house alone. As a huge number of male members

migrates to other state for job purpose, women play an important role in the house. They are also involved in cottage industrial works.

Behavioral pattern of pandal-makers: The pandal makers of urban area lead a very normal life. They take simple Bengali foods at breakfast, lunch, and dinner. But in the evening the women make variety of fast foods at home for their children. They prefer to wear Bengali dresses. If they sick then they prefer mostly allopathic doctors but others also consult with kabiraji and the medical facilities are good at their native lands. They have aware nesses about the films, politics, crickets and various social issues too as they have television at their house and read newspaper everyday. According to the respondents, among different educational institutions only primary schools are higher in number than other schools, found nearby their places within 1 to 2 kms, whereas the colleges are far away. They prefer to cover the distance by walking, sometimes by rickshaw, auto or bicycle. It is noticed that they are happy with the health facilities whatever they are getting at their villages or towns as they have Govt. Hospitals, Nursing Homes, Private Dispensaries etc. within their proximity. Govt. hospitals are higher in number than any other hospitals. The pandal makers are not from any remote villages rather they live at the urban fringes in South and North 24 Parganas. Among different amenities market facilities are well developed as maximum respondents are happy and satisfied with their daily and bi-weekly market types and the maximum markets are within their walking distance. Besides markets, schools, colleges they have the other amenities like banks, post offices, police stations, municipalities etc. and these are all situated within 6-8 kms from their residence. But they do not spend their time at leisure as they do not have the proximity of the cinema halls, parks, sports complex etc.

The pandal makers of sub-urban area live a simple rural life. In the morning, they usually take muri and chop as breakfast, in lunch they take rice, dal and fish, the menu remains same at night. They wear simple lungi, t -shirt and trouser. They celebrate Hindu festivals together as they belong to agricultural family, they use to celebrate ‘Nabanna’. They mainly spend their leisure time chatting with friends. They are addicted to tobacco. Some pandal makers are also addicted to alcohol. They have taken homeopathy medicine. The medical facilities are not so good in their villages. They are not involve in politics but use to cast votes. They have to voter card and ration card. Their social awareness is quite good as they travel in different places, they have good knowledge about different social issues.

Problems: In case of urban pandal makers, they do not have much complaints against the puja committee as everyone has admitted that they are happy with the payments and everything but only there is one problem which is they cannot do anything according their wish, they always have to take permission from the secretary or president or other members of the committee.

In case of sub-urban pandal makers, they do not issue any legal contractual paper at the time of agreement and the organizers take the advantages. They do not pay the exact amount to the decorators. As influential persons are involved with the puja committee, police do not take any report against the committee members. A pandal makers have told us “Last year, when we made a pandal at Sonarpur area, at the first day of Durga puja, the organizers deny to pay the amount and we stopped our work. Then local political leader and his gang attacked us and we were threatened to complete the pandal in half amount of money. Out of fear we have done it. We had to face a huge loss”. Besides this, they do not get any recognition because all the prizes are given to puja committee .They are hidden under the shadow of organizers.

Recommendations: Being a researcher it can be said that they should not be dominated rather they should allow doing their work by an open mind.

In case of sub-urban pandal makers, there are some recommendations which are as follows:

- i. The agreement should be done legally.
- ii. Government should organize some exhibition to promote their work and also start some award for the best artesian group.
- iii. They should be given importance in media.
- iv. They should be given loan at low rate of interest in the bank for this purpose.

Differences between urban pandal makers and sub-urban pandal makers:

There is some differences between these two types of pandal makers which are as follows:

- i. The urban pandal makers live in a nucleus family whereas it is found that the sub-urban pandal makers live in a joint family.
- ii. The mother tongue of every urban pandal makers is Bengali. But it is not fit with the sub-urban pandal makers as they talk in different dialects of a particular region.
- iii. The urban pandal makers are quite richer than the sub-urban pandal makers as their range of salary is different.
- iv. The urban pandal makers lead a more sophisticated life having some personal assets (bike, cycle, refrigerator etc) than the sub-urban pandal makers.
- v. In case of building pakka houses the urban pandal makers didn't get any help from the Government but the sub-urban pandal makers have built their pakka houses through the Indira Gandhi Awas Yojna.
- vi. The urban pandal makers prefer to have fast foods in the evening but it is not found within the sub-urban pandal makers.
- vii. The maximum urban pandal makers are dependent on the allopathic treatment for the rapid progress of health whereas the sub-urban pandal makers are dependent on the homeopathy treatment.
- viii. Several amenities like market, post office, police station etc are situated within the proximity of the urban pandal makers. But these facilities are not well developed in the areas where the sub-urban pandal makers live.

Limitations:

- We were not able to collect huge number of data due to the shortages of time.
- There are no seasonal data.
- Literature and documents are very limited on this matter.
- The pandal makers were not willing to talk to us properly.

Conclusion: Pandal makers are the cultural as well as economic group in our society and they have started their work after the initiation of the industrialization. Now a days, the pandals have become the center of attraction than the idols but do we ever try to know that who has done this? Can we see the person in front of the pandal? Well the answer is no because they are always neglected in our society. Their creativity has become popular but the person has found still in the darkness, especially in the sub-urban regions. For this, authority is responsible because they do not allow them in front of everyone as they want to come only in the spotlight. Sometimes the pandal makers have become the victims of political issues, their work is also obstructed due to some political leaders too. They are always dominated and cannot do their work by their own will. False promises are made by several

souvenir and for this the pandal makers have to suffer. The pandal makers of both the urban as well as sub-urban area work hard but do not get the proper respect what they deserve. If the negligence upon them goes on like this then the entire puja committee of urban as well as sub-urban areas will have to face lot of difficulties in future.

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