Live-streaming the goddess in the times of COVID-19: a digital ethnography of diasporic Durga Puja festivals in pandemic Britain

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ABSTRACT

Diasporic Durga Puja festivals in contemporary Britain have emerged as focal points in the religious lives of Hindu Bengalis. However, the public health measures introduced because of the COVID-19 pandemic made it impossible to host in-person indoor Durga Puja festivals in Britain in the autumn of 2020. In response, many UK-based Durga Puja organisers staged small-scale ritual worship of the goddess in private, and then livestreamed it to their members through social media. Based on participant observation of these festival livestreams and remote interviews with Durga Puja organisers from across Britain, in this article I demonstrate that far from being a rupture, these blended Durga Puja festivals mark a development in existing templates of mediatisation of religious practices and are part of the wider continuum of adaptations that characterise diasporic lived religion. I also reflect on how internal hierarchies within the diaspora played out vis-à-vis blended Pujas amidst the pandemic.

Introduction

Transnational migrants in today's world not only move physically across national borders, but also carry along their embodied ideas and practices. These transmigrants, to use Umut Erel's (2010) words, do not simply put neatly packaged identities, customs and cultural resources into a 'rucksack' and then unpack them upon arrival in their new country. Instead, they negotiate their way, drawing on their existing ideas and tools to create new ones and bargain with institutions and people to gain recognition for their ethnic cultural resources and practices in their countries of settlement (Erel 2010; Modood 2007). Religion is no exception to this wider arc of cultural negotiation, accommodation and legitimisation that informs diasporic lives (Smart 1987). This article contributes to our growing understanding of religious accommodation and cultural negotiation in the diaspora through a digital ethnographic study of blended Durga Puja festivals mounted amidst the COVID-19 pandemic in the autumn 2020 by UK-based Hindu Bengalis. Such a dedicated attention to Hindu Bengalis is particularly warranted since lived religion among British South Asians differ along sub-national/linguistic lines and draw on localised practices of Hinduism in

South Asia (Waghorne 2004; Vertovec 1992). In what follows, I deploy the sociological lens of lived religion to explore the way diasporic Hindu Bengalis in Britain dealt with the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic in staging their annual Durga Puja, which is arguably the most important religious festival for this community. The study of lived religion breaks away from the preoccupation with official texts, institutions, and experts in the study of religion and instead lays emphasis on how religion is lived out in the everyday practices of ordinary people (Ammerman 2015).

The five-day autumnal Hindu Bengali festival of Durga Puja, which pivots around the worship of the goddess Durga, has been described as the 'single most important festival in [contemporary] Bengal's rich and diverse religious calendar', one that 'outstrips anything [else] that happens in Bengali life in terms of pomp, glamour, and popularity' (Ray 2017, 1126). Now, hundreds of Durga Puja festivals are held across the global Bengali diaspora including the UK. These diasporic Durga Puja celebrations have emerged as the fulcrum of the Hindu Bengali social calendar in Britain. However, such in-person indoor Durga Puja festivals could not go ahead in the autumn of 2020 because of the public health directives imposed by the UK government in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic which hit the UK hard, with the country registering one of the worst death tolls in 2020 (Islam 2020). The second wave of the pandemic, which reportedly ended up taking more lives in Britain than the first one (Conway 2021), started in the autumn of 2020 and as a result the government imposed region-specific public health measures that curtailed unnecessary travel and mass gatherings (Siddique 2020). The higher the infection rate in a region, the more stringent the COVID measures were. In response to this health emergency, some organisers decided to cancel that year's Durga Puja festival altogether while most others mounted small-scale puja in private homes or in *COVID-secure* small venues and livestreamed them for free to their members via YouTube channels or Facebook pages. The screenshot below (Figure 1) is from the Facebook livestream of the 2020 Durga Puja organised by 'Indian Cultural Society' in Cambridge. The priest had formed a COVID-19 'bubble' with the family of a committee office bearer in whose living room the ritual worship was held, and then livestreamed

Figure 1. Screenshot of blended Durga Puja (Source: Indian Cultural Society, Cambridge official Facebook page, 24 October 2020).

to the public for free. The priest can be seen reading the hymns from a tablet computer and wearing a face shield to curb the spread of the virus. Instead of their usual human-sized fibreglass Durga idol, the organisers can be seen using an image of the goddess for ritual worship.

Grounded in broader debates on lived religion in the diaspora and mediatisation of religious practices among diasporic Hindus, in this article I explore the strategies for blended Durga Puja celebrations adopted by Hindu Bengalis in Britain amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. In reflecting on the significance of online Durga Puja festivals for diasporic community life, I argue that the adaptations and innovations exemplified by 'livestream pujas' amidst the pandemic are part of a wider continuum of religious adjustments and negotiations in the diaspora. The strategies enacted by the organisers and the resources they drew on, therefore, need to be understood in that context, while paying close attention to the former's privileged location as mostly middle-class, upper-caste transnational subjects. In what follows, I begin by charting the origin and contemporary religious significance of Durga Puja in Bengal and its global diaspora. This is followed by a discussion of the methods used in this study, the empirical insights gained, and my reflections on the structures of diasporic religious lives, the mediatisation of religion and the internal hierarchies within the diaspora.

Durga Puja: origins and developments

The Durga Puja festival epitomises the cult of goddess Durga, the Great Goddess (*Mahadevi*) of the Hindu pantheon, the first textual references to whom can be found in several early Vedic texts dating back to 1200 and 800 BCE. However, the most elaborate early mythology of Durga that undergirds her present iconography and the festival of Durga Puja flows from the Sanskrit text *Devimahatmya* (Glory of the Goddess) composed sometime between fifth and sixth centuries CE (Rodrigues 2018). This text contains stories about goddess Durga's exploits, such as her slaying of the buffalo-demon Mahisasura, and the hymns sung in her honour by the gods. It is because of this myth that she is often referred to in Bengali as *Mahisasuramardini* (the slayer of the buffalo demon Mahisasura). In Bengali Durga Puja festivals today, goddess Durga is depicted as having multiple arms, each carrying armaments presented to her by the other gods (such as Siva's trident, Krishna's discus, and Agni's spear), mounted on a lion and slaying the demon *Mahisasura* – imageries that derive directly from the *Devimahatmya* myths.

Bengali Durga Puja starts on the sixth day of the waxing new moon during the Bengali lunisolar month of Ashwin (which usually falls around mid-September to mid-October) and lasts for five days (see Rodrigues 2003). The dates and timings of the Puja shift every year and are calculated and published in the *panji* or *panjika* (the Bengali Hindu almanac). When exactly the Bengali regional Durga Puja tradition began is difficult to ascertain. Textual references to the worship of the goddess can be found in Bengali sources from the twelfth century onwards, but public festivities sponsored by royal and wealthy families emerged only in the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century (McDermott 2011). While elsewhere in India, Durga worship is mostly undertaken as part of the wider nine-night long Navaratri festival and is performed following Vedic rituals, the Bengali Durga Puja tradition combines Vedic, Puranic and Tantric elements of Hinduism which lends it a unique regional identity (Rodrigues 2003).

Durga Puja is the fulcrum of the social calendar in the Indian state of West Bengal, with public holidays given for all five days of this autumnal festival. Today, there are two principal instances of Durga Pujas that co-exist in West Bengal: domestic worship or *barir puja* which are organised and financed by mostly aristocratic families, and the publicly held community puja or *sarbajanin puja* which is the predominant form of the festival and is sponsored by neighbourhood groups, civic associations, and local businesses (McDermott 2011; Rodrigues 2003). The former predates the latter by at least four hundred years, as the Puja started in Bengal as *barir puja* of the ruling elite and began assuming its current form of a public festival only in the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century (Zeiler 2018). The community pujas are held today in temporary shrines called *pandals* that are erected in public spaces. The *pandals* house the clay idol of Durga, flanked on either side by the idols of her four 'children': Ganesh, Karthik, Lakshmi and Saraswati. Based around the idol, a range of art works, lightings and elaborate decorations are installed. Adjacent or sometimes within the pandal are performance spaces where a host of cultural programmes from singing and dancing to elocution and quiz contests are held for the entire neighbourhood to take part in. Thus, the festival encompasses the ritual worship of the goddess Durga (the *puja*) as well as social-cultural festivities (the *utsab*) held around it, both of which are public events. For the five days of the puja, towns and cities across Bengal are transformed into 'museumlike space [s]' (Sen 2018, 107) filled with public art installations, colourful lightings, food stalls, and thousands of people throng the streets to look at the pandals and its paraphernalia (see Guha-Thakurta 2015).

The community-based Durga puja is not only the dominant form of the festival across West Bengal; it has also travelled with Bengalis to different parts of India and across the globe (Zeiler 2018). As the number of Hindu Bengalis in North America and Europe has grown in the last three to four decades, comprising mostly of middle-class professionals from West Bengal arriving through skilled-worker visa routes, hundreds of Durga Puja festivals have sprung up in the Hindu Bengali diaspora where it has become integral to community life. Diasporic lived religion among Hindu Bengalis in the UK mostly pivots around personal worship undertaken at home by erecting small-scale *thakur ghor* (domestic shrines) or through the installation of images or idols of deities. Although such domestic forms of religious observances and rituals are relatively easier to engineer, collective festivals such as Durga Puja pose something of a 'cosmo-logistical problem' (Brown 1999, 79) for diasporic Hindu Bengalis: namely, how to stage a festival in Britain that is intimately tied to places and communities in Bengal? To resolve this conundrum, Hindu Bengali community organisations in the UK have pooled the resources and connections of their members to mount modified versions of Durga Puja festivals in their local areas. They bring in Durga idols, votive materials, celebrity performers and even priests from India to recreate the rituals, whilst also making a range of accommodations and innovations along the way to make the festival happen in Britain. For example, instead of holding the festival on dates specified in the Bengali Hindu lunisolar calendar (corresponding to a long public holiday in Bengal), most diasporic Durga Pujas in Britain are often condensed into a weekend affair to ensure most people can attend. Similarly, Durga Pujas in the UK are held indoors in rented halls as opposed to outdoor public spaces like in Bengal. Through these adjustments, Durga Puja festivals in Britain have emerged as the focal point of Hindu Bengali community life where

diasporic Bengalis come together, worship the goddess, cultivate ethnic social networks, consume Bengali food and sweets, and participate in Bengali cultural performances, thereby directing ethnic place-making in multi-ethnic Britain and reinforcing their religious and ethnic identities.

Ethnographic studies have documented similar efforts made by Hindu Bengalis in the United States and elsewhere in Europe to organise diasporic Durga Puja festivals. McDermott's (2011) ethnography of Durga Puja festivals in the New York and New Jersey area found that Hindu Bengalis invested a great deal of effort in creating an 'authentic' experience, for instance through the consumption of Bengali food and by flying in Bengali priests from India to perform the rituals. At the same time, they had to depart from tradition in some respects: for example, they staged the Puja indoors in community centres and church halls and reused their idol made of durable materials since water pollution laws do not allow clay Durga idols to be immersed in water bodies post-Puja. Similarly, based on his research in a California-based Durga Puja, Banerji (2019) argues that the festival as a social drama facilitates the performance of a transnational Bengali identity through religious engagements, which provides much needed lifeblood to the community by linking new and existing members of the diaspora and educating the US-born diasporic children about their Hindu Bengali heritage. Similar narratives of Durga Puja have been captured by others in different parts of North America and Europe, which highlight the salience of this festival for Hindu Bengali community life in the diaspora (Sardella 2020; Montes and Goddeeris 2020; Luchesi 2020).

The career of the goddess Durga across time and space bears testimony to the way many well-known Hindu goddesses have undergone transformations, travelling to new geographical locations and adapting new forms of worship and iconography to meet the ever-changing needs of devotees (Padma 2014; Waghorne 2004). Indeed, Durga has over the centuries been associated with devotees of various background from peasants to warriors to city dwellers and these earlier manifestations have now been subsumed to cast her as 'one great transcendent goddess' (Padma 2014, 9) who incorporates innumerable lesser-known goddesses. Moreover, as Pintchman (2014, 90) has shown, when Hindu goddesses linked to a specific region in India travel oversees 'a form of locative religiosity' is constructed which is grounded in Indian vernacular traditions but which at the same time alters those traditions in dialogue with the new diasporic setting. These transformations are not only geographical or cultural but are also classed. In twenty-first-century India the resurgence of popular religion in the urban public sphere has largely been spearheaded by the middle-class, whose concerted efforts have led to the gentrification of shrines, construction of new temples, and the reanimation of various deities and rituals within cities (Moodie 2019; Waghorne 2004). The prominence of these self-consciously middle-class devotees is based not only on their economic clout but also on their ability to be 'cultural entrepreneurs' (Joshi 2001). As these middle-class professionals have migrated to the global north, they have brought into being patterns of transnational religion predicated on the 'globalization of more localised … traditions' (Waghorne 2004, 172; also see Banerji 2019; Rayaprol 2017). However, as Waghorne (2019) has recently pointed out, this intersection of middle-classness and lived religion among Hindus is woefully under-theorised. Similarly, gender plays a key role in the way rituals are staged within Hindu festivals (Pintchman 2010), and the way cultural reproduction through religion is engineered in the diaspora

(Rayaprol 2017). Studying Durga Puja livestreams in pandemic Britain, mounted by tech-savvy middle-class professionals, offers a unique window into middle-class religiosity in the diaspora and the way gender and caste inflect it.

For more than two decades now, scholars of religion have documented the way diasporic communities such as Hindus in Western Europe and North America have seized the affordances of the internet for mediated presence in religious rituals and for the cultivation of religious networks over long distances (Srinivas 2018; Karapanagiotis 2013; Scheifinger 2008). Diasporic Durga Puja organisers too have exploited digital media technologies to reach out to fellow Hindu Bengalis and build community. For example, most Durga Puja organising groups in the UK today have websites or social media accounts through which they recruit new members, spread the word about their festival dates and put out videos and photos of their events. For the past few years, the website of a community group called 'Indian Bengalis in [the] UK' (IBUK) has hosted an interactive yearly 'UK Durga Puja Map', created using Google Maps, which provides details of the various Durga Puja festivals being held in the UK that year. These practices point to the long-standing process of mediatisation of Durga Puja festivals going back to at least 1998 when five Kolkata-based software companies launched websites for dedicated coverage of the Durga Puja festival in the city, which attracted tens of thousands of virtual visitors from abroad (Banerjee 1998). By early 2000s, there were at least twenty-five websites focused solely on Durga Puja that targeted diasporic Bengalis and contained puja schedules, special recipes, e-greeting cards, slide shows of Kolkata Puja pandals, Puja songs and videos and elaborate instructions for various Durga Puja rituals (Andersson 2007). More recently, this interface between Durga Puja festival and digital media has expanded and assumed greater significance with organising committees regularly using smartphone technologies to communicate with each other and with priests and artisans, while the affordances of journalistic, entertainment and social media platforms are being optimised for advertising and broadcasting of audio-visuals of the festival to Bengalis across India and the global diaspora (De and Nandi 2020; Zeiler 2018). Indeed, technologies such as webcams and other audio-visual tools and engineering innovations have been incorporated into religious practices across India and the diaspora. As Srinivas (2018) argues, the incorporation of technologies in Hindu religious contexts not only foments ritual innovation but these technologies are actively engaged by religious subjects as tools for the creation of intersubjective experiences. The insertion of technology within Hindu ritual practices, therefore, calls for renewed attention to materiality as a vital religious category which has historically been eschewed in the study of religion in favour of the immaterial domain of ideas, beliefs and doctrines which cast religion outside history and the material realm (Pintchman 2015).

Researching diasporic Durga Puja in a pandemic

This article is based on a wider project about UK-based Durga Puja festivals and the COVID-19 pandemic that I conducted between October and December 2020, supported by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The digital ethnographic approach I adopted for this study entailed participant observation of Durga Puja livestreams followed by remote interviews with Puja organisers. According to the 'Indian Bengalis in UK' website, around seventy Durga Puja festivals are held across the UK,

but in 2020 a number of Pujas were cancelled because of the pandemic and it is difficult to estimate the exact number of blended Pujas held. For this project, I approached thirty Durga Puja organising groups from across England, Wales and Scotland that mounted a Puja in the autumn of 2020 through their website or official social media pages, out of which twenty-two agreed to participate. The livestreams of these twenty-two UK-based Durga Pujas were publicly available and most organisers later uploaded the full video from each day of the festival to their YouTube channel or Facebook page. When they agreed to take part, the groups nominated one or two committee members to participate in the interview which was conducted remotely over the telephone or, in some cases, via the video conferencing platform Microsoft Teams. The names of participants used here are pseudonyms.

My own identity played a key role in this project, in terms of reaching out to potential study participants and shaping the data that I generated. Like all the committee members I interviewed, I had grown up in a middle-class family in urban West Bengal and this shared ethnic-linguistic background facilitated my access to these diasporic groups. It also helped establish a rapport with my participants despite the remote nature of the interview. Further, my own lived experience of Durga Puja in Bengal helped me better understand the key religious tropes that my participants liberally used during the interview.

Besides this digital ethnographic project, I also build on the insights I gained through a previous study into Indian diasporic families wherein I visited multiple in-person Durga Puja festivals in and around London between 2016 and 2019 and also participated in several UK-based Bengali Facebook groups. My previous experiences of attending and researching these festival spaces in pre-pandemic times offered a comparative framework to fully contextualise the changes and continuities present in the blended Durga Puja festivals of pandemic Britain.

In what follows, I illuminate the way the COVID-19 pandemic re-shaped the discursive and material practices around diasporic Durga Puja festivals in Britain by focusing on three key aspects: organisational challenges, the spatial–temporal dimensions of blended Puja, and the way power relations within the diaspora played out in this context.

Planning a Puja in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic

Staging a Durga Puja festival in the diaspora is complex and time-consuming. It requires the effort of multiple people and the procurement of entities such as the image of the goddess and relevant votive ingredients most of which are not readily available in the UK. While for certain Hindu groups like Gujaratis, Punjabis and Tamils, mass religious festivals are organised in their respective community-centric temples that have been established in major UK cities over the last few decades (see David 2008; Waghorne 2004; Vertovec 1992), Hindu Bengali religious festivals are mostly organised outside institutional structures by informal community groups that are run by unpaid volunteers with full-time jobs. The greatest concentration of these community groups is in London, where a few dozen Durga Pujas are held every year. The Durga Puja organising committees in the UK differ in size and levels of structural formality, but they have all developed their own blueprints for how to conduct the Durga Puja festival in their locality in terms of selecting a venue, and the procurement of idols, votive materials and priest from India.

The Durga Puja organisational blueprints developed over the years in the diaspora were stretched to their limits by the pandemic. Durga Pujas in community halls with scores of people in attendance could no longer take place in the autumn of 2020 because of the COVID-19 restrictions imposed by the UK government. At the time, different parts of the UK were under different sets of restrictions and the government was particularly worried about the second wave of the pandemic. The list of restrictions and regions were constantly updated by the government in light of the latest data. Consequently Durga Puja organisers could no longer draw on their established blueprint. All the organisers I interviewed described a sense of uncertainty in the face of the changing government restrictions. At the same time, they wanted to carry on with their yearly autumnal worship of the goddess. To do so, from spring 2020 onwards they started planning for various contingencies and multiple plans were drawn up for each scenario. The worship of the goddess, the organisers believed, was particularly relevant now since praying to her could help defeat the virus and hold the community together in this difficult time.

Mukul, a business executive, is part of the organising committee of one of the biggest Durga Puja festivals in London. When I interviewed him, he described the approach he and his committee members took vis-à-vis the planning of the puja in the middle of the pandemic:

> We usually book our halls 12 months in advance, so it was booked in advance … But as the ebbs and flows of the government guidelines happened, we constantly had to think through the scenarios. By August … we had four scenarios outlined from a completely full Puja to a completely virtual Puja, so those were the two extremes. We ended up somewhere in between, where we did a physical Puja with a virtual angle to it, which was scenario B to be honest. *(Telephone interview; October, 2020)*

Similarly, others spoke at length about the back-and-forth nature of the planning for the 2020 Durga Puja. Amlan, a subsea engineer, leads the organisation of a Durga Puja festival in Scotland. In his area, there are a few dozen Bengalis from both West Bengal and Bangladesh who have formed an association to celebrate Durga Pujas every autumn in a hired community hall. Below he reflects on how his organising team approached the planning of the 2020 puja.

> We [the organising committee] had a Zoom meeting and we basically discussed what to do … We hired a hall. Later on, we realised that there was no way we can organise a puja in the hall. And the regulations were getting stricter and stricter by the day. So, the only way we could do it was as a digital Durga Puja. *(Telephone interview; December, 2020)*

The changing nature of government restrictions created a constant sense of uncertainty among the organisers. Many felt stressed and spoke of 'hectic' schedules and the feeling of being 'rushed off the feet' in having to continually modify plans to accommodate new public health measures. As a northern England-based organiser put it 'Because the [COVID-19] situation was so sort of fluid … all the planning was also fluid'. Another organiser from southern England confessed during an interview via MS Teams: 'This was a very difficult Puja for us, I must say. We had to take one day at a time towards the end.' Several instances of COVID-19 infection among friends and family also impacted the organisation of the festival. A large number of organisers were medical doctors who have treated COVID-19 patients, and others had to start

working from home because of the pandemic. Nevertheless, a large number of Durga Pujas in Britain did go ahead amidst the pandemic. These modified, blended forms of Durga Puja were undergirded by the subjective significance the Puja holds for many Hindu Bengalis. Keshab, who is a medical doctor and a Brahmin, acts as a priest during Durga Puja. In 2020, he conducted the worship of the goddess from his conservatory and livestreamed it to friends and family. In acknowledging the organisational challenges, he described the pandemic as a 'spiritual challenge' as well, insofar as it was 'test from her [goddess Durga] that can you overcome all of this and yet reach out to me and complete your Puja?'. In a similar vein, Mithun, a retired civil servant who has been organising Durga Puja festivals in the English Midlands for the last forty years, said: 'Maa [Mother] Durga came as far as we know for the welfare of mankind. What would be most significant than doing a Puja this year when mankind is faced with COVID and where the blessings of Maa Durga is more immediate than perhaps any other'. Indeed, the Durga mythology describes the goddess as a boon giver and as a mother figure who protects earthlings from danger. This mythology assumed new meaning, with Durga as a Mother being worshipped to eradicate the evil that is the COVID-19 pandemic. Kharaj, who is a clinical psychiatrist by profession and a Brahmin, took on the role of priest for a community Durga Puja in London. When he conducted the *anjali* (a prayer to the goddess where devotees repeat the hymns after the priest) over Zoom, he highlighted a mantra which refers to illnesses and pandemics. He later told me over the telephone:

> Pandemics have happened in the past. One of the *anjali* mantras uses the phrase "*horo mari*" where "*mari*" means pandemic. I was pointing it out to the audience that "*mari*" has been around for a long time; it's nothing new. So, we are praying to Maa Durga to liberate us from the "*mari*".

The *anjali* hymn he referred to was *horo rogo, horo khobo, horo mari* which roughly translates as 'liberate us from illness, liberate us from grief, liberate us from epidemics'; a supplication to the goddess. While this mantra has been chanted in pre-pandemic Pujas as well, it assumed an immediacy in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic therefore not only prompted organisers to adopt a new form of festival organisation; it also lent newer connotations and significance to the cult of the goddess. In Bengal, several community Pujas in 2020 commissioned idols of Mahisasur in the form of 'Coronasur' (Das 2020), with the head of the demon resembling the outline of the novel coronavirus, being slayed by the goddess Durga, herself depicted in some pandals as a doctor (Sinha and Kundu 2020). These re-interpretations of Durga as a contagion goddess by Hindu Benglis in India and the diaspora builds on existing Hindu practices where for centuries goddesses have been called upon to cure diseases and pandemics, with many of them becoming a part of everyday religious worship. For example, despite the eradication of smallpox its dedicated deity Sitala is still worshipped in Bengal to prevent a set of other infectious diseases (Ferrari 2010). Although traditionally worshipped by lower caste, rural and other marginalised communities, the contagion goddesses have been merged with the Great Goddess and domesticated by upper-caste, middle-class Hindus (Srinivas 2020). Echoing these trends, Durga was conscripted by diasporic Hindu Bengalis in the collective fight against COVID-19.

Re-aligning temporalities and spatialities

In autumn 2020, the majority of Hindu Bengali groups in the UK did their Puja in a private venue such as the living room of the priest and livestreamed the ritual worship through their social media channels using videoconferencing platforms like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and StreamYard. The remaining held their Puja in large indoor spaces and instituted a time slot booking system whereby people pre-booked blocks of time and physically attended the Puja for a limited time with strict physical distancing rules in place and no more than six people were present in the venue at the same time. Even then, the rituals performed by the priest were livestreamed for those who could not attend in-person. Both kinds of blended puja tied together multiple spatialities and temporalities in ways that illuminate the 'religious social shaping of technology'
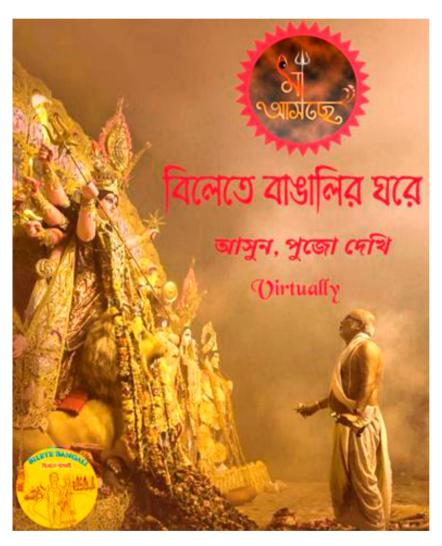

Figure 2. Bilete Bangali Durga Puja 2020 poster (Source: Bilete Bangali official Facebook page, 1 October 2020).

(Campbell 2010) and the nature of diasporic lived religion characterised by adaptation of ritual practices and creative efforts at building community (Mellquist Lehto 2020; Smart 1987).

One UK-based organising group named *Bilete Bangali* (literally, Overseas Bengalis) communicated their decision to host a blended Puja to their members through a poster which announced: 'In the homes of overseas Bengalis, come let's watch the Puja virtually' - thus weaving together the domestic/private and the virtual/public Figure 2.

Yet another group, *Essex Indians*, run mostly by Hindu Bengalis, published a poster entitled 'Pandemic & Pujo' with an image of the goddess Durga and her son Ganesh wearing oxygen masks. On either side of the image public health guidelines were arranged in the form of a *chandmala* (a decorative item of paper discs and strings often put on deities in Bengal). The appeal to save the UK's publicly funded National Health Service (NHS) by following government advice grounded this blended Puja in its national context. The emphasis that although the 'Puja is virtual' the 'prayer is real' underscore the long-established trend among Hindu devotees of considering digital representations of gods and goddesses as ontologically real forms of the divine and no less valid than materially cast ones (Karapanagiotis 2013) Figure 3.
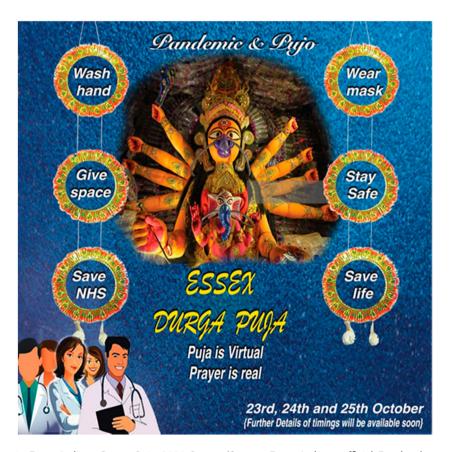

Figure 3. Essex Indians Durga Puja 2020 Poster (Source: Essex Indians official Facebook page, 21 October 2020).

In Wales, one of the main Durga Puja organising groups decided to hold their Durga worship in the attic of a hired house where only the priest and his wife were present. The whole ceremony was then livestreamed on the group's public Facebook page. During her telephonic interview with me, Ruby, who is a medical doctor by profession and one of the key organisers for this Puja, described the geographies of the blended Puja she helped stage in 2020:

> The priest came forward and offered to do the puja. Now the question was, where to do the puja? So, we hired a house where the priest and his wife will be there. And then we decided to share our puja on Facebook and YouTube Live via the StreamYard platform … The puja was to start on Friday. Unfortunately, the country went into lockdown from six o'clock - literally the moment the priest and his wife were checking into the venue. *(Telephone interview; November, 2020)*

In the livestreamed video, the priest – a retired lawyer – can be seen sitting on the floor with a *namabali* (a sacred piece of saffron robe with Sanskrit hymns inscribed on it) draped over his body, worshipping a small metal statuette of goddess Durga and her children with hymns and votive offerings. Beside the statuette was placed a still photograph of the Durga idol they have used in previous years at their usual in-person community Durga Puja festival. At regular intervals, the priest's wife would bring in a fresh supply of flowers and other votive materials, and he would turn to the camera and explain the Sanskrit hymns in English. While according to the Hindu Bengali calendar, the Durga Puja in 2020 spanned from Thursday 22nd to Monday 26th October, these organisers in Wales much like previous years had condensed the five days of worship into a three-day weekend Puja. This practice of reconciling the Hindu Bengali lunisolar calendar and the British working week is long established in the diaspora, and it enables more people to attend the Puja.

Organisers like Ruby ship durable fibreglass Durga idols from Kolkata and reuse them for three to five years. However, owing to logistical difficulties, in 2020 they decided not to bring out the heavy human-sized idol from the paid storage facility where it is kept all year round and instead the priest used a miniature metal statuette for worship. By placing a photograph of their idol from previous year's Puja, the organisers connected their Puja's history in Wales to the current pared-back Puja in the pandemic and established a sense of temporal and spatial continuity. The staging of the Puja in the attic of the rented house, which in turn was transmitted into people's living rooms through digital technology, demonstrate the shifting geographies of the Durga Puja festival which first began in Bengal as a domestic festival in the homes and palaces of the elite, and then became a public-facing community festival only from the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century onwards (McDermott 2011), and was now being undertaken in a blended space incorporating the physical and the digital, the private (of domestic space), as well as the virtually accessible public. Moreover, two additional temporal demands are evident in Ruby's account: what can be described as *pandemic temporality* (marked by lockdown timings and length of the pandemic for example) and the *synchronous digital time* of livestreams which Hindu Bengalis all over Wales watched and participated in. The livestreamed Puja not only reconciled competing temporalities – Hindu lunisolar calendar, British working week, lockdown times, live broadcast, past and present Pujas – it also connected multiple places and spaces. While the Puja

happened in one place, people were engaging with it live from their living rooms and participating in the *anjali*s. In one Puja in Scotland, the ritual event itself was distributed across geographical locations – the idol was offered flowers and food in the organiser's living room in the north of Scotland while the priest, who could not fly into Scotland from Kolkata (India) because of travel restrictions, performed the ritual practices in Kolkata over a *ghat* (sanctified jar) and the two events were broadcast simultaneously on the Facebook page of the group. This of course demanded coordination of time zones. In another pandemic Durga Puja in central England, *anjali*s were offered over Zoom by people based in different parts of the UK, the United States, and even India. In the meantime, in West Bengal, the Calcutta High Court ruled that no in-person *anjali*s can be offered to the goddess Durga in community Puja pandals to curb the spread of the virus (Chattoraj 2020). Without this opportunity of giving *anjali*s at their regular neighbourhood *pandal*, many people from West Bengal whose relatives and friends organise Durga Pujas in the UK took part in Zoom *anjali* at UK-based Pujas. As one organiser in London told me:

> We had *anjali*s over Zoom on all three days of our puja. People from the US, and various European countries like France, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and even people from India registered online and we sent them a Zoom link in advance which let them take part in *anjali*s. *(Telephone interview; December, 2020)*

Other Puja organisers used different platforms like Facebook Live on their official Facebook page to hold the *anjali* sessions. Those joining in used the 'comments' section to communicate with the organisers during the session, and often expressed their gratitude to the organising group for holding the Puja despite the pandemic and for giving them the opportunity to take part from the comfort of their home. Those watching live used folded hands emojis and flower emojis in their comments as proxies for physical prayers and flowers that are usually offered to the goddess at the end of each part of the *anjali* – indeed, *anjali*s are often called *pushpanjoli* in Bengali where *pushpa* means flowers. One of these Facebook Live participants, a Kolkata resident, wrote in the comment section in Bengali script 'It's wonderful that even in this pandemic the Puja is taking place. I am very happy to be able to take part in your Puja despite living so far away'. While it is well documented that at least since late 1990s the Bengali diaspora has used the internet to consume photos, videos and other content about Durga Puja festivals held in Kolkata (Andersson 2007; Banerjee 1998), the above instances point to a new development during the pandemic where this relationship was inverted and people living in India were taking part in and consuming audio-visuals of UK-based Durga Puja festivals as their own neighbourhood Puja remained out of bounds because of the High Court order mentioned earlier.

The way the blended Pujas played out in pandemic Britain also demonstrate that digital technologies, far from determining religious practices, were themselves being shaped and put to novel uses by religious subjects. Zoom was launched as an assumedly secular video conferencing platform, meant to hold meetings. Diasporic Durga Puja organisers mobilised the affordances of Zoom for interactive prayers and *anjali*s in ways that the platform was never designed for, just as many participants on Facebook Live used emojis of folded hands and flowers to mirror the physical acts of *anjali*. Through these practices both the producers and consumers of blended Durga Pujas

blurred the distinctions between the physical and the virtual and integrated the use of digital technology with existing practices of in-person worship, contributing to the 'religious social shaping' of these technologies (Campbell 2010). While Campbell's (2010) thesis centred around 'new media' technologies that are no longer new and there is now a considerable history of digital media's usage in religious practices, not least in Hindu pujas and festivals (see Karapanagiotis 2013; Scheifinger 2008), the premise of the 'religious social shaping of technology' is useful in unpacking how the affordances of contemporary digital media technologies are being exploited by religious groups like diasporic Hindu Bengalis and deployed in ways that are coherent with their liturgies and cosmologies.

While the affordances of digital technologies were integrated with established mores of in-person worship, not all embodied and sensory practices could be transported online. Organisers and participants negotiated their way around the embodied and the disembodied, the (mediated) presence and the (physical) absence, to supplement the 'blended' Puja with certain embodied sensory experiences of touch, smell and taste wherever such opportunities could be seized depending on public health directives and logistics. Many organisers arranged for packed *bhog* (blessed food offerings) to be physically transported on Puja days to members who live within driving distance. Another ritual called *Sindoor khela* is usually performed by married women on the last day of the Puja where they put *sindoor* (vermilion) on the goddess and on each other. In 2020, Hindu Bengali women in Britain put sindoor on themselves while on Zoom calls with fellow diasporic women, and many had a picture or statuette of Durga in front to physically apply *sindoor* on the goddess. One Puja committee in England even 'trapped' the sacred heat of *hom* (fire ceremony) performed in the organiser's living room in aluminium foils and sent it to members by post. In these ways, certain embodied, sensory practices were incorporated into the overall festival to supplement the 'blended' rituals and enhance the experience of the Puja.

(Un)Doing social hierarchies in pandemic pujas

The UK-based Durga Puja organising groups I researched are headed by middle-class professionals who volunteer their time to create and nurture these organisations and organise community events such as Durga Puja. Their social class location reflects the fact that the UK's immigration regime has over the past three decades allowed mostly middle-class professionals or so-called 'skilled workers' in the knowledge-based economy to apply for work visas and settle in the country. The majority of the organisers I interviewed worked in sectors like medicine, academia, banking, IT, and software who migrated to the UK between ten and twenty years ago. As evident from their excerpts earlier, they bring their work-related organisational, IT and project-management skills to their volunteering role in Durga Pujas. For pandemic blended Pujas, these IT-savvy middle-class professionals created contingency plans for the festival using spreadsheets and made the technological arrangements for the smooth livestreaming of the rituals. Moreover, unlike the vast numbers of precariously employed people in the UK, these middle-class professionals, even those classed as key workers during the pandemic, had more control over their work schedules and were able to get a few days of leave from work to help with the Puja. These class privileges and resources were instrumental in making the Puja happen.

In the 2020 livestreamed Pujas, the focal point was the ritual worship of the goddess and the physical space where it took place was organised around the figure of the Brahmin priest or *purohit* who chanted the hymns and conducted the rituals. Getting a Bengali priest on board, every organiser confessed, is always a big challenge in the UK: they are fewer in number and the demand is high. Unlike many other religions, there is no formal training process for Hindu priests (Smart 1987). It is largely a hereditary right that men born into Brahmin (the highest caste rank) families possess, who then undergo initiation rituals (such as the sacred thread ceremony) to gain the right to act as priests. Women and non-Brahmins are barred from performing the core Durga Puja rituals. In these diasporic Pujas, even amidst a global pandemic, none of the organisers contemplated hosting the Durga worship without a Brahmin priest performing the rituals. Pre-pandemic, many groups flew in priests from Bengal to perform Durga Puja while for other groups, group members who are full-time professionals and happen to be Brahmin men volunteered to act as the priest. One medical doctor, who is a Brahmin, told me that he sourced Durga Puja manuals from India, studied them thoroughly and then acted as the priest at his local Durga Puja. Another Puja committee in southern England postponed their 2020 Puja by a week so that their priest could do their Puja after performing another one the week before. This central importance of the priest reproduces caste hierarchies and normalises the symbolic and religious privilege of the Brahmin man in this context. While the camera focused on the deity and the priest, in the majority of 2020 blended Pujas the priest was accompanied by a woman – either his wife or someone from the organising group – who was at hand, providing the priest with a steady supply of flowers, votive materials, lamps and other paraphernalia required for the smooth conduct of the ritual worship. Rupali, a woman medical doctor and organiser of a Puja in the home counties, recounted during the telephone interview that leading up to the Puja 'every night I went to bed at around three o'clock sorting out who will do what and all those things, so I was completely exhausted [by the end]'. Another woman commented on the Facebook Live feed of a different Puja: 'Abha-*di* [elder sister Abha] is doing all the puja-related work by herself and I cannot help her like previous years; feeling so helpless'. The women cooked the food offered to the goddess and tidied up after each day's Puja. The success of the blended Pujas rested on this gendered labour of women who were largely invisible in the video feeds and occupied the literal margins of the screen. By partaking in female-only rituals and contributing their collective labour to religious ceremonies, Hindu women often cultivate inter-personal bonds with each other as Pintchman (2010) has demonstrated. Indeed, this sense of solidarity and camaraderie is evident in the concern expressed about Abha-*di* above. However, as Rayaprol's (2017) has shown, religious spaces in the Hindu diaspora often posit women as custodians of traditions and as primary agents for the transmission of cultural identities to the next generation which reinforces patriarchal ideals of womanhood and culture. The accounts of blended Durga Pujas in pandemic Britain that I have presented here throw fresh light on the way class-, caste-, and gender-based inequalities operate within the Hindu Bengali diaspora. However, dissolving the need to physically travel to the Puja venue and the use of technology created new opportunities for disrupting hierarchies as well. For example, elderly people who were asked by the government to 'shield' during the high-point of the pandemic, or those too frail to physically travel long distances, or those who do not feel comfortable

in the upper-caste/middle-class/heteronormative family-oriented festival spaces, were able to follow the Puja and take part in *anjali* from the safety of their own home. Bringing the idol home, often to the living rooms of priests and/or (upper-caste) committee members redrew the geographies of community-based diasporic Durga Puja. The blended Puja in these instances were simultaneously *barir puja* and *sarbajanin puja*, both and at the same time domestic, community-based, and public. Moreover, on several occasions, these hybrid livestreamed Pujas inverted the power relation between the homeland and the diaspora, with diasporic Pujas attracting devotees from India. Meanwhile, new hierarchies were erected around technological skills with elderly people including some priests being completely dependent on others to set up the equipment for livestream.

Conclusion

In this article, I have shown how diasporic Hindu Bengalis in Britain dealt with the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic in the autumn of 2020 and staged modified versions of their usual Durga Puja celebrations in keeping with the government mandated public health measures. The snapshot of these blended Durga Pujas that I have provided in this article illuminate issues of organisation, time–space of livestreamed worship, and power hierarchies. These empirical insights contribute to wider debates within the sociology of religion and the study of contemporary Hinduism especially with reference to the cultural politics of diasporic lived religion, mediatisation of Hinduism and the way class and gender shape Hindu diasporic religiosity.

Based on my observation and interview data, I argue that the UK-based blended Durga Pujas of 2020 mark a further development in the ongoing and long-establishment trend of mediatisation of religion among diasporic Hindu Bengalis in Britain rather than being an unprecedented rupture, novelty or indeed a wholly new mode of religiosity. This step-up in the face of a public health emergency resonates with the wider continuum of religious adjustments that characterise diasporic lived religion. Expanding on Smart's (1987) thesis, I contend that diasporas are particularly generative sites for studying the multiple spatialities and temporalities of religious belonging, and ritual continuities and developments during a global pandemic. Indeed, as Mellquist Lehto (2020) notes, the COVID-19 public health advice against physical congregation made all religious communities feel a heightened sense of estrangement and dislocation that religious diasporas have always experienced. Therefore, examining the way diasporic Hindu Bengalis dealt with physical separation, adapted ritual practices and built community amidst the pandemic offers valuable lessons to *all* scholars of lived religion.

Although these blended Pujas were not merely a case of 'crisis-induced digital leap' (Vekemans 2021), they demonstrate how religious actors and their practices actively shape the use of technology in religious contexts as much as technology creates opportunities for religious participation (Srinivas 2018; Campbell 2010). The organisers I spoke to deployed video conferencing platforms initially designed to host 'secular' business meetings for interactive *anjali*s while livestream participants posted emojis of folded hands and flowers in chat boxes to mirror the physical act of in-person *anjali*. Similarly, COVID-19 public health advice was depicted on a digital poster in the form of a *chand-mala*. Meanwhile, certain ritually meaningful sensory practices around *bhog*, *sindoor*

khela, and *hom* were incorporated in modified forms to supplement the 'blended' Puja thus illustrating how pandemic Pujas bridged the physical and the virtual, the private and the public, the embodied and the disembodied. Future research needs to assess the long-term implications of these blended Pujas for the lived religion of Hindu Bengalis in post-pandemic Britain.

This article has also pushed sociological understanding of Hindu Bengali diasporic lived religion in new directions by revealing how class, caste and gender interact and shape festival spaces and practices. Class as a category of analysis is under-developed in the study of contemporary Hinduism (Waghorne 2019) while the role of caste and gender have been long acknowledged as relevant lenses for studying lived religion (Rayaprol 2017). My analysis of middle-class upper-caste Hindu Bengali diaspora in the UK has shed light on how these caste-, class- and gender-based inequalities operate within the Durga Puja festival, including its blended versions in 2020. At the same time, I have pointed to the ways in which power hierarchies within the diaspora and its relation to the country of origin were reconfigured when devotees based in India consumed and participated in the livestreams of UK-based Durga Pujas. Sociologists studying Hindu Bengali diasporic lived religion need to explore these complex interactions further, and chart the way social locations implicate diasporic religious practices in the (post)pandemic world.

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