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Exploring Agricultural Aspects in Durga Puja Rituals in Bengal

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Abstract:

Durga Puja, a significant festival in India which is celebrated in the post-monsoon season has immense cultural, social, and economic significance. This festival fosters farmers a temporary relaxation and cultural engagement from their toilsome agricultural activities. This celebration serves as a platform for community belongingness, exchanging ideas, participating in rituals associated to agriculture, seeking blessings for a prosperous harvest and performing ceremonies related to crop fertility. Further, Durga Puja nurtures economic activities in local markets, indirectly benefiting agriculture by raising demand for agricultural products. Moreover, eco-friendly initiatives, such as utilizing by-products in making idols and pandal decorations, reflects the festival's symbiotic relationship with agriculture and ecological sustainability. This paper focuses on how Durga Puja contributes to the cultural, social, and economic impact on the farmers, nurturing a sense of community bonding and traditions related to agriculture.

Keywords: Durga Puja, Agriculture, Sapta Dhanya, Ghatasthapan, Nabapatrika.

Introduction: Durga Puja festival stands for festivity, social unity and cultural integrity. This festival provides a temporal break in the agricultural calendar in the post-monsoon season by creating a collaboration between cultural heritage and farming traditions. While Durga Puja predominantly symbolizes the triumph of good over evil, its timing during the agricultural calendar provides far-sighted impact on the lives of agrarians.

The celebration of Durga Puja not only marks a cultural tapestry but also presents an interval in the routine of cultivators. Farmers, habituated in the cyclical process of sowing and harvesting, find an interval during this post-monsoon season by accepting respite from their laborious tasks to participate in cultural engagement and social festivities. Beyond this temporal significance, Durga Puja manifests a unique connection between culture and agriculture, integrating traditional practices, rituals and the agrarian way of life.

This paper aims to search the multifaceted aspects of the Durga Puja festival by exploring its impact on agricultural practices and the socio-economic frame of farming occupants. By examining the cultural rituals, economic aspects, and community cohesion associated with

this celebration, we get a deeper understanding in the profound role of this festival in shaping the agrarian life.

By focusing the tradition, festivity and sustainable practices, this research maps the cultural landscape of Durga Puja and its effects on the agricultural canvas through analyzing the connections between culture, rituals, and the never-ending process of agriculture.

Our objectives are:

- 1) To explore the religious and cultural significance of Durga Puja as a commencement of new harvest cycle and its impact on farming households.
- 2) To evaluate how the timing of Durga Puja impacts on the agricultural activities of farming households.
- 3) To identify the seasonal pattern of crop cultivation in India and its influence on Durga Puja.
- 4) To identify the relationship between agriculture and coming and going of goddess Durga in various rides namely elephant, horse, boat and palanquin.
- 5) To explore the significance of various crops and plants in various rituals and ceremonies associated with Durga Puja focusing on agricultural aspects such as fertility, crop protection, and prosperity.
- 6) To analyze economic implications of Durga Puja on local markets and its effects on agricultural income, expenditure patterns and market dynamics for agrarian occupants.
- 7) To examine eco-friendly initiatives practiced in the festival, particularly the use of agricultural by-products in idol making and decorations by assessing their sustainability and environmental impact.

Literature Review: Samaddar (2006) documented how farmers' traditional agricultural and cultural practices have been influenced by the adoption of new agricultural technologies. This concept is discussed in two ways. Firstly, it discusses the level of technological complexity in the villages of West Bengal. Secondly, it discusses how the adoption of technology affects the various agricultural rituals in the villages of West Bengal.

R. K. Bhakat (2008) focuses on how the rituals of Durga Puja have an integral relationship with ecological sustainability, especially with the worship of *Nabapatrika*. This paper also illustrates the symbiotic relationship among religion, environment and conservation.

Walter and Barbate (2014) focuses on the impact of idol immersion made up of non-degradable components and paints containing heavy metals. This work highlights the deterioration of the quality of the river water after idol immersion and its adverse effects in farming.

The study of Sabina Begum (2015) reveals that the impact of the connection of the tribal communities with larger society and the adoption of modern agricultural technology resulted in socio-economic and cultural changes among them.

Singh et. al. (2016) investigated the role of Chhath Puja in conserving tropical fruits. Chhath Puja is a folk festival in Bihar. It combines worship with, biodiversity conservation,

social integrity and local development. The ritual practices of this festival protect tropical fruits, flowers and water bodies. People plant and harvest many types of tropical fruit trees and flower plants in their home garden. This festival occurs on the banks of different water bodies. So water body conservation is also an important aspect of this festival.

The review work of Manas Ray (2017) identifies how a religious festival has been transformed into a public art and enterprise through the evolution of Durga Puja from the elite family to the '*Sarbojanin Durgotsab*' (belonging to all). There is an entire shift from the traditional worship to the contemporary theme-based culture. This shift is associated with pandal structure, idol making, the outer environment, decoration, use of colour and paint, lighting, and even the music and cultural performance.

Pant (2019) suggests that proper organization of Durga Puja may result in the economic growth of India as well as the benefit of the people. Durga Puja is the best time to promote the culture and tradition of Bengal worldwide. Linking this festival with various centrally sponsored schemes may benefit the Indian economy, especially tourism. Further, it may be beneficial for the common people. He aims to provide some suggestions as how Durga Puja can benefit Indian economy optimally and contribute simultaneously for the welfare of the people.

Deb (2021) views the significance of rice in Bengal's culture. Rice cultivation is the backbone of Bengal's agrarian economy. It is not only a staple food in Bengal it is also connected to Bengal's cultural practices, rituals, festivals and ceremonies. The relationship between rice and Bengal culture symbolizes prosperity and auspiciousness.

Analyzing the Relationship between Agriculture and Durga Puja:

Relationship of Durga Puja with Agricultural Calendar in West Bengal: Durga Puja is celebrated in a significant time in agricultural calendar; between the end of the monsoon season and the beginning of the late autumn harvest season in the Indian agricultural calendar. It marks the change from the monsoon to the post-monsoon period when agrarian activities start to switch. More clearly it can be said that Durga Puja occurs in the ending of the kharif crop season and the starting of the rabi crop season. Thus, this festival symbolizes the commencement of the upcoming rabi crop season, especially for crops like Boro rice, pulses, vegetables etc. This time, farmers take a temporal interval from their toilsome agricultural activities and accept respite to participate in the Durga Puja festival before boosting up for the intensive agrarian activities.

Crops	Timing	Duration of Months
Kharif	During monsoon	June-July to October-November
Rabi	Post monsoon	October-November to February-March
Zaid	Summer	February-March to June-July

Table 1: Kharif, Rabi and Zaid crops; their timing and duration of farming

Durga Puja serves as a festival of community engagement, social interaction, and cultural exchange. Villages and towns come close together which not only provides a break for farmers but also a time for cultural exchange among both rural and urban communities. Moreover, Durga Puja signifies the triumph of good over evil. So, farmers perceive this time as auspicious for starting preparations for the next agricultural cycle.

As the monsoon harvests have been sold and it provides earnings to the farmers, they might enjoy their lives during this festival by purchasing new dress, having good food, visiting pandals, etc. In short, the timing of Durga Puja in the Indian agricultural calendar provides a significant cultural, social and psychological relaxation for farmers, pointing the end of one agricultural cycle and the commencement of another agricultural cycle by celebrating the triumph of good over evil.

Significance of Coming and Returning of Goddess Durga to Earth in Agricultural Cycle: It is believed that goddess Durga comes to earth and returns riding four types of vehicles. These vehicles are elephant, horse, boat and palanquin. All four rides have special significance in relation to agriculture. Arrival or departure of goddess Durga on the elephant is a symbol of peace, prosperity and good harvest. It is believed that elephants move spreading water throughout the path.

When goddess Durga arrives or departs riding on the horse, the result is dispersal. This points to social and political unrest. The horse is associated with kings, kingdoms and politics. It also signifies drought and chaos as horse runs very fast through dry land and destroys order.

If Goddess Durga comes or returns in a boat, it increases crops and increases water. If the water rises, there may be flooding. However, if it rains, it can also be a good crop.

When Goddess Durga comes or departs riding on palanquin, it signifies disaster, disease and death as palanquin moves in a swinging way. So, this ride signifies a tumultuous situation.

Again, it is believed that result may be good or bad based on the arriving and departing of goddess Durga riding on the respective animals or vehicles. However, these beliefs don't have scientific reason but agrarian people believe these.

Coming Vehicle	Believed Outcome	Going Vehicle	Believed Outcome
Elephant	Good harvest	Elephant	Good harvest
Horse	Drought and chaos	Horse	End of drought and chaos
Boat	Flood	Boat	Good harvest
Palanquin	Disaster and death	Palanquin	End of Disaster and death

Table 2: Coming and going of goddess Durga on various vehicles and their believed result

Significance of *Sapta Dhanya* in Durga Puja: Durga Puja celebrated during Autumn Season is also known as *Akal Bodhan*. It means this Durga Goddess is invoked and worshipped before the actual schedule, that is the Spring Season, which is commonly known as *Basanti* Durga Puja.

Before the actual worshipping, a pot (ghat) filled with soil and seven types of grains is worshipped in *Akal Bodhan*. These seven grains, namely, Barley, Sesame, Rice, Moong Gram, Millet, Chickpea, and Wheat as shown in Figure 1 are commonly known as *Sapta Dhanya*. This ritual is known as *Ghatasthapan*. These terms and all other terms derived from Sanskrit are italicized throughout the paper. They signify the commencement of a new agrarian cycle and upcoming harvest. An example of ghat used as part of *Ghatasthapan* is shown in Figure 2.



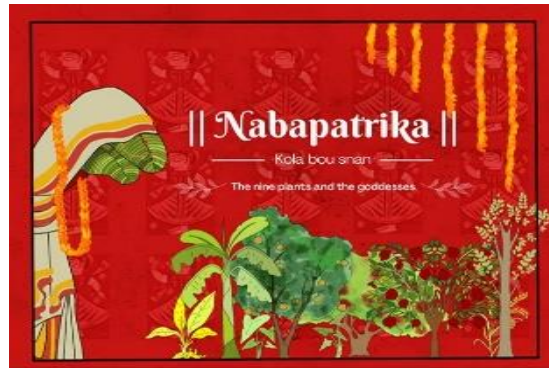
Figure 1: *Sapta Dhanya*: the seven grains used in *Ghatasthapan*

Each of these seven grains is surely either Kharif crop or Rabi crop. We have prepared the type of the crops of the corresponding grains and shown in Table 3. These two crops are cultivated surrounding Durga puja festival. Therefore, they are used in the *Sapta Dhanya*.

<i>Sapta Dhanya</i>	Kharif Crop	Rabi Crop
Barley	No	Yes
Sesame	Yes (North India)	Yes (South India)
Rice	Yes	Yes
Moong Gram	Yes	No
Millet	Yes	No
Chickpea	No	Yes
Wheat	No	Yes

Table 3: Classification of *Sapta Dhanya* according to the categories of Kharif and Rabi crop

Significance of *Nabapatrika* in Durga Puja: There is another ritual named *Nabapatrika* (Figure 2) which is commonly known as *Kala bou* in West Bengal, which represents goddess Durga herself in her natural existence in plants. In this ritual nine varieties of plants namely Wood-apple, Mankachu, Arum, Turmeric, Jayanti, Pomegranate, Asoke, Paddy, and Banana are tied together with blue butterfly pea plant before starting of the *Saptami* puja. *Nabapatrika* is covered with a sari and dipped into fresh water. This ritual signifies the power of unity, ecological sustainability, prosperity, fertility and the optimism for abundant harvest.

*Ghatasthapan**Nabapatrika***Figure 2:** The two important rituals in Durga Puja

The cultural significance of various seeds and plants in various rituals of Durga Puja is deeply rooted to agriculture, fertility, prosperity, seasonal cycle and ecological sustainability.

Importance of Durga Puja in the Economic Benefits of the Farmers: Durga puja generates economic activities in local markets. Farmers economically benefit from the increased demand for crops and other agricultural products and goods during this festive season. This demand creates opportunities for farmers to sell their products at desired prices as well as engaging in additional earning activities such as opening temporary food stalls surrounding the pandals and benefit their overall earning during the festive period.

In rural Bengal, agrarian people work as temporary pandal artists, self-taught idol makers or *dhakis* (drum players) during the seasonal intervals. So, Durga Puja provides them opportunity to showcase their talent besides farming. It also provides them additional income to improve lives and social status.

Fish farmers economically benefit from the increased demand for fish during this festive season. Fish is a staple food for Bengalis. In many familial Durga Puja, the deity is offered fish along with vegetables, dairy products and other cooked foods. Moreover, many temporary food stalls are set up surrounding the pandals where varieties of fish items are

available. It increases demand for fish. Thus, fish farmers increase their earnings during the Durga Puja.

During Durga Puja there is always a demand of varieties of flowers for worshipping, idol decoration, pandal decoration etc. Flowers such as lotus, marigold, jasmine, night-queen have special demand during this festival. Flower farming creates economic opportunities for farmers. The demand of specific flowers during this festive season increases incomes for the farmers. Additionally, sustainable farming practices, such as organic methods and water conservation can be employed by flower farmers. Organic cultivation of native and seasonal flowers may contribute to environmental conservation.

During Durga Puja there is always an increased demand of milk and dairy products like paneer, curd, ghee, butter etc. Farming communities who are also engaged with cattle husbandry can earn additional income during this festival.

Women from the farming household make various handicrafts by using agricultural by-products. These handicrafts are a source of extra income as well as hobby in leisure time. During Durga Puja the demand of handicrafts increases for pandal decoration. Women earn this time by selling their handicrafts directly to the Durga Puja Committees.

McDermott (2011) has discussed the economic benefits of higher society or elite people from such Shakti Puja festivals like Durga Puja, Kali Puja, Jagaddharti Puja, etc. Nicholas (2013) discussed the importance of Durga Puja for the landholding families for their ruthless collection of revenues.

Agricultural By-products used in Idol Making and Pandal Decoration: Various agricultural by-products are widely used in making idols and pandal decoration as shown in Figure 3. These materials are eco-friendly and have cultural, significance. Artistic and sociological significance of Durga Puja is explored by Rai (2022). As discussed by Guha-Thakurta (2015), skilled artisans and craftsmen create the supporting structures of the idols by using bi-products like bamboos and wooden sticks. These eco-friendly materials like bamboos, wooden sticks, jutes, coconut ropes are also used in making the framework of the pandals.



Figure 3: Structure of Pandal and Idol

These structures of idols are further covered with paddy straw to give the shape to the idols. Paddy straw, being a bio-product, eco-friendly and sustainable product is used as an alternative to synthetic materials like clay or plaster of Paris. Plaster of Paris is a non-biodegradable product which causes water pollution after the immersion by releasing toxic substances. As paddy straw is a biodegradable product it naturally decomposes and causes less pollution to the environment after the immersion. This eco-friendly practice echoes the sustainability and reverence for nature. It promotes awareness about environmental conservation and reflects cultural values. Overall, the use of paddy straw in framing Durga idol emphasizes the eco-friendly traditions during the festivals like Durga Puja.

Art of idol-making materials includes clay, paper, *shola* (Indian cork), cloth, wood, bamboo, colours, etc. Clay is a primary and traditional material for creating the idols of Durga. Symbolically, the clay stands for Mother Earth by emphasizing the eco-friendly aspect of the festival.

Various crop grains, jute sticks, cane sticks, variety of leaves, flowers are extensively used for idol and pandal decorations. Coconut shells are now-a-days used to make the face of the idols instead of plaster of Paris. Rice powder, natural dyes, floral dyes and floral paints are widely used in *rangoli* decoration inside pandals. See Figure 4.



Figure 4: Coconut shell being used in idol face and flowers in *rangoli* decoration

These agricultural by-products and natural materials contribute to the eco-friendly and sustainable nature of Durga Puja Decorations as well as symbolizing cultural and traditional values associated with agriculture, prosperity, and reverence for nature.

Conclusion: By examining the multifaceted aspects of Durga Puja in relation to agriculture, this paper highlights a tapestry of cultural heritage, sustainable practices, and socio-economic dynamics. The timing of Durga Puja in relation to agricultural calendar marks not just a festival but a temporal interval in the laborious works of farming households. This interval provides farmers a moment of relaxation, fostering community engagement, cultural, ritual and social interactions that are integral part to their agrarian identities.

Various rituals of Durga Puja are tied to agriculture, fertility, prosperity, protection of crops and sustenance of livelihood. Moreover, the economic impacts of Durga Puja influence

agricultural incomes, expenditures, market dynamics and socio-economic landscape of farming families.

The eco-conscious initiatives through the use of agricultural bi-products in idol-making and decorations provides environmental sustainability. These practices not only honour the cultural traditions but also reflect a harmonious coexistence with nature.

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