



Durga Puja Heritage in Assam: A Study

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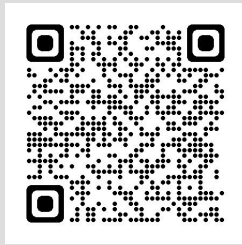
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Abstract: Durga Puja, one of the most significant festivals in eastern India, has acquired distinctive dimensions in Assam. While its ritual essence follows pan-Indian traditions of goddess worship, its cultural expressions in Assam reflect deep regional identity, blending Vaishnavite influences, Assamese art forms, and modern innovations. This paper examines the heritage of Durga Puja in Assam by tracing its historical development, ritual practices, and contemporary transformations. It highlights how puja committees, artisans, and communities collaborate to preserve tradition while embracing thematic creativity. The study also addresses challenges of commercialization, environmental concerns, and heritage conservation. By situating Durga Puja within Assam's socio-cultural matrix, the paper argues that the festival serves as a living heritage that negotiates between continuity and change, spirituality and spectacle, tradition and modernity.

Keywords: Durga Puja, Assam, heritage, rituals, cultural identity, sustainability

Introduction

Durga Puja, the grand autumnal worship of Goddess Durga, is celebrated across India with regional variations. In Assam, the festival has evolved into a powerful cultural event that reflects both religious devotion and social solidarity. While Bengal has historically been considered the heartland of Durga Puja, Assamese traditions of goddess worship date back centuries, often linked with Shakta practices, royal patronage under the Ahoms, and localized folk expressions (Mahanta, 2018; Sharma, 2020). Today, Durga Puja in Assam combines devotion, artistry, and community engagement, making it a vital part of the state's intangible cultural heritage.

This study aims to explore Durga Puja in Assam as heritage: a living tradition that integrates ritual, performance, and community identity. It examines historical continuities, artistic practices, and contemporary challenges, including commercialization and ecological concerns.

Historical Background of Durga Puja in Assam

The earliest records of goddess worship in Assam can be traced to pre-Ahom times, with temples dedicated to Kamakhya in Guwahati and other Shakta shrines providing evidence of a rich tradition of Devi worship. Archaeological excavations have uncovered sculptures of ten-armed Durga and lion-riding Durga from the 9th to 13th centuries, testifying to a long-standing tradition

of goddess worship in the region (Sentinel Assam, 2025). According to the Kalika Purana, Kamakhya Dham is considered the supreme pilgrimage site for Goddess Durga, with its unique Tantric traditions highlighting distinctive characteristics of Shakti worship in the region (Kamakhya Temple Organization, 2025).

Historical records indicate that in 1614 CE, King Bali Narayan of Darrang performed the first recorded Durga Puja in Assam (Sentinel Assam, 2025). The Ahom kings (13th–19th century) patronized Durga Puja along with other Hindu rituals, integrating it into the socio-political life of the region. King Rudra Singha initiated the grand tradition of royally-sponsored Durga Puja at Gargaon, later moving it to Rongpur and then to the Burhi Gosani Devalaya in Jorhat, which has been meticulously observed for four centuries (Times of India, 2024).

This historical trajectory shows how Durga Puja in Assam was not a mere imitation of Bengal but a localized practice shaped by Assam's socio-cultural conditions (Myind.net, 2023). Local chronicles and district gazetteers often mention the popularity of autumnal pujas, indicating their deep-rooted presence in Assamese society.

Ritual Practices and Cultural Expressions

Durga Puja in Assam follows the classical ritual cycle beginning with Mahalaya, the invocation of the goddess, and culminating in Vijayadashami, the immersion of idols. However, Assamese pujas display regional flavors:

Idol-making: Clay artisans (kumars) often incorporate Assamese motifs such as jaapi (traditional conical hat) or motifs inspired by satriya art. Recent innovations include eco-friendly approaches, such as artisan Pradip Kumar Ghosh's creation of idols using unconventional materials like expired papad, vegetables, and plastic bottles to promote environmental awareness (India Today NE, 2025).

Pandals: The temporary structures housing the idols often depict Assamese heritage—tea gardens, Namghars, satras, and bamboo crafts. Thematic pandals now design concepts around themes such as Sankaradeva's life, ecological awareness, or national heritage, bringing global recognition while fostering healthy competition (Bhadra, 2019).

Community activities: Alongside rituals, cultural evenings featuring bhaona-inspired dramas and Bihu dance performances are staged. Bihu dance, the most renowned folk dance of Assam, symbolizes youthful vigor and fertility, with performances accompanied by traditional instruments like dhol, pepa, and gogana (Government of Assam, 2024).

Cuisine: The distribution of bhog reflects Assamese culinary traditions, blending rice, pulses, and fish, creating a distinctive regional identity within the pan-Indian festival framework.

Thus, Durga Puja becomes not only a ritual but also a socio-cultural performance representing Assamese identity (Boruah, 2024).

Contemporary Transformations

In recent decades, Durga Puja in Assam has witnessed major transformations:

Thematic Pandals: Inspired by Kolkata's creative pujas, Assamese committees now design pandals around themes such as Sankaradeva's life, ecological awareness, or national heritage. This brings global recognition but also fosters healthy competition (Ghosh, 2015).

Urbanization and Media: Guwahati and Jorhat now host hundreds of pujas, each striving for grandeur. Media coverage, sponsorships, and social media promotions have amplified their reach,

transforming the traditional community festival into what scholars term an "urban festival" that serves as a template for other celebrations (Guha-Thakurta, 2015).

Commercialization: Sponsorships from corporate houses have altered the traditional community funding model, raising concerns about commodification. This shift reflects broader changes in social structure, resulting in more sophisticated celebrations (Bhaduri, 2015).

Diaspora Participation: Assamese communities abroad also organize Durga Puja, strengthening cultural links across borders and contributing to the "glocal" nature of the festival—global in thought but local in action.

Environmental and Heritage Concerns

The rapid expansion of Durga Puja in Assam has led to significant challenges:

Pollution: Idol immersions contribute to water pollution in rivers like the Brahmaputra. Though eco-friendly idols are encouraged, their adoption remains partial. The Pollution Control Board of Assam has issued guidelines promoting biodegradable clay and organic dyes while prohibiting thermocol and chemical materials (PCB Assam, 2024).

Waste management: Urban pujas generate large amounts of plastic and thermocol waste, raising ecological alarms. Tamulpur district pioneered Assam's first carbon-neutral Durga Puja in 2024, using locally sourced sustainable materials like recycled paper, bamboo, and jute for decorations, along with biodegradable idols and solar power (Pragyan Xetu, 2024).

Innovative solutions: The "Zero-Waste Durga Puja" initiative in Jorhat demonstrated best practices by eliminating single-use plastics, using stainless steel glasses instead of 1,760 plastic glasses, and distributing prasad in traditional palm leaves instead of 4,000 plastic bowls (Saahas, 2024).

Heritage preservation: The balance between innovation and tradition often creates tension. Older ritual practices sometimes get overshadowed by modern spectacle, requiring careful negotiation between continuity and change.

Despite these challenges, local communities, NGOs, and municipal bodies are working toward sustainable puja practices, demonstrating the festival's capacity for adaptive evolution while maintaining cultural authenticity.

Durga Puja as Living Heritage

Durga Puja in Assam represents more than a festival; it is living heritage that actively engages with contemporary challenges while preserving traditional elements. The festival sustains traditional crafts (idol-making, bamboo work, bell metal artistry from Sarthebari), promotes cultural performance (Bihu dance, Sattriya, bhaona), and reinforces community solidarity through institutions like Namghars and Satras (Industries Department, Assam, 2024).

The Namghar-Satra network, established by Srimanta Sankaradeva in the 15th century, provides a decentralized religious structure unique to Assamese Vaishnavism. These institutions serve not only as centers for Neo-Vaishnavite worship but also as platforms for community decision-making, cultural performances, and social integration (Nath & Barua, 2024). During Durga Puja, Namghars often host cultural programs that blend Vaishnavite traditions with Shakta worship, creating a syncretic religious experience.

By embedding Assamese identity within a pan-Indian religious frame, Durga Puja reinforces Assam's plural culture. Its potential recognition as intangible cultural heritage can help safeguard both ritual and ecological dimensions of the festival.

Conclusion

Durga Puja in Assam, while sharing ritual commonalities with other regions, has developed unique cultural expressions rooted in Assamese society. From historical royal patronage to modern thematic pandals and environmental innovations, the festival reflects both continuity and change. Today, its role as heritage is crucial: sustaining local crafts, promoting community participation, and negotiating with modern challenges like commercialization and ecological degradation.

For Assam, Durga Puja is not only a festival of devotion but also a cultural mirror—an emblem of collective identity and creativity. Ensuring its sustainable future requires collaboration among communities, artisans, and policymakers, as demonstrated by pioneering initiatives in carbon-neutral celebrations and zero-waste practices.

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