

City, Culture and Public Event - a temporal construct

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ABSTRACT

Durga Puja Festival have created thousands of Puja pandals every year transforming the image of the city- a characteristic unique to Kolkata. These transformations are temporary and last for four days although their engagement with city space is about two months (including preparation to their dismantling). Interestingly this physical pattern replicates every year though their presentation or their image varies. This phenomenon posed a general enquiry of place making and space making in a city to accommodating a public event - investigating its relation to the city's culture and its society. This temporary urban transformation is a unique occurrence for hosting a particular public event specific to city culture. It is therefore necessary to understand the nature of the public event, their relation to city culture and the emotive power that it garners to generate, motivate such a large-scale public engagement across class, religion, gender, demography, and political aspirations. This unique cultural phenomenon - the intangible heritage of Kolkata that is spatially and architecturally manifested through temporarily generated public places appropriating, transforming the existing public-private domain.

The author undertakes a journey of deconstructing the temporary urban transformation during Durga Puja festival to understand the nature of the public event Durga Puja - its cultural roots, their sacred as well as universal appeal to the citizens of the city. The paper also explores the role of the public event which trigger elaborate design process that transform the ordinary existence into an extra ordinary public place complete with space and image making exercise into an awesome experience. These transformed public spaces also host a range of public rituals and practices that converts outsiders or visitors into a group of involved, engaged participants. This aspect of the publicness of the stated event establishes, reaffirms the unique culture of the city- the belief, shared values, creativity of the local communities and their collective effort. The periodicity of the event also creates a stage for aspiration of the local community to make necessary arrangement for the next year's event - Asche Bochor Abar Hobe (See you again next year).

KEY WORDS: *Cityness, Culture, Shared Values, Sacred, Design Process, Temporality, Transformation, Public Place, Public Event.*

Date of Submission: 26-05-2021

Date of Acceptance: 09-06-2021

The Culture of a City

The multiple conceptualisations of a city frame it as a physical, spatial construct - but it is even more a mental construct. Physical planners usually characterise a city through its spatial structure, use patterns or their legibility, infrastructure – the tangibles. Yet, cities are much more meaningful through its culture, its users, their behaviour, their emotions, connections that manifests the cityness – the unique realisation of a city, its intangibles. Therefore, instead of studying these two factors separately, we must explore the concept of cityness holistically for a comprehensive understanding of the relationship of the tangibles and the intangible in manifesting a city's character.

The culture of a city is the way its resident communities, the dependant population from its catchment and the visitors respond to and engage with to its publicness. Culture thus connects to a city's infrastructure in celebrating urban life through public events – events which bring into being the various meanings of existence. (Fig.1)

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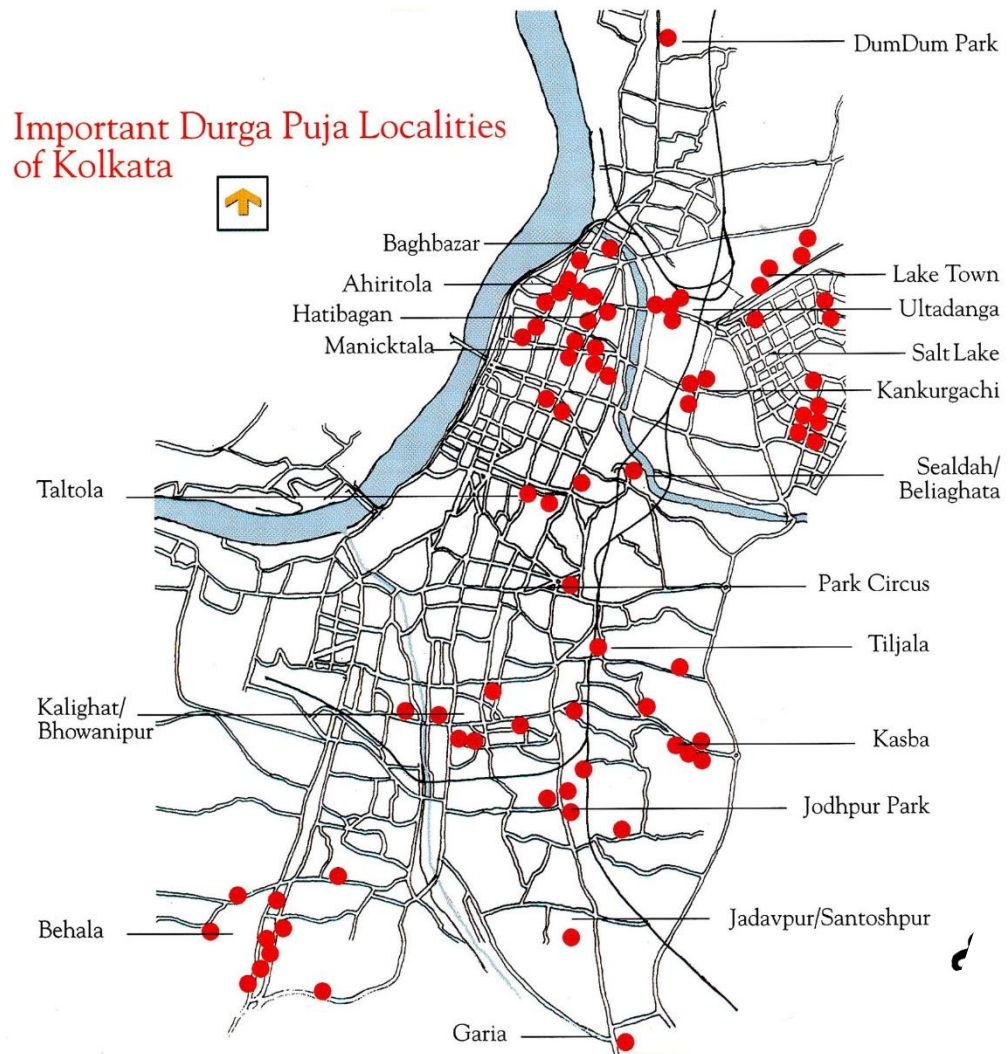


Fig 1. Map showing the location of important Durga pujas in Kolkata

Public Events and Temporality

These public events are the key to the life of a city. They can also be identified as temporal acts that occur for a short duration of time but creates and sustains the memory of city's association - its cultural narrative involving Space, Culture and Time. This is an evolved relationship that exists in the city lending its unique cityness and therefore best understood as a cultural narrative of the city. This paper tries to elaborate this Public Event as Temporal Act through a narration of the phenomena of Durga Puja in Kolkata. (Fig.2)

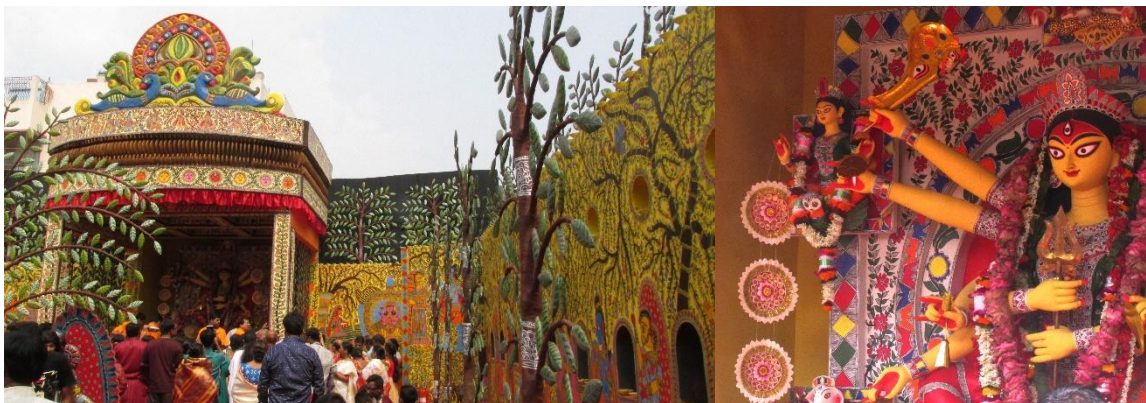


Fig 2. The festive ambience and public engagement within a typical Puja pandal

Come autumn, the city of Kolkata starts transforming. The aspiration to change is in the air, there is a sense of preparedness in different parts of the city to celebrate the event of the year. It is *Durga Puja* time – a cultural extravaganza with a sacred overtone. The mindset of the citizens is set to celebrate the public event in style. Everyone wants to get out of the daily routine, put on new attires, dress up appropriately for the event. Social connections are reinforced, gifts and presents are distributed to encourage being blessed through sacred acts. Acts like being a part of the larger public, being seen and appreciated become common occurrences. (Fig.3)



Fig 3. Publicity and pride surrounding the Durga Puja

This impulse also influences the immediate public domain – the physical setting that one can immediately identify with. It transforms into a sense of place - my territory or *Amar para* in local parlance. Neighbours get together and take active initiatives to create appropriate setting that follows a spatial arrangement to meet all the associated functional requirement and goes beyond to embellish it creatively with images, symbols, loaded meanings etc like a public art installation. Together they become a whole new experience of a public place complete with smell, sound and light and very alive. These new transformed public places within the locality are opened to the city and welcome outsiders to visit, experience, and participate while the event lasts. After the event is over this act deconstructs and retraces back to the original physical setting and restores the routine arrangement leaving behind a dreamlike memory with the hope for its re-enactment in the coming year- '*asche bochor abar hobe*'. (Fig.4)



Fig 4. The rituals and collective celebration to symbolise both the end of the pujo and the beginning of the next cycle

Puja Pandals – Negotiated Public Spaces

The Durga Puja phenomenon is not a chance happening but a regular one and is painstakingly put up by a community who goes beyond their regular daily life to piece together this act and event – helping to stage, negotiate for space with the city, bargain for shared values and finally create this lived experience. It is a design process of a different kind that is essentially collaborative, coproduced, and holistic. They involve from conceptualising, mitigating legal formalities, implementation, execution and finally the event and crowd management ensuring safety security of a remarkably high volume of people in a restricted space for a week. (Fig.5)



Fig 5. The process of construction of image and the overall transformation of the space

During the Durga Puja festival, the city of Kolkata physically transforms into an amalgamation of public spaces and public spectacles that engage every aspect of city life. Some of them occur at designated public places like Park Circus, College square, Maddox Square, Tala park, Deshapriya Park, or the large open spaces as in Baghbazar, Salt Lake Block open spaces, Naktala, Chetla etc. There are about four thousand plus *puja pandals* (temporary festival and sacred space). As there is a paucity of public open space, majority of these temporary public spaces germinate into the nooks and corners of the organically grown city of Kolkata. For making it happen, citizens of each localities negotiate their immediately available neighbourhood streets, bazars, community halls etc, even the neighbouring private spaces to generate these temporary public spectacles for the large number (in thousands - even a small *pandal* can surpass the maximum number of visitors of population tourist destination) of visitors from across the city and surrounding region during the festival days (five days continuously). (Fig.6)



Fig 6. Durga puja pandal mega project in large designated public spaces of the city – transformation as art installation

To do this they have to forego some essential convenience - like vehicular access, privacy, parking, movement etc along with the added impact of congestion, crowd, privacy, pollution, safety, security, fire, and environmental hazards etc. This is the scenario for the actual festival days, but residents must endure these transformations at least two months before the festival when their execution involving construction and finishing of the *puja pandals* and up to the time of their dismantling and dispersal after the festival. During this period there are lot of human and material movement in the area. The locality has to accommodate with a large number of labourers who help the decorators, artisans, technicians along with their associated facilities and public utilities. The process slowly transforms the mundane side spaces, streets, street junctions, adjoining

buildings, trees of the locality into an awe-inspiring temporary public space that would last for only a week. This elaborate affair needs a large amount of manpower, resource, finance, public relation, permissions, marketing, and management to host this event. A very nominal puja pandals may cost about Rupees Five Lakhs or more, moderate ones almost to Rupees Thirty Lakhs and the popular ones may go up to a Crore. Out of the approximate 4000 pujas about 10 usually belong to the popular category and about 500 to the moderate category.

Transformations of the Durga Puja event through history

The Durga puja event has been historically evolved to demonstrate the social position and financial power of the organisers. About three hundred years back Raja Kanishka Narayan has celebrated this puja and spend almost three lakh rupees at time when one could buy forty kilograms of rice with a rupee. Other popular Durga Pujas in Bengal has been celebrated by the Malla king of Bishnupur. The primary purpose of hosting this public event is to consolidate the social position and emphasise dominance over their subjects necessitating such an elaborate rituals and practice evolved around universal sacred concepts. To organise such an event you must involve and engage people from various cross sections of the society. Therefore, they need a spacious dedicated space – the '*Thakur Dalan*' to accommodate the sacred rituals and flanked by a large open space for public gathering. They must have financial credibility to organise this socio-religious function and sustain it over the years. Durga Puja became the critical public event made popular by the *Zamindars* (local landlord) during 17th century Bengal. (Fig.7 & Fig.8)

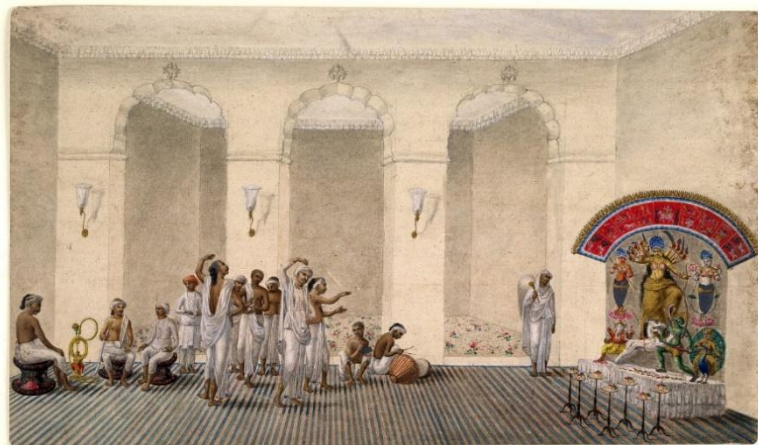


Fig 7. An artist's rendering of the traditional Durga Puja celebration at the Bengal Royal Households, Period 17th Century.



Fig 8. An artist's rendering of social functions and events at the traditional Durga Puja celebration at the Bengal Royal Households, Period 17th Century.

As the city prospered, a neo-Bengali trading group belonging mostly to the non-brahmin (upper caste Hindus) caste has capitalised the concept of Durga Puja as a major public event and started hosting the same in their large mansions imitating same grandeur and style for the sake of social prestige- '*Bonedi Barir Pujo*'. (Fig.9)



Fig 9. Traditional Bengali Durga puja in traditional family

The Asiatic Journal in 1816 describes that the houses of wealthier Bengalees are thrown open for the reception of every class of the inhabitants of this great city'. Durga Puja thus from the very beginning is a public event even though sponsored by the elite. This was a general trend in 19th century. However, one of the most powerful Bengalis - Radhakanto Deb went further and organised Durga Puja at a grand scale at "Sovabazar, the entertainment was free for all, for twelve days starting from the ninth day of the proceeding cycle of the waning moon when bodhan of Deb family puja took place." This extravaganza was also capitalised on as a way to return favour of the ruling British by accommodating ways to make it culturally inclusive yet a socially exclusive event. "... [O]n the three big nights when the British were invited over, entry was severely restricted." Dramatist Amritalal Basu recalls that "for the British, there was some sherry, champagne, brandy and biscuit" and it was also followed by elaborate *mujhlis* (banquet). Thus, Durga Puja became an important social event. (Fig.10)



Fig 10. The Durga puja at Sovabajar Rajbari

The common man never had much say in the Bonedi (elite) 'Barir Pujo' or in the organisation of the event. It is within this context that the concept of community Puja germinated. In around 1790, twelve Brahmin friends in *Guptipara*, about eighty kilometres from Kolkata in Hooghly District, decided to institute a Puja on their own after being denied entry into a household puja. The Friend of India in May 1820 reported that "...[a] new species has been introduced within the last thirty years, called Barwaree .. about thirty years ago, at *Goopti-para*, near *Santipoora*.. a number of Brahmins formed an association for the celebration of a Pooja independently They elected twelve (*baro*) men as a Committee from which circumstance it takes its name, and solicited subscription in all the surrounding villages". Thus, Durga Puja has slowly transformed into a truly public event - hosted and sponsored by the community for the visitors from the locality and beyond. "Thus, started the '*baro-yaar- i*' (of twelve friends) or *Baroari Puja* in Bengal. It gained immense popularity. Here at last was a concept that brought the Devi among the masses to be worshipped by them as their means permitted. Thus, Durga Puja went democratic years before the country did." In a city of Kolkata, the small neighbourhoods called *para* represent the basic social units of the city. They have realised the potential *Baroari Durga Puja* as a key public event where their shared cultural values can represent their identity at the city very much like the Traditional elite families (*Bonedi Paribar*). Majority of paras of old Kolkata started celebrating the form of *Baroari puja*. In this process they recreated the Puja Pandal in a temporal manner - a temporary sacred space in the public domain as a response to the privately owned and often permanent *Thakur Dalan* structures of *Bonedi Bari r Puja*. Architecturally, this provided a freedom to explore new aesthetics and symbolism – opening up avenues for public art with the possibility of new forms of public sponsorship. Now instead of only traditional values, the puja started experimenting with non-conventional aesthetics in response to contemporary values and shifts in society. (Fig.11)



Fig 11. A typical example of a Baroari Durga puja

Further transformation of *Baroari puja* to *Sarbojonin Durgotsab* (every body's Durga Festival) happened amongst the more educated, enlightened localities of Kolkata – such as Bhowanipur, Balaram Basu Ghat Road, etc. in South and Sikdar Bagan, Ramdhan Mitra Lane, Simla Street, Bagbazar in the North. This transformation occurred around 1910-1920. This takes to an all-inclusive form, more expansive than the strictly local *baroari puja*. This has transformed the local public event, scaling the same up to becoming the major public event of the city. However, all the forms of the Durga Puja – *Bonedi Barir Pujo* (in private residences), *Baroari Pujo* and *Sarbojonin Puja* in numerous residential localities co-exist side by side within the city even today in a continuation of their own legacy and tradition. (Fig.12)



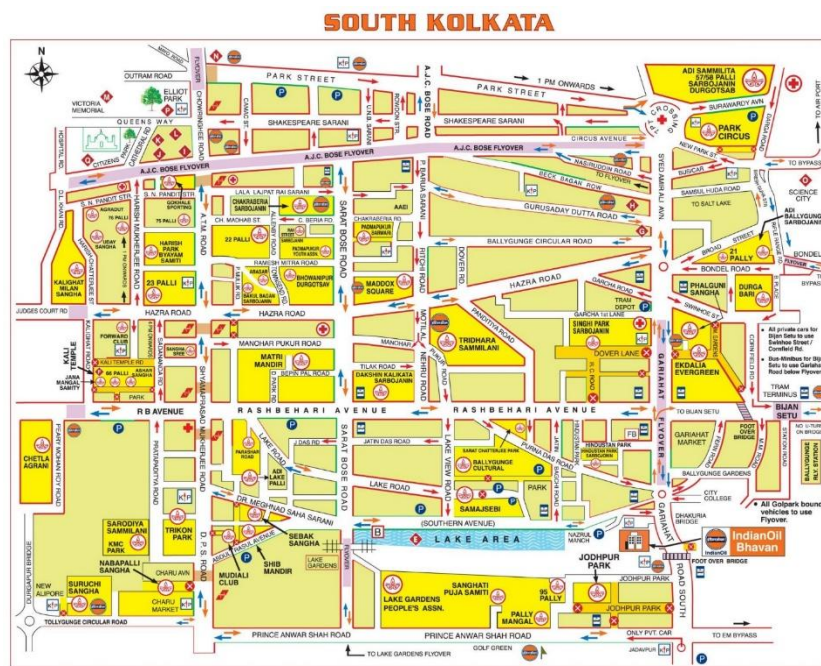
Fig 12. A typical example of a Sarbojonin Durga Puja

Conclusion – city, space and culture through a temporal event

This highlights the importance of this event in the socio-cultural landscape of Bengal. In recent times local communities reinterpret this potential of Durga Puja as a vehicle for city level imageability and become an essential part of Kolkata culture. This becomes evident when we plot these *puja pandals* (temporary sacred space) over the city fabric and superimpose it with various *para* (local neighbourhood) one can realise the spatial pattern across the city. '*Durga Puja*' - thus emerges as a truly Public event of and in the city. It evokes a

universal human appeal as well as with a strong sense of sacred values. Thus, what has started as a major social occasion has now become a popular cultural extravaganza of the city of Kolkata.

The experience of Durga Puja been carefully crafted to through sacred images, embedded symbolism that depicts a cultural narrative. Sacred rituals with traditional practices around the Sacred Images make alive a range of human emotions – empathy, love, tolerance, care and connected ness with nature and the living world. This is wholesome experience, nurtured through involvement, engagement, participation that blends the intangible in to the tangible Durga Puja is celebrated in *Puja Pandals*- a temporary Public Place that can satisfactorily meet the emotional, social, sacred cultural attributes of the event. It demands a unique spatial arrangement, built form spacious enough to accommodate large number of visitors. To gain popularity, the *puja pandals* of each *para* (*local community*) tries to outdo the others in an intense competition. The success of a *puja Pandal* is measured by the visitor’s footfall and its publicly judged artistic value through the various public art installations. To capitalise on this creativity and design innovation, several corporates sponsor competitions on various aspects of the *puja pandal* – be it the adherence to its cultural tradition, image of the deity, the *bahan* (mount), light or illumination, overall ambience, innovation in pandal design, environmental issues to crowd management and safety features etc. With these corporate sponsorships and political patronage, the creativity in Puja Pandals has flourished with added fervour every year. (Fig.13)



Media takes an active role in setting the direction of the pandal hoppers to various parts of the city. *Durga Puja with elaborate rituals* makes a direct and indirect impact on the overall economy of the city-about ten years back it surpassed four thousand crores almost close to the then annual state budget and city streets were frequented by more than thirty lakhs over the five festive days. (Fig.14)

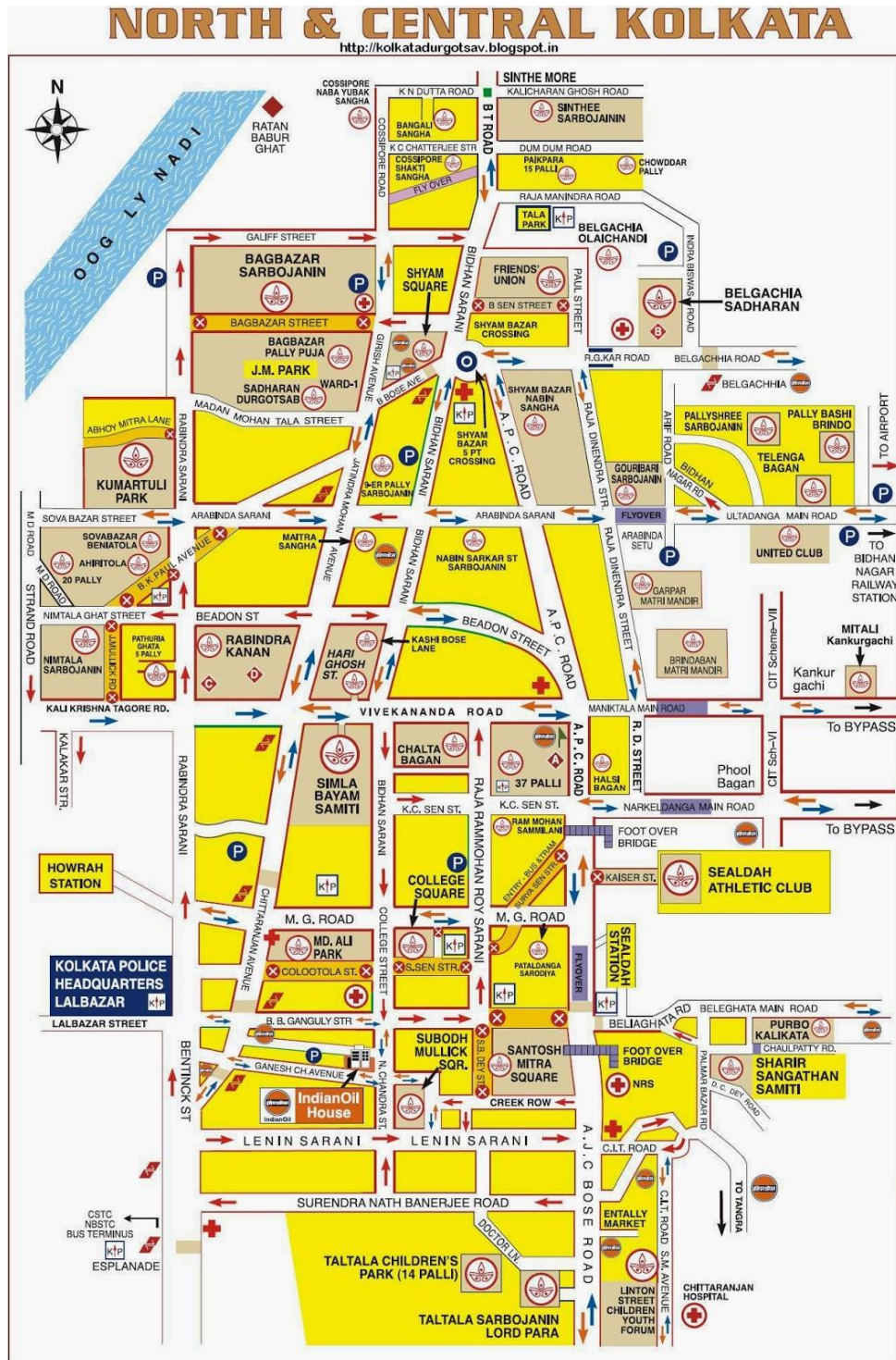


Fig 14. Location and traffic management plan for Durga Puja pandals

Finally, it is the nature, embodied myth, sacredness of the Public event (Durga Puja) that is solely responsible for triggering the emergence of Temporary Public Places – *Puja Pandals* across the city. Durga Puja thus helps to foreground and manifest the unique cityness of Kolkata – a confluence of space and culture through a major public event.

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Anjan Mitra, et. al. "City, Culture and Public Event - a temporal construct." *International Journal of Engineering Research and Development*, vol. 17(02), 2021, pp 19-29.