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## MEASURED ACCESSIBILITY: DURGA PUJA BETWEEN DIGITAL MEMORY AND ANALOG PRESENCE IN BENGAL

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**Abstract:** This paper examines how Durga Puja in Bengal negotiates between digital documentation and lived devotional presence. In an era when cultural memory is increasingly mediated by smartphones, social media and algorithmic circulation, religious festivals encounter a shift in how participation, witnessing and remembrance are performed. Drawing from concepts of cultural memory: aura, and ritual embodiment, the paper argues that contemporary interaction with Durga Puja oscillates between experiencing the moment (the presence of ritual) and capturing it (the digital reproduction of memory). The study proposes the Theory of Measured Accessibility, which emphasises a balanced negotiation between participation and digitally-mediated preservation, stressing that neither total abandonment of digital media nor complete surrender to it sustains cultural continuity.

This conceptual intervention is supported by examples from Kolkata and suburban Durga Puja celebrations that demonstrate how photographic saturation and social media publicity may transform ritual space into a spectacle, yet also enable documentation that preserves ephemeral traditions. Thus, instead of viewing technology as a threat to sacred experience, the paper suggests a calibrated accessibility that uses digital tools to preserve cultural aura without replacing embodied devotion of worship. The aim is to rethink how festivals may retain spiritual immediacy while embracing memory technologies, proposing a model for cultural participation in the digital age.

**Keywords:** *Durga Puja, cultural memory, aura, digital documentation, ritual presence, Theory of Measured Accessibility*

### INTRODUCTION

Durga Puja in West Bengal is widely celebrated as a reunion between a mother-daughter figure and her maternal home, rather than merely the worship of a female deity. The popular phrase “Uma/ Maa aschhen” signals not only a religious event but a period in which the everyday rhythm of life is affectionately suspended. Yet, in the recent decades, especially in parts of urban Kolkata, the experience has steadily transfigured into a spectacle of digital documentation, driven by the desire to record, share, and circulate the festival through online media platforms. What was once a ritual of devotion has increasingly become a curated display of screen presence.

The prophetic sound of the dhak, the smell of shiuli flower, or the slow unveiling of the goddess's eyes during Chokkhudaan; are now portrayed mostly by mobile screens held higher than those old folded hands of devotion. The access to Durga Puja no longer begins at the pandal nowadays; rather it begins via Instagram trending reels, YouTube vlogs, blog reviews, and digital "must-visit" lists curated by media pages such as Kolkata Buzz or The Bong Guy and several others. The queue which is formed outside the pandal is not to witness a ritual but "to capture it in their digital screens" This transformation reflects what media theorist Ravi Sundaram calls a shift from devotion to spectacle, where rituals become "public media events" (Sundaram) and hence they slowly lose their authenticity.

However, this shift has not occurred uniformly. Field observations (2025) from certain towns of North 24 paraganas such as Habra and Ashoknagar, and from some fringe areas of Adra and Purulia located in the southwest of Bengal show striking contrasts. In these regions, idols still follow the ek-chala tradition; dhakis remain central; golden ornaments are preferred over synthetic aesthetics; and visitors witness rituals without crowding for photographs. Here, digital presence remains supplemental, and not a mere dominant phenomenon. On the other hand, metropolitan Kolkata's thematic pandals; such as the Deshapriya Park (pre-2015 stampede and its contemporary return), Tala Prattoy, Hindustan Park, and many others attract massive crowds primarily motivated by the viral media coverage, PR-driven rankings, and immersive so called modern "selfie-zones." The contrast displays how the same festival splits into devotion-based presence and documentation-driven presence, depending on the level of digital influence it has created over the past few years.

Scholars have often tried to historically explore the religious and cultural meanings of Durga Puja. Raghunandan's "Durgapuja Tattwa" codifies ritual authenticity, clarifying why Bengali timings, offerings, and procedures differ from the rest of the pan-Indian practices (Raghunandan). Tapati Guha-Thakurta later analyzes how Durga Puja aesthetics shifted into a public and artistic sphere shaped by committees, artists, and several other sponsorships (Guha-Thakurta). Yet, neither the ritual history nor the aesthetic scholarship can fully explain the new tension introduced by digital mediation; the need to balance living a ritual and documenting it continuously.

Therefore, this paper proposes a framework called the "Theory of Measured Accessibility", which strongly emphasizes that digital mediation is not inherently harmful, but it requires strict intentional limits so that documentation does not replace active participation. The central question guiding this research is:

"How can Durga Puja in Bengal sustain devotional presence while negotiating the pressures of digital documentation and media driven spectacle?"

To address this question, the study draws from field snapshots (Habra, Ashoknagar, Adra-Purulia, and some parts of urban Kolkata), cultural scholarship, and media theory to suggest how digital access can coexist along with ritual authenticity. It argues not for rejection of technology, but for measured engagement, where screens do not overshadow the spiritual experience, and presence is shared without being surrendered.

## Research Question and Methodology

This study is anchored in the following central question:

“How can Durga Puja in Bengal sustain devotional presence and cultural depth while adapting to the demands of digital documentation and media-driven visibility?”

To address this question, the paper adopts a third-person ethnographic approach, examining shifts in ritual practices, modes of participation, and visual representation within contemporary Durga Puja celebrations in Bengal. The observations emerge from publicly visible interactions in Kolkata and its outskirts (Habra and Ashoknagar in North 24 Parganas, and culturally distinct regions such as Purulia) during Durga Puja 2023–2025. These observations further analyzes the:

- crowd behaviour shaped by photography and social media sharing,
- ritual participation patterns in borough pandals versus traditional family pujas, and
- how digital publicity influences aesthetic decisions in pandal-making.

The examples included are mostly empirical encounters, not personal autobiography; they serve as illustrative public observation, comparable to third-person field notes. This study does not claim formal ethnographic fieldwork; instead, it adopts a conceptual–interpretive approach supported by cultural observation and public documentation. Because the paper’s aim is not just a mere statistical measurement but cultural interpretation, it aligns with a qualitative cultural methodology; similar to practices used in cultural anthropology and ritual studies.

The study also integrates Indian ritual scholarship (e.g., Raghunandan, Guha- Thakurta) and digital media theory (e.g., Sundaram), to situate these observations within wider debates on ritual aesthetics, popular participation, and media spectacle (Guha-Thakurta; Sundaram). This blend of lived observation and critical analysis of literature allows the paper to argue for a new conceptual framework: the Theory of Measured Accessibility, which emphasises a balanced relationship between devotional presence and digital mediation.

## Literature Review: Memory, Media, and Festival Culture

Research on cultural memory has long emphasized how societies remember through these shared practices. Pierre Nora’s concept of lieux de mémoire describes memories that survive through ritual repetition rather than the personal recollection (Nora). Similarly, Walter Benjamin stated that mechanical reproduction alters the “aura” of cultural objects, replacing presence with its mass visibility (Benjamin). These frameworks help to comprehend how religious festivals stand at a risk of becoming spectacles when mediated excessively through the frequent use of technology.

However, Indian scholars highlight that the festival memory in South Asia cannot be examined solely through the lens of Euro-American theory. Raghunandan Bhattacharyya’s 16th-century ritual codification of Durga Puja has established the rules for liturgy, sequence, and timing, making the festival not merely devotional but a memory practice bound to time,

body, and various other community ethics (Bhattacharyya). These ritual grammars are still followed in Bengal which shows that religious performance is inseparable from the social organization.

The contemporary cultural theorist Tapati Guha-Thakurta further expands this perspective by tracing how the modern era's Durga Puja in Kolkata has transformed into an "urban visual economy" where aesthetics, sponsorship, and mass tourism has completely reshaped devotion into a curated spectacle. Her work demonstrates that art, commerce, and belief now intersect to convert divine presence into a form of public exhibition, which human beings enjoy, while forgetting their ancestral roots (Guha-Thakurta).

To address the impact of digital media, Ravi Sundaram's framework of "the noisy spectacle" explains how communication technology intensifies the public crowds, amplifies the hype created, and produces a shared urgency to witness rather than to meaningfully participate. The logic of visibility; through the medium of selfies, reels, vlogs, and festival rankings, pushes rituals towards a mass consumption, where the real cultural participation becomes a mere performance for documentation only (Sundaram).

Together, these scholars show us that Durga Puja cannot be studied as only a form of devotion or art. It is a dynamic space where ritual authority, visual culture, and digital spectatorship continuously reshape one another. Yet none of them propose how these forces might be balanced rather than being polarized. This gap becomes the basis for introducing the proposed Theory of Measured Accessibility, which argues for a participatory balance between lived ritual experience and the excessive digital documentation.

### **Introducing the Theory of Measured Accessibility**

The Theory of Measured Accessibility proposes that cultural engagement in festivals must maintain a balance between digital documentation and embodied participation. It argues that neither complete immersion without documentation nor excessive recording through digital devices allows a meaningful relationship with the real ritual space. Instead, the festivals like Durga Puja gain value when presence (living in the moment) or something which we commonly describe as *carpe diem*, and preservation (capturing it) are practiced in proportion, but not in excess.

Measured Accessibility suggests three major interconnected principles:

#### *1. Selective Documentation*

Moments with shared cultural or artistic value; such as rare craftsmanship, community-driven themes, or endangered ritual practices benefit from documentation. Such recording enables memory preservation across several generations (e.g., traditional *ek-chala* idols in suburban regions of Habra or Ashoknagar).

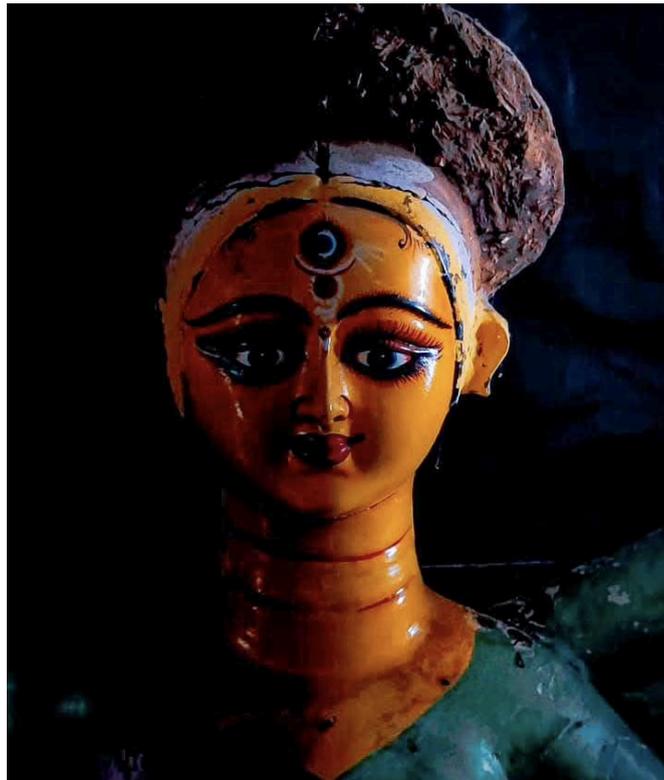
#### *2. Embodied Attention*

Certain ritual instances demand full immersion without simultaneous digital intervention. The common acts such as *Debi Boron* (welcoming the Goddess) and *Dorpon Bisharjan* (mirror

farewell) function as affective, intimate exchanges between the devotee and the sacred deity. Here, excessive filming weakens the intended emotional communion, and the bond slowly fades.

### 3. *Contextual Participation*

Accessibility must vary by context: crowds, ritual sanctity, artistic purpose, safety issues, and spatial design. During the 2015 Deshapriya Park overcrowding, excessive photographic enthusiasm amplified mass spectacle, thereby increasing the risk rather than reverence. But conversely, the 2020 pandemic Puja emphasized distanced participation, demonstrating that accessibility can also be moderated for the collective welfare.



“Light and shadow: the need for measured accessibility”

This image, where light and shadow coexist, visually suggests the need for restraint in how we approach visibility. Not everything always demands full illumination. Some experiences require ‘observation before documentation, and absorption before circulation’. The partial darkness here is not the mere absence, but the intention which serves as a reminder that accessibility does not mean excess. In the context of Durga Puja, this balance becomes necessary: to know when to look, when to pause, and when to let presence take precedence over the lens. (Image credit: Himadri K. Das [Kalakar].)

Thus, the theory positions accessibility not as free and limitless entry, but as a calibrated cultural ethic, where documentation does not replace experience, and experience does not ignore the art of preservation. It aims to prevent two extremes: ritual amnesia (no documentation) and spectacle dominance (only documentation).

## Digital Excess and the Erosion of Devotional Presence

The contemporary experience of Durga Puja in Bengal increasingly reflects what Ravi Sundaram terms a “media urbanism,” where public visibility shapes participation more than devotion (Sundaram). During the field observations in 2025 across Kolkata and its outskirts, several pandals including the Deshapriya Park (which was reopened after a decade-long hiatus), Tala Prottoy, and the few other gorgeous pandals near the airport area, attracted massive footfall not only for their thematic artistry but due to their curated online popularity. Instagram handles such as Kolkata Buzz and several other pages listed “Top Durga Puja Must-Visit Spots,” functioning as unofficial gatekeepers of the modern cultural experience. This attention economy transformed visiting a pandal into the pursuit of capturing images suitable for mere online display, rather than creating an essence of a spiritual engagement.

The crowd behaviour further illustrated the digital excess. Participants often paused before the idol not for the darshan but to determine the best angle for their respective photographs. Selfie poses replaced the folded hands; meanwhile the cameras replaced the religious offerings attempting to record themselves performing a ritual which they were barely absorbed in. Ritual actions thus became gestures staged for visibility rather than expressions of devotion. The religious site increasingly resembled a public set, where one participates through performance rather than presence.

This excessive mediation sharply contrasts with regions outside Kolkata’s metropolitan spectacle. In Habra municipality, Ashok Nagar, and Purulia’s ‘Gele Parar’s area, pandals mostly adhered to traditional forms such as *ek-chala thakur* (idols) and handcrafted *daaker shaaj* jewellery, accompanied by the live dhak rhythms rather than those cinematic soundtracks. Here, phones appeared briefly, often only after worship ended, allowing rituals to unfold with minimal interruption. The contrast highlights that it is not digital technology itself that diminishes presence, but the unregulated consumption driven by metropolitan spectacle culture which erodes it.

This shift has been reinforced by pre-Puja media practices. Platforms like Instagram and YouTube often broadcast pandal tours from parts of Kumortuli weeks before Mahalaya, encouraging spectators to arrive with pre-scripted expectations. Idol makers have publicly expressed frustration with photographers crowding their workspaces and recording the process of idol making rather than respecting their hard labour. *The Hindu* (2024) reported that continuous filming disrupts artisans’ concentration and slows production timelines. The ritual space is thus mediated even before the festival begins, transforming sacred craftsmanship into content.

Within this scenario, the urgency for measured accessibility becomes clearly evident. The festival must neither reject digital documentation nor surrender entirely to it. Instead, cultural participation must maintain limits that safeguard devotional presence. Rituals such as Dorpon Bisharjan already model this balance: although spectators record the moment, the mother goddess “sees” her reflection only through a simple mirror, independent of digital screens, suggesting symbolically that sacred farewell must remain ‘*unfiltered*’. Durga, in this moment, rejects spectacle and embraces introspective departure. The ritual implies that memory should

first be lived before being documented.

### **Photographs, Memory & Ritual Presence: Case Observations from Bengal (2023–25)**

The Contemporary Durga Puja participation in Bengal reveals two parallel forms of engagement: the devotional presence and the digital documentation. Several observations from North 24 Parganas (Habra and Ashok Nagar, 2025) shows that local pandals; such as Paly Club, Bharati Club, Haichai Sangha, Athletic Club and the United Club continue to emphasize *ekchala* idols, traditional *dhak* performances, and Shola decorations, aligning closely with ritual continuity. Here, photography occurred after participation, with families taking pictures only after offering pushpanjali, indicating that documentation is followed by devotion rather than replacing it completely.

In some parts of metropolitan Kolkata, visibility frequently overshadows sacred devotion. Pandals located near Deshapriya Park, Tala Prottoy, and Hindustan Park often attract large crowds not for the ritual experience but because they commonly trend on social media rankings and on several influencer reels. Visitors often pause frequently not for worship but to stage photographs, prioritising different angles, filters, and documentation over participation. As a result, the entry into such a sacred space was repeatedly interrupted by the constant demands of visual circulation, where appearing online seemed more meaningful than engaging with the ritual itself.

Further, the visits to Kumartuli during Mahalaya (2024–25) demonstrate the consequences of excessive media visibility. According to some local idol makers, constant vlogging, influencer collaborations, and thematic “aesthetic photography” sessions have often disrupted their working schedule, compelling the artisans to pose or wait while those electronic devices capture their labour rather than support it. This shift marks a transition where the aura of creation becomes a backdrop for spectatorship, revealing that overexposure shapes creation before worship even begins, transforming sacred craftsmanship into content.



“The Art of Idol-making: the labour, the touch, and the unseen”

The process of idol-making shown here reflects the quiet labour that precedes celebration. A single touch of the artisan’s hand gradually takes the shape of Maa Durga, reminding us that devotion begins long before the pandal officially opens. Seen through the photographer’s lens; an artist, the image does not glorify spectacle, but it draws attention to the “shram” of the “karigar”, the patience, the skill, and the care embedded in each and every movement. It is through the eye of the kalakar, and the sensitivity of the lens, that this labour becomes visible, reminding us that the sacred is first crafted, and not captured. (Image credit: Himadri K. Das [Kalakar].)

These observations assert that digital tools are not inherently harmful; rather their unchecked use often displaces the major ritual attention. A theory of measured accessibility would therefore encourage intentional pauses in the moments where viewers first participate as devotees, and only then, when meaning has been absorbed totally, this document as the witnesses of culture.

### **Rituals as Embodied Memory: Boron and Dorpôn Beyond Digital Capture**

Durga Puja rituals in Bengal demonstrate how sacred practices hold aesthetic value without requiring digital mediation. Two key ceremonies: Boron (the welcoming of the daughter-goddess) and Dorpôn (her final departure through the symbolic mirror), reveal how access to spiritual meaning depends on presence rather than on mere documentation. During Boron, women commonly perform the welcoming of Durga as Uma, offering betel leaves,

rice, and conch water as a gesture of intimate recognition. This ritual is not performed for spectacle; it is performed as a symbol of the goddess's homecoming. In contrast, Dorpôn reflects her face in a mirror before immersion. The mirror is not simply an object; it signifies how the goddess sees herself before returning to her divine abode. Despite the increased prevalence of digital tools, the priest still uses a traditional mirror, not a phone camera to reveal her reflection. This demonstrates a boundary between mechanical tools used for devotion and digital tools used for spectacle.



“Boron: Of age, memory and continuity”

This image deeply captures an elderly woman performing the “Boron” rite with Maa Durga. What stands out is not only the ritual itself, but the quiet truth that it carries deep within: ‘Devotion has no particular age’. There is no stage of life where access to Maa Durga ends or begins. Whether one is young or old, the Boron remains necessary; not just as a mere spectacle, but as a moment of recognition and belonging. Having witnessed this moment in person, the act becomes memorable not because it was photographed, but because it was lived. The image therefore records continuity; how traditions do not fade with time, but are carried forward through touch, memory, and sacred presence. (Image source: Google; used for representational purposes only.)

Thus, measured accessibility suggests that rituals may be photographed but not replaced or reshaped by digital devices. The purpose of accessibility is preservation without interfering with the embodied experience.

### **Ritual Meaning, Cultural Continuity and the Need for Measured Accessibility**

The rituals such as 'Boron' and 'Darpan' already reveal how spiritual memory depends on presence rather than on spectacle. These ceremonies maintain an embodied intimacy that does not reject photography but delays it, showing that participation must precede documentation. This cultural logic directly aligns with the Theory of Measured Accessibility, where meaning is first lived and only then preserved.

By contrast, Darpan Bisarjan requires the priest and devotees to witness the reflection of the idol in a mirror instead of looking directly at the face of Maa Durga. The mirror substitutes the Goddess at the moment of separation, so that the last memory is preserved without attaching any sorrow to her grand departure. The mirror is mechanical, unfiltered and fragile, signifying that memory must be handled with care, not conquered through repetition. Even in an era of constant documentation, the ritual insists on a non-digital mode of remembrance. The image is preserved not because it is reproduced, but because it is respected. This is a significant example of what the Theory of Measured Accessibility underscores: cultural memory survives not through unlimited access, but through appropriate access.

Field observations from Kolkata (e.g., Tala Prottoy, Behala's local clubs) and suburban pandals in Habra and Ashoknagar reveal widening differences in accessibility practices. In metropolitan pandals, Boron frequently becomes a stage for mobile photography, where participants pause to perfect angles rather than complete offerings. Conversely, smaller community pujas maintain direct embodied rituals, where photography follows the act rather than interrupts it. The difference is not between "urban" and "suburban," but between ritual experienced first-hand and ritual curated for public viewing. Digital media alters the sequence of participation, where worship follows the camera instead of guiding it.

In this context, Measured Accessibility helps articulate a balanced cultural approach: rituals need documentation so that future generations can remember, learn, and reinterpret them; but documentation should follow presence rather than replace it. Cultural value must not collapse into digital spectacle, where devotion becomes a mere backdrop for content production.

Thus, the need is not to reject digital technologies, nor to romanticize pre-digital purity, but to cultivate a disciplined participation where worshippers first contribute to the ritual's aura and only then they try to preserve it with their respective digital lenses. Durga Puja's future depends on whether communities engage in the festival as living participants or media spectators. 'The Theory of Measured Accessibility' thus advocates that rituals remain accessible without losing their sanctity, thereby ensuring that Maa Durga is welcomed as a daughter in the presence of several audiences, not merely displayed as an icon on a digital closed screen.

## Conclusion: Reframing Durga Puja Through Measured Accessibility

The contemporary celebration of Durga Puja in Bengal reveals how digital documentation has shifted the festival from an intimate ritual space to a widely broadcast cultural spectacle. While crowds move between pandals with mobile phones raised, the act of devotion increasingly becomes mediated by screens. Yet, ethnographic observations from Habra, Ashoknagar, and regional pandals across Adra-Purulia show that ritual depth continues to survive where aesthetic choices remain rooted in tradition rather than commercial display. Practices such as Boron and Darpon, still performed through tactile, non-digital objects illustrate that memory and presence do not need full technological intervention to remain meaningful.

The proposed Theory of Measured Accessibility argues that the goal is neither the complete rejection of digital media nor total immersion in it. Instead, cultural memory is preserved through a careful balance between documentation and lived participation. Such a model acknowledges that photographs enable future recall, yet insists that devotion cannot be outsourced to mechanical recording; the cultural meaning continues only when worshippers actively participate beyond devices. Durga Puja's future cultural value depends on how communities learn to participate without letting technology overpower experience. Measured accessibility offers an approach through which Bengal can protect ritual nuance even as it negotiates the global visibility that digital media offers.

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