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Article

Durga Puja at Bonedi Homes in Kolkata in a Fragmented Documentary Ecosystem – The Scenario in Public Libraries, Family Archives and Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Durga Puja celebrated by the Bonedi families of Kolkata represents a major segment of Bengal's intangible cultural heritage, which testifies to the socio-cultural, economic, and historical transformation of the city from the colonial period onwards. Although Durga Puja has received global recognition as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, the historical narratives, family traditions, ritual practices, and associated memories of many centuries-old Bonedi household, pujas remain inadequately documented and dispersed across different information sources. The present study investigates the scenario of local history collection related to Durga Puja in Bonedi families of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation area, present in century-old public libraries, family archives, social media platforms, and collective memory. The findings reveal that information related to Bonedi Bari Durga Puja exists within a fragmented documentary ecosystem. While private family archives and social media platforms preserve valuable historical narratives, century-old public libraries often lack systematic local history collections, specialized services, trained manpower, and collection development strategies focusing on immediate cultural heritage. The study recommends an integrated heritage information management framework involving public libraries, family archives, academic institutions, museums, and digital platforms.

Introduction

Bonedi Baris are the so-called aristocrat houses of flourishing business families (zaminder and baniks) and other rich families of erstwhile Calcutta (present-day Kolkata), which were once rooted in ancestral zamindaris situated in districts in undivided Bengal (Chatterjee, 2024). After the collapse of the Mughals and at the beginning of British rule, Calcutta emerged as the business epicenter of eastern India. This eventually attracted these wealthy families to build lucrative mansions at certain segments of Kolkata, where they had flourished financially and became influential through collaboration with British rule. Subsequently, they initiated grand religious celebrations like Durga Puja and other festive

rituals like Rathayatra, Raasyatra, Dolyatra, etc. The celebration of these occasions had given prominence to the Bonedi families among their subordinates or *prajas* and the local people; moreover, these calendar cultural events were considered as a sign of royal etiquette towards their subordinates.

In contemporary Bengal, the autumnal homecoming of Devi Durga has scaled up to a mass festival, from a grand religious ritual to a commercial, social, and cultural showcasing on the global stage. The festival has created a mark on the socio-cultural mindset, as it is inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (McDermott, 2011**;** Ray, 2017; UNESCO, 2021; Chakrabarti, 2026). Knowing its cultural history would help know the roots of Bengal. This root connects the rise of the Bonedi families, reshaping of the cityscapes, pioneering merchandizes, genealogy of these families, advent of idol making and patua cultures, patronage of early Bengal school of pottery, emergence of the *Babu* culture in 18th and 19th-century Bengal, resurgence of classical Bengali music, indigenous songs such as *Tappa, Khyal, Agomoni* and *Kavigaan* flourished in family *Baithakkhana* (living room) and so on (Bhattacharya 2007; Bhakat, 2013; Banerjee, 2016). To trace the local history (LH) of these centennials to bicentennials household Durga Pujas in the collections of the century-old public libraries, family archives, social media and collective memory of citizens, library users, librarians, local historians, archivists, and independent researchers were interviewed.

Objectives

Following are the major objectives:

1. Kolkata's prominent Durga puja of Bonedi familes will be identified.
2. The present condition of local history collections, including documentary and non-documentary (oral history or collective memory) sources regarding Durga puja in these public libraries will be identified and assessed.
3. The collection development policy of century-old public libraries of the nearby localities will be identified and observed.
4. Local history collections in personal archives regarding nearby famous Durga puja of Bonedi families will also be identified and assessed.
5. To identify major issues which cause gaps between the ideal conception and real scenario will be identified.
6. The role of social media to disseminate local historical information will be assessed.
7. Several suggestive measures will be recommended to fill up the gap.

Literature review

Intangible cultural heritage (ICH) refers to the living cultural practices of ethnic groups and communities, inherited from previous generations and passed on to future generations in their authentic form (UNESCO, 2002). Beyond practicing heritage, understanding and documenting it in publicly accessible repositories such as libraries, museums, and archives, and expanding it through social media, is pivotal. Globally, efforts have been made to identify the otherwise intangible heritages in the collection development of public libraries (Luehrsen, 2010; Runhao, 2018). Cultural heritages are a matter of concern primarily for the local community; thus, local bodies, repositories, independent historians, and academic

institutions must come forward to support this cultural identity (Doncheva & Pancheva, 2026; Moitra, 2019). Several studies (Briciu et al. 2025; Chica et al. 2024) have shown the catalytic role of social media in cultural heritage preservation, which seamlessly ensures public participation and a forum for mass thought exchange. Festivities of various scales and origins of heritage value carried in the collective memory are priorities in a fast-transforming world; thus, Durga Puja in Bonedi residences of Kolkata should be richly documented in its immediate sphere. Very little published literature and organized research output (Basu, 2025) have been noticed in this perspective, which is considered the prime motivation for the present study.

Scope and Limitations

The Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) has been selected as the chief study area. The KMC area includes more than 40 (forty) Bonedi and zaminder families who has been celebrating Durga puja for centuries. Due to time constraint, 16 (sixteen) Bonedi families have been selected as sample who have been celebrating Durga puja for more than 200 years, i.e. within a time frame between 1600 AD and 1799 AD. The century-old public libraries situated in close proximity or adjacent areas to those Bonedi families have been selected as population sample.

Methodology

Study area and selection of Bonedi families: According to the objectives and scope of the study, the boundary of KMC area has been selected. Bonedi families who celebrate Durga puja for more than 200 years have been clubbed in five cluster regions (Table 1).

Selection of sources: Local history materials in various formats have been selected, viz. books, souvenirs, genealogies, letters, manuscripts and brochures. Digital collections, viz. blogs, YouTube videos, film strips, and oral history interviews have also been selected. Selections have been made from personal archives too. Public libraries and personal archives are selected primarily on the basis of their close proximity to the selected Bonedi families. To procure the necessary data and information, public libraries and archives were visited and with prior permission of the Librarian and/or in-charge, necessary information was collected.

Questionnaire: Total two sets of questionnaires were structured; for Librarian and for descendants of Bonedi families.

Data collection techniques: Following methods have been adopted to collect necessary data.

- ***Interviewing method:*** Interview method was adopted to collect data from human sources of information. One-to-one interviews and questionnaire surveys of the librarian, users/readers at the libraries, and descendants of Bonedi families were conducted.
- ***Observation method***: During survey, observation method was adopted for critical review of the present collection of the library and/or information centre. In particular, collections were minutely observed.

Assessment of collective memory: The collective memory of Durga Puja in the Bonedi families (aristocratic households) of Kolkata can be conceptualized as an Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) because it exists not only in the rituals connected with the nearly week-long event but also in the shared memories, societal influences, emotions, family narratives and community participation among Kolkata's citizens. Surveyor has interviewed respondents from three different age groups (below 30, between 31-50 & 51 and above) irrespective of gender and asked open-ended questions that influence various facets of cultural identity on rituals, idol features, family traditions unique to each pujas, puja offerings, idol immersion process, and any special ritual, etc.

Analysis of collected data: Collected data were gathered and analyzed critically to find out the real situation of local history collections in public libraries and other information repositories in the selected study area.

Population Sample

The population sample consists of 16 (sixteen) Bonedi families of KMC area which have long history of Durga puja for more than 200 years. To ascertain the relevant local history collection, total 11 (eleven) public libraries and information centers were selected, corresponding to the postal addresses of the Bonedi families. The population samples are represented in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1: List of Aristocrat and Bonedi families of Kolkata engaged in Durga pujas

Pin code	Name of the house & commencement year	Locality within Kolkata
700003, 700005	Sovabazar Raj Bari (1757)	Sovabazar & Bagbazar area
700006	Mallick Bari (1614) Chhatu Babu Latu Babu's Family (1770) Baishnab Das Mallick (1785) Haatkhola Dutta Family (1794) Laha Family (1794) Madan Mohan Dutta family (1794)	Pathuriaghata & Jorasanko area
700007	Chorbagan Mitra Family (1775)	Chorbagan area
700009	Harinath Mukherjee Family (1722) Jhamapukur Chandra Family (1761)	Jhamapukur & Manicktala area
700010	Beleghata Bhattacharya Family (1737)	Beleghata, Bowbazar & Pataldanga area
700008	Barisha Sabarna Roy Chowdhury (1626)	Barisha
700034	Behala Jagat Ram Mukherjee (1740) Behala Roy Family (1742)	Behala

700023	Bhukailash Rajbari, Khidirpur (1782)	Khidirpur
700087	Rani Rashmoni Janbazar (1790)	Janbazar

Table 2: List of Public Libraries and other Information Centers

Sl. No.	Name of the repository & Year of establishment	Locality within Kolkata
1.	Bangiya Sahitya Parishad Sub-divisional Library (1894)	Maniktala
2.	Beleghata Chhatra Samsad Library (unknown)	Beleghata
3.	Kolkata Police Library & Museum (1996)	Esplanade
4.	Chaitanya Library (1889)	Beadon Street
5.	Bagbazar Reading Library (1883)	Hati Bagan
6.	Burrabazar Library Boy's (1900)	Jorasanko
7.	Boys Own Library & Youngmen's Institute (1903)	Beadon Street
8.	The Behala Town Library (1903)	Behala
9.	Barisha Pathagar (1904)	Barisha
10.	Sabarna Sangrahashala (2005); family archive*	Barisha
11.	Michael Madhusudan Library (1915)	Khidirpur

Findings

- **Inadequate collections in public libraries:** Most of the public libraries under sample, do not have adequate information on local Bonedi family's Durga puja, except The Behala Town Library. 'Bonedi Kolkatar Durgotsab' by Subhadip Roy Chowdhury is the only book on Bonedi bari puja, found in this library. Though the library has over 23,000 books, only one book has been found related to Bonedi family Durga puja. While the private collection, Sabarna Sangrahashala has adequate information regarding centuries-old Durga puja at Sabarna Roy Chowdhury's ancestral house. The collection includes genealogy of Roy Chowdhury family, portraits of eminent family members, pictorial representation of almost 300 years old Durga puja events. Books on Bonedi family Durga Puja and memoirs of elderly family members who were zaminders at their times.
- **Inadequate collection of local history:** It is observed that most of the sample public libraries have some local history collections which reflect the local history of West Bengal in general. But it is observed that these libraries do not have precise collection of local history materials related to their immediate localities. That's why local history related to famous Durga pujas of Bonedi families did not find places in public libraries.
- **Lack of the concept of 'Local History':** The basic problem is that the concept of 'local history' is not clear to library professionals who are in-charge of the libraries. According to UNESCO Public Library Manifesto, building local history collection is a compulsory task of all public libraries. But in reality, the situation is quite different.
- **Improper collection development policy:** It is observed that none of the library professionals are involved in book selection procedure in public libraries. Mostly the job is done by Local Library Authority, where books are centrally selected for all public

libraries. This is one of the major reasons behind lack of proper knowledge among public library professionals about local history collections.

- **Under-equipped local history sections:** Public libraries, in general, do not have separate local history sections within their holdings. Whatever local history materials are kept, these are with all other collections of books in the main stack area. These resources are unorganized, doesn't have proper display area and no special care has been taken to preserve them or disseminate information among the readers.
- **Absence of local history related specialized services:** Since local history collection is a kind of alien concept in century-old public libraries, it is quite obvious that these libraries do not render any specialized service for local history information, viz. reference service, referral service, OPAC service, research assistance, local history exhibition, etc.
- **Deficient infrastructure and human resource:** Almost all public libraries reported the lack of satisfactory manpower, infrastructure, funding, professional training, preservation and restoration facilities, etc. In the long term, these factors lead to reluctance, unwillingness and ignorance of public library professionals to take care of the same.
- **Lack of staff training:** From the administration, no initiatives have been taken to impart professional training to the public library professionals, so that they can brush up their knowledge. It is observed from the study that most of the library professionals are eager to learn about new concepts and practices, but administrative initiatives are lacking. This obviously leads to lack of proper knowledge about developing local history collection in public libraries.
- **Lack of information for independent local history researchers:** Since public libraries are mostly unable to render information services on Durga pujas in ancient Kolkata, independent researchers often face difficulties in getting accurate and sufficient information on the same. Though the picture is somewhat better in personal archives where sufficient information is present.
- **Lack of enthusiasm among family descendants:** Most of the family descendants of Bonedi zaminder families of Kolkata are reluctant about providing their family puja information to local public libraries. Instead, they are interested to share the same information in the social media. This mindset is another significant factor for the absence of local historical information on ancient Durga pujas in the city.
- **Commencement year dilemma –** Survey also found that several households and family descendants tend to disagree over the commencement year of the puja. Mostly, pujas were initiated in the earlier district residences, later they were shifted to Kolkata and celebrated with grandeur. Establishment years of *Thakurdalan* or mansion were often misconsidered as the puja commencement years.
- **Social media and hyper-visible heritage:** Survey documents testify to the increasing trend on display of Bonedi family Durga puja in online platforms such as blogs, Facebook pages, YouTube channels, Instagram etc. Such trend indicates hyper-visibility of heritage through social media compared to privately maintained archives and public libraries. Another facet is the flexibility and accessibility had drawn audiences in virtual domain more than localized repositories.
- **Collective Memory:** Interview outcome reveals that respondents above the age of 30, have been most consistent in answering most of the queries since they have developed cultural continuity, emotional connection, shared narratives, historic awareness and sense of pride and etc. with the event.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations may be proposed:

a) **Bonedi family Durga puja as socio-cultural focus point:** In ancient Calcutta, Durga Puja, along with other religious festivals, became a meeting point for the Bengali zaminders, common people, royal courtmen, and high-ranking British officials. This established the socio-political influence of the host families, i.e. zaminders, on society (www.sharadotsav.telmac). Wealthy Bengali families (like Shovabazar Dev family, Chorbagan Mitra family, and Haatkhola Dutta family) accumulated immense wealth by working for the British East India Company. No doubt, Durga puja in these zaminder families carry significant traces of ancient Calcutta's socio-political history. Public libraries and other information centre should be more enthusiastic and pro-active in collecting and preserving such important historical information for future research.

b) **Family archives**: The Sabarna Roy Chowdhury of Barisha maintains the oldest continuous Bonedi family puja. The family maintains an archive named as *Sabarna Sangrahalaya* (since 2005) where several valuable documents are preserved. The archive possesses original *Destabej* or land grants offer reflecting the scenario of pre-colonial Calcutta. While the Shobhabazar Rajbari archives at Raja Nabakrishna Street consists of historical correspondence and guest lists involving British dignitaries. Pathuriaghata Mallick Bari archives at Darpanaryan Street preserve rare household manuscripts, ritual manuals, and documentation of art, valuable jewelry, and unique domestic customs dating back to over two centuries.

c) **Centralized digital repository:** A digital repository should be developed which will be dedicated to the local history of Bonedi family Durga Pujas only. This project can be undertaken in collaboration with public and academic libraries, museums, archives, etc. It should preserve both tangible and intangible heritage resources with standardized metadata.

d) **Upgradation of local history sections in public libraries:** An appropriate centralized collection development policy in public libraries should be adopted which will include various forms of local history information sources related to ancient Durga puja of the city. These sources include genealogy, manuscripts, souvenir, photographs, leaflets, newspaper cuttings, maps, local magazines and festival documentation.

e) **Digitization of family archives:** Personal archives of Bonedi families should be digitized systematically following international archival standards. Rare documents should be digitized using high-definition technologies. These will allow users to access the information over various digital platforms.

f) **Oral history projects:** Oral history is no doubt an immensely important local history information source. Oral history projects can be developed from the interviews of Bonedi family members, priests, neighbourhood residents etc. This task should involve librarians, archivists, researchers, historians, and even high-school teachers and students. These valuable memories must be digitally recorded before they get permanently lost.

g) **Family database creation:** Bonedi family names, house names and locations, names of family members, eminent personalities, special rituals in Durga puja festival, and such other significant information should be included in specific centralized database for consistency in indexing and information retrieval.

h) **Promoting community involvement:** Bonedi family members, common residents of the locality, independent researchers, and local historians should be encouraged to take part in collection and preservation of local history information sources. Various types of information sources can be collected through crowd-sourcing method under librarian's expert guidance.
i) **Creation of collaborative heritage information networks:** Public libraries, personal archives, museums, academic libraries, special libraries, UNESCO-funded organizations and heritage conservation agencies should develop a collaborative network which can collaboratively select, collect, preserve and disseminate necessary information on Bonedi family Durga puja of the city.

Discussion

The findings show that the history of Bonedi Bari Durga Puja is recorded in a scattered way. Historical information is spread across public libraries, private family collections, spoken stories, and online platforms, making it hard to get a holistic picture from any one source. This shows the idea of spread-out cultural knowledge, where different places keep different parts of the same cultural history (Gilliland, 2014). Although UNESCO has recognized Durga Puja as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (UNESCO, 2021), the histories of many Bonedi families remain poorly recorded.

The survey also shows that some century-old public libraries are still important sources of local history because they keep rare books, newspapers, manuscripts, and regional publications that are often not found elsewhere (Evans & Saponaro, 2012). However, information on the Bonedi Bari Durga Puja is limited due to the lack of clear documentation rules, trained staff, and user awareness. While family archives hold many valuable records, including photos, letters, and ritual documents, they are not available to public libraries because there is no combined documentation system or proper effort. Also, talks with descendants show that private archives often do not have proper conservation system, which public libraries and museums can provide. On the other hand, growing social media offers rich digital resources that can help tell the story and impact of the Bonedi family Durga Puja (Conway, 2010; Giaccardi, 2012). This platform acts as a uniting force to bring institutional and private collections together. The shared memory of intangible cultural heritage is found mostly among older people who can remember household traditions and historical events better than younger ones (Halbwachs, 1950). This may mean that passing down cultural knowledge between generations is slowly weakening, making the recording of oral history more important (Assmann, 2011; Ritchie, 2015; Thompson, 2017).

Inconsistencies in the reported commencement years of several household Durga Pujas suggest that historical information should be verified through multiple sources, including archival records, genealogies, newspapers, and oral accounts (Tosh, 2015). All these endorse the necessity for an integrated documentation approach that brings together institutional collections, family archives, oral histories, and digital resources (Gilliland, 2014; International Council on Archives, 2016). Future studies may explore collaborative digital heritage repositories, GIS-based mapping of Bonedi Bari heritage, linked-data applications, and community-led archival models to improve the long-term preservation and accessibility of these traditions.

Conclusions

The documentation of Bonedi family Durga puja should move beyond the conventional preservation of printed records towards an integrated knowledge management approach encompassing documentary heritage, archival collections, oral traditions, collective memory, and digital resources. Information professionals are uniquely positioned to coordinate this multidisciplinary effort through expertise in collection development, archival management, metadata creation, digital preservation, information organization, and community engagement. Such an integrated documentation model would not only preserve the historical legacy of Kolkata's Bonedi households but also ensure that this invaluable local history remains discoverable, authentic, and accessible for future generations of researchers, policymakers, and the wider public.

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