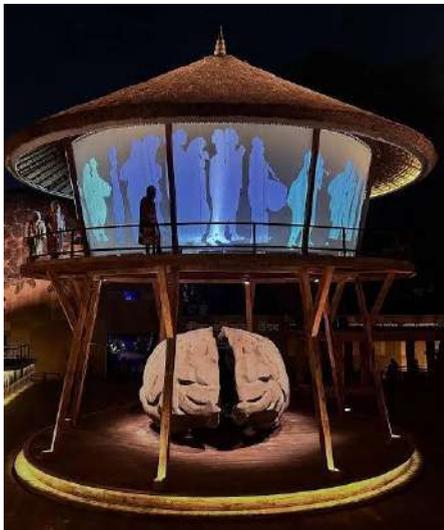


When a City Becomes a Museum: Durga Puja as Public Art in Bengal

Vikram Bachhawat

Durga Puja in Kolkata is best understood as a city-scale experiment in installation art: thousands of site-specific, time-bound environments authored by teams of artists and artisans, funded by neighbourhood committees, and experienced by millions as a democratic, free, public exhibition. UNESCO's inscription of "Durga Puja

in Kolkata" on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity formalised what practitioners and scholars already knew – that this is not only ritual but a contemporary cultural form characterised by "large-scale installations and clay sculptures," embedded in civic life rather than the market.



Bhabatosh Sutar's Beej Āngan (Seed Courtyard) for Tala Prattoy's centenary Puja, a monumental installation where agricultural time, seed forms, and community memory converge into a ritual landscape.

Across north and south Kolkata, the 2025 season again demonstrates how sophisticated the creative vocabulary has become. In Tala, Tala Prattoy marks its centenary with **Bhabatosh Sutar's** theme *Bej Āngan* (Seed Courtyard) – a spatial narrative that

stages germination and renewal through material metaphors and procession paths; the committee's communications name Sutar as theme artist, and the pandal was among those inaugurated by the Chief Minister, underscoring its civic centrality.



Weaving Grandeur in Marble-White Illusion

In Lake Town, Sreebhumi Sporting Club deploys architectural mimicry at urban scale by reimagining the BAPS Swaminarayan Akshardham (New Jersey); the

idol – by **Pradip Rudra Pal** – anchors an environment where spectacle and darshan are collapsed into a single dramaturgy of light, façade, and procession.



Arjunpur Amra Sabai Club, Shovin Bhattacharjee's Mukhomukhi, a futuristic pandal of mirrored steel spheres."

In the east, Arjunpur's Aamra Shabai Club credits **Shampa Bhattacharjee and Shovin Bhattacharjee** with concept and images, extending Shovin's stain-

less-steel idiom into reflective volumes that multiply the gaze and choreograph crowd flow – an installation-logic closer to biennale practice than festive décor.

Equally telling is the way neighbourhoods curate their own art histories. Tollygunge's Santipally mounts a Chalchitra-themed environment where the painted back-panel of the idol becomes the curatorial pretext for scenographic expansion, an art-historical motif translated into full-scale spatial design. In Ranikuthi, Netaji Jatiya Sebadal – now in its jubilee year – illustrates the long arc of barowari (community-organised) patronage that

keeps these installations firmly non-commercial and publicly funded; planning began early with a substantial budget raised locally, emblematic of the model through which most major pandals are produced. That model is not incidental: the barowari genealogy is precisely what distinguishes Puja art from fairs and museums – art made for use, encounter, and devotion, financed by subscriptions and donations rather than by sales.



Sanatan Dinda's Durga for 2025, an expansive installation where painted textile, sculptural form, and community craft merge into a pulsating red cosmos – an aesthetic of intensity and devotion characteristic of his practice.

Other artists bring their own vocabulary to this civic biennale. **Sanatan Dinda**, internationally recognised for his contemporary art practice, transforms Puja in-

stallations with painterly scenography, often layering urban memories and ecological motifs into immersive environments.



Susanta Paul redefines the pandal through light, geometry, and illusion. His futuristic environments turn ritual into a cosmic journey, where divinity emerges through rhythm, energy, and spatial harmony.

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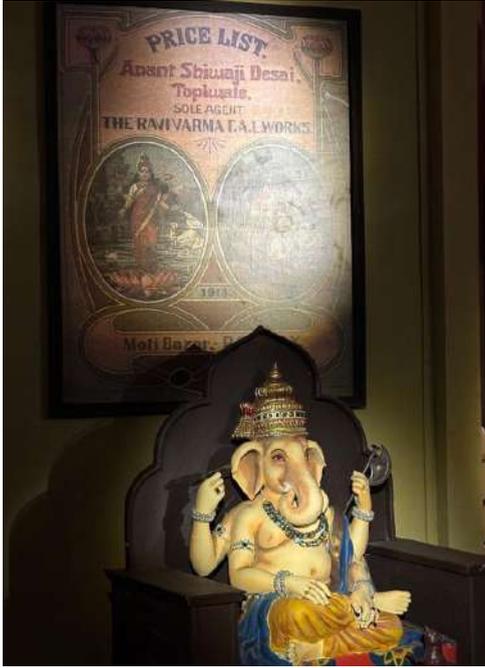
tial harmony. His earlier works celebrated textural play with jute and cloth, fusing tactile, material experimentation with ritual iconography.



Excavating Memory Through Monumental Narratives

Pradip Das, working across painting and set design, has created some of the most visually spectacular pandals in recent years, where colour and scale amplify the ritual theatre of Durga's

arrival. Together, these names highlight how Puja pandals are not "folk crafts" alone, but vital spaces of experimentation where Bengal's finest artists continually innovate.



Trikone Park's Debdarshan, a tribute to Raja Ravi Varma, conceived by Deep Das and Eshika Chandra, where his painted deities step out of the canvas into living installation.

One of the most striking curatorial gestures this year comes from Trikone Park in Bhowanipore, which presents Debdarshan, a full-scale homage to Raja Ravi Varma. Conceptualised and executed by artists **Deep Das and Eshika Chandra**, the pandal transforms into a living gallery of Ravi Varma's oeuvre, with idols styled after his naturalistic deities, walls lined with reproductions and oleographs, and the very

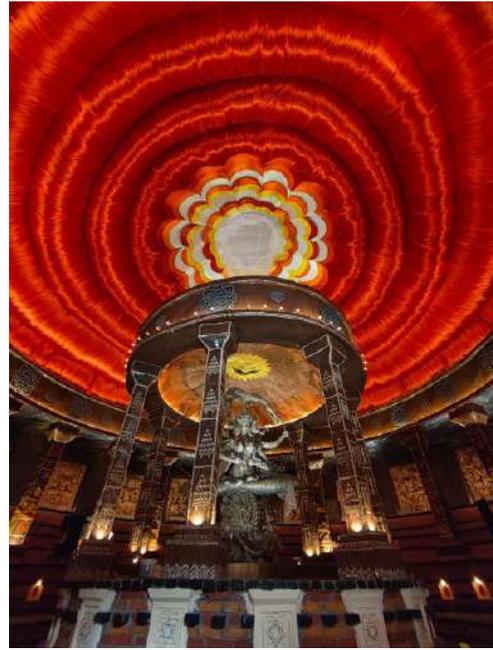
mise-en-scène evoking the painter's studio and lithographic press. Here, the gods appear to step directly out of Varma's canvases into three-dimensional reality, making the pandal at once devotional, archival, and art-historical. It exemplifies how Durga Puja installations have evolved into curatorial projects in their own right, bridging ritual practice with the history of modern Indian art.



Partha Dasgupta's 2025 Durga Puja installation, celebrating the woodcut legacy of Haren Das with monumental carvings and collaborative works by artists from Kolkata and Santiniketan.

Artist lineages matter here. **Partha Dasgupta** – acknowledged by practitioners as a master sculptor of Durga – directs a 2025 project celebrating the woodcut legacy of Haren Das, convening six artists from Kolkata and San-

tiniketan to translate printmaking principles into environmental installation. The project's communications emphasise collaborative authorship and process visibility, which are signature features of Puja-era making.



Akhil Chandra Das's monumental Durga for 2025, a sculptural tour de force where classical figuration meets architectural scale, embodying Bengal's tradition of hand-finished, community-rooted artistry.

Akhil Das brings sculptural grandeur into Durga Puja, creating idols that echo epic narratives. His monumental forms, detailed and dynamic, celebrate divinity with an intensity that bridges ritual and art. And the sculptural tradition

that nourishes this ecology is broader still: the practice of Akhil Das, for instance, exemplifies a Bengal sculptural idiom – technically exacting, figurative yet elastic – that has fed both gallery circuits and the festival's taste for monumental, hand-finished form.

What visitors encounter are not “decorations” but immersive installations where theme, movement, and sound are co-composed. Sutar’s Beej Āngan compresses agricultural time into a ritual corridor; Sreebhumi’s replica-architecture turns citation into spectacle; Arjunpur refracts the viewer within a mirrored lattice; Tollygunge’s Chalchitra extrapolates a canonical pictorial device into a walk-through archive; and Trikone Park re-imagines Ravi Varma as a spatial experience. Each is a curatorial argument rendered in bamboo, cloth, steel, unfired clay, projection, and sound. The result is a distributed museum whose rooms are streets, whose opening hours are the nights of Shashthi through Dashami, and whose visitor-ship – measured in spontaneous queues and circulating crowds – far exceeds that of formal fairs. The fact that these works are dismantled within days is not a deficit but an aesthetic parameter: ephemerality functions here as a compositional constraint and a social contract.

This year’s narrative also carries a civic mood. Record rains and severe waterlogging have damaged parts of several pandals and slowed movement across the city; artisans in Kumartuli and

committees across Behala, Ultadanga, Dum Dum, and Salt Lake have raced to protect structures and idols. As Shashthi approaches, the refrain across organisers and artists is simple: may the sun return so that viewers can fully witness what months of collective labour have produced.

To read Durga Puja as the world’s largest art exhibition is therefore not hyperbole but an analytic proposition: a city-wide, publicly funded, non-commercial system of large art installations that operate with curatorial clarity, craft excellence, and mass address. It is where under-exposed artists and studios test ideas at 1:1 scale; where local clubs act as patrons and producers; where viewers are not consumers but participants; and where Bengal’s talent – Akhil Das, Partha Dasgupta, Sanatan Dinda, Susanta Paul, Pradip Das Bhabatosh Sutar, Shampa and Shovin Bhattacharjee, Deep Das and Eshika Chandra among many others – asserts a plural, process-rich modernity. For museums, critics, and gallerists, this is an indispensable field laboratory: an encounter with the future of public art, authored by a city that has made the exhibitionary form its own.

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