I Am My Own Goddess:

Intersectional Agency and Transformation in The Brata Rituals of Urban Bengal

By
Suramya Pushan Dasgupta

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Supervisors:
Professor Vlad Naumescu
Professor Jean Louis Fabiani

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Abstract

This thesis investigates intersectional agency and transformation in the women-centric Brata rituals, an understudied but important form of Bengali folk religion practiced by low-caste women in the largest urban sphere of East India, Kolkata. First, it deconstructs the socio-historical context of these rituals to establish their discriminatory origins as part of an exclusionary, caste-based, and patriarchal Hindu society. Second, it conducts an ethnographic study of the double marginalized Bengali low-caste women at important communal-religious junctions, keeping their lifeworld at the center of the analysis, to identify the traditional and modern forms of resistance against caste and gender-based hegemony. Looking beyond structural critiques of an age-old ritual practice, this research study employs an inductive grounded-theory approach, prioritizing local narratives and lived experiences, to arrive at conclusions about the unique nature of agency shown in the practice of these women-centric rituals. In doing so, it situates the women actors as the agents of projecting intersectional agency. Lastly, it contributes to a fresh understanding of a transforming folk ritual in a rapidly modernizing urban backdrop by including cases of male participation and inter-caste interactions that alter the purity and pollution dichotomy of the caste system. Thus, it produces a testimony of how the women's Brata rituals, breaking historically divisive norms, adopt an inclusionary nature to provide agential spaces of expression in a rigid hegemonic religious system.

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Introduction

This thesis investigates intersectional agency and transformation in the women-centric Brata rituals, an understudied but essential form of Bengali folk religion practiced by low-caste women in the largest urban sphere of East India, Kolkata. First, it deconstructs the socio-historical context of these rituals to establish their discriminatory origins as part of an exclusionary, caste-based, and patriarchal Hindu society. The Brata ritual is a form of austerity and penance that is observed by women in Bengal to seek the blessings of a particular deity or goddess. It involves fasting, praying, and following certain rituals to please the deity and express gratitude. The women fast for a day or more, depending on the Brata they are observing, and follow certain practices or rituals during the fasting period, such as chanting prayers and hymns, worshipping the deity's idol or image, and performing certain rituals. The Brata ritual is an important aspect of Bengali religious and cultural traditions and demonstrates the devotion and faith of the women who observe it. Several scholars have written accounts of these practices, mostly in the local Bengali language (Tagore, 1919; Roy 1960; Wadley 1976). Most have worked at documenting in detail the different types of these rituals, originating in the ancient pre-Aryan era and eventually evolving to find a niche for themselves within the later dominant Brahminical Hindu religion.

In the mid-19th century, scholars of Religious Studies began to explore the agential nature of these rituals, especially in the case of marginalized low-caste women (Das, 1953). Nevertheless, scholarships for these ritual practices have been far too less as they are often overshadowed by scholarships for the mainstream, "great tradition" of the Durga and Kali festivals of Bengal (Pal et al., 2016). June McDaniel (2002), however, conducted an ethnographic study of these rituals under the border domain of Folk Religion in rural and semi-

rural spaces. But her approach was not enough to gauge the dynamic nature of this ritual when observed in a rapidly modernizing urban setup like Kolkata (capital city of West Bengal, East India). This thesis, hence, situated its fieldwork in the bustling Kalighat temple region, and similar Harijan or Scheduled Caste slum areas in South Kolkata, where a multiplicity of social factors intermingle and affect the way a ritual is practiced within the low-caste communities. Like the work of McDaniel, it initially analyzes the lived experiences of various low-caste and Scheduled Caste Bengali communities (Pal, Majhi, Das, Ghosh, Namasudra, etc.), highlighting their personal narratives. However, this thesis looks deeper into different ways the women seek to project intersectional agency against dominant caste and gender-based hegemonies, through personalized actions such as deity selection and immersion, self-expression through art and performance, and self-care through dietary regulation. All of which is carefully knit together in a strong inter-generational circle of matrilineal knowledge passed down from generation to generation. But this study also goes beyond these narratives to rope in the unique accounts of the new generation, navigating ways of ritual innovation on the part of the younger, educated children, and the two-way sharing of knowledge and practice.

Through their involvement in Brata fasting rituals, Bengali women exercise agency, from deliberately choosing the Brata they observe to asserting their autonomy and negotiating traditional and modern views. They navigate their routes to spiritual growth while simultaneously promoting their beliefs, aims, and aspirations by practicing Brata fasting. Thus, this research explores the symbolic dimension through a careful study of the performative, to then situate the women practitioners, their agency, and intersectionality, within the larger social structure. It so seeks to answer the final dimensions posited by rituals within the society; strategic, and, integrative (Platvoet 1995). According to Saba Mahmoud (2005), the religious practices of women in the Middle East are frequently regarded as apolitical or insignificant,

but the spiritual practices of men are regarded as political. Similarly, Brata rites practiced by Bengali women are frequently dismissed as insignificant or unimportant by mainstream culture. According to Mahmoud and other researchers, women's religious practices are essentially political since they allow marginalized groups to exercise their agency and challenge dominant norms. Furthermore, Kalapana Ram's (2016) work emphasizes how women's agency is frequently tacit, embodied, and not always visible in public. When viewed from the outside, the Brata ceremony is a perfect illustration of how women's agency may not be readily apparent. However, by examining women's embodied practices, it is able to understand how women exercise their agency within the constraints of the ritual.

Looking beyond structural critiques of an age-old ritual practice, this research study employs an inductive grounded-theory approach, prioritizing local narratives and lived experiences, to arrive at conclusions about the unique nature of agency shown in the practice of these women-centric rituals. In doing so, it situates the women actors as the agents of projecting intersectional agency, identifying with the double marginalized Bengali low-caste women at important communal-religious junctions, keeping their lifeworld at the center of the analysis.

Lastly, it contributes to a fresh understanding of a transforming folk ritual in a rapidly modernizing urban backdrop by including cases of male participation and inter-caste interactions that alter the purity and pollution dichotomy of the caste system. In an urban space such as Kolkata, where social norms are rapidly changing, there is a growing awareness and acceptance of inclusivity and equal participation in religious rituals, and this reality permeates all sections of society. Men's participation and support in these rituals are viewed as an example of intersectional solidarity, demonstrating how various marginalized groups band together to

oppose the discriminatory cultural standards of caste and patriarchy. Moreover, the inclusion of Brahmin priests in low-caste households, a seemingly unthinkable phenomenon, further supports the inclusionary nature of these ritual practices. All of these thereby attesting the dynamic nature of rituals beyond the expected standardizations, formalizations, and routinizations, and their immediate effect on society, and vice versa (Turner, 1969; Sax, 2009, Jonaitis & Glass, 2010; Lan, 2018). Further, accounts of non-Bengali low-caste women where a significant contrast is observed with the absence of self-expression and lesser importance for feminine divinity, support the more feministic Bengali habitus. Thus, it produces a testimony of how the women's Brata rituals, breaking historically divisive norms, adopt an inclusionary nature to provide agential spaces of expression in a rigid and exclusionary hegemonic religious system.

1 Background

The Brata ritual is a religious observance practiced by lower-caste women in the Indian state of West Bengal. It is a fasting ritual, typically undertaken to fulfill a specific wish or desire and involves a strict regimen of dietary restrictions and prayer. During the observance, participants must abstain from eating or drinking during the day or only eat specific foods prepared according to ritualistic guidelines. The Brata ritual also involves specific prayers and songs that are recited throughout the day. It is believed that by successfully completing the Brata ritual, participants are able to receive blessings and attain their desired outcome. The Brata ritual is considered an important part of the cultural and religious traditions of lower-caste women in Bengal and is often passed down from generation to generation.

Figure 1-1 Sitala Puja at the Garcha Harijan Community

Source: *Author*

Brata is an important element of Bengali religious and cultural rites, and women perform it to honor a certain deity or goddess. The Brata ritual is a type of austerity and penance in

which women fast for a day or longer and perform particular practices in order to obtain the blessings of the deity they are serving. The following are some major parts of the Brata ritual:

1. **Deity selection:** Women choose a specific deity or goddess for whom they want to observe the Brata. This deity may be selected for personal reasons, family traditions, or astrological reasons.
2. **Fasting:** Depending on the Brata, women may fast for a day or more. In some cases
3. **Observing specific practices/paraphernalia:** During the fasting period, women observe particular practices or rituals such as singing prayers and hymns, worshipping the deity's idol or image, and executing certain rites.
4. **Prayers and offerings:** Women make offerings of food, flowers, and other objects to the deity they worship, requesting her blessings and expressing appreciation.

The fast is broken with special food and sweets, and the blessings of elders and family members are sought at the end of the Brata. As a result, Brata appears to be a household type of religion unrelated to temple service. The absence of a male Brahmin priest (assigned to offer prayers and services on behalf of the devotees) and the absence of needless ceremonial elaborations distinguish the Brata from other mainstream Hindu festivals.

1.1 Socio-historical Context

Brata is the fundamental religion to which all Bengalis are born and brought up (Roy 1960: 10). Originally Brata was not a secluded domestic religion but existed as an interior wing of a single and complete magico-religious observance that also had a powerful exterior wing for men. The introduction of Brahmanical religion, philosophy, and mode of worship tended to disintegrate the full-scale functions of the Brata religion (pp.12-13). In other words,

with the introduction of the Brahmanical religion into the domestic life of the Bengali household, men have gained more power and importance in the external aspect of religion. In contrast, women have retained their participation in the domestic observance of religion in the form of Brata. Certain Bratas have retained their indigenous features. Their originality is marked by the absence of a male Brahmin priest, (who is appointed to offer prayers and services on behalf of the devotees) and the lack of unnecessary ceremonial elaborations, making them an all-inclusive women-centric ritual. Besides, the lack of strict caste rules makes the Brata an open system in which all participate irrespective of caste norms. (Das 1953: 2-3).

There are chiefly three types of Brata identified by Tagore (1919: 17):

1. The *Shashtriya Brata*: Brata that originated in the Aryan culture and is mentioned in the Rig Veda),
2. *Kumari Brata*: is performed by unmarried girls between the age of 9 and 14), and,
3. *Meyeli Brata*: is mainly observed by married Bengali women whose rituals are the result of cultural acculturation between the Aryans and the natives.

The Brata that I am chiefly concerned with in my study and that is commonly followed by women in Bengal is *Meyeli Brata.* Susan Wadley was the first author to mention the auspiciousness that women attached to the ritual performance. For the practitioners, Brata observance marked their auspiciousness, which was explained by their commitment to womanly duties (Wadley 1976: 150). Chakraborty (2015) observes that Brata empowers women to act independently in the religious domain by challenging the powers of the male priesthood.

Professor of Religious Studies June McDaniel (2002), author of “Making Virtuous Wives and Daughters: An Introduction to Women's Brata Rituals in Bengali Folk Religion”, hence, chose Bengal to research Brata ceremonies for numerous reasons:

1. Cultural Importance: Brata ceremonies are culturally and religiously significant in India and Bangladesh's Bengal region. June McDaniel, a researcher in South Asian religions, was drawn to examine this specific ceremonial tradition because of its deep cultural and theological significance.

2. Availability and Accessibility: McDaniel discovered that studying Brata rituals in Bengal gave her better access to primary sources like temple archives, oral traditions, and personal experiences from those who conduct the rituals. Furthermore, those who participated in the Brata rites were more inclined to share their expertise and experiences with her.

3. Intersectional Agency: McDaniel was curious about the confluence of gender, religion, and social hierarchy in Bengal's Brata ceremonies. This ritual practice provided an opportunity to comprehend the agency of women from marginalized communities, with a major portion of practitioners hailing from lower-caste groups.

4. Impact on Women's Lives: Brata rituals have significantly impacted the lives of Bengali women. McDaniel could better appreciate the function of these practices in developing gender identities, social roles, and community relationships among women in the Bengal region by researching the ritual.

1.2 Personal Motivation

During the many festivals, I celebrate at home, I often find the ritual practices, like the offering of *Panchasashya* (five grains), the dipping of 108 stone apple (Bengal quince) leaves in *ghee* (clarified butter), and their accompanying *mantras* (hymns), to collectively represent a unique coherence with nature—a deep reverence toward the natural resources abundant in that particular season[1]. Being an adherent of Hinduism myself, the beliefs I have grown up with and the rituals I have performed have intrigued me in several ways. Induction into the discipline of Anthropology gave direction to this curiosity.

Figure 1-2 Brata offerings for Goddesses Durga and Kali at the Author's residence

Source: *Author*

[1] The five grains: paddy, barley, black sesame seed, black gram, and yellow mustard, are offered in most Hindu rituals. Symbolically, these represent well-being, hope, mirth, and fertility, their presence bringing good harvest and unity to the family. The number '108' is considered holy in Hinduism: both Lord Shiva and Krishna had 108 chief followers, the *japa mala* (prayer garland) consists of 108 prayer beads made from basil wood, and goddess Durga has 108 Avatars (Source: my grandmother, the late Reba Lala).

I began to comprehend the nuanced ways in which my mother and grandmother exercised agency in patriarchal houses. Not only within the household but by effectively carrying out these rituals in their own ways and according to their own standards, they would symbolize a uniqueness that was not entirely opposed to the commune. Furthermore, the household helpers—women from lower castes, would join my mother and grandmother in a spirit of solidarity, unity in womanhood, and feminine inventiveness, breaking down class and caste barriers while sharing their deities, songs, and offerings. I could see how Brata rites helped lower-caste women develop and strengthen social networks. Brata rites are frequently observed in groups, giving women an opportunity to engage with other women from similar social backgrounds. These groups help create a sense of solidarity and belonging among lower-caste women, strengthening their agency and power to challenge discrimination and oppression.

2 Ritual and Society

Ritual activity is conventional. It is socially prescribed, a characteristic that sets it apart from mundane activities (Bell 1992). Saba Mahmoud in her study of feminist Islamic practices in Egypt inquired into the "variable re-relationships assigned to rule-governed behavior within different conceptions of the self under particular regimes of truth, power, and authority" (Mahmoud, 2001: 828). She also linked her analysis of ritual to issues of "embodiment, emotions, and individual autonomy", examining parallel conceptions of *salat* that coexist in some tension in contemporary Egypt (Ibid). The debates between formal and routine behavior, rehearsed and authentic emotions, and public demeanor and private self, are at the center of a fruitful dialogue among anthropologists highlighting the variable ways in which people link ritualized behavior with mundane activity in different cultural systems. Victor Turner argues that ritual action is a means of, and space for, channeling and divesting the antisocial qualities of powerful emotions (Turner, 1982: 89-100). Bruce Kapferer defined ritual as a "multi-modal symbolic form, the practice of which is marked off (usually spatially and temporally) from, or within, the routine of everyday life, and which has specified, in advance of its enactment, a particular sequential ordering of acts, utterances, and events, which are essential to the recognition of the ritual by cultural members as being representative of a specific cultural type" (Kapferer, 1991: 3).

2.1 Bengali Habitus

The notion of habitus developed by Kalpana Ram (2016) provides a framework for understanding how the Brata rites are rooted in the cultural and social practices of Bengali culture. The term "habitus" refers to the unspoken social and cultural norms and practices that shape people's behaviors and attitudes (Bourdieu, 1977). Individuals are socialized into their

particular roles and positions within society through habit. The habitus of Bengali culture impacts women's behavior and attitudes in the setting of Brata rituals, influencing their choice of deity, method of ritual performance, and even their bodily movements during possession. Women have control over their bodies and activities in this setting, allowing them to defy societal norms and express their autonomy.

2.2 Phenomenological: Lived Experiences

Looking at Brata rituals practiced by Bengali women through the lens of Saba Mahmoud's (2005) Politics of Piety requires an understanding of how women's religious practices are intimately linked to their lived experiences and struggles. Mahmoud's work highlights the complexities and nuances of Muslim women's religious practices in Egypt and how these practices are entangled with politics, gender, and power. In the same vein, looking at the Brata rituals practiced by Bengali women allows us to explore the ways in which their religious practices are intertwined with their experiences of caste and gender oppression.

This ambitious model—a fresh approach to gauge the complexities of long-surviving pre-Aryan rituals in Bengal—aims not to detach the material from the emotive but posits both as essential components for the survival of a practice. Certainly, as the study shall progress, more interrelated domains, like changing gender and kinship roles, family structures, and the politics of a modern pan-Hindu reality—caste and class dynamics—are sure to pose challenges to this study. There is a significant dearth of literature on the *Brata* as mainstream Bengali festivals of Durga Puja and Kali Puja overshadow it. The existing literature on *Brata* presents mere descriptive monographic accounts of the ritual with little attention to the deeper anthropological implications of the ritual *dimensions*. It is as if the ritual is only limited to the

initial three basic dimensions of Platvoet: *interaction, collective, and customary* (Platvoet, 1995: 23-30).

June McDaniel (2002) addresses the topic of Women's Brata Rituals in Bengali Folk Religion in her book "Making Virtuous Daughters and Wives: An Introduction to Women's Brata Rituals in Bengali Folk Religion," by exploring the experiences of particular women who have engaged in these practices. McDaniel uses personal narratives to help the reader understand what the Women's Brata Rituals comprise, why they are essential, and how people who participate perceive them.

2.3 Intersectional Agency through Rituals

Gender, class, caste, religion, and ethnicity are all overlapping elements that impact women's identities and experiences, according to the study of intersectional agency. Intersectionality emphasizes the ways in which many types of oppression and privilege cross and impact the lives of women, as well as the importance of addressing diverse and intersecting forms of inequality (Runyan, 2018).

Eminent anthropologists, gender studies, and religious studies researchers have explored women's intersectional agency through religious rituals. Leela Dube's book "Women and Kinship: Comparative Perspectives on Gender in South and South-East Asia" describes how Hindu women use rituals to question their subservient status in the family and show their agency (Malik, 1997). Susan Starr Sered investigates how elderly Jewish women in Jerusalem use their knowledge of religious rituals to obtain social and emotional power in her book "Women as Ritual Experts: The Religious Lives of Elderly Jewish Women in Jerusalem" (Steinberger, 1993). Her detailed ethnography delves into the religious beliefs and practices of

a group of elderly Jewish women from Kurdistan and Yemen who now reside in Jerusalem. Despite being illiterate and barred from official religious practices, the ladies are masters in rites designed to protect the well-being of their extended families. Sered reveals the tactics used to circumvent the patriarchal structures of Judaism, building their own "little tradition" within and parallel to the "great tradition" of Torah Judaism by analyzing rituals, daily experiences, life stories, and nonverbal gestures (Ibid).

Returning to India, Vasudha Dalmia analyses how women in Banaras use religious rites to demonstrate their autonomy and fight patriarchal restraints in her book "The Nationalisation of Hindu Traditions: Bharatendu Harishchandra and Nineteenth Century Banaras" (Hansen, 1998). These researchers have shown how women use religious rituals to assert their agency and fight repressive hierarchies, shedding light on the intricate intersections of gender, religion, and culture.

The emphasis on agency moves attention away from external institutions and constraints like sexism and towards how individuals navigate and make sense of their lives within those structures. Women, according to the agency concept, are neither passive nor determined by their social setting, but rather actively negotiate and resist the limits of their social position. Empirical research and in-depth ethnographic investigation underpin the study of intersectional agency. Listening to women's voices, seeing their practices, and engaging in discourse with them and their communities are all part of the process. This method provides a more complex understanding of how Bengali women navigate their identities, experiences, and wants within the context of Hindu Brata rites.

The structural approach, on the other hand, focuses on overarching social structures and power systems, such as patriarchy, without paying enough attention to individual experiences and agency. While the structural approach is helpful in analyzing the larger social, historical,

and political backdrop of women's lives, it can sometimes ignore the subtleties and nuances of individual experiences and identities.

2.4 Tradition vs Modernity: Folk Religion in the Urban Sphere

During a Brata fast, women negotiate their traditional and modern personas in order to build their own identities. They can choose to accept some traditional Bratas while rejecting the patriarchal values they imply, such as supporting gender equality and modern femininity but adhering to the Sitala Mata Brata, for instance. By participating in Brata Tasting ceremonies, Bengali women exhibit autonomy and negotiate ancient and modern perspectives. They accomplish this by actively selecting the Brata they observe. They progress their own ideals, goals, and aspirations while navigating their own spiritual paths through Brata fasting.

Returning to June McDaniel's (2002) study, she situates the Women's Brata Rituals within the larger context of Bengali folk religion, emphasizing how these practices represent the values and beliefs of this particular cultural tradition. She addresses the importance of caste and gender in determining the experiences of women who participate in Brata rites, emphasizing how these rituals provide women with a space to assert their agency, express their wishes, and connect with a community of other participants. McDaniel maintains a courteous and questioning tone, avoiding value judgments, and instead seeks to understand the rituals from the perspective of individuals who participate in them. McDaniel is able to provide a nuanced and enlightening introduction to the Women's Brata Rituals in Bengali Folk Religion by prioritizing the experiences of women and spotlighting their voices and tales (Ibid).

So, McDaniel brings in the dimension of intersectional agency, nevertheless, it still needs to be improved in the fact that it projects the ritual as a static phenomenon of Bengali Folk Religion. Moreover, when studied in an urban setup like Kolkata, the field site for this research, the folk religion works more in the manner of Sered's "little tradition" against the more significant "great tradition" of upper-caste patriarchal Hinduism. Rather than projecting the low-caste women practitioner's agency as retaliation to the exclusionary pre-existing structure of the society, the observations, and findings for this thesis, as we will see in the coming chapters, required a broader, more critical perspective to holistically understand the form of agency. Thus, McDaniel's studies and observations, which were limited to rural settings, can seem to be a simplistic and idealized view of the practices.

While McDaniel's introduction to Women's Brata Rituals in Bengali Folk Religion provides valuable insight into the experiences and perspectives of individual women who participate in these practices, it may not provide enough tools to fully understand the phenomenon, particularly in urban settings where forms of practice and agency can be more dynamic. Looking just at the intersectional agency in the form of documenting the ritual's regular equipment may create a sense of community and belonging for some women, but it may exclude or marginalize others based on caste, class, or other characteristics, thereby projecting exclusionary behavior. This would ultimately be a failure since the exact societal structure it seeks to combat (caste and patriarchy) is based on discriminatory social conventions.

A more thorough approach would entail interacting with a variety of theoretical perspectives, such as feminist, postcolonial, and critical theory, and setting the rituals within their larger historical and political contexts, thereby incorporating the aspect of ritual alteration. This can help to illuminate the complicated power dynamics, ambiguities, and issues

surrounding the brata rites of low-caste Bengali Hindu women in modern-day Kolkata. Encourage a more in-depth and nuanced understanding of this essential cultural practice.

2.5 Ritual Transformation

In anthropology, ritual transformation theory emphasizes how rituals can transform individuals or groups by establishing new social meanings, identities, and relationships. Rituals, according to this view, are not simply static actions that repeat tradition, but rather dynamic happenings with the ability to create new meanings and modify social relations. Rituals have the potential to challenge existing power systems, reorganize social hierarchies, and generate new forms of social organization (Wojtkowiak, 2018; Lan, 2018). The anthropology of ritual transformation is a branch of anthropology that studies the symbolic meanings and definitions attached to rituals in various cultural contexts, emphasizing ritual's dynamic nature and emphasizing how rituals can create new social meanings and relationships, challenge existing power structures, and create space for social change and resistance (Stephenson, 2015).

Victor Turner (1969) is well-known for his research on the symbolic value of rituals, particularly in African communities. He coined the term "liminality" to describe the transitional stage in ritual transformation, which is characterized by ambiguity and disorganization. His study emphasizes the significance of comprehending how ritual practices alter social relationships and meanings. Clifford Geertz's (1966) work on the subject of symbolic anthropology has had a significant impact on the study of rituals. In his important article “Religion as a Cultural System,” Geertz argues that rituals can be viewed as systems of symbols that have meaning for people in a given cultural context. He contends that in order to

comprehend rituals, we must explore their symbolic meanings and relationships to larger cultural processes. Catherine Bell (1992) examined the evolution of ritual practices in modern societies. Her work, in particular, investigates how rituals adapt to changing social, cultural, and political situations. She contends that rituals have a transformative power that can be used to promote social change and political activism. Myerhoff's research also focused on the relevance of storytelling in ritual practices. She investigated the use of rituals in the formation and maintenance of social identities and group membership. Her research demonstrates how rituals can be viewed as a form of cultural expression as well as a means of passing cultural knowledge down through generations (Kaminsky & Myerhoff 1992).

2.6 Intersectional Agency and Ritual Transformation

Thus, we can see how rituals are performative acts that generate and reinforce social norms, values, and identities. Individuals or communities are transformed through the production of new and significant experiences when these rituals are performed. The idea emphasizes the necessity of understanding the performative dimensions of ritual, concentrating on how rituals impact social action and experience. Rituals, in this view, can also be viewed as tools for societal transformation and resistance. Rituals can provide a forum for marginalized people to express their identities and challenge the dominant culture. These organizations can generate alternative sources of social power and meaning by reinterpreting and reworking the meaning of traditional rituals.

This thesis will thereby employ both theoretical frameworks gifted by the above scholars of intersectional agency and ritual transformation to gauge a holistic picture of the dynamic Brata ritual practice in the urban centers of Kolkata. As the chapters will proceed, one

will realize the importance of combining both these viewpoints to rather redefine the form of agency practiced by low-caste Bengali women. Doing so will encompass certain groundbreaking observations on the field, like the participation of men in women-centric rituals, the presence of female priests, and the non-reluctant participation of Brahmin priests in the "untouchable" Harijan homes. All of these present a different picture of these rituals, one that is transformative and inclusionary.

3 Methodology

In an effort to look beyond structural deductive approaches, this study will employ inductive Grounded Theory through a bottom-up approach. Thereby, presenting a phenomenological perspective on the study of intersectional agency. A **multi-locale study** of the *Brata* rituals and their accompanying carnivals was conducted across 3 locations in Kolkata, the capital city of the eastern Indian state of West Bengal. The holy Kalighat temple of Kolkata shall remain the focal field site where the semi-urban localities along the holy Hooghly River shall be frequented, before, during, and after the rituals to examine and differentiate the lived experiences of the rituals against the usual daily life. Further, two slum areas in South Kolkata's Ballygunge locality, particularly in Ward 69 recognized by Kolkata Municipal Corporation, were the complementary field sites. First was the Garcha Harijan[2] Community and second, the Deodar Street Harijan slum area. The key informants for conducting unstructured interviews shall be selected based on purposive sampling. Owing to grounded theory. these interviews shall be then subjected to thematic analysis. Snowball sampling was used to select the households/families/clans for participant observation and ethnography.

3.1 Methods of Data Collection:

- Participant Observation
- Unstructured Interviews

[2] The term Harijan refers to the "children of God" and is used to describe members of the Dalit community in India. Historically, the Dalits were considered the lowest caste in the Hindu social hierarchy and were subjected to social, economic, and political discrimination. Mahatma Gandhi popularized the term Harijan in the 1930s to refer to Dalits, reflecting his view that they were the children of God and deserved equal social status as other castes. Today, the Harijan community includes a diverse group of people from various Dalit castes, who continue to face discrimination and marginalization in India. The Indian government has implemented various affirmative action programs, including reservation quotas in education and employment, to promote social justice and uplift the status of the Dalit community (Srinivas, 1965).

- Visual-Aural Documentation & Analysis
    - Live sketches
    - Photography
    - Videography

3.2 Field

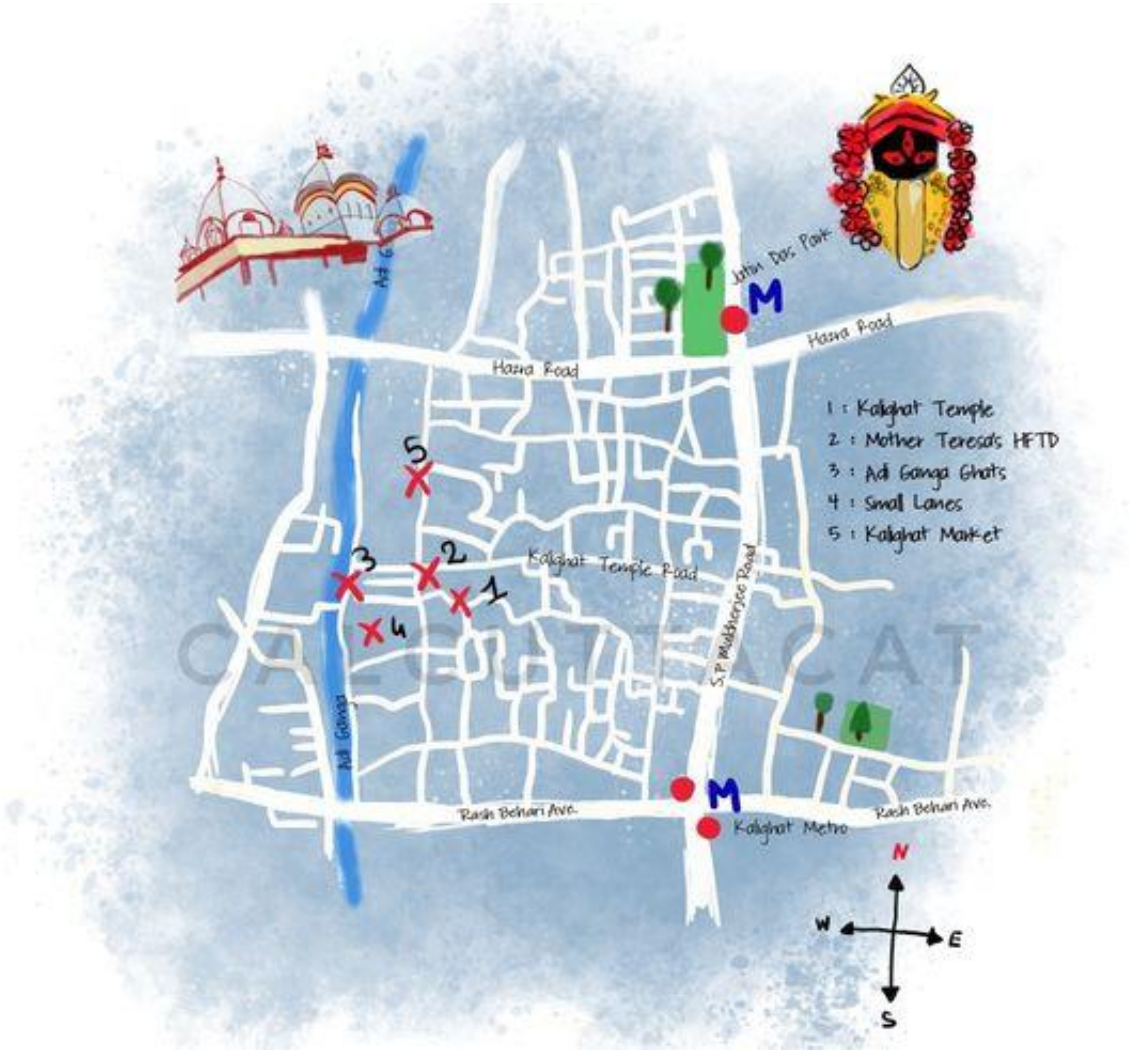

Figure 3-1 Illustrated map of Kalighat Temple Complex

Source: *https://kolkatatourism.travel/kalighat-kali-temple-kolkata*

The sites have been carefully chosen keeping two factors of time and space in mind. First, in accordance with the traditional Bengali lunar calendar (indexed in the References below), with an aim to cover the main events (e.g., full moon and new moon festivities). Second, keeping the sacred Kalighat Temple in the urban center of Kolkata as the focal point along with two complimentary slum locales where Brata rituals and festivities for the Goddesses **Sitala** and **Manasa** were observed in small permanent temples and make-shift pandals. Besides, the city of Kolkata, with its Kalighat Temple area and the Harijan slums, offers a unique lens through which to study the intersectional agency and ritual transformation of Bengali women's Brata rituals. Here are a few reasons why:

1. Cultural Importance: Kolkata is known for its rich cultural past, and the city's Brata rites, which are observed by Bengali women, are culturally and religiously significant. Exploring the intersection of religion, gender, and social hierarchies that impact the performance and meaning of these rituals in the context of Kolkata allows one to investigate the junction of religion, gender, and social hierarchies that influence the performance and meaning of these rituals.

2. Kalighat Temple: Located in the heart of urban Kolkata, the Kalighat Temple is one of the most revered and significant shrines for Bengali women. The temple is dedicated to the goddess Kali and attracts a large number of devotees who come to pray and perform various rites. The study of Brata rituals in the setting of the Kalighat Temple region provides an exceptional opportunity to see and comprehend the many socio-cultural factors at work in the performance of these rites.

3. Harijan Slums: Lower-caste Bengali women who reside in the city's slums, notably the Harijan slums, frequently practice Brata rites. The study of Brata rituals in the context of these slums allows one to investigate the junction of caste, religion, and

gender and comprehend how these social structures affect the agency of the women who execute these rituals.

4. Intersectional Agency: Women who participate in the Brata rituals navigate complicated social hierarchies and power systems, and researching these rituals in the context of Kolkata allows scholars to investigate how gender, caste, religion, and socioeconomic status intersect to shape women's agency.

The above factors made the field ideal to investigate the lives, belief systems and practices of the marginalized amid the larger dominating forces in the Hindu society of a complex cosmopolitan urban setup.

Detailed information on the particular locales and their events were also retrieved from the original "Panjika: The Hindu Astronomical Almanac" written in Bengali, and reconfirmed by Shri Sukhdev Goswami, eminent Hindu priest, and Indian Classical vocalist, and Surangama Dasgupta, a leading psychotherapist and Indian Classical dancer. At each location, in-depth interviews of leading woman practitioners of the *Brata* rituals were be conducted alongside participant observation of the festivities. The pre- and post-ritual paraphernalia were also documented through extensive ethnographic fieldnotes and audio-visual recording equipment wherever possible.

Brahmin priests at important junctures of the temple areas were also interviewed to gain the counter-perspective of the main narrative of this ethnographic research. The Brahmin priest being the individual who sits at the top of the socio-religious hierarchy, and the one to dictate the sacred ways and paraphernalia of Hindu rituals. Also, the men in the households were interviewed to gauge the nature of ritual transformation and intersectional agency, whether the women-centric ritual was in truth an exclusionary exercise or an inclusionary practice.

The research study aims to employ an inductive grounded-theory approach based on 30 interviews (refer to Appendix for interview schedule) to arrive at conclusions about the nature, functions, and transformations of these women-centric rituals. Efficient primary data through field notes and interviews were collected over the main days of the festivals, while the few days between the new moons and full moons were utilized for revisiting and compiling data from the field. This also allowed for deeper bonds and rapport establishment with the subjects of study and hence, more focused interviews, shifting the focus to better study aspects of embodiment, performance, and aesthetics, thereby locating the women actors' agency within the larger social structure.

3.3 Research Question

Main Question: How do Bengali low-caste women incorporate ritual innovation, self-expression, and societal inclusion in the Brata fasting rituals to challenge caste and gender-based hegemony and find Agency?

Sub-questions/Themes

- How and when did the ritual begin/what are the origins?
- What is the main purpose that the ritual serves for its believers and practitioners?
- How are the aesthetics and paraphernalia of the *Brata* rituals representative of the agency of women actors?
    - Hymns/Songs
    - Art
- How does the ritual practice situate its low-caste women practitioners within the larger caste-based, patriarchal social sphere?

- What is the true nature of the agency found in the current practice?

3.4 Methods of Data Analysis

The study presents itself as a qualitative and descriptive analysis exercise. It tries to explore the lived realities of marginalized women and gauge the conflicts and transformations in traditional practices within the modern urban sphere. In that, it calls for an inductive pathway to serve conclusions. Thereby, the Narrative Analysis method was carried out. Also, upon interviewing using the free-listing exercise, the Domain Analysis method was also used to arrive at common perspectives of the variables under study. Further, Content Analysis was used to systemize findings from audio recordings, live sketches, videos, photographs, and documents obtained from the field.

I also ascertain that my own insights and instincts as a researcher and an artist/musician myself also played a valuable role in the rapport establishment with some of my concerned informants, over ritual song, dance, and art sessions in some households.

3.5 Timeline of Rituals

Figure 3-2 Bratakatha and Panjika book covers (Official guidebooks for Brata Pujas)

Source: *https://www.booksandpublishers.com/Puja-Padhyati/Sri-Sri-Lokkhidevir-Baromaser-Panchali-O-Bratakatha-p35653c7221*

Fieldwork Duration: 5th April to 8th May 2023

List of Main Festivals and Events according to the Bengali Lunar Calendar:

6th April - 9th April — (4 days)

Event(s):

1. ***Sri Sri Shoshankali Mata Puja* and *Mohamela* (Carnival)**
2. ***Amabasya Nisi* (New Moon Day) - Brata fasting ritual.**

11th April - 13th April — (3 days)

Event(s):

1. ***Basanti Devi Nabaratrir Brata* - begins.**
2. *Choitro Gajan Shiva Puja* - begins.

3. *Neel Upobash* (fasting ritual) and *Neel puja*

14th April - 19th April — (6 days)

Event(s):

1. Bengali New Year (15th May)
    1. *Haal-khata* - New Year-New Harvest Puja
2. *Birbhum Mukhtiya Kali Puja*
3. ***Amabasya Nisi*** **(New Moon Day—19th May) - Brata fasting ritual.**

20th April - 21st April — (2 days)

Event: *Jogonmata* ***Sri Sri Rokhyakali*** *Mata Puja* and *Utshob* (Carnival)

23rd April

Event(s):

1. Akshaya Tritya - annual spring festival signifying the "third day of unending prosperity."
2. INTERVIEW with Sri Sukhdev Goswami (Brahmin priest and Indian Classical Vocalist) and his family

27th April

Event(s):

1. *Jahnobi Puja - Gangar upolobdhi* - Puja for river Ganges
2. *Sorkora Saptami Brata* - fasting rituals
3. *Brahma-pitripurush Torpon Snan* - fasting rituals for male ancestors

28th April

Event: *Sri Sri Singhabahini Debi Puja* and Brata

4th May

Event(s):

1. *Sri Sri Nrisingha Puja*
2. *Uma-Maheswar Brata*
3. *Sitala Mata Puja* (Rituals for Goddess of skin diseases–practiced by the "Untouchables"—lowest castes)

5th May

Event: *Mata Gondheswari Puja* **-** fasting rituals

(Bengali lunar calendar with corresponding Gregorian calendar dates attached in Appendix section)

3.6 Challenges and Limitations

The primary challenge, and the make-or-break factor for this ethnographic exploration, was rapport-establishment. Going by the traditional ways of Hindu Bengali society, my positionality as an urban upper-caste Bengali man stood in direct conflict with my subjects, chiefly lower-caste women from the semi-urban sphere. In many ways, it is a case of either or, where my own involvement or participation in these rituals could spoil the very social fabric that these women-centric rituals try to challenge. Nevertheless, I wish to turn this challenge over its head by becoming a male learner of the female ways of resistance and agency in a patriarchal society. I have two female friends, early career anthropologists based in Kolkata, who agreed to accompany me during my field visits whenever possible or required.

Besides, the limited time of the study–a month–is insufficient to come to factual, definitive conclusions about the true nature of the rituals and their practitioners. Therefore, I am composing it like a case study that can pose valuable questions and hints to further longitudinal, detailed studies on the Brata rituals.

3.7 Gifting Sketches and Tunes: Rapport Establishment

So, whenever I would come across paintings or handicrafts, or when I would simply sit and sip some milk tea in the misty mornings, I would most definitely take out my sketching book and colored pencils and engage in some live sketching. Not all the subjects were comfortable to open up readily to an “upper-caste”, educated-looking, urban boy who grew up studying in an elite English medium school. Breaking the ice with people not used to having

many visitors around was undoubtedly challenging. However, both people and their ritual artwork and decorations were highly sketching-worthy. It was only a matter of time till the word of my live-sketching fervor spread across the slums and temple area. Eventually, I began gifting some of these sketches as a token of honor. The ice was broken, and trust was built.

I was also carrying my most valuable possessions, my musical instruments. They included an Irish Tin Whistle, a Hindustani Bansuri (Indian flute), and a Ukulele. One can imagine how ecstatic a young musician exposed to global music, living in a noisy Indian city, may feel on experiencing the most marginalized households and their ritual celebrations. As soon as I familiarized myself with the communities, I would shamelessly take my instruments along to the many common meeting areas, and string tunes. To my delight, the Bansuri became a favorite among the older women, while the Tin Whistle was a ‘hit’ among the adorable kids. Thus, by gifting Sketches and sharing Tunes with my subjects, I unknowingly developed a valuable rapport with my concerned informants.

4 Women as Agents

As we have discovered from their socio-historical context, Brata rituals and practices are profoundly ingrained in Hinduism's patriarchal and Brahminical traditions and are frequently used as mechanisms to enforce gender and caste-based hierarchies. Despite their restrictive nature, low-caste women have found methods to undermine and adapt these customs to fit their own needs. They've utilized their power to carve out areas inside these rituals where they can assert their identities and question conventional societal standards. In this chapter, we will see how, during Brata rites, low-caste women frequently take on tasks typically held for upper-caste men, such as leading the parade or performing the puja. By taking on these roles, they are challenging the ritual's gender and caste-based structure. These women have also used Brata rituals to vent their frustrations and attract attention to their issues as a form of resistance to their marginalization and oppression. It might be claimed that low-caste women are the agents of intersectional agency and ritual transformation in the context of Brata rites and practices in modern-day Kolkata.

4.1 Double Marginalization

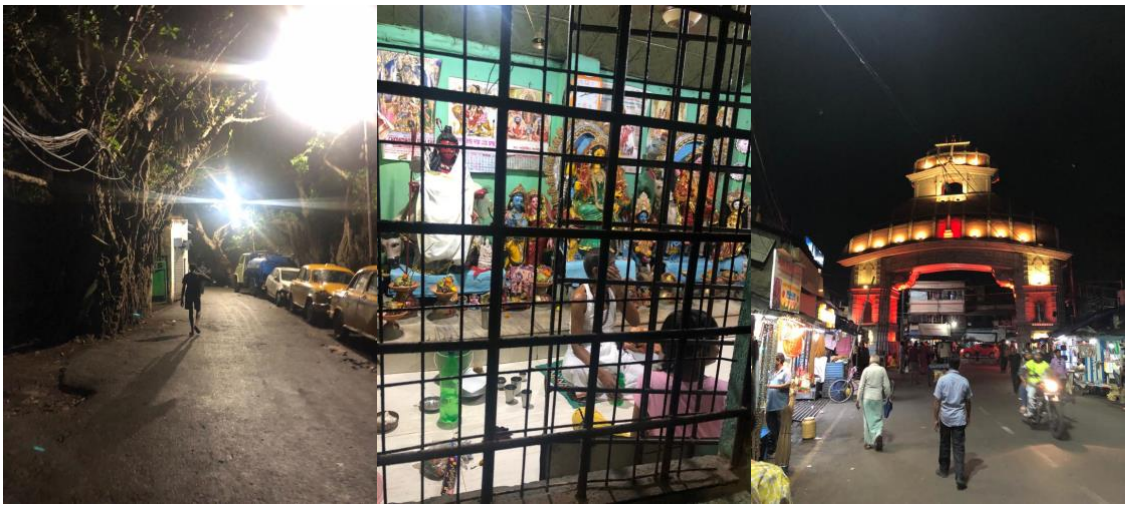

Figure 4-1 Entrance to Deodar Street Harijan slum (left), Manasa temple at Garcha Harijan slum (center), Entrance to Kalighat Temple complex (right)

Source: *Author*

Bengal's caste structure has long been rooted in Hinduism, with four major castes: Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (merchants), and Shudras (laborers). The Shudras were followed by the Dalits, often known as "untouchables." However, it is crucial to highlight that in practice, each of these main groups has multiple sub-castes and further divisions (Padmanabh, 2015; Srinivas, 1965). The caste system has been a source of social, economic, and political inequality in Bengal, as in many other parts of India. For decades, low-caste individuals and communities have experienced prejudice and disenfranchised. This has led to widespread poverty, restricted access to education and employment opportunities, and a lack of political representation.

The situation can be considerably more difficult for low-caste women. They confront patriarchal norms and gender-based discrimination in addition to social and economic restrictions as Dalits. This frequently results in a double marginalization in which low-caste women lack agency and decision-making capacity (Thapa et al., 2021). Low-caste women often have to resist caste-based norms and patriarchy to break through these barriers and discover agency. This necessitates a substantial adjustment in societal ideas towards caste and gender, specifically when they express themselves to the larger society through their rituals. Therefore, it is critical to recognize and address the intersections of caste and gender-based discrimination which the low-caste women in Bengal have to counter to find their own agency. In her article "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Colour", Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) discusses how intersectionality shapes the experiences of women of color, including how religious practices provide them with spaces to resist oppression and assert their agency. In her book "Shamans, Nostalgias, and the IMF: South Korean Popular Religion in Motion," Laurel Kendall investigates how Korean women

engage in shamanic rituals to question gender stereotypes and assert their agency (Thomas, 2012).

4.2 The Castes, People, and their Rituals

Figure 4-2 Kalighat Temple

Source: *Author*

Certain Bratas have retained their indigenous traits because they were not legitimized by the Brahmins and absorbed into Vedic culture. The lack of a male Brahmin priest (assigned to deliver prayers and services on behalf of the devotees) and the lack of unnecessary ceremonial elaborations that make them an all-inclusive women-centric ritual characterize their distinctiveness. Furthermore, the lack of strict caste standards makes the Brata an open system in which seven of the lowest caste communities can participate, making the Brata a true folk religion (Das 1953: 2-3). Let's take a closer look at the profile of the main caste communities confronted in the course of this ethnography along with their characteristic Brata practices:

Majhi

The Majhi caste population in Kolkata's Kalighat Temple region has long been involved in fishing as their primary occupation. They are also known as the Kaibarta[3] caste and are part of the Shudra caste. The Poush Sankranti Brata (performed on the auspicious day of Poush Sankranti in mid-January) and the Basanti Brata (observed during the spring festival of Basant Panchami[4]) are two of the most popular Brata rites practiced by the Majhi group. The Gajan Brata is a popular Brata ceremony that is primarily associated with the Majhi community. This Brata is observed throughout the Bengali month of Chaitra (March-April) and involves fasting, worshipping Lord Shiva[5], and singing devotional songs. The Gajan Brata is an important cultural custom of the Majhi community and is widely appreciated. The Majhi women participate in the "Manasa[6] Brata" in the Bengali month of Ashar (June-July). During this brata, the women fast and avoid eating salt and veggies like onions and garlic.

Das

The Das caste community in Kolkata's Kalighat Temple region has long made and sold numerous items of worship, including incense sticks, oil lamps, and garlands, among other things. They are also known as the Poshak caste and are part of the Shudra caste, which has historically been associated with the Dhobi or the trade of drying and washing clothing. The Shiv Chaturdashi Brata (held on the 14th day of the Hindu month of Phalgun) and the Sitala Puja Brata are two notable Brata rites practiced by the Das community. The Charak Puja Brata is a popular Brata ritual that is closely associated

[3] An aboriginal ethnic group and Scheduled Caste group of fisherfolk from the Indian states of Orissa, Bengal, and Assam.

[4] A Hindu festival celebrated at the onset of the spring season and involves the worship of the goddess Saraswati, goddess of knowledge, wisdom, music and art.

[5] One of the three principal deities of Hinduism, also known as the destroyer of the universe.

[6] A fast in the hindu tradition of Bengal to appease the snake goddess, Manasa.

with the Das community. This Brata is observed during the Bengali month of Chaitra and involves fasting, the construction of a massive wooden pyramid, and the skewering of devotees' skin as a sign of penance.

Pal

The Pal caste community in Kolkata's Kalighat Temple region has always been interested in dairy farming and cow husbandry. They are also known as Yadavs and are part of the larger Shudra caste in Hinduism. The Pal community's most popular Brata rituals include the Santoshi Mata[7] Brata (fasting for the goddess Santoshi Mata), the Satya Narayan Brata (worship of Lord Vishnu[8]), and the Shyama Puja (worship of goddess Kali[9]).

Ghosh

The Ghosh caste community in Kolkata's Kalighat Temple area has always been active in fishing. They are sometimes referred to as the Ghoshal community. Throughout the year, they execute numerous Brata rites, or religious observances, such as the Charak Puja and the Basanti Puja, which are performed in the spring. The Brata of Goddess Sitala is also associated with the Ghosh community.

"Untouchable" beggars

A few Scheduled Caste populations, sometimes known as "untouchables," are traditionally affiliated with Kolkata's Kalighat Temple region. The Namasudra, also known as Namassej in Bengali, is one such community. Names like Mondal and Biswas

[7] A local goddess worshiped in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, mostly by women devotees.
[8] One of the three principal deities of Hinduism's triumvirate is the protector and provider of the universe.
[9] The Hindu goddess of death, time, feminine sexuality and violence. Kali literally translates to the black one or the one who is death.

are common family names. Fishing, agricultural labor, and manual scavenging are common vocations for this community, besides begging on busy urban junctions, like the Kalighat temple itself. Another Scheduled Caste community in the Kalighat area is the Bauri. Names like Shaw, Mallick, and Sardar are common among their families. Traditionally, the Bauris worked as basket weavers, rope makers, and laborers. The Namasudra and Bauri communities each have their own Brata rites. The Namasudras practice a Brata known as the Jele Keli Brata, which entails praying to the goddess Manasa.

There were at least 5 subjects/interviewees from each of the above caste groups and participant observation of the Brata practices, before, after, and during the fasting days, was conducted in at least 2 households from each. The fieldwork, being conducted between the months of April and May, that is, chiefly during the Bengali month of Chaitra, the Sitala Brata, which is commonly practiced by most of the above groups during this period, was heavily documented for the sake of this research. Also, the preparational phase leading up to the Manasa Brata, also commonly practiced, as mentioned above, was documented. The resultant findings of these Brata practices and their consequent projections of the intersectional agency have been thus noted in the following sections.

4.3 Deity Selection and Immersion

"Do you want to leave us now Mother?" the Dalit woman asked her little Sitala Goddess idol every night before the new moon day would approach, signaling the time for breaking the fast and immersing the idol. The man would be annoyed by the space the idol would occupy within the small household, already cramped with six members under one roof. But for the woman,

her Goddess was as much a part of the family as her own children. Ma Sitala was the seventh member, and perhaps the most important, and also the most spoilt. She was well fed, and well decorated and heard melodious hymnic renditions to her name every evening of the fourteen-day Brata cycle. And then, on the night of saying goodbye, there appeared a mysterious teardrop on Sitala's beautiful pink face. She came in the woman's dream the night before, riding on her donkey, and told the woman that she does not want to go so soon. And so, Sitala remained, against the prescribed rule. The next year she would be repainted and redecorated in new clothes and new festive fervor, much like the woman's daughters and sons.[10]

The practice of deity selection during the Brata rites gives low-caste Bengali women some agency by allowing them to choose which deities to worship, thus undermining the rigid hierarchies of the caste system. These women construct their own kinds of knowledge and religious practices by choosing deities associated with power, fertility, and prosperity, allowing them to defy the existing social order.

Figure 4-3 Clay idols of Goddess Kali at a Pal lady's store outside the Kalighat Temple

Source: *Author*

[10] Translated from Bengali to English from original transcription.

The Kumar caste, another Shudra community, has been involved in the occupation of sculpting and painting Hindu idols for worship. Their workshops are mostly in the North of the city of Kolkata, in an area called Kumorpara, or the locality of the Kumars. It was interesting to see how the Shudra and Dalit communities in Kalighat, Garcha, and Deodar Street, all had their own Kumars for buying their idols, dating their sculptor-customer ties to many generations. But the beyond just selecting the deity and bringing the idol to the household, what is most essential is the *Pranpratistha*, or the ritual of bringing the deity's spirit into the idol. This is a process one would associate with the certified priest. However, in all the cases covered, for all the caste groups mentioned, it is the women in the household who are responsible for the very first Puja of the idol. Thus, the first sanctimonious inception is in the hands of these women. The holy or spiritual inception is in their hands, and they were seen to take much pride and honor in the same. But it is not that the women will openly proclaim and flaunt this honor. They will instead mention it as a calling from the deity herself, who comes in their dreams and summons Herself usually through the eldest woman of the household.

At the end of every seasonal festival for a deity, the idol is immersed in the holy waters of the river Ganges. This is the ultimate phase of the entire ritual cycle. In the case of small, temporary temples in the household or within the community area, the ritual dates for immersion are prescribed in the Panjika. However, around a quarter of the households observed chose to keep their deities at home for a period of not less than 3 years. This could not just be a case of poverty disallowing annual expenses for the idol since they are quite affordable even for the poorest homes. This was more a case of practicing individual choice, asserting freedom and connection with their deity. As several women of the Majhi caste speak about the powerful snake Goddess Manasa coming into them in their dreams or in visions, telling them that She did not wish to leave so soon. Similarly, in the main temples at the slum centers of Garcha and

Deodar Street, some idols were not immersed until they themselves showed the eldest women, through some supernatural communication or materially manifested symbol—tears in the idol's eyes, or certain external damages to the shape or form—, that it was time for Her to go.

Thus, the true connection here is between the devotee—the woman, and her Goddess. In the end, it is up to the personal choice or desire of the devotee. Undoubtedly, these are symbolic ways in which lower-caste women use this unique aspect of deity selection and immersion to challenge societal norms and carve out spaces for themselves within the dominant social structure. Tithi Bhattacharya (2017) in her work has focused on how the practices of deity selection and worship can be seen as a form of resistance against patriarchal and caste-based oppression. It is almost as if the women project themselves to be closer to the divine and hence gain a power that is not overt and unabashed on the face of it. Therefore, empowerment that is behaving more like agency while also adding a highly personal dimension to the entire ritual.

4.4 Self-expression: Art and Performance

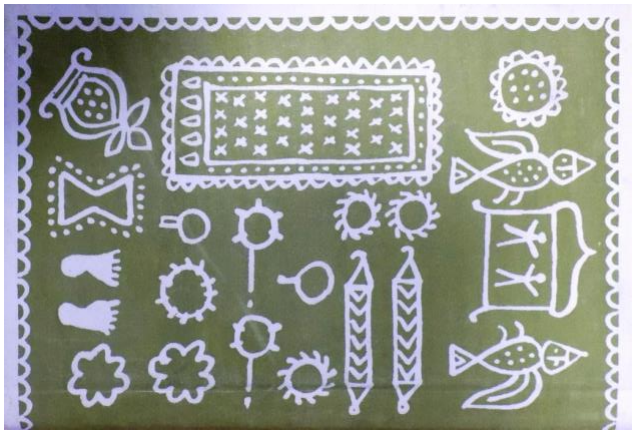

Figure 4-4 Alpona art for Sitala Puja

Source: *https://www.booksandpublishers.com/Essay/Brata-Katha-p24823c989*

When asked as to what the decorations—artworks on the walls and floors, garlands for the deities, painting symbols on ritual objects—mean to the women practitioners and believers, and if it is a personal dimension where they can freely express themselves, a mid-aged lady from a Ghosh household gave a perfect response:

"So, what would you do when your children would get married? Would you not decorate it all with your family and friends? Would it not be your own designs and personalizations? The decorations and preparations for our Goddesses are very much the same…It is a lot like a marriage!"

Sitala Brata traditions, for instance, include lighting a lamp, offering flowers and fruits, and reciting hymns and mantras. People adorn their homes, create beautiful meals, and attend cultural programs and fairs. It is also an opportunity for individuals to socialize and establish communal relationships. The art of alpona, ritual decorations, and the singing of hymns and songs during Brata ceremonies are all opportunities for low-caste Bengali women to demonstrate their intersectional agency. Alpona is a temporary decoration made of rice flour or chalk powder drawn on the floor or walls. During Brata rites, women utilize alpona to decorate their houses, shrines, and community areas. Women assert their inventiveness and aesthetic sensitivity, as well as their power to modify their surroundings, through this practice. Furthermore, the ritual decorations frequently feature symbols and patterns unique to the women's local traditions and religious practices. Since these practices are typically passed down through the maternal line, they give a space for women to produce, exchange, and retain their own forms of knowledge.

Women frequently sing in groups, and songs are passed down through the maternal line. These songs summon local deities and religious leaders, recount stories about the lives and trials of women, and convey themes of empowerment. Women demonstrate their togetherness, shared cultural legacy, and ability to produce alternative forms of knowledge through the group singing of these songs. It can be argued that the songs sung by women during these rituals are not just a form of entertainment but are imbued with knowledge and wisdom that is passed down through generations of women (Flueckiger, 2006). While in the case of the alpona, this creative practice presents a form of creative resistance against the dominant patriarchal order, through which women re-interpret and transform their social and physical environments, empowering themselves.

4.5 Self-care: Dietary Regulation

Figure 4-5 Women of Ghoshal household preparing for idol immersion

Source: *Author*

"If you fast righteously for the Goddess (Manasa), you will be cured of 64 ailments. She relieves you of toxins. I have given birth to 13 children, and even today I can work for six hours and cook for ten people. Why do you think I can do that?"

These were powerful words from an aged Dalit woman from the Garcha Harijan community. Dietary management practices in Bengali Brata rituals are not just a technique of purifying one's body, but also a tool for low-caste Bengali women to assert self-care and intersectional agency. Women recover control over their bodies and reinforce their power over the conditions of their lives by adhering to rigorous food regulations during these ceremonies. As mentioned, women in Bengali Brata rites observe a set of dietary restrictions that forbid them from eating meat, fish, eggs, onions, garlic, and other spices. Fasting is another popular practice in Brata rites. In fact, the Sanskritik meaning of the word "Brata", from which Brata is derived in Bengali, chiefly means to fast. Women purify their bodies and minds by adhering to these dietary rules, thereby expressing their devotion to local deities. During the Sitala Brata, ladies fast and avoid eating foods containing salt, onions, garlic, and certain vegetables. During this time, they also avoid consuming non-vegetarian foods. Women get up early in the morning, bathe, and then go to a neighboring temple to pray to Sitala Mata. This Brata is performed to fight off heat and summer-related ailments.

Presenting a critique of this, however, Jaita Talukdar (2014), employing Bourdieu's theory of habitus, capital, and embodiment, argued that "the impetus for active negotiations, which entail a more dialectical engagement with meanings of cultural rituals, is located in a set of class-based predispositions that are fostered and reinforced in the experiences and opportunities that women encounter in their daily lives." The scholar continued, "Ritualistic

fasting practices of Bengali Hindu women were strongly linked to resources—both cultural and material--- at the disposal of women, especially those associated with class-gender-body expectations, practices, and inclinations which, here as elsewhere, can be viewed as forms of capital." (Talukdar, 2014: 142).

Nevertheless, looking clearly from the perspective of the subjects, magnifying their lifeworld, and taking a bottom-up approach, this practice gives women a sense of control over their bodies that they may not have in other aspects of their lives. Anuradha M. Chenoy (2002) emphasizes how dietary rules, particularly fasting, serve as an important strategy for self-care and resistance. She contends that fasting allows women to delve within and focus on their bodies while also acknowledging their revolutionary potential. On the seventh day of the Brata, women also take a vow of celibacy and perform a holy bath with water and neem leaves. On the eighth day, the fast is broken with the distribution of prasad, which is offered to the goddess Sitala and subsequently distributed to the worshippers. The Brata entails following strict rituals to seek Sitala Mata's blessings and cleanse oneself spiritually and physically, providing an opportunity to reflect on one's own revolutionary potential.

Aside from these benefits, commemorating Sitala Puja has public health implications. It teaches individuals the value of cleanliness and hygiene, especially during the hot summer months when the risk of illness due to inadequate sanitation is considerable. To prevent the transmission of infections, people are encouraged to clean their surroundings and practice proper hygiene. Needless to say, such practices are excellent antidotes to the generally filthy and unhealthy living circumstances in the Harijan slums.

4.6 Matrilineal Knowledge Circle

"In our Bangla bhasha, we address our deities and Goddesses as our Ma," exclaimed a woman from a Majhi household. The very next moment she started screaming at her young girl who was playing around with the Goddess's flowers, "Ma, stop hampering Ma's flowers, she will get angry and not grant your wishes!"

Yes, she also addressed her daughter as "Ma". And there lies the beauty of the Bengali language and culture, where the mother, the daughter, and the Goddess, are all addressed as "Ma".

Some of the Namassej and Bauri old women beggars right at the entrance to the Kalighat Temple stated how they would do the Bratas when they were younger. "Now our bodies are better for begging," said one Bauri woman, in her late sixties. "But our daughters and younger ones practice them, and they mostly do it independently," she concluded. We have seen how, usually, it is the eldest woman who receives this "calling", though there were cases of even the youngest girl of the household to have received this sacred call.

The matrilineal knowledge circle is crucial in the assertion of intersectional agency for low-caste Bengali women who participate in Brata rites because it provides a platform for women to produce, discuss, and pass on knowledge. The practice of Brata rites is frequently passed down through the maternal line, with mothers passing on their knowledge and talents to their daughters and other female relations. Through this process, low-caste Bengali women are able to build their own forms of knowledge and religious practices while also challenging the dominant social order, and the larger institutional knowledge body of Hinduism pioneered

by the Brahmin priests. Joyce Flueckiger researched the matrilineal knowledge circle in the framework of Indian rites, though in the instance of Islam. In her work, “In Amma's Healing Room: Gender and Vernacular Islam in South India,” she investigates how women in rural South India use local healing and shrine traditions to demonstrate their autonomy and agency (Flueckiger, 2006). Old age may become a factor in being unable to successfully practice physically or mentally demanding rituals, like in this case, the Brata, but the aged play an important role in directing and passing the knowledge to the next generations.

4.7 The New Generation: Ritual Innovation

The influence of modern civilization has led to modifications in the way these rites are performed in urban locations. Workers in the informal sector and the service industry, particularly domestic workers, are now finding it difficult to take time off from work to execute these rites and must frequently rely on other women to do so on their behalf. This has resulted in changes in how the rituals are done and experienced, but the underlying practices of agency and resistance continue to be crucial to their meaning. It is crucial to remember that, while these communities have their unique traditions and practices, they have experienced social and economic persecution for millennia. Their vocations are frequently stigmatized, and they have few prospects for social mobility. Affirmative action measures and social welfare programs are being implemented to counteract this discrimination. At such a juncture, several households with working women displayed a kind of tag team in successfully carrying out the ritual. Women of the Das community in particular see a surge in their business of selling Puja items at the time of the Bratas. Two young girls would take on the jobs of their mothers while also catching up on their daily homework tasks, glancing at their school textbooks once in a while, in the small streetside shops outside the Kalighat Temple. This would allow sufficient time for

their mothers and grandmothers to carry out their ritual tasks while not overburdening themselves. Not just the occupation, but the girls would also readily participate and contribute to the decorations and offerings for the rituals, often taking a leading role. Some girls were also seen to create their own small sacred corners with their own sets of offerings, emulating that of their elders. They would place everything on the ritual offering plat that they believed needed the Goddess's blessings, including their textbooks, toys, and mobile phones.

With their active participation in the alpona, the young girls are often seen to be drawing unfiltered themes—cars, modern buildings, shops, modern fashionwear—intermixed with the more traditional ones—flowers, birds, animals, holy symbols. We will know with time if they still maintain this unfiltered and free medium of expression as they grow up but what was fascinating to observe in one Pal household was the sharing of old and new artistic expressions where the girl would learn the effective ways of placing their fingers to perfectly draw the traditional sacred symbols and the elder grandmother would learn how to use measuring scales and protractors form her granddaughter's geometry box to perfect the new designs.

In the case of the hymns and songs, the younger girls were never shy to rhythmically beat onto any surface they could find and add improvised vocalizations, even adding their own lyrics and broken sentences in the praise of their Goddess:

"Ma Sitala, give me full marks in my next exam. Please ensure a high-paying job for my brother. I will not offer you my favorite toy to play with next year if you don't fulfill these wishes!"

Rarely would the elders dismiss these improvised heartfelt words to the Goddess. With the otherwise distracting forces of modernization and pressures of education in the urban setup, with its distractions, that could seemingly take the younger generation away from the traditional practices, it was evident that this aspect of innovation is an adaptive disposition on the part of the women, preserving inter-generational bonds, freedom of self-expression as well as the tradition as a whole.

The education of younger generation girls can have an impact on the matrilineal knowledge cycle linked with Brata rites in both positive and bad ways. On the one hand, education may empower girls and women by providing them with new types of knowledge that they can utilize to combat patriarchal and caste-based oppression. However, education can also impede traditional knowledge transfer because younger generations may be less interested in or invested in these practices. Furthermore, modern education systems sometimes prioritize formal Western knowledge over local traditional practices, which might weaken the transmission of these practices even further. Nonetheless, among low-caste Bengali women, the matrilineal knowledge cycle linked with Brata rites remains an important site of intersectional agency.

5 Inclusion over Exclusion: Ritual Transformation

Anthropologists who have studied rituals have for long struggled to differentiate between typical behavior, rites of passage, and rituals, making it difficult to categorize them. Most earlier scholars who studied rituals of traditional societies considered the rituals to be as static and unchanging as the societies and cultures they examined. Though the formalization, standardization, or routinization of a ritual is not its essential element, what people want to change through ritual is crucial (Lan, 2018: 5). Ritual certainly is an essential part of the institution of religion and the continued practices work to re-establish pre-existing societal norms. However, in modern India, especially in the urban spheres where a multiplicity of influences—both local and global—exist, it is not a given that age-old gender roles and caste-based dictates will continue to reproduce themselves. As a researcher seeking to document the intersectional agency of low-caste Bengali women through the practice of Brata rituals, particularly the *Meyeli Brata* which negates the Brahmin priest's legitimacy over the spiritual realm of the Goddess, the women-centric lifeworld and the consequent findings seemed perfectly placed to attest the claim. However, midway into the fieldwork, certain cases came up which completely shifted the very form of agency and resistance shown by these women. In the following sections, we will see these cases and understand how the "double marginalized" women, the agents of change, have redefined their ritual domain to be one that is inclusionary. And there this research has found its central contribution; how the Brata rituals are showing the capacity to truly resist the norms of an exclusionary society, one based on divisions and discrimination, by employing the values of inclusion, both for men and the higher castes. Thereby, along with the individualistic and matrilineal dimension, adding yet another bold dimension to their agency: inclusionary.

5.1 Brahmin priests in "Untouchable" homes

"We are never allowed inside the big temples. We are content, toiling around the shabby corners, trying to get a glimpse of the great Ma Kali," said a Dalit beggar lady. When asked if the Brahmin priest can enter their homes and slums, she smirked and said, "We are the achhut (untouchable), we are dirty, but all that is history… that Brahmin priest you see there, he knows me for years and he comes every year to my home to chant Vedic mantras for our Sitala and Manasa Ma. Unthinkable, right? It is simple, Ma is everywhere, she is within me and within you too. I have devoted my life to her worship and if I bring her to my household, and keep her clean, decorated, and happy, why won't the Brahmin come and pray to her for us? He is no enemy to us. He has also given his life to devotion and mastered the Vedic scripts. So, we feel honored if he enters our homes."

This was not the only case. A couple of Brahmin priests of the Sitala and Shiva temples adjacent to the main Kali temple readily agreed to the fact that even they enter Dalit homes to offer prayers to the household Goddesses. Pandit Sukhomoy Goswami himself attested to this. He has been greatly involved with the community Pujas of the Ghoshals and the Pals and has also taken to teaching Vedic knowledge to some of the kids, both boys and girls, from these Shudra communities. This was a ground-breaking revelation.

On this, another woman from the Ghosh community said:

"For our Charak and Gajan Bratas, the Brahmin is required. Won't you need the Master to teach your lessons in school and university? Bratakatha which is read from the Panjika has to be done by the Brahmin. Some of us cannot even read a word, we are uneducated. So we do

our bit, we decorate, we do the alpona, we fast and we cook. And our Brahmin brothers read the scripts. We are all the same in Ma's darbar (the Goddess's council)."

Traditionally, Brahmin priests are not allowed to enter the homes or localities of "Shudra" and "untouchable" castes, as they are considered lower caste. However, these cases show that the extent to which this practice is followed varies across time and regions in India. In some regions, especially in rural areas, Brahmin priests may still follow strict caste-based practices and avoid entering the homes of lower castes. However, modernization and urbanization have led to a relaxation of such caste-based practices. In urban areas, Brahmin priests may enter the homes of lower castes to conduct pujas. We have earlier noted the agency of the low-caste women in the invocation and initiation of their Goddesses, connecting with them in a spiritual domain. Further, it is to be noted that the Brahmin priest does not offer his services for free; it is very much a profession. In the Garcha Harijan slums and around Kalighat, the low-caste community homes do have the required funds to compensate for the Brahmin priest's services too, something that might not have been possible earlier, besides the age-old "untouchability" factor. So, both on a spiritual, sacred level and economically, this bond between the two extreme rungs of the caste system is changing the very nature of society.

Furthermore, there have been examples of Brahmin priests who have broken away from traditional caste-based practices and have embraced a more inclusive approach. For instance, some Brahmin priests in Kolkata have started entering the homes of lower castes and conducting pujas for them, especially during the Durga Puja or Kali Puja festival. Such practices reflect changing social norms and a move towards a more inclusive society and have been documented and covered in local media in recent years. There have been several scholars who have studied the inclusive approach of Brahmin priests entering low-caste households to

conduct pujas, particularly during the Durga Puja festival in Kolkata. In the book "Puja and Piety: Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist Art from the Indian Subcontinent," the changing attitudes of Brahmin priests towards lower-caste households during the Durga Puja festival have been documented (Pal et al., 2016). However, it is to be noted that these are the mainstream festivals that receive global traction. In the case of Sitala, Charak, Gajan, and Manasa Pujas, which are highly low-profile, to see such inclusion is exemplary.

5.2 When Men Fast, Decorate, and Sing

"Yes, the Bratas are challenging, both mentally and physically. It is not a man's thing! But I could say this more easily some forty years ago. Back then, even my father would tell me that I am not fit to study or do a job, the household was my life, and I was to dedicate my energy to finding a good husband. But My son cannot say that to my granddaughter. She is going to school and wants to become a doctor. So, if she can do the man's thing, why can't the boys do the Bratas?"

These were the words of an old Majhi woman probably in her late 80s. Another Majhi woman while selling her garlands said,

"Earlier we would see husbands and wives do these rituals but now I also see unmarried boys and girls partake more often. Fasting is always important. It is healthy and good for us all. So why can't the man do it?"

These Brata rites were formerly conducted solely by women and were connected with feminine identity and empowerment. As we assumed and investigated in the last chapter, which

focused on women as change agents. However, as social, and cultural dynamics have changed, males have begun to participate in these rituals, resulting in new meanings and modifications of the rites. The inclusion of male family members, such as spouses, brothers, and sons, in the women centric Brata rites practiced in Kolkata, might be viewed as a ritual transition phenomenon. Over the course of the ethnography, five out of twenty households showed active participation of male members across generations in one form or another. Not a significant number but a sign of change, nonetheless.

This phenomenon can be viewed through the perspective of Victor Turner's (1969) concept of "liminality." The presence of male family members in the Brata ritual might be viewed as a transitional stage in the ritual's evolution. The presence of men in a setting that was formerly entirely feminine blurs gender boundaries and generates a sense of social uncertainty. This transitional period is characterized by a sense of disarray and the renegotiation of social roles and relationships.

This phenomenon is not new in anthropological studies. Scholars have researched communities all around the world and identified men’s rebellious engagement in women-centric ceremonies and rituals in order to question age-old gender norms and express queer themes. In his book “God of Justice: Ritual Healing and Social Justice in the Central Himalayas,” William Sax (2009) investigated how men in the Central Himalayas engage in women's healing rituals and obtain social status and power as a result. In “Kwakwaka'wakw Potlatch and Totem Pole,” Aldona Jonaitis describes how men in North America’s Kwakwaka'wakw community participate in women-centric potlatch celebrations and use their participation to express their status and power (Jonaitis & Glass, 2010). Returning to Asia, in “Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan,” Jennifer Robertson

investigates how Japanese men join the all-female Takarazuka Revue stage ensemble and utilize their participation to explore and challenge gender and sexual conventions (Ayako, 1999).

These anthropologists have shown that men's participation in women-centric rituals can serve a variety of purposes, from asserting power and status to exploring and challenging gender norms and identities. Moreover, the inclusive participation of male family members in Brata rituals can also be understood as a form of cultural adaptation. In the traditionally patriarchal society of Kolkata, where men hold a subtle dominant position despite the matrilineal resurgence and active worship of feminine divinity, the participation of male members in female-centric rituals can be viewed as a way of reaffirming the importance of women's contributions. But not taking the agency away from the women, from the narratives we see above in this case, it is not clear as to which gender is responsible for this change. In fact, there is no need to do so because here we are abiding by the value of inclusion and togetherness, modernity, and progressive thought. This adaptation of the ritual creates a new meaning and function, emphasizing gender equality and solidarity within the family.

5.3 Bengali Women vs Bihari Women

During the many interview sessions with Dalit women on the streets outside the Kalighat Temple, there were instances of Hindi-speaking women originating from the North-Indian state of Bihar[11] joining in the discussions. The Brata rituals are not restricted to just the Bengali women, as we have learned earlier in its history. However, the dominant form of

[11] The Bihari community has for many years been a dominant immigrant population in the state of Bengal. Since the colonial era, the region of Bihar was under the Bengal Presidency and ever since has seen mass migrations into the city of Kolkata for better economic opportunities.

feminine worship and divinity is characteristic of Bengal and its brand of Hinduism. In North-Indian states, stationed at the Indo-Gangetic plain and away from the coastal delta regions (where Bengali culture orginates), Hinduism has developed differently. There, practicing Brata rituals for male Gods is more common. As narrated by a couple of such Dalit Bihari women:

"The Bengali women do these Brata for Manasa and Kali. We Biharis do the Brata for Lord Hanuman[12]*. Our main Brata is the Mangal Brata. It is most important for a wife to do this. We do it to get a son in the family. We do it on Tuesdays.*[13]*"*

This was the intrusion on the part of the Bihari women when the Bengali women were asked about their individual desires and expressions when they practice the Brata rituals. For the Bihari women, the idea of practicing a ritual for the "self" induced a most surprising response, almost as if they were alien to such a way of thinking, let alone praying to feminine divinity over masculine ones.

This research had no intention to document or interview the narratives of non-Bengali women. However, it seemed incorrect not to include this case. This instance in turn re-established the unique brand of agency shown by the Bengali women and their communities. As mentioned in the previous chapter, it is not that they will overtly proclaim ideas of self-care and self-expression. Instead, they use symbolic expressions through their spiritual connections with their Goddesses. But this aspect was seemingly absent for the two Bihari women.

[12] Hanuman is a Hindu god who is Lord Rama's celestial friend and follower. He is a major character in the epic Ramayana and is also featured in the Mahabharata and Puranas. He is thought to be Lord Shiva's reincarnation and the son of Lord Vayu, the God of Wind.
[13] Translated from Hindi to English he original transcription.

5.4 Inclusionary Rituals in an Exclusionary Society

Thus, with the help of the above narratives, we can argue that the "little tradition" of Brata rites practiced by low-caste Bengali women in urban Kolkata demonstrates an inclusionary character of intersectional agency against the restrictive societal norms of caste and patriarchy. Male participation in these women-centric rituals is an important aspect of this inclusionary ritual practice. Men's participation and support in these rituals might be viewed as an example of intersectional solidarity. It demonstrates how various marginalized groups are banding together to oppose the discriminatory cultural standards of caste and patriarchy. Men's participation also helps to break down traditional gender norms related to religious practices in Bengali society.

Moreover, the inclusion of Brahmin priests in low-caste households further supports the inclusionary nature of these ritual practices. By entering these households to conduct pujas, Brahmin priests break down caste barriers and increase inclusivity in religious practices. The fact that Brahmin priests are willing to perform pujas for low-caste households challenges the traditional notion of purity and pollution associated with caste, which often excludes lower-caste communities from mainstream religious practices.

This demonstrates how religious practices can evolve to meet the needs of marginalized communities and how different marginalized groups can come together to challenge societal norms and create a more inclusive society. In the case of male household members participating in the women centric Brata ritual of Bengal, we can clearly see the phenomenon of Ritual Transformation. This ritual was traditionally performed exclusively by women, and men were discouraged from participating. However, in recent years, the social norms around male

participation have shifted, allowing them to take part in the ritual. This shift is a form of Ritual Transformation since the ritual is reinterpreted to include male participation. This change can be ascribed to evolving gender dynamics, challenging patriarchal norms restricting men's participation in these rituals.

This inclusive approach of Brahmin priests entering lower-caste households to conduct pujas undoubtedly also shows a kind of ritual transformation in Kolkata. In an urban space such as Kolkata, where social norms are rapidly changing, there is a growing awareness and acceptance of inclusivity and equal participation in religious rituals. This paradigm shift is reflected in the willingness of Brahmin priests to break away from traditional caste-based norms and embrace a more inclusive approach, which is greatly valued by the lower-caste households who are finally able to participate in the pujas with full involvement. This phenomenon reflects how religious practices are dynamic and can evolve over time to meet the changing social needs of their followers.

Conclusion

We have understood how the understudied and low-profile Brata rituals function as a form of resistance against patriarchy and caste-based oppression. Women from lower-caste communities often face marginalization and discrimination based on their caste and gender. Brata rituals provide them with a platform to assert their agency and challenge the patriarchal norms that often dictate their lives. They do so by personalizing the spiritual domain, and their relationships with their deities—feminine divinity, while also embodying practices such as dietary regulation for self-care and expressing themselves through art and song. A formidable matrilineal knowledge body is formed that replenishes this practice while also transforming itself through innovation on the part of the new, younger generations. Brata rituals allow lower-caste women to form and strengthen their social networks, which strengthens their agency and power to challenge discrimination and oppression. All of this is not just a show of "virtuous" motherhood, daughterhood, or that of being "virtuous wives" as stated by earlier scholars like June McDaniel. In the urban sphere, especially, with the multiplicity of modern influences, education of the younger generation, and rapidly changing social, and inter-communal ties, these women-centric, domestic forms of rituals increasingly become personal and political, expanding their influence beyond the domestic. Women are able to practice choices over the course of these rituals when otherwise they are suppressed and marginalized in the wider society. Through Brata rituals, lower-caste women carefully claim the space to practice their cultural and religious beliefs without being subject to discrimination and marginalization.

In the Kalighat temple complex and the slum areas of South Kolkata, low-caste and scheduled-caste women across generations are seen to negotiate their traditional and modern selves to construct their own identities. They are able to adopt certain traditional Bratas while simultaneously rejecting the patriarchal norms they entail, such as choosing to observe the

Sitala and Manasa Bratas while also promoting gender equality, readily accepting free expression of family members, and even including male members in the ritual practice. By practicing Brata fasting, they navigate their paths to spiritual growth while promoting their values, goals, and aspirations.

The little tradition of Brata rituals practiced by low-caste Bengali women in urban Kolkata shows an inclusionary nature of intersectional agency against the exclusionary "great tradition" of Brahminical patriarchal Hinduism in multiple ways. First and foremost, the Brata rituals are part of a little tradition, which is a localized, marginalized form of performing religious practices that are distinct from the dominant Brahminic patriarchal Hinduism. By performing these little traditions, low-caste Bengali women, who are often excluded from mainstream religious practices due to their caste and gender, are demonstrating their intersectional agency against the dominant patriarchal order. By taking control of the ritual process, especially the women's connection with their deities, these so-called "untouchable" homes now see even the Brahmin men voluntarily entering to pay respect to their devotion and offer prayers and sacred hymns. The inclusion of male participation and Brahmin priests in these rituals further supports the inclusive nature of these practices. It helps to break down traditional barriers that have marginalized low-caste communities for many years. Therefore, the little tradition of Brata rituals practiced by low-caste Bengali women in urban Kolkata symbolizes an intersectional agency that challenges the exclusionary patriarchal norms of Brahminic Hinduism.

"I am My Own Goddess," is not what the women may not outrightly proclaim, but in their inclusionary practices and subtle navigation across the different domains of spirituality, self-care, devotion, household and family, and society, they arguably project a revolutionary

character, strong enough, or must I say, divine enough to overturn age-old discriminatory customs, even if just for the few days of the ritual. This phenomenon in the urban field requires longitudinal studies to better analyze the changes and transformations. Future studies must focus on how the new generations exposed to modern ideas of inclusivity, individualism, and eco-sensitivity manage to maintain as well as revolutionize these exemplary rituals in the developing world.

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Glossary of Bengali terms

BENGALI WORD	MEANING
Achhut	Untouchable
Akshaya Tritya	Annual spring festival signifying the third day of unending prosperity.
Alpona	Liquid Rice flour Art on floors
Amabasya Nisi	Night of the New Moon
Ashar	Bengali summer month
Basanti Devi	Spring Goddess, an incarnation of the goddess Parvati
Bauri	Bengali Dalit community/Scheduled Caste
Bhasha	Language
Biswas	Bengali lower Caste community
Brahma-pitripurush Torpon Snan	Holy rituals–dipping into the Ganges waters–for the male ancestors
Brata	Fasting ritual
Charak	Festival associated with such deities as Shiva, Neel, and Dharmara
Choitro	Bengali month between spring and summer
Darbar	Fort
Das	Bengali lower Caste community
Gajan	Festival associated with such deities as Shiva, Neel, and Dharmara
Ghosh	Bengali lower Caste community
Gondheswari	Deity worshipped by the Gandhabanik community—an incarnation of Durga
Haal-kata	A special Puja by the Hindu traders & shopkeepers
Harijan	Term coined by Mahatma Gandhi for Scheduled Castes and Tribes
Hooghly	Tributary of the Ganges that empties into the Bay of Bengal
Japa mala	Praying Beads Necklace or Bracelet
Jele Keli Brata	Fasting ritual for a coastal incarnation of Goddess Kali
Kalighat	The abode of Goddess Kali

Kumari	Virgin
Kumorpara	The locality of idol makers/sculptors
Ma	Mother
Majhi	Bengali lower Caste community
Manasa	Snake Goddess believed to cure snake bites and 64 body ailments
Mangal	Positive
Mata	Holy Mother
Meyeli	Feminine
Mohamela	Grand Carnival
Mondal	Bengali lower Caste community
Namassej	Bengali Dalit community/Scheduled Caste
Namasudra	Bengali Dalit community/Scheduled Caste
Pal	Bengali lower Caste community
Panchasashya	Five Sacred Grains–used for sacred rituals as offerings
Panjika	Hindu astronomical almanac
Poshak	Bengali lower Caste community
Poush	Bengali winter month
Puja	Sacred Ritual or Festival
Pranpratistha	Process of bringing life to the inanimate
Sankranti	End date of a month
Santoshi	An incarnation of Goddess Parvati–revered as the Mother of Satisfaction
Satya Narayan	The truest form of Lord Vishnu
Shashtriya	Classical/High Culture/Textual
Shoshankali	Fiercest form of Goddess Kali who resides in the cremation grounds
Shyama	Form of Goddess Kali
Sitala	An incarnation of the Goddess Parvati believed to cure poxes, sores, ghouls, and diseases, and most directly linked with the disease smallpox.
Sorkora Saptami Brata	Fasting rituals for the sacred seventh day

Upobash	Fasting
Utsob	Festival/Celebration
Yadav	North Indian lower Caste community

Appendices

Note on Ethics and Informed Consent

In only a handful of cases, it was possible to attain written informed consent since most subjects for this ethnographic research were illiterate. Hence, audio-recorded vocal consents were duly attained prior to interviewing or recording on aural and visual devices. All interactions on the field were in the local Bengali language, with some being in Hindi too. Thus, narrative reports included in this thesis have been duly translated into English from the transcribed interviews.

Keeping the subjects' privacy and individual rights in mind, no real names have been displayed in this thesis. The family names have been used to show the profiles of the different communities and thereby place their responses.

Figure 0-1 Author with Dalit women at the entrance to Kalighat Temple

Source: *Author*

Bengali Lunar Calendar to Gregorian Calendar—months of April and May

Source: https://bengalicalendar.com/

Interview Guide

Intersectionality and Agency of *Brata*: Ritual Transformation in Rural Bengal

Script prior to the interview:

নমস্কার! (Nomoskar/Hello)

I am Suramya Pushan Dasgupta, a student studying at Central European University, Dept. of Sociology and Social Anthropology. I hail from Kolkata, a city you all know very well. I have come to your beautiful village to research your local lives and practices. I feel extremely honored to be your guest.

I would like to thank you once again for being willing to participate in the interview. I am positive that this interview with you shall provide valuable information and perspectives and enrich my research study. As I have mentioned, my study seeks to understand how the brata fasting rituals practiced by the women of Bengal have transformed from their historical contexts to the present. In doing so, the study aims to inspect the functions of these rituals by examining the active roles played by rural women in defining the aesthetic and reproduction of the paraphernalia. Thereby, it also aims to situate the rituals within its larger societal field, recognizing caste-based relationships, Brahminical authority, and patriarchal structures. Our interview today will last approximately one hour. I will ask you about your upbringing, position in the household/family, position in the village community, your practices during the *rata*—why and how you do it, and what role the ritual plays in your life.

[to review aspects of consent form]

Previously, in my common meeting at the village center, I informed you about the formalities and responsibilities of this research. You completed a consent form indicating that I have your permission (or not) to audio record our conversation. Are you still ok with me recording (or not) our conversation today? Yes / No

If YES: ধন্যবাদ! Thank you! Please let me know if at any point you want me to turn off the recorder or keep something you said off the record.

If NO: Thank you for letting me know. I will only take notes of our conversation. I hope that is ok with you.

[Word of assurance given the sensitivity in the social context/environment] Do not worry about the consequences of your sharing your personal reflections on your society and your practices. Your identity shall not be disclosed if you do not want that.

Now, before we begin the interview, do you have any questions? [Discuss questions] If any questions (or other questions) arise at any point in this study, you can feel free to ask them at any time. Please do not hesitate. I would be more than happy to answer your questions.

Research Questions

Main Question: **How have the *brata* rituals transformed from their historical contexts to the present times?**

Sub-questions/Themes

1. **How and when did the ritual begin/what are the origins? ***

2. **How are the aesthetics of *Brata* paraphernalia representative of the agency of**
    1. **local ecology?**
    2. **women actors?**

3. **What is the main purpose that the ritual serves for its believers and practitioners across the rural landscape?**

4. **How does the ritual practice situate its women practitioners within the larger rural social sphere?**

*[NOTE: For sub-question (1) archival material, including the Bengali *brata* calendars and previous literature on the ritual origins shall be examined. Brahmin sages (the official upper-caste gurus or knowledge-keepers) shall also be surveyed/interviewed if time permits about their perspectives. For this interview design, I focus on the lower-caste women practitioners.]

Main Question: **How have the *brata* rituals transformed from their historical contexts to the present times?**	Background Information	**Awareness** of the historical context/origin	**Awareness** of intersectional forces (caste, gender, status, age, etc.)	**Expertise** of ritual paraphernalia	**Reflection** of individuality/self-agency	**How does the ritual practice situate its women practitioners within the larger rural**

						social sphere?
Upbringing *Let's begin this interview by getting to know you better. Allow me to ask some questions about your family background, your family members, and your childhood.*						
1. What is your full name? *Follow-up #1* Is this your title or surname? (In India, you often find 2 kinds of status symbols with family names: titles—those obtained through occupational/historical social upward mobility, and surnames—original family name that reflects the caste.) *Follow-up #2* Who named you?				X	X	
2. Did you grow up in this village? If NO then… Where did you migrate from and why?		X	X	X		X
3. Are you married? If YES… - Have you married into the same caste? If NO… - Did you marry into a higher caste?		X		X		X
4. Has there been any inter-caste marriage in your family before?		X		X	X	X
5. Between your maternal and paternal lineages,		X		X	X	

which women practice the *brata* more regularly?						
Sub-question 1a **How are the aesthetics of *Brata* paraphernalia representative of the agency of the local ecology?**						
Thank you for all the information on your background. If you object to any of my previous questions and would like to change or omit any of your responses please do not hesitate to let me know. Now, can we look into your own practice of the Brata? First, I will ask you some questions about the paraphernalia:						
6. What is the connection of the ritual with your local environment/ecology/nature? *Follow up* - Could you delineate the seasonal variations of your offerings? - Which flowers and grains do you offer in which season? - Do you ever offer off-season materials?	X		X			
7. Do you ever buy your offerings from the market or are they all fetched from the wild or the fields and jungles? If YES to buying… - Which ingredients do you usually buy?		X	X			
8. Do you know other households	X	X	X			

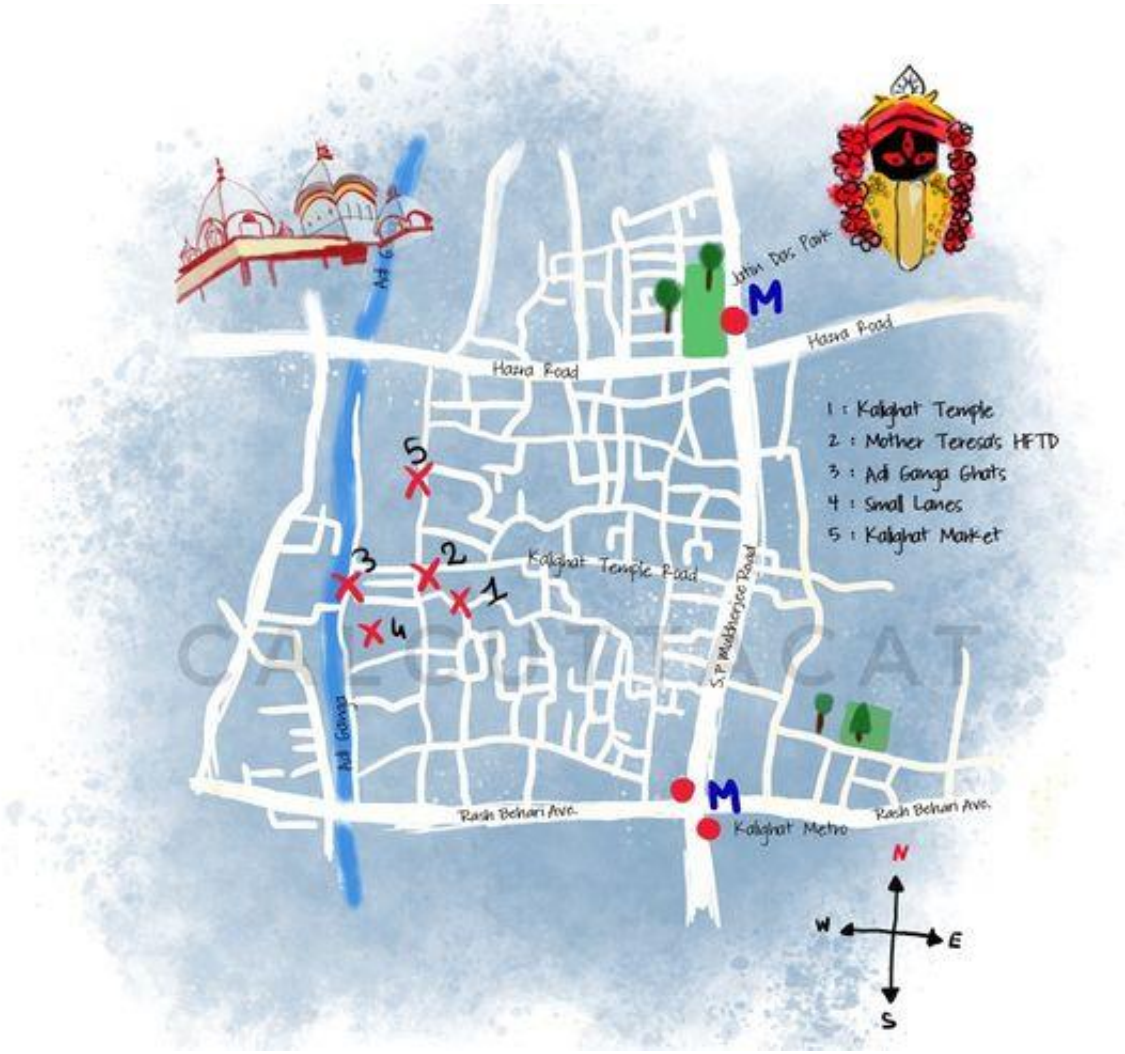
who buy their offerings from the market? Do you think they do the right thing?						
9. Do you know if the ritual products sold in the markets come in packaged forms? Do they use plastic?		X	X		X	X
10. Do you ever use plastic utensils or fake plastic offerings? If NO *Follow up* - Why do you think plastic products should not be used in the ritual process? - Do you think it makes the space and processes impure?	X	X		X		X
Sub-question 1b **How are the aesthetics of *Brata* paraphernalia representative of the agency of women actors?**						
If you object to any of my previous questions and would like to change or omit any of your responses please do not hesitate to let me know. Now, I will ask you more about the role of men and women in the ritual process.						
11. Do you obtain all the offerings and goods for the ritual yourself? If NO… - Who else helps you? - Are they all women? If NO… - Do men older than you ever help you gather the offerings?	X		X			

12. Have you ever sought a Brahmin man's blessings or instructions to proceed with or carry out your *Brata*? If YES… - When and why? If NO… - Why not?	X					
(Q 12 follow-ups rephrased to avoid the WHY question) 13. Do you think it is not necessary for the Brahmin sage to purify the sacred space for the ritual?	X				X	
14. Do you know if your mothers, grandmothers, or ancestors sought Brahminical intervention for their *brata?*						
15. For whom do you observe the fasting rituals?		X	X	X		
16. Do you pray with the same devotion for both the male and female family members—your son and your daughter/your mother and your father—?	X	X	X	X		X
17. Why do you think only women partake in this ritual?						

18. Would you mind if a boy/man wishes to learn and practice the *brata*? *Follow up* Why or Why NOT?	X			X		
19. Do you always follow a strict guide (*Panchali*— religious book for fasting rituals) to carry out your rituals OR are you trained through generations by observing?		X	X			
20. Do you add your own unique proceedings to the *brata?* If YES, - How do you individualize your ritual?	X	X	X	X		
Sub-question 2 **What is the main purpose that the ritual serves for its believers and practitioners across the rural landscape?** *Thank you so much for bearing with me for so long, Lastly, I will ask you just a few more questions about the purpose of this ritual; why you do it and what you get from it.*						
21. What aspect of the ritual excites you most? OPTIONS: - art (floor and wall art) - chanting - fasting and breaking the fast		X	X	X		X

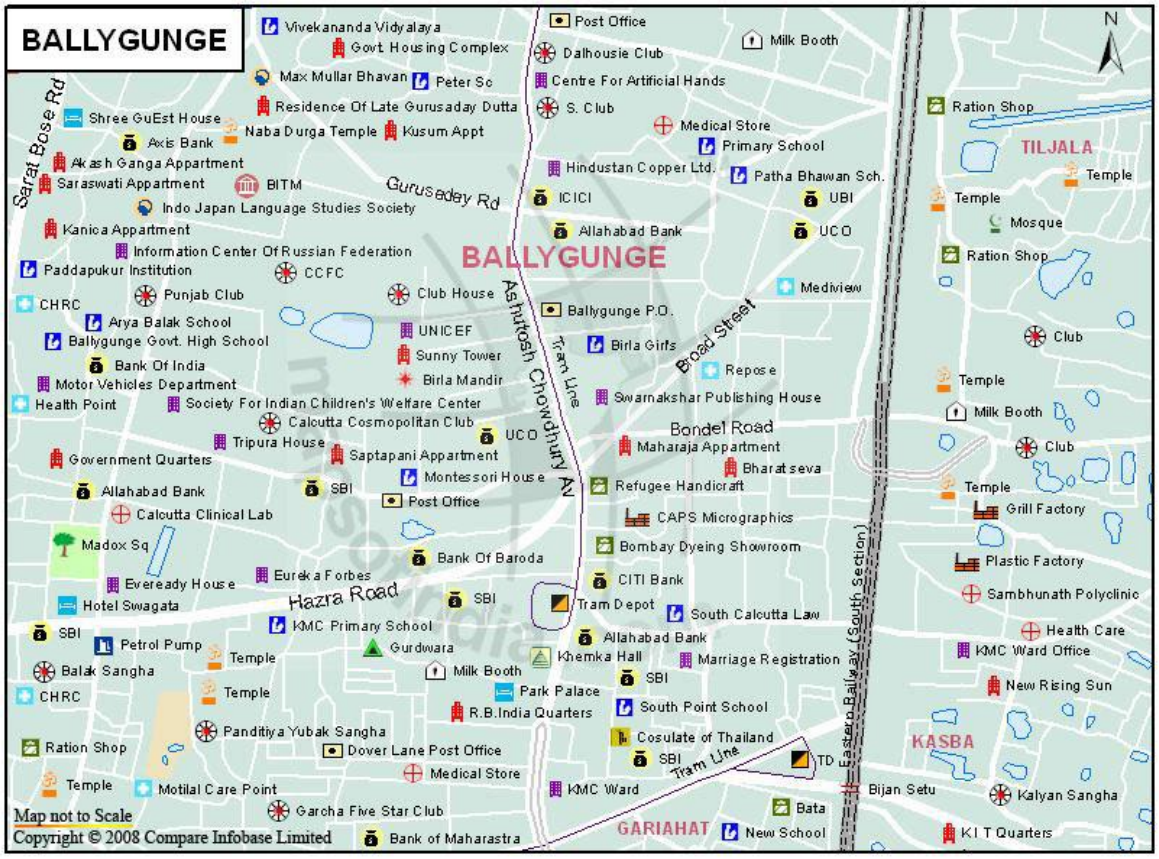
- cleaning and purifying the space - decorating the idol - cooking - gathering offerings - supervising						
22. Why do you like the option(s) you chose above most?	X	X	X	X		
23. Do you think women in the future must also practice *brata*?				X		
24. Beyond praying for the well-being of others in general, do you think *brata* gives you positivity—confidence, satisfaction, fulfillment—of any kind?	X	X	X	X		
25. Have you ever prayed for your own well-being or for the fulfillment of any of your own dreams through *brata*?	X	X	X	X		
26. Do you think practicing this ritual gives you prominence and confidence within your community in general?	X	X				
Before we conclude this interview, is there something about your experience while practicing the brata that you think influences how you engage with your daily life, household, and the village community that we have not yet had a chance to discuss?						

City Maps



Source: Kalighat Temple Map in https://calcuttacat.wordpress.com/

Source: Kalighat Temple Map in http://oldcalcutta.blogspot.com/2012/03/on-kalighat.html



Source: Ballygunge Map in https://www.mapsofindia.com/kolkata/maps/ballygunge.jpg