

ISSN 0976-8165

*The Criterion*



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An International Journal in English

Bi - Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal

April 2014 Vol. 5, Issue- 2

5<sup>th</sup> Year of Open Access

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## Puja Thoughts

Rumpa Das

As the immersion procession led by Durga and her children recede slowly from the misty vision, amidst hysterical dancing by local lads, mesmerizing 'dhaak' beats, reminding everyone of the transitoriness of life – *Thakur aasteey katokshan, thakur jaabe bisarjan* (How long before the goddess arrives, how long before she departs) – and ritual blowing of conch-shells by sindur-smearing the ladies - *boudis, mashimas* and *jethimas* of our 'paara'(neighbourhood), I wipe a truant tear-drop that had stealthily glided down my cheek. A long wait has just begun. A wait spanning a year, more than three hundred days and more – innumerable minutes of unexpected joys, heart-rending tragedies, unnamed acts of kindness, uncalled-for hypocrisies and myriad moments, defying emoticons. A calendar year that begun with Puja and ended with the immersion of clay idols - too human, too vital, and closely kindred to all *Bong* souls.

Last year, the year before, and even in the years before that, the same scene had been enacted. The idols that had lit up the carefully-designed pandals and our mundane lives, had gone back to their ethereal abode, accompanied by a similar frenzy – a surreal blend of ritual, glamour and excitement, only to return back. But times have changed, and so have the characters surrounding this annual carnival. The little girl in the pink-flowered dress who had fought with her brother, two years her senior, for one, just one shot from that toy gun, looks askance at the 'chhele-manushi'- the innocent playfulness of childhood with the arrogant indifference of a twenty-one year old, dressed in a crisp yellow handloom sari, with her tab-toting boyfriend by her side. Poltu and Bablu, who had charmed the 'paara' once by their roles in the production of 'Dui-chor' (The two thieves) at a Bijoya Sammilani some two decades ago, are now NRIs. Poltu's wife is Swedish, while Bablu has taken his widowed mother away to his workplace in Toronto. Mampi-di, the antakhshari champion of yesteryears, has come home this puja after almost eight years with her two teenaged sons, and her South Indian husband – they are now settled in Abu Dhabi. Mampi di waxed eloquent on the malls at 'her' neighbourhood there, and the 'typical Baangali maanoshikota'(the quintessential Bong mindset) of contemporary Kolkatans, but kept mum on the actual purpose of her visit – her ancestral home is to be sold off to promoters, and she has come to 'settle' her septuagenarian father in 'Sayannho'(Eventide)- an old age home by the Hooghly in Uttarpara.

Mukherjee *kaku*, one of the wealthiest persons in the locality, and chief patron of the Puja committee for years, is smiling at all and sundry from his garlanded photograph that has been placed in the pandal – he expired last November. Giving him company is the slightly-faded sepia photograph of Ram Bahadur, the old faithful Gorkha durwan of Bengal Film Laboratory, a once-famous institution now making way for a luxurious apartment. In death, Mukherjee *kaku* and Ram Bahadur have been equalled, though just last year, Ram Bahadur had flashed his signature-toothy smile on receiving his Puja bakshish from Mukherjee *kaku*, who had also scolded him indulgently for his drinking habits. Another photograph, albeit coloured, is that of cheerful and bubbly Jhuma – our Jhuma was a superb Bharatnatyam dancer and always featured prominently at cultural programmes, held in our as well as neighbouring localities. Jhuma's husband and mother-in-law had allegedly poisoned her, when she had refused to hand over her last bit of jewellery to her wayward husband. Wonder who is looking after her six-month old daughter now? Jhuma's old infirm mother, completely shattered after the tragedy, has sold off their modest house and is now staying with her brother in Asansol or nearabout. Jhuma's friends, all decked up and alive to the annual festivities, yet cast occasional glances at their deceased friend, possibly ruminating on the happy moments she had shared with them.

The pall of gloom, however, cannot overcast the festive fervour. Poltu's half-Bengali, half-Swedish six-year old son lisps broken answers to indulgent aunts of the 'para', who drool over his blond, silky hair. Ram Bahadur's deaf-and-mute son, oblivious of the difference in their station, gurgles in delight as Poltu's son throws a balloon at him that he strives to catch. Mukherjee kaku's daughter informs whoever wants to listen that she is sponsoring this year's Astami *bhog*, and the best caterers have been appointed for that. Mampi-di's sons, chaste in English and in the latest gadgets, enjoy every bit of the attention local teenage pretty-lings lavish on them, though they are supremely unaware of any unwarranted heartburn they may cause as fallouts of Puja romances. Somewhere, in this rustle of silks and cotton sarees and dresses, rising fumes of tepid incense sticks mingled with strong deodorants and perfumes, and amidst motley chants of mantra and 'para' gossip, the near and the far, the local and the global, the tears of death have blended into the tears of joy – in living and loving.

I bring myself from the gaiety of the magic days back to the eternal tale of separation from a loved one, and prepare myself to face life squarely once again, postponing it to the next morrow. Here, in this *para*, I had come with my grandmother, parents and siblings from a rented flat to our new home. Every day, as I grew up from a chirpy schoolgirl to a love-lorn teenager, the *para* stood on silent vigil, like a careful parent. Here, I met my husband for the first time, in a house decorated with flowers, lights and happily-dressed relatives and friends, to embark on my conjugal journey. And here, my children, prance and play in alleys that have known me since my childhood. Its here that the sedate shiuli blossoms blend into the multi-hued brilliance of the marigold and do-paati flowers on puja thalis, and its here that I watch how the dazzling glare of summer is humbled by the pearl-drops of monsoon, as they caress the young neem-leaves on that old tree beside my house, a few doors away from my paternal house. The wails of a mother who has lost her daughter fade gradually as the hymns sung at a toddler's *annaprasan*(rice-eating ceremony) grow in pitch – here, in my *para*, the ten-handed goddess with her children shower her benediction on all. In a small corner of the vast world, like so many others of its kind, stands our locality, where I see the drama of human life enacted everyday, with a motley crew of actors and actresses. One last time, I glance at the pandal that has just been emptied and the place where another set of photographs may be placed next year. Who would they be? Who would come back to let their children partake of true Puja flavour next year? Whose children would participate in the cultural programmes? Will the *dhaakis* who were apprehensive of the future of their lands come back again next year? I muse absent-mindedly as the flickers of the 'mangaldeep', standing all alone, capture my attention. The sounds of the *dhaak* are heard no more, the flashy lights have also dimmed, but the *para* would again be abuzz, very soon. Next year. I go, only to come back.