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Mapping the Sacred: Devi Temples and the Landscape of Mother Goddess Worship in Hooghly-Chinsura

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Abstract:

Chinsurah is one of the oldest metropolises in Bengal and West Bengal. The holy Ganges River flows through this megacity. In the 15th and 16th centuries, a European trading group, the Dutch, captured the megacity and established a colony. Once upon a time, this region, like other regions of pastoral Bengal, was based on pastoral contemplation generalities and religious ideas, but despite colorful changes over time, the core contemplation conception has not changed. This exploration paper has revealed the religious study of that major megacity, especially the image of the deification of the mama goddess. It has stressed how the issue of the mother goddess deification has surfaced in the religious studies and deification of the indigenous people. Grounded on fieldwork, oral accounts, and archival exploration, the study explores the literal development of these sacred locales and analyzes how major periodic carnivals similar as Durga Puja, Kali Puja, and Jagaddhatri Puja — temporarily reshape megacity spaces into lively capitals of participated religious practice. The study also foregrounds the vital part of women in sustaining these rituals, revealing the deeply unsexed confines of Shakti deification. In pressing both enduring traditions and contemporary shifts — amid civic growth and evolving patronage this exploration underscores how the Devi tabernacles of Hooghly- Chinsura continue to anchor original identity, memory, and social cohesion. Eventually, it argues that to understand the artistic heart of this region, one must explore these living sacred spaces where history, faith, and community intertwine.

Keywords: Mother Goddess worship, Devi temples, Hooghly-Chinsura, Shakti cult, sacred landscape, Bengal religious traditions, Durga Puja, Kali Puja, Jagaddhatri Puja, gender and devotion, ritual practices, spatial mapping, local identity, historical patronage, ethnographic study, urban transformation.

Introduction:

Hooghly- Chinsura, nestled along the banks of the Hooghly River, stands as a living palimpsest of Bengal's layered once — bearing traces of Mughal administration, Dutch and British social imprints, and deeply confirmed original traditions. At the heart of this region's cultural

identity lies the enduring worship of the Mother Goddess, or Shakti, celebrated through myriad forms such as Kali, Durga, and Jagaddhatri. These devotional practices are far more than ritual observances; they actively shape the social and spatial fabric of Hooghly-Chinsura. This study explores how the sacred landscape of the area has been historically and culturally mapped through its network of Devi temples. By tracing their spatial distribution, local myths, and festive cycles, it reveals how these temples become focal points of community life, forging collective identities and sustaining social memory. Festivals like Durga Puja and Kali Puja transform streets into vibrant arenas of artistry, commerce, and devotion, while women's participation in vows and rituals underscores the gendered dimensions of Shakti worship. Amidst rapid urbanization and changing patterns of patronage, these sacred sites continue to negotiate tradition and modernity, adapting yet anchoring local values. By examining how the Devi temples of Hooghly-Chinsura mediate history, faith, and community ties, this paper highlights the profound role of sacred spaces in crafting a region's cultural heartbeat. In doing so, it invites a deeper understanding of how locality and devotion intertwine to sustain Bengal's living heritage.

Objectives:

1. To trace the historical development and spatial distribution of Devi temples in Hooghly-Chinsurah.
2. To study the role of these temples in structuring the religious and cultural landscape of the region.
3. To analyze how festivals and rituals centered on these temples reinforce local identities and gendered devotional practices.
4. To examine the contemporary challenges and transformations affecting traditional forms of Mother Goddess worship in the area.

Methodology:

This study employs a historical-ethnographic approach to examine how Devi temples shape the sacred landscape and cultural life of Hooghly-Chinsura. It integrates three core methods:

1. Archival and Documentary Research:

Using district gazetteers, colonial records, temple documents, and scholarly works on Bengal's Shakta traditions to trace the historical emergence and evolution of Devi worship in the region.

2. Field Surveys and Spatial Mapping:

Conducting on-site surveys of Devi temples to document their locations, architectural features, patron histories, and associated oral narratives, supplemented by photographic and schematic mapping to visualize their spatial patterns.

3. Interviews and Participant Observation:

Engaging temple priests, local historians, and especially women devotees through semi-structured interviews, and observing key festivals (Durga Puja, Kali Puja, Jagaddhatri Puja) to explore ritual practices, gender roles, and community dynamics.

By combining textual analysis with ethnographic insight, this methodology captures how historical memory and contemporary devotion together sustain local identity and social cohesion.

Mapping the Sacred: Distribution and Significance of Devi Temples:

The sacred landscape of Hooghly-Chinsura is richly textured with a diverse constellation of Devi temples, from centuries-old shrines steeped in legend to newer urban sanctuaries emerging alongside the region's expanding neighborhoods. These temples, dedicated chiefly to Kali, Jagaddhatri, and other local manifestations of the Mother Goddess, function not merely as sites of worship but as vital nodes in the social and cultural fabric of the community.

Mapping the distribution of these sacred spaces uncovers telling patterns of historical settlement and patronage. Many prominent temples trace their origins to the benefaction of zamindars or prosperous mercantile families, whose patronage intertwined religious devotion with assertions of local prestige and authority. By contrast, the proliferation of smaller neighborhood shrines points to more intimate, community-driven articulations of Shakti worship, reflecting how collective faith takes root in everyday spaces.

These temples do more than preserve ritual continuity; they actively animate the region's social life. During festivals such as Durga Puja, Kali Puja, and Jagaddhatri Puja, they transform surrounding streets into vibrant corridors of devotion, performance, and commerce, temporarily reconfiguring urban geographies into sacred landscapes. Thus, the spatial distribution of Devi temples in Hooghly-Chinsura is not only a cartographic reality but a living testament to how history, locality, and collective identity are continually negotiated through sacred practice.

Selected Devi Temples in Hooghly-Chinsura: Profiles and Cultural Significance:

Dayamoyee Kali temple: Situated in the heart of Chinsura, the Dakshina Kali Mandir is one of the region's oldest and most frequented shrines dedicated to Goddess Kali. According to legend this temple was probably built in the 17th century during the reign of Mughal emperor Akbar at the initiative of his minister Todarmal. At that time the jagirdar of this place was Jiten Roy and this temple was built on his initiative. Later in 1793 Gopal Ram Pathak purchased this area and started looking after this Temple. This is the most famous temple in Chinsurah City. Every year on the new moon day of Kali Puja or the 7th day of the Shukla saptami of the month of Magh (9th month of Bengali calendar), that is on the foundation day a large number of devotees gather here regardless of men and women and a social area is developed.

Mahismardini Mata temple: Mata Mahishmardini Temple at a temple about 400 years old in the Dharampur area of Chinsurah. Used to house the goddess in a very small temple there was no

idol there. Every year during the Jamai sasti festival there is from the soshti tithi (sixth day) to the dashami tithi (tenth day) of the Krishna paksh of the month of jayashtha (second month of Bengali calendar) idol of Mata Mahishmardini Shiva and Ganesha were worshiped along with a huge fair. This tradition continues even today. However now a large temple and a permanent idol have been built. Every year a large number of people come to this fair and a lot of buying and selling takes place. In ancient times there was a stage drama and puppet dance that happened during this fair, but it is now discontinued. However even today many people come to this fair and shopping and trading take place creating a beautiful social scene.

Goddess Yogadya: Sandeswartala is an ancient and growing vill.' Sandeswar' is then. The religious and artistic terrain of the vill has been developed grounded on' Sandeswar'. Then, along with the hero of Sandeswar, there are colorful family icons around. similar as Siddheshwari Kali, Yogadya, Olaichandi, Jagannath, Radhakrishna, Annapurna etc. But the ascendance is that of Sandeswar. Every family in the vill is associated with the diurnal deification of Sandeswar Shiva, special deification and periodic Gajan, Charak- Nil etc. Then, the south- facing goddess Yogadya is located conterminous to the Shiva tabernacle. Shyam Ram of the notorious Soma dynasty of Chunchura is the author of Soma. They used to worship and serve it for generations. presumably in 1760- 61 announcement The black gravestone goddess hero was established. It's said that Shyamaram Som, after hearing or seeing the greatness of the Goddess in Kshirgram of Mangalkot police station of Burdwan quarter, established an hero of the Goddess then and, following the rituals of Kshirgram, a suitable person of the Som dynasty was appointed and the designated director of the Som dynasty was supervising the proper conduct of the puja form. The last joker of this dynasty, Trishulicharan Som and two other sisters failed childless. As a result, the Bhattacharya family, the preachers, had to perform the service and puja of the Goddess Yogadya. The ancestors of this Bhattacharya family were worshippers of ' Dhakeshwari' in Dhaka. Shyamaram Som brought Brajkishore Bhattacharya from Dhaka to Chunchura to worship the Goddess Yognaya. Since also, this Bhattacharya family has been worshipping the Goddess from generation to generation.

Gramdevi Shrines and Open-Air Altars:

Scattered across the more rural fringes of Hooghly-Chinsura are countless small shrines dedicated to village goddesses—often worshipped in the forms of Sashti, Shitala, or Bonbibi. Typically consisting of a simple stone or clay idol beneath a tree or in a modest courtyard, these sites are cared for primarily by local women. They serve as intimate spaces for vows related to childbirth, children's health, and protection from epidemics, reflecting a deeply gendered and household-centered dimension of Shakti worship that continues largely outside the purview of formal temple structures.

Rituals, Festivals, and Gendered Devotional Practice:

The Devi temples of Hooghly-Chinsura acquire heightened significance during major festivals such as Durga Puja, Kali Puja, and Jagaddhatri Puja. These events are far more than ritual obligations; they transform the local landscape into dynamic, performative arenas where devotion, aesthetics, and community identity converge. Streets become temporary sacred corridors adorned with elaborate pandals, lights, and processions, effectively reconfiguring urban spaces into sites of collective celebration and spiritual renewal. Integral to these ritual cycles is the prominent role of women, whose participation underscores the profoundly gendered dimensions of Shakti worship. Women not only manage household rituals and coordinate offerings but also undertake vows (manats) for the health, prosperity, and protection of their families, weaving personal and domestic aspirations into the broader tapestry of communal devotion. Their embodied practices — from preparing offerings to leading folk songs and devotional gatherings — illustrate how the worship of the Mother Goddess serves as a key domain through which gender, faith, and social cohesion are negotiated. In this way, festivals and everyday rituals at Devi temples do more than sustain religious continuity; they actively reproduce social relations and reinforce the intergenerational transmission of local identities, embedding the sacred within the rhythms of daily life in Hooghly-Chinsura.

Continuities and Transformations:

Although traditional forms of Mother Goddess worship continue to flourish in Hooghly-Chinsura, the sacred landscape is simultaneously being reshaped by contemporary forces. Processes of urbanization, evolving patterns of patronage, and the increasing commodification of festivals have altered how temples operate and engage with the community. Grand pujas organized by local clubs, elaborate sponsorships, and the incorporation of modern aesthetics reflect these shifts, infusing age-old rituals with new social and economic dynamics.

Yet, amid these changes, Devi temples remain enduring anchors of local identity and collective memory. They adapt fluidly, integrating modern influences—such as amplified performances, themed pandals, and expanded civic participation—while preserving the essential ritual frameworks that tie devotees to longstanding traditions. In doing so, these sacred sites illustrate the dynamic balance between continuity and innovation, demonstrating how cultural practices evolve without severing their deep historical and spiritual roots.

Conclusion:

This study demonstrates that the Devi temples of Hooghly-Chinsura are far more than sites of ritual observance; they actively construct the region's sacred geography and sustain its cultural identity. By examining their historical patronage, spatial distribution, and vibrant festival cycles, the research highlights how these temples function as dynamic centers where community bonds are forged and reaffirmed. Crucially, the prominent role of women in household vows, temple offerings, and festival preparations underscores the deeply gendered nature of Shakti worship, revealing how

devotional practices simultaneously reinforce and negotiate local social structures. Even amidst the pressures of urban expansion and the commercialization of religious festivals, these sacred spaces continue to adapt—absorbing new forms of sponsorship and aesthetic display without abandoning core ritual frameworks. In illuminating these continuities and transformations, this study underscores how the worship of the Mother Goddess in Hooghly-Chinsura remains a living tradition. It weaves together history, locality, and collective memory, ensuring that sacred practices are not static inheritances but evolving expressions of community life uniquely anchored in this region of Bengal.

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