
DURBAR'S DURGA PUJA INAUGURATION: A CELEBRATION OF RESILIENCE & PERSEVERANCE

“We are the face of our own puja” “আমাদের পুজো, আমরাই মুখ”



OCTOBER 17, 2023

DURBAR MAHILA SAMANWAYA COMMITTEE
12/5 Nilmoni Mitra Street, Kolkata 700006

Durga Puja Inauguration: A Celebration of Resilience and Perseverance

Introduction:

On a vibrant and auspicious evening, Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee had the privilege of hosting a unique and heartwarming inauguration ceremony for their Durga Puja celebration. This year, the organization decided to embrace the spirit of inclusivity and celebrate the festival of Durga Puja with great zeal, uniting representatives from different religious groups. This event held at Sonagachi showcased the power of solidarity and diversity, highlighting the importance of addressing the rights and well-being of sex workers. The puja not only celebrated the essence of the goddess Durga but also symbolized the strength, resilience and dignity of every woman.

Objectives:

- To foster a sense of community mobilization and togetherness among sex workers by providing them with an opportunity to connect with each other.
- To challenge and change societal stereotypes and biases against sex workers by highlighting their contributions to cultural and social events like Durga Puja.
- To raise awareness about the issues and challenges faced by sex workers, shedding light on their rights and advocating for their social inclusion and legal protection.
- To empower community members and promote inclusivity by celebrating a traditional festival that is marked by social and cultural exclusion.

Venue:

The venue located in the heart of Sonagachi, Kolkata was beautifully decorated with colorful lights, floral arrangements, traditional artwork and informatics posters. A stunning Durga Maa adorned the main stage symbolizing strength, empowerment and the embodiment of the divine feminine.

Present special dignitaries:

Dr. Sashi Panja, Minister-Of-State, (IC), Child Development and Women Development & Social Welfare Department, GoWB

Mr. Madan Mitra, MLA, Kamarhati

Ms. Ellora Saha, Councillor, 24 no. Ward, Kolkata Municipality

Mr. Rajesh Singha, Councillor, 25 no. Ward, Kolkata Municipality

Mr. Haranath Chakraborty, Bengali film Director

Dr. Santa Dutta, Director, NICED

Dr. Arista Lahiri, Assistant Professor, Dept. of Community Medicine, Dr. B.C. Roy Multi-Specialty Medical Research Centre

Dr. Sweety Jha, Dept. of Community Medicine, Dr. B.C. Roy Multi-Specialty Medical Research Centre

Dr. Leena Bandyopadhyay, Assistant Professor, Dept. of Community Medicine, All India Institute of Hygiene & Public Health

Ms. Lovely Yashmin, Social Worker - Bangladesh

Dr. Maitri Bose, Associate Professor, Raja Peary Mohan College

Dr. Dipanwita Hazari, Medical Practitioner

Ms. Aparajita Ganguly, Coordinator, Brave Souls Foundation

Ms. Moumita Chakraborty, State Coordinator, SEWA Bharat

Dr. Srikanta Das, Bishop, Goodnews Mission of India

Mr. Sauvik Halder, Priest, Kalighat Kali Temple

Dr. Partha Sarathi Mukherjee

Fr. John Kerketta, Director, Udayani

Mr. Bapi Thakur, Secretary, Domjur Book Fair

Ms. Mili Das, International Poet and Writer

Dr. Arijit Kumar Niyogi

Dr. K.P. Sengupta

Mr. Gautam Sen

Inauguration of Durga Puja symbolized the beginning of Bengali's favorite festival Durga Puja celebrations. Durbar with sex worker community in Sonagachi initiated this ceremony with enthusiasm and zeal. This year, the inauguration ceremony attracted attention as Durbar gathered members of several religious units this year to demonstrate the equality of all Human beings. This year the puja theme was decided as “আমাদের পূজো, আমরাই মুখ্য” a Bengali quote which means we, the Sex Worker community people are the face of our own puja. This statement suggests that Sex Workers are an essential part of the Durga Puja festivities. They don't need any celebrity face to represent their puja because their own faces are enough and they are proudly representing their community in this celebrations of Durga Puja. Through this message, community people are deeply exploring the concept of inclusivity, and representation, breaking stereotypes and reclaiming their own dignity from the mainstream population.



The event commenced with a warm welcome by Mahashweta Mukherjee, advocacy officer of Durbar. She expressed her gratitude to all attendees, highlighting the significance of celebrating Durga Puja within the context of Durbar as a Sex Workers organization. She emphasized the importance of respecting and empowering women from all walks of life and commended the government and other people of society for their support in this endeavor.

Mr. Madan Mitra, MLA as well as the President of Durbar Durgotsab Committee welcomed all the audience with warm greetings and acknowledged the remarkable strides made by Durbar. He also talked about Amra Padatik, an organization for children of Sex Workers in championing the rights and welfare of the community. He shared the importance of Durga Puja within this community with a few stories and how Durga Puja is a significant festival in West Bengal that brings people together in celebration and devotion. The speech highlighted the need for compassion and support rather than stigmatization and discrimination. By sharing the theme of this Durga Puja, he encouraged society to adopt a more open-minded and empathetic approach towards sex workers and their children by



Presenting a heartfelt memento to our dedicated MLA as a token of appreciation for his unwavering commitment to our community.

recognizing their rights as individuals and their dignity. He also recognized the Durga Puja festival's historical and cultural significance, emphasizing how it celebrates the victory of good over evil and embodies the strength of the feminine divine. He then connected this symbolism to the difficulties experienced by sex workers. He was highlighting the fact that the community of sex workers should have the same chances and rights as any other group in society, just like any other community. He promised to be there for all of the community members and their children at all times, offering support and being there for them in times of need. In closing, he wished everyone a happy and safe Durga Puja celebration and expressed his admiration for the bravery of the Sex Workers Community. Ms. Bishakha Laskar, Secretary of Durbar thanked Mr. Madan Mitra by extending a warm welcome to join with them in this celebration. She acknowledged the importance of breaking down barriers and building bridges with the wider community. She highlighted the significance of Durga Puja in the

community not just as a religious festival but as a symbol of female empowerment, strength and courage. The Secretary drew parallels between the struggles faced by sex workers and the goddess Durga's battles against injustice, underlining the shared quest for justice and dignity while justifying the puja theme.

On Madan Mitra Sir's commitment to standing with community people, Ms. Aparajita Ganguly, coordinator, Brave Souls Foundation shared a case study of an acid survivor who was helped by Madan Mitra Sir by giving her a bed in a hospital during the critical COVID lockdown.

Ms. Lovely Yashmin, a social worker from Bangladesh, talked about the stigma that is often associated with sex work profession. Despite the fact that their labor is just as important as that of any other profession, she admitted that sex workers frequently experience prejudice and isolation from mainstream society. She urged the audience to understand the struggles faced by sex workers and the necessity of social acceptance, stressing the significance of recognizing their humanity and dignity, not only for the people of West Bengal but also for the people of Bangladesh. The core message of her speech was the equality of all professions and equal rights of all professions. She argued that society often categorizes work into hierarchies, assigning different values to different jobs. However, she firmly believed that every occupation, when performed with dedication and integrity, is valuable and deserves recognition. She gave instances of people in a variety of fields who have had a big impact on society, such as doctors saving lives, teachers molding young minds, farmers producing food for the masses and Sex Workers offering intimacy and companionship.



Empowering Communities: A Bangladeshi Social Worker Inspiring Change with Words of Hope and Progress

Renowned Bengali film director Mr. Haranath Chakraborty also commended Durbar on its innovative utilization of Durga Puja to inspire community members and wished them well in the future.

In his opening remarks, Dr. Partha Sarathi Mukherjee stated that Durbar's Durga Puja is unique and has the guts to alter the perception of the general public in society, which is why he thought UNESCO needed to choose Durbar's Durga Puja first rather than choosing other pandals of Kolkata. He also added that he will proudly inform everyone about his visit to Sonagachi.



Inspiring Change: Dr. Mukherjee advocating for social changes

Speaking to an excited audience, Ms. Ellora Saha, Councillor, 24 no. Ward, Kolkata Municipality, started off by recognizing the importance of the soil from this well-known location, Sonagachi in Durga Puja. In a powerful statement, she addressed the community people as “Social friends” and emphasized the need for a society that not only celebrates diversity but also upholds the principles of equality and mutual respect. She further elaborated on the fundamental idea that no work should be undermined or devalued and that every profession contributes to the fabric of society in its unique way. Amidst the vibrant ambiance of the event, the councillor encouraged the audience to reflect on the societal biases and stigmas associated with certain professions, particularly those marginalized and misunderstood. Drawing attention to the often-overlooked contributions of the Sex Workers community, she highlighted their resilience and the importance of acknowledging their labor as an essential part of the societal framework. By doing so, she aimed to promote a culture of inclusivity and understanding that embraces all individuals, irrespective of their chosen profession.



Councillor Ellora Saha sharing her passion and vision for a brighter tomorrow.

Mr. Rajesh Singha, Councillor, 25 no. Ward began his speech by expressing his gratitude for being invited to the event and commended the Sex Workers' community as well as Durbar for their courage, resilience and social work activities. He emphasized the idea that in our society, professions are often ranked or valued differently and the work done by marginalized communities is often underappreciated. Mr. Singha stressed that this perception is not only unjust but also detrimental to our society's progress. He declared that it is time for society to recognize that all work is equal and must be respected.

The secretary of the Domjur Book Fair, Mr. Bapi Thakur, promised to participate in all social events and asked Durbar's representative to present at their book fair as a way to show the inclusion of community people and he will felicitate them with the chief guest of honor.

Amidst the vibrant celebration, Dr. Srikanta Das, Bishop, Goodnews Mission of India took to the stage, emphasizing the values of equality and acceptance within the broader community. His speech, laced with poignant anecdotes and thoughtful insights resonated deeply with the audience comprised of individuals from diverse religious unit backgrounds.

Mr. Sauvik Halder, Priest, Kalighat Kali Temple talked about the unity or togetherness of all people irrespective of their religion. Additionally, he praised each member of Durbar for their effort and the unique concept they highlighted for this year's Durga Puja.



Church's Father and Temple's Priest embracing message of Unity and Equality for All

The director of NICED, Prof. Santa Dutta, commended Durbar for organizing this kind of community mobilization activity, which has since evolved into a festival for the local populace and thanked Durbar for inviting her. She also talked about the difficulty in organizing this Puja and the happiness she found in every person's face after succeeding in it. She gave her word that NICED will always encourage this kind of creative effort and wishes the best for the future.

Dr. Leena Bandopadhyay, Assistant Professor, Dept. of Community Medicine, All India Institute of Hygiene & Public Health thanked Durbar for giving her opportunity to talk and she initiated the speech by acknowledging the significance of Durga Puja in Indian culture and emphasizing how it is a celebration of the divine feminine energy, strength and resilience. She highlighted the paradox wherein society often fails to recognize the same attributes in women, especially in marginalized communities such as sex workers. She also talked about equality, inclusion and empowerment.

Last but not least Dr. Sashi Panja shared a powerful and heartwarming statement to the values of equality and inclusivity after hearing the poem of Mahashweta Mukherjee. She emphasized that although community members stand in the midst of Durga Puja's vibrancy and hues, it's important to remember that our celebration is about more than just rituals. It includes honoring strength and bravery in the face of difficulty. She claimed that all people are equal before Durga Maa and the injustice is done to people by society and now this needs to change. Durbar has pursued their journey to respect and dignity with extraordinary



Dr. Sashi Panja, a visionary leader addressing on Equality and Social Progress

bravery. She pledged her support for giving the people in this neighborhood better access to healthcare and education.

The ceremonial lamp was lit at the end of the ceremony by Ms. Radharani Sarkar, one of the oldest Sex Worker of Sonagachi with our honorable Minister Dr. Sashi Panja to symbolize the victory of light over darkness and the start of a festive celebration. The heavenly atmosphere was enhanced by the melodious sounds of traditional dhak, dhol and sonkho which evoked a feeling of spiritual intensity and cultural diversity. The Durga idol, adorned in resplendent attire stood as a symbol of strength, courage and female empowerment resonating deeply with the ethos of the organization. The sex workers' community actively participated in these rituals, underscoring the cultural significance of the event. Colorful cultural performances, including dance and music, showcased the talent and vibrancy of the community.

The event concluded with a heartfelt vote of thanks delivered by Mr. Ratan Dolui, President of Amra Padatik. He expressed his gratitude to the dignitaries, guests, representatives of organizations and participants for gracing the occasion with their presence and for their continuous support in furthering Durbar's noble mission. He emphasized the importance of continued collaboration and urged everyone to work towards a more inclusive and just society.

Conclusion:

The inauguration of Durga Puja by Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee was a remarkable event that underscored the importance of respecting and empowering women, regardless of their professional background. The participation of government ministers, representatives from various organizations and various religious groups signified a collective effort towards social change. The celebration was a poignant reminder that every individual irrespective of their profession or circumstances deserves dignity and respect. This event was a crucial step forward in the ongoing struggle for sex worker's rights and social inclusivity.