10-29-2017

Saraswati Puja: An Ethnographic Account of a Bengali Religious Festival in the United States

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Available at: https://digitalcommons.shawnee.edu/indicreligions/vol1/iss1/1
Abstract

In this article, I use ethnographic method to study a Bengali religious festival, Saraswati Puja, as celebrated in the United States. I contend that Bengali Indian Americans chose to celebrate this festival because of its symbolic significance; goddess Saraswati is the goddess of knowledge and wisdom. I analyze how this religious celebration satisfies Bengali Indian Americans’ nostalgic yearnings while becoming a means to transfer their culture and tradition to second generation Indian Americans. I look at how different activities within the religious frame blur the boundaries between the religious and the secular. I also examine how this one-day event reflects their strong desire to maintain their tradition while simultaneously challenging it.

Keywords: Bengali diaspora; Bengali Hindu festival; Saraswati puja; Indian American Culture
South Asian Indians immigrated to the United States for various reasons other than religion. Many immigrants were not piously religious when they first came to the United States (Fenton 1988, vii). They continued with their rudimentary religious observances and practices within their homes or cultural organizations based on their regional languages as they did in India. John Fenton claims that Indian immigrants did not even consider preserving their cultures and religious traditions until they spent a considerable number of years in the United States and were economically successful (1988, vii). A factor in their ethnic consciousness is their family cycle, as many immigrants had children after they arrived in the United States. More aware of cultural continuity in their child rearing, they then felt the need to retain and hand down their religion, tradition, and culture. I contend
that a way they expressed this need was through rituals and festivals that they selected because of their symbolic significance. *Saraswati Puja* is one such religious ritual, which is not only symbolically significant, but also strongly connects South Asian Indians, especially Bengalis, to their homeland.

Saraswati Puja is originally an indoor ritual, but with changing time it is celebrated indoor as well as outdoor, both in India and the United States. The main factor for this festival being transformed from an indoor ritual to an outdoor festival is its social function that holds true for both the countries. An additional factor plays a role in its celebration as an outdoor event in the United States is the concern of handing down Bengali traditions to second generation Indian Americans. Unlike India, very few Bengali cultural organizations in the United
States organize Saraswati Puja. But with each passing year, it is growing. For the purpose of my research, I observed this ritual turned festival as a “cultural scene” — the collective, communal celebration of Saraswati Puja-- in Sampriti, the Bengali Community of Central Pennsylvania, in 2012. With attention to the socially framed communication and behavior in the cultural scene, I analyze how this religious celebration acts as a catalyst to satisfy Bengali Indian Americans’ nostalgic yearnings while becoming a means to transfer their culture and tradition to second generation Indian Americans. I examine how different activities of men and women reflect their gender roles and if there is any overlapping or switching of gender roles. I further look at how different activities within the religious frame blur the boundaries between the religious and the secular. I also analyze the
tension between being Indian and becoming American reflected through various activities in this religious event; or in other words, I show how this one-day event reflects their strong desire to stick to their tradition while simultaneously challenging it.

I have used the method of folkloristic ethnography based on the “frame theory” of cultural practices proposed by Jay Mechling, Simon J. Bronner, and Gary Alan Fine to study the “cultural scene.” According to folklorist Simon J. Bronner, “The act of framing captures a narrative as well as action that have a bearing on the perception of the event from the perspective of the participants and assorted viewers. Consequently, frames refer to the ways insiders and outsiders comprehend activity as a deep cognitive structure in addition to viewing, and strategizing, what occurs behaviorally” (2010, 275). I
used this method to analyze how and why different narratives and actions arose and were enacted. As an interviewer and a Bengali Indian living in the United States, I did the following to collect data from my participants: first, I recorded all the practices performed here as in West Bengal, India. Second, I aimed to understand the various perceptions of culture in their new homeland held by my participants. Apart from interviewing people, I also played the role of a silent observer on the day of the festival. Being a Bengali Indian observing the celebration for the first time in the United States, gave me an insider’s view as well as an outsider’s view. I easily identified the differences in the celebration of Saraswati Puja in India and the United States and understood how this festival was replete with multiple meanings in the United States. Therefore, before
discussing my observations and analyzing various aspects of the festival, I will give a brief cultural context of this festival with reference to mythology and demonstrate the significance and/or relationship of Saraswati Puja to Bengali Indian Americans.

Cultural Context of Mythology

Saraswati Puja is a Bengali Hindu festival celebrated in either January or February to mark the onset of spring. Participation in this puja (worshipping the goddess) is considered compulsory (by Bengalis) for students, scholars, and creative artists because the goddess Saraswati personifies wisdom, intellect, speech, and learning. On the day of Saraswati Puja, all academic and creative materials, including books, notebooks, laptops, pens and pencils, and musical instruments, should be left with the goddess for her blessings on those
materials. It is also said that students should not study on the day of puja to excel the rest of the year. All these lead to the question, why is the goddess revered and worshipped the way She is?

Goddess Saraswati is one of the few worshipped goddesses whose origin can be traced to the Vedic period. The Sanskrit word “sara” means "essence" and “swa” means "self." Thus, Saraswati means "the essence of the self." Her name, also meaning “the flowing one” or “the watery,” underlies her origin as a feminine sacred river in India. Unlike the Ganges, the river Saraswati no longer exists, but it is believed to flow as a celestial underground river purifying and fertilizing the earth. This connection between the rivers and the divine has been central to the development of the idea of India as a sacred place. Such a connection also emphasizes “the interconnection between

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the physical and the divine, especially as the sacred rivers in Hindu mythology are said to flow from the realm of the gods” (Foulston and Abbott 2009, 27).

However, Saraswati’s connection to the river rapidly decreased in later Hinduism. In Brahma Purana, Saraswati is associated with speech and identified as Vagdevi (the goddess of speech). However, the association between Saraswati and Vagdevi is not clear. The performance of vedic rituals on the banks of Saraswati river and the centrality of sacred speech in vedic culture might have led to the association of these two goddesses. Nonetheless, goddess Saraswati increasingly became associated with wisdom, learning, creativity, speech, art, and culture. In later Hinduism, Saraswati is said to have been Lord Brahma’s wife as well as his daughter with whose knowledge and wisdom he created...
the universe. She is also considered the embodiment of
one of the five *shaktis* (dynamic powers) where she
represents pervasive reality with insight, knowledge, and
learning. Saraswati is also said to have had her origin from
Lord Vishnu’s tongue; therefore, her association with
speech. Epithets such as *Vagdevi* (goddess of speech),
*Jihvagravasini* (one who lives on the tongues),
*Kavijihvagravasini* (one who dwells on the tongues of the
poets), *Sabdavasini* (one who is in the sound), *Vagisa*
(mistress of speech), and *Mahavani* (possessing great
speech) are often associated with goddess Saraswati (see
also Kinsley, 1986).

Speech and sound are central to Hinduism. They
convey meaning in Hindu *mantras*.iii Mantras are
considered to have great power; these are sometimes
considered to be equivalent to the deity itself. Kinsley
noting the importance of mantra states that, “to pronounce a mantra is to make the deity present” (1986, 59). Furthermore, speech is revered because it enables communication between human beings which distinguishes humans from animals. Thus, Saraswati, as an embodiment of speech, is present wherever speech exists. She is also identified with intellect and thought, or in other words, with coherent speech/expression which equips human beings with creativity, imagination, and reasoning. Goddess Saraswati is further associated with arts, science, and music.

Saraswati’s iconography depicts her with four hands each holding a book, a vina (lute), a rosary, and a water pot. Book associates her with science and learning, lute with musical art, rosary and water pot with spiritual science and religious rites. Four hands denote her
omnipresence and omnipotence. Two front arms symbolize her presence in the physical world and two back arms connect her to the spiritual world. All four hands represent the four elements of inner personality: *mana* (mind) is represented by the front right hand, *buddhi* (intellect) by the front left hand, *chitta* (consciousness) by the rear left hand, and *ahankara* (ego) by the rear right hand.
Goddess Saraswati with vina, rosary, water pot, and a book (manuscript).

Goddess Saraswati is mostly depicted in white saree sitting on a lotus. Her appearance symbolizes purity and transcendence of the physical world. She floats above the “muddy imperfection” of this mortal world (Kinsley 13).
1986, 62). David Kinsley notes that “although rooted in mud (like man rooted in the physical world), the lotus perfects itself in a blossom that has transcended the mud” (1986, 62). Such depiction symbolizes that humans should also be able to transcend their physical limitations through their knowledge, intellect, and creativity. She has a swan as her carrier. Swan is the symbol of “spiritual transcendence and perfection in Hinduism” (Kinsley 1986, 62). A swan is said to have a sensitive beak that enables it to differentiate between pure milk and a mixture of milk and water. It, therefore, symbolizes the power or ability to discriminate between right and wrong or good and bad. Swan being Saraswati’s vehicle indicates that one must acquire and apply knowledge for the good of mankind and must be able to discriminate between good and evil. Knowledge that is dominated by ego can destroy
the world. Sometimes the goddess is portrayed with a peacock sitting next to her and anxiously waiting to serve as her vehicle. A peacock mythically symbolizes unpredictable behavior as its mood can be influenced by changes in the weather condition. Saraswati’s choosing swan as her vehicle signifies that one should overcome fear, indecision, and fickleness in order to acquire true knowledge.

Goddess Saraswati is significant and very close to Bengali Indians. Various sociologists, psychologists, and anthropologists have often discussed how Asian Americans, including Indian Americans, prioritize education over everything else (see Barringer & Kassebaum, 1989; Kim & Chun, 1994; Barringer, Takeuchi & Xenos, 1990). Indian Americans, especially Bengalis, equate education with social status that can
either be superior or inferior depending on the nature of education and occupation one gets into (Joshi 2005, 76; see also Bacon 1996). STEM fields, medicine, and literature are the most preferred areas of study as well as occupation. Therefore, education is emphasized since early childhood in Bengali Indian families. This emphasis becomes more potent in the United States because here they are considered as “model minorities” and to remain true to this concept, Bengali Indian American children have to excel and be successful in academics and work places. Thus, the symbolic significance of worshipping goddess Saraswati and making participation compulsory for students, scholars, and artists becomes evident.
Goddess Saraswati sitting on a lotus with a swan below her and a peacock behind her.

**Sampriti’s Saraswati Puja: The Socio-Religious-Cultural Frame**

As mentioned earlier, Saraswati Puja is an indoor ritual and is seldom celebrated as a community festival in the United States. Very few Bengali associations in the
United States organize Saraswati Puja. *Sampriti*, the Bengali Community of Central Pennsylvania, started organizing and celebrating this festival in 2012. As this association was new then, it did not have defined rules and regulations regarding membership, participation, and celebration. Only seven or eight families were active members of this organization. However, the crowd (mostly Bengali Indian Americans) on the day of the festival was substantial; around a hundred people participated in the celebration.

Along with organizing this festival, Sampriti also launched their website in 2012 with details about the worship and pictures and videos of the event. Though Sampriti’s use of digital media was limited in their first year of puja, digital media as a realm of religion has become very common and popular these days in the
United States. This virtual space plays a huge role in the creation and sustenance of Indian American religious identity. Apart from being the market space for buying and selling religious goods and Gods, the digital media has become the medium for disseminating information, advertising, providing advice and suggestions and even instructions on various procedures for performing different rituals. Although Sampriti advertised their puja and informed people about their various puja day activities via digital media, they, regarding the rituals and traditions, decided to rely more on verbal transfer of religious knowledge from the priests and older women in India and on the books containing elaborate discussions of ritual’s regulations and requirements.
Not only did Sampriti take a step forward technologically, but they also managed to bring a Saraswati *murti* (deity statue) from India. They commissioned a fiberglass idol to the idol makers in Kumhartoli (a place in Kolkata, India, which is famous for...
idol sculpting) and had it shipped to Pennsylvania. It was not just the idol that they brought from India; various religious items were also brought from there. As India is considered the home of Hindu religion, religious items are always preferred and brought from India. Indian Americans attach the notion of “authenticity” to religious items from their “homeland.” It is a way for them to adhere to their roots. This sentiment of being connected to the roots has been manipulated by businessmen and entrepreneurs. As any religious item from India is considered authentic, the items do come from India but are sometimes mass-produced in China from where these are then supplied to India and from India to the rest of the world (see Sinha 2011). It is important to note that this very sentiment of authenticity has been, to some extent, ingrained by marketing and advertising techniques of
business owners. Thus, such sentiments are expressed by Indian Americans, including Sampriti members, and are acted upon by entrepreneurs, thereby, blurring the line between a religious and a secular event.

*Sampriti’s Saraswati *murti* made of fiber-glass (by Dr. Indranil Chakrabarti)*

Furthermore, the idea of organizing and celebrating Saraswati Puja was born in a casual secular
setting. During my interview session, one of the active members of the organization told me that the idea came to their mind when they were having a casual family dinner with few other Bengali families in the year 2011. On being asked why they chose to celebrate this festival over all others, my informant told me, “Saraswati puja is important and also it is a one-day festival as compared to other Bengali festivals including *Durga Puja*, and is less complex ritually.” My informant further explained that it is “important” because goddess Saraswati is the goddess of knowledge and learning. However, I argue that the importance of the festival is not just restricted to it being a one-day event or being less complex-- it is more than that. Bengali Indian American parents feel that it is an easy way to attract their children’s attention to their tradition and hand it down. On a subconscious level they
hope that their children will be able to connect themselves better to this goddess as they are all students. This, in turn, will help the parents, as “keepers” of tradition, to pass on this tradition and religious beliefs more easily and successfully to their children.

Therefore, with this subconscious hope and desire, Sampriti started its arrangements several months prior to the actual day of the festival. In 2012, the puja was celebrated on February 16th in the community hall of West Enola Fire Company, Enola, Pennsylvania. The actual puja was on February 15th, but because it was a weekday (Friday), the members decided to do it on the following weekend, which happened to be the very next day. They held regular meetings to discuss and organize the puja. Those meetings were attended only by seven or eight active member families. They shared the entire
responsibility of the puja among themselves. The responsibilities included arrangement of a venue for the puja, assembling puja items, shopping for fruits and flowers necessary on the day of puja, cooking lunch and dinner for all the people attending the puja, decorating the venue, collecting funds, and organizing a cultural program involving children and adults.

On the day of the puja, the ritual part of the festival took place in the morning (9:30 a.m.- 10:30 a.m.) followed by lunch, the cultural program in the evening, and dinner. The ritual can be divided into three parts: first, arrangements and decoration done by women; second, the actual puja (performance and worshipping of the goddess) done by a Brahmin priest; and finally, the last part of the puja involving all men, women, and children who wanted to worship and seek blessings from the goddess. The first
part of the ritual involved purification of the place with the holy water of Ganges to dispel all negative forces and unwanted spirits. The priest also ritually purified himself with the holy water. After purification the most important ceremony was the installation of ghata (ceremonial pot that represents the goddess). For the protection of the ghata, a number of rituals were performed, such as scattering of mustard seed and its enclosure by a sacred thread.
The elaborate arrangements made by the women: the ghata covered with a red cloth on the left, the priest, fruits, flowers, and sweets (by Dr. Indranil Chakrabarti)

The second part of the ritual began with offering flowers, incense, water, and fruits to the goddess as well as to the ghata. An offering of light, known as aarti, was also made
to the goddesses. The last part, which involves participation of the people, was repeated quite a number of times as more people came in. Traditionally, people, especially students and artists, fast until they participate in this last part of the ritual as this is considered to be the

*Aartī*, the light offered to the goddess (by Dr. Indranil Chakrabarti)
only formal way to seek blessings from the goddess for the rest of the year. The fast is broken by eating fruits, sweets, and other traditional foods which are offered to the goddess. But, things were different here; very few adults and children fasted.

Fasting is an important part of this festival, yet both adults and children ignored this part of the ritual. The reason can be that they (adults) are no longer students and they did not want to interrupt the routine food habit of their children. It can also be because they are no longer in India they do not see any justification of fasting in this religious festival. The religious frame has changed along with the cultural frame. In West Bengal, India everyone (all the Bengalis) fasts, so people have the impetus to do it the way others are doing, while in the United States it is more about meeting people and enjoying the day together.
The religiosity, and to some extent devotion, has diminished and the celebration has become more of a secular event with people and food and cultural programs. Therefore, it is important to note the continuous tension that is reflected in this religious festival: the tension between sticking to tradition by doing everything in an “authentic” way and challenging traditions (consciously or subconsciously) by ignoring the rituals altogether. Or in other words, the Sampriti members are organizing the religious festival in an authentic way by bringing the goddess and religious items from India, but challenging the age-old ritualistic tradition by not fasting.
The last part of the ritual where people prayed together (by Indranil Chakraborti)

However, while they are challenging/ignoring traditions by not fasting, Sampriti members are still abiding by certain rules/roles to stay true to their roots, especially those regarding castes, irrespective of those being just or unjust. All Hindu religious rituals are
significantly gendered and caste regulated in India as well as in the United States. Saraswati puja is no exception. Women do all the hard work including the entire arrangement and decoration of the place of ritual. However, a male Brahmin priest performs the actual ritual. Not only the female members, but other male members were also equally restricted in their participation on the day of the puja. Neither men nor women preferred or were allowed to touch the goddess during the ritualistic worship. It was only the priest who did everything on behalf of the people. The Brahmins were once considered superior humans; though that thought does not exist now, they are the ones who continue to serve the gods directly and be the medium for the masses. “This is how it works [in India]. Right? It is tradition,” said a member when I asked why they still maintain this discrimination. This
member’s comment clarifies that by having a Brahmin priest do the ritual in the United States, in spite of the obvious and forced gender and caste distinction, gives Bengali Indian Americans the satisfaction that they are maintaining tradition and are doing it in an “authentic” way. Therefore, the paradox is once again reified; on the one hand, Sampriti members are getting rid of other religious customs, such as fasting, while on the other hand, they are still carrying forward this caste distinction only to render the ritual traditions as authentic.

The morning rituals were followed by lunch and dinner on that day which made food an important part of the puja day. Almost one hundred people attended the puja and Sampriti arranged for their lunch and dinner. Food was cooked by the members including all active and a few passive members (who did not attend the meetings).
The lunch menu was a typical Saraswati Puja vegetarian lunch menu, which included *khichuri* (a dish made of rice and lentils), *beguni* (fried items), *panchmishali* (a side dish made of mixed vegetables), and *chutney* and *payesh* (desserts). Usually on the day of puja, especially Saraswati Puja, people in India do not eat any non-vegetarian food. For dinner however, *Sampriti* members decided to have a non-vegetarian menu: rice, lentil, stuffed potato, and mutton (goat meat, which is a favorite Bengali non-vegetarian dish). The members of the organization cooked everything. Preparation of food, though led by women, was not restricted to them; the male members also participated in it actively, which is a deviation from daily life.
Men cooking in the kitchen (by Semontee Mitra)
Lunch served by the women (by Semontee Mitra)

Food in religious celebrations acts as a symbolic connection between the diasporic population and their homeland. It was no exception for Sampriti’s Saraswati Puja. Men and women gathered around the kitchen since morning to prepare lunch and dinner for almost a hundred people. While cooking, a major part of their conversation...
revolved around their days in India and how they used to celebrate these festivals in their homeland. Thus food acted as a catalyst in making them nostalgic and churning their emotions and also their notions of home, longing, and belonging.

Additionally, food became a symbol of resistance and rebellion on the day of Saraswati Puja. The kitchen is usually considered a woman’s arena and in traditional Indian Bengali households, be it in India or in the United States, it is the woman who cooks and feeds the family; men seldom take part in cooking. However, things were different at Sampriti’s celebration. Both men and women shared the kitchen space and men were actively involved in the cooking process. Thus, food/cooking became a means to challenge the age-old patriarchal regulation and
gendered hierarchical structure that exists in Hindu society.

At the same time, food also served as a means to once again showcase their affiliation with their homeland on that day. Cooking traditional Bengali food defined the moment of exhibiting their identity and ethnicity against diasporic realities, which is often infused with a feeling of “otherness.” Cooking and eating traditional food reduced the distance between their homeland and their new-found land and for once they stepped out of the duality of being Indian and becoming American.

However, though Bengali Indian Americans tried to affirm to their traditions and culture through food, there was also a complete disregard for the same. Traditionally, no meat or fish is eaten on the day of any Hindu religious festival. But, as mentioned earlier, the dinner menu had...
meat on it and it was included for a purpose. Mutton, which is goat meat, is one of the favorite dishes of Bengalis and because there is a scarcity of good mutton shops in Central Pennsylvania, Bengalis often travel to New Jersey or Baltimore to get good quality mutton. As they have to travel quite a bit to get good meat, mutton is rarely prepared at homes. Thus, to have mutton in their dinner menu not only made everybody enjoy the food, but it also brought them together to share the abundance and made people stay longer until the end of the day. The satisfaction expressed after having dinner and the subsequent gratification conveyed to the Sampriti members gave them a boost and became a motivating factor to celebrate the puja next year. Thus, the food also became symbolic of the physical taste of gratification, abundance, satisfaction, and joyousness of the occasion.
(Smith 1975, 111). However, in the process, the festival was redefined as being an occasion of reunion, mass gathering, and revelry. Religiosity was undermined thereby blurring the line between the sacred and the profane once again.

Dress, in addition to food, was also crucial to the festival. Most men, women, and children were in Indian ethnic attire: men wore kurta and pajama, women mostly wore saree and few wore salwar kameez, young girls were either in saree/salwar or in frocks, and young boys wore fancy kurta pajama. Women wore jewelry mostly made of gold (22 carat). The sarees along with jewelries were an important part of women’s conversation.
Men in traditional (kurta pajama) and western (shirt-trousers) wear (by Dr. Indranil Chakrabarti)
Women in traditional sarees (by Dr. Indranil Chakrabarti)

Seeing and being seen were the two primary objectives of the women at Sampriti. This notion of “seeing” or darshan is central to Hindu religion. Religious and Indian studies scholar Diana Eck states that darshan “is to stand in the presence of the deity and to behold the
image with one’s own eyes, to see and be seen by the deity” (1998, 3). Thus, *darshan* is a means of direct communication with the gods and the goddesses. However, Indian American Bengali women extended the meaning of *darshan* and redefined the concept by replacing deities with living women. Women’s effort on the day of the festival was considered complete only when they were “admired with envious gaze” (Schmidt 1995, 193). In this religious gatherings, women displayed their gorgeous *sarees*, jewelries, and shoes. Saraswati Puja became intricately intertwined with current fashion and trends in vogue; more so because such religious gatherings are the only places where women can show-off their recent ethnic purchases. This showing off of *sarees* and jewelries has several meanings embedded: first, by displaying their recent ethnic purchases, these women
show that they keep pace with the current fashion in India and are up to date with the changing trends in India despite their stay in the United States; second, this also portrays that they have not lost touch with their homeland, instead they have successfully maintained their connection with their roots; third, such exhibits depict their economic and social status in the United States, because the more the expensive the sarees and jewelries are, the more economically prosperous they are considered to be; fourth, such dress parades have become a cultural expression and one of the fundamental ways such religious events are identified and celebrated; finally, these redefine religious events as an enhanced form of carnival with “a synthesis of piety and material culture” (Schmidt 1995, 214). I should also mention here that all these displays were not simply restricted to the “envious
“gaze” of the women; they became an important part of women’s discussions on the day. If any particular fashion item appealed to any woman, especially elderly women, that woman enquired the price, the place of purchase, and the year of purchase from the wearer only to make sure if it was a recent trend. Older women also indulged in detailed conversation with young fashionable women to know more about what is in vogue only to keep up with the changing trends in Indian ethnic fashion. As outdoor religious events are less in number in the United States, such religious events with mass gatherings become the platform to showcase as many sarees and ornaments as they can, but also to gather information regarding current Indian fashion. Hence, I witnessed a few women wearing different sets of attire in the morning and in the evening.
The merchants exploit this growing relationship between religion and fashion and women have become their “arch-consumers” (Schmidt 1995, 214). Banu Gokariksel and Ellen McLarney claim that in the process of buying and consuming fashion goods, women’s bodies turn into commodities and circulate in the market (2010, 3). These women are not just targeted as “consumer niche, but their bodies constitute a territory on which capitalism stakes its claims” (Gokariksel and Mclarney 2010, 3). Women mediate these markets with their longings to be an extended part of their homeland, maintain their tradition, construct identities, and at the same time be trendy and at par with current fashion. Therefore, the importance of women to the merchants is not limited to simply consuming, but also to marketing and circulating fashion items. However, nothing deters
women from establishing a strong relationship with fashion in any given context or occasion.

Apart from food and dress, the cultural program was another significant event of the day. As the celebration was a full day event (from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m.), Sampriti members organized a cultural program after lunch. The program was divided into three parts: a drawing event for children, dance and songs performances by children as well as adults, and finally, a performance by a Bengali singer who was brought from India. Children’s paintings were later exhibited on one of the walls of the community hall to display their creativity. The cultural program started
Sit and draw event (by Dr. Indranil Chakrabarti)

with an opening talk by Dr. Jeff Long who is a Professor of Hinduism. As the talk was mainly addressed to the children, he gave a brief overview of the mythology and talked about the significance of the festivals. The performance began with the National Anthem of India,
followed by that of Bangladesh and ended with the United States’ National Anthem.

Children singing America’s National Anthem (by Dr. Indranil Chakrabarti)
Children performing an Indian folk dance

(by Semontee Mitra)
A child playing the keyboard (by Dr. Indranil Chakrabarti)

A child playing violin (by Dr. Indranil Chakrabarti)
A teenager performing Indian classical dance, 

*Bharatnatyam* (by Dr. Indranil Chakrabarti)
An adult member performing another form of Indian classical dance, Odissi (by Dr. Indranil Chakrabarti)

An adult member singing Bengali songs (by Dr. Indranil Chakrabarti)
Children, apart from their performances in the cultural program, had the whole day as their own because their parents were busy either with the ritual or socializing with others. These children were free to do anything they wanted within the boundary of the community hall. They played all day long. There were around thirty children belonging to different age groups. They played different games forming their groups based on their age. Children belonging to the age group of four (especially girls)
played “Ring around the Rosie.” Children between five and seven played running and chasing games, where a boy always led the group and the girls always followed. Children who were in between eight and thirteen years formed two groups, one of boys and the other of girls. Boys were either engaged in playing video games, spinning tops, and fighting, or simply chatting throughout the day. The group of girls (ages eight to ten) played tag games, video games, chatted with one another, or most importantly tried to eavesdrop on the conversation of their older sisters (age twelve to thirteen). Boys and girls who were above thirteen sat together and talked on various issues, including classes, career, beauty, fashion, nail art, and music.
Some of the children at the end of the day (by Dr. Indranil Chakrabarti)

All these children and adult activities were going on simultaneously within the closed space of the community hall. The cultural space, or the community hall, was divided into five parts: the stage (for cultural program), the puja area (where the goddess was placed
and also the space used for sit-and-draw event), the audience zone, the dining area, and the storage area (to store extra tables and chairs). The storage area was separated from rest of the space with a temporary partition wall. There was also a large kitchen where the members cooked lunch and dinner. The children who took part in the dance program used another separate area beside the stage as their dressing room. Children were strictly forbidden to enter the storage area. Though the area was divided, the entire space became the children’s territory by the end of the day.

Traditionally, all books and notebooks are offered to the goddess to seek blessing. These materials stay with the goddess for one and half day which is the actual length of this festival, so children do not study on this day. But, in Sampriti, neither children brought their books along
with them to offer to the goddess, nor was the ritual as long as it is in India. But, the children took “no study day” as the essence of this religious festival. Their interaction with and within the frame of a religious ritual reveal that such a festive day is actually the day of their freedom from their parental rules and regulations.

The given frame of religious ritual limited the children from exercising their entire freedom but only in terms of space occupied by them. The games they played were restricted within the inner space of the community hall. They could not play outdoors as their parents did not allow them to. But this does not mean that they did not play outdoor games. Their games included chasing and tagging which is an outdoor game. They colonized even the forbidden zone by making an “adventure trip” to the storage unit.
This “adventure trip” is structurally and functionally similar to legend tripping as defined by folklore scholars Elizabeth Bird (2004), Bill Ellis (1989), and Patricia M. Meley (1991). Structurally, a legend trip is divided into three parts: initiation, the actual visit, and culmination. Initiation or the introduction is where the children discuss the place they plan to visit. The second part consists of the actual visit and discovering things unknown and unseen. The final part or the culmination involves telling and retelling of the experiences at the site. The children, I observed, discussed about the storage unit since morning. The storage unit interested them because it was a forbidden zone and they did not know what was inside it. They wanted to find for themselves what was inside it and why it was forbidden. Later in evening, the children successfully made the trip and discussed one
another’s experiences in the unit. Thus, like all other legend trips this adventure trip also fulfills the tripartite structural pattern of legend tripping.

Not only structurally, but this trip is also functionally similar to actual legend tripping. Referring to the functional aspects of legend tripping, Bill Ellis states that adolescent “legend trip” is in part a “ritual of rebellion” in which they escape the authoritarian world (1983, 64). On the day of Saraswati Puja, the boys between eleven and fourteen years of age portrayed traits of “rebellion” against authority by initiating the trip. Though it was an act of rebellion, Meley notes that through ritualization of the rebellion children make their challenge to the adult authority manageable and comprehensible and so is not considered as a delinquent activity (1991, 21). This stands true for my participant
children. Patricia Meley further claims that the function of legend tripping is “primarily recreation” and such trips have a “social aspect” where children do things together (1991, 6 & 11). She states, “a ‘typical’ trip almost always includes a mixed-sex group of adolescents” (1991, 17). I identified all these characteristics in the adventure trip that the children under my observation made to the storage unit. The two adolescent girls said, “We were there because Nikhil and Ankan asked us to.” The children between five and twelve curious about the activities of their older brothers and sisters and so they went in. Ishana said, “I wanted to see what didi (elder sister) was doing inside with her friends.” They were less curious about the place or the reason for it being a forbidden space as they were about what their older siblings. Another reason for this trip was an escape from boredom, which is obvious
because they spent their entire day within the demarcated indoor space and wanted to do something exciting that would rid them of their boredom.

No matter where the children are or with whom they socialize, they establish a boundary around themselves with play that Gregory Bateson (1999[1972]) originally termed as “play frame.” Though the festival allowed the play frame to form, the children separated their play from the religious frame and defined it as an adult observation. The point of tension occurred when an altercation occurred and the adults had to intervene. It could have undermined the continuation of the play but after its resolution, the games resumed. In effect, the children redefined the meaning of space and the religious ritual (Saraswati Puja) by their activities. The children’s engagement with tradition, even if different from the way
adults perceived it, allowed them to sustain their separateness and freedom from regulation, even if temporarily. They further redefined space by blurring the boundary between indoor activities and outdoor activities (see Mitra 2015).

The redefinition is not just restricted to space; the children gave a new meaning to the religious ritual itself. The adults surrounded the children throughout the day and expected them (the children) to be a part of the religious festival in order to hand down their culture and tradition; however, the children used the religious frame in a different way to exercise their own free will. Taking advantage of their busy parents (due to the religious ritual and a social gathering), they used this day as the day of their freedom. Some of the children mentioned during our interview sessions that they do not get such an opportunity
in other social gatherings. This is mostly because they do not get so much of time as the social gatherings are restricted to one afternoon or evening unlike this one, which was an all-day event. Another reason for this day being different for them is that in the case of casual social gatherings they are spatially restricted. They are given a room or two where they can indulge in their activities. But there is a further restriction to their activities. As they are in somebody else’s house their activities are always under the radar of their parents. Thus, the event being a religious festival added to their advantage.

**Conclusion**

Saraswati Puja in the United States has acquired a new meaning through the activities of adults as well as children. Taken together, the religious rituals, the elaborate display of dress and ornaments, the grand
arrangement of food, and the children’s activities generate complex meanings. The apparent reason to celebrate this religious festival is to maintain continuity between Indian-born Bengalis and their American-born children. But it is much more than that. Religious festivals such as Saraswati Puja act as nostalgia for their childhood days and they therefore perform their identity through food and through the festival. Outside the frame of these festivals, Indian parents feel pressurized to assimilate to the American ways. Such festivals provide them an opportunity to wear Indian ethnic dress and perform Bengali cultural activities. They sing and dance and display their talents and, most importantly, are appreciated by others. Festivals like Saraswati Puja also enable them to meet new people, make new friends, and socialize with old friends.
As mentioned earlier, celebration of Saraswati Puja as an outdoor festival is increasing in the United States. The major reasons for the rising significance are: first, it is less complicated ritualistically; second, it can be celebrated in one day, whereas other Hindu religious festivals, such as Diwali or Durga Puja, are two or four days long; third, the parents feel it is an easy way to introduce the culture and religion to the second generation Indian Americans because Saraswati being the goddess of knowledge and learning, children can easily connect to Her than to any other Hindu Gods or Goddesses. But from ethnographic evidence, I maintain that a huge void exists between what adults think of this ritual and how children conceive it. Children’s activities throughout the day of the puja showed that this was the day of their freedom from parents and their culture. No studying and doing whatever
they wanted were more important to them than cherishing and enjoying the festival or learning the traditions.

Not only did children formulate a new meaning of the ritual, but also men and women redefined it. Women through their display of dress and jewelries transformed the day into a fashion parade, while the abundance of food and choice of dishes rendered it to be a carnival. Thus, this religious festival is replete with tensions that exist in the lives of Bengali Indian Americans, or Indian Americans in general: tension between identity and assimilation; tension between fostering Indian culture among second generation and the influence of American culture on them; tension between religion and consumerism; tension between old memories of India and the realities in America. They use religious festivals as a means to remain connected to their cultural roots rather than a...
spiritual experience; such festivals allow its followers to “feel part of a chain of memory, connected to a past, a present, and a future” (Levitt 2006, 9).

End Notes

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i Any religious ritual performed by Hindus is called a “puja.”

ii Most of the Bengalis come from the eastern state in India called West Bengal. Saraswati Puja is celebrated with great pomp and show there.

iii Hymns that are chanted while worshipping deities

iv Sampriti no longer exists today. Due to some disagreement among the members, it was dissolved in the year 2015. Two new separate Bengali associations have been formed in Central Pennsylvania instead.

v Kurta Pajama is a traditional outfit worn by Indian men. Much like salwaar kameez, kurta pajamas are also worn in different styles. Kurta is a loose knee-length shirt-like outfit worn by men. Pajama is a loose trouser.
Salwaar Kameez is a traditional outfit worn by women all over India in different styles. It originated in south and central Asia. Salwaars are loose trousers with narrow ankles. Kameez is a knee-length top with varying neck patterns.

Being away from their parents, friends, and family, Indian Americans mostly talk about their childhood and youthful days in India. They embrace the Indians they meet in America as their family.

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