

Chapter-I**Cultural Continuity and Diasporic Identity: Bengali
Religious and Cultural Practices in Hyderabad**

By

¹Dr. Paromita Nandy & ²Dr. P. Veerraghava^{1&2} Assistant Professor of English, Department of H&S, BVRIT, JNTU, Hyderabad,
TelanganaDOI Number: <https://literaturechronicle.com/doi-2026-55661>**Abstract**

This paper examines the religious and cultural practices of the Bengali diaspora in Hyderabad, focusing on Kali Puja and Durga Puja as significant sites of cultural memory, identity formation, and civic engagement. Drawing on theories of diaspora and cultural memory (Hall, 1990; Vertovec, 1999), the study situates these festivals within broader discussions of transnational belonging and negotiated identities. A qualitative methodology was employed, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis conducted between 2019 and 2024. The research analyses how ritual performances, spatial organisation of pandals, and linguistic practices enable diasporic communities to construct and reaffirm collective belonging within a multicultural urban environment.

The findings indicate that Kali Puja and Durga Puja extend beyond religious observance to function as dynamic socio-cultural processes. These festivals reflect historical continuity with Bengal while simultaneously adapting to Hyderabad's cosmopolitan context through cultural hybridity and institutional collaboration (Bhabha, 1994). Ritual place-making of urban spaces, philanthropic initiatives, and community participation foster civic visibility and intercultural dialogue. Moreover, the festivals play a crucial role in intergenerational transmission of language, values, and collective memory, ensuring continuity amid spatial mobility and demographic change. Thus, the Bengali diaspora not only preserves distinct cultural traditions but also actively contributes to Hyderabad's pluralistic urban culture.

Keyword

(Bengali Diaspora, Hyderabad, Urban multiculturalism, Cultural Hybridity, Spatial Negotiation)

Introduction

Diaspora studies conceptualise migrant communities not merely as displaced populations but as active agents engaged in the continuous reproduction of cultural memory (Safran, 1991; Clifford, 1994). Religious festivals function as powerful mnemonic devices through which diasporic subjects reaffirm collective identity and transmit cultural values across generations. In the context of the Bengali diaspora in Hyderabad, Kali Puja and Durga Puja emerge as ritualised

sites of remembrance that enable the symbolic reconstruction of the homeland while remaining geographically distant from it.

These practices resonate with Anderson's (1983) notion of imagined communities, wherein collective identity is sustained through shared symbols, narratives, and performative acts. The replication of Kolkata-based ritual aesthetics—such as idols crafted in the Kumartuli style or temples modelled after Dakshineswar—reflects a conscious effort to maintain cultural authenticity while adapting to a new spatial and social context.

The twin cities of Hyderabad and Secunderabad have witnessed a significant transformation in their cultural landscape with the increasing visibility of Bengali religious and socio-cultural practices, particularly Kali Puja and Durga Puja. What was once a marginal and relatively low-key observance has evolved into a large-scale, community-driven phenomenon. This transformation reflects not only demographic shifts but also the adaptive strategies of a diasporic community negotiating identity within a multilingual and multicultural urban environment.

Research Methodology

A) Research Design:

The study adopts a qualitative, exploratory research design to examine the religious and cultural practices of the Bengali diaspora in Hyderabad, with a particular focus on Kali Puja and Durga Puja as sites of identity construction and community negotiation. Given the symbolic, spatial, and experiential dimensions of these practices, a

qualitative approach was considered most appropriate for capturing meanings, lived experiences, and social interactions within their urban context.

B) Data Collection Methods:

Data were collected between 2019 and 2024 using a multi-method qualitative approach comprising the following techniques:

1) Participant Observation

Non-intrusive participant observation was conducted at major Kali Puja and Durga Puja venues across Hyderabad and Secunderabad, including Ameerpet, Sainikpuri, Secunderabad, Domalguda, and selected IT corridor localities such as Miyapur and Narsingi. Observations focused on ritual practices, spatial organisation of pandals, audience composition, language use, and patterns of participation.

2) Semi-Structured Interviews

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with approximately 30 respondents, including:

- Office bearers of Bengali socio-cultural organisations
- Priests and ritual specialists
- Second-, third-, and fourth-generation Bengali residents
- Young professionals employed in IT and allied sectors

C) Document Analysis:

Archival materials, organisational records, souvenir publications, festival brochures, media reports, and social media content produced

by Bengali associations were analysed to trace the historical evolution and institutionalisation of cultural practices.

D) Data Analysis:

Data were analysed using thematic analysis through an inductive coding process. Recurrent patterns were identified and grouped under key analytical categories such as cultural reproduction, spatial expansion, hybridity, linguistic adaptation, and civic engagement. Triangulation across observational, interview, and documentary data enhanced the reliability and validity of the findings.

Findings and Discussion

a) Historical Presence of Bengalis in Hyderabad

The Bengali presence in Hyderabad can be traced back to the Nizam period, when members of the community migrated in professional capacities such as education, administration, science, and law enforcement. A notable early figure was Aghornath Chattopadhyay, who served as the first principal of Nizam's College. Over subsequent decades, Bengalis became embedded within Hyderabad's institutional framework, contributing as geologists, engineers, scientists, bankers, educators, and entrepreneurs. This historical continuity challenges the perception of Bengalis as recent migrants and situates them as long-standing participants in the city's socio-economic development.

b) Demographic Expansion and Generational Continuity

At present, the Bengali population in the twin cities is estimated to exceed ten lakhs, with a significant proportion comprising second-,

third-, and fourth-generation residents who identify Hyderabad as their primary home. This demographic shift has directly influenced both the scale and the nature of cultural expression within the community.

c) Cultural Production Beyond Religion

The Bengali experience in Hyderabad exemplifies a model of diasporic identity formation characterised by cultural retention alongside local assimilation. Community members often demonstrate multilingual competence and active participation in the city's social and political life. Hyderabad's relatively inclusive urban ethos has facilitated this process, allowing cultural difference to be expressed without social marginalisation. Bengali cultural life extends beyond religious festivals to include literature, cinema, music, and culinary practices. Initiatives such as the Hyderabad Bengali Film Festival promote regional and global cinematic exchange, while community-maintained libraries support literary engagement in the Bengali language. Culinary spaces and social media-based food communities further contribute to the everyday maintenance of cultural memory.

d) Urban Space and Ritual Territorialisation

From an urban sociological perspective, religious festivals function as practices of ritual territorialisation (Kong, 2001), through which communities symbolically claim and transform urban spaces. Temporary pandals, processions, and public performances reconfigure neighbourhoods into culturally marked zones, producing what Lefebvre (1991) terms lived space. In Hyderabad, the spatial dispersal of Kali Puja and Durga Puja celebrations—from traditional areas such as Secunderabad and Sainikpuri to IT-dominated suburbs like Miyapur

and Narsingi—reflects patterns of demographic mobility and occupational change within the Bengali diaspora. These spatial shifts demonstrate how cultural practices evolve in tandem with economic restructuring and residential relocation.

e) Philanthropy and Civic Engagement

A significant dimension of Bengali associational life in Hyderabad is its emphasis on social responsibility. Funds generated through festivals are frequently redirected towards philanthropic initiatives, including healthcare support, disaster relief, and welfare programmes. This practice underscores the community's integration into the civic life of the city and reflects a broader ethos of collective responsibility. Organisations such as Bangiya Sanskritik Sangha, Hyderabad Bengalee Samity, and Uttarayan function as institutional mediators between tradition and modern urban life. Drawing on Putnam's (2000) concept of social capital, these associations strengthen intra-community bonds (bonding capital) while simultaneously fostering inter-community engagement (bridging capital) through public cultural programmes and welfare initiatives.

f) Negotiating Identity in a Multicultural City

The Bengali diaspora in Hyderabad demonstrates a dynamic process of identity negotiation characterised by cultural continuity and local adaptation. Multilingual competence, occupational diversity, and civic participation enable community members to integrate into Hyderabad's multicultural social fabric while maintaining distinct cultural markers.

g) Language, Identity, and Sociolinguistic Adaptation

Sociolinguistic theory identifies language as a critical marker of diasporic identity (Fishman, 1991). While Bengali retains its symbolic significance in ritual and cultural domains, everyday communication frequently involves Telugu, Deccani Urdu, and English. This functional multilingualism facilitates social integration while preserving the symbolic linguistic capital of Bengali during festivals, literary events, and ritual performances.

Limitations and Scope for Future Research

While the study provides an in-depth qualitative account of Bengali diasporic practices in Hyderabad, it is limited by its focus on selected organisations and localities. Future research could adopt a comparative framework by examining Bengali diasporic practices in other Indian cities or employ quantitative methods to assess participation patterns and generational attitudes. Longitudinal studies may further illuminate how cultural practices evolve in response to ongoing urban transformation and migration dynamics.

Analytical Overview

The study presents a conceptually robust and empirically detailed examination of the Bengali diaspora in Hyderabad, interpreting Kali Puja and Durga Puja as significant arenas for cultural remembrance, identity construction, and civic interaction. Drawing upon major contributions in diaspora scholarship (Hall, 1990; Vertovec, 1999; Safran, 1991; Clifford, 1994), the analysis portrays the Bengali community as an evolving social formation that actively reshapes and

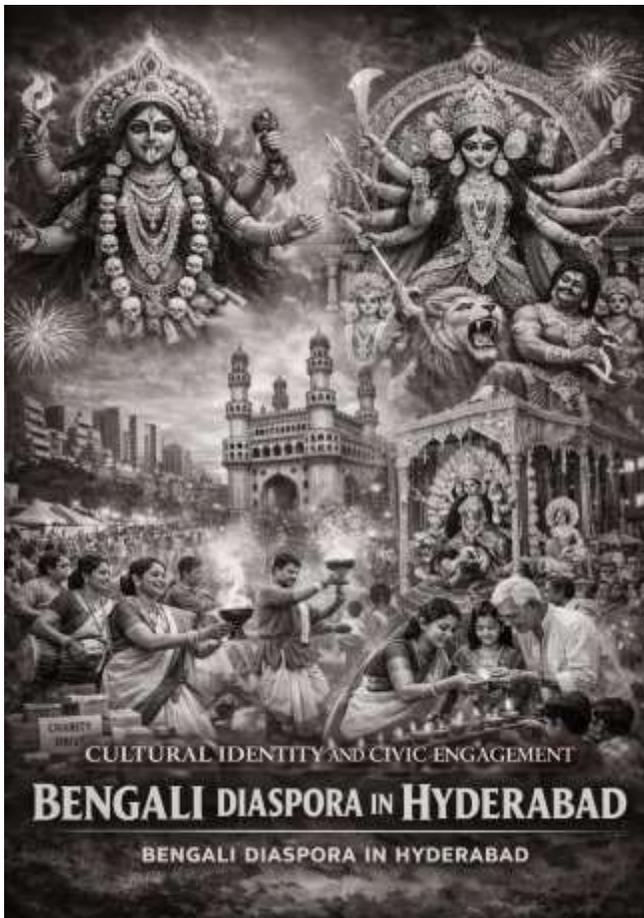
rearticulates its cultural identity within a new urban milieu. The use of Anderson's (1983) notion of imagined communities further reinforces the view that festivals operate as symbolic and performative frameworks through which collective belonging is continuously reaffirmed.

A notable strength of the research lies in its sustained qualitative design. The combination of participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentary analysis conducted over an extended period enhances analytical depth and methodological credibility. Thematic coding enables a meaningful connection between empirical observations and theoretical perspectives such as cultural hybridity (Bhabha, 1994), the production of lived space (Lefebvre, 1991), ritualised spatial appropriation (Kong, 2001), and social capital formation (Putnam, 2000).

The findings illustrate that these festivals transcend devotional practice and function as mechanisms of spatial reconfiguration, institutional organisation, linguistic continuity, and civic engagement. Temporary ritual structures reshape segments of the urban landscape, making diasporic presence publicly visible. At the same time, patterns of multilingual usage reflect adaptive integration without abandoning symbolic cultural markers.

The discussion of philanthropy and associational networks highlights the community's contribution to civic life, demonstrating how intra-group solidarity and inter-group collaboration coexist. Nevertheless, further attention to internal variations—such as gendered experiences or class-based differences—could deepen the analysis.

Overall, the study makes a meaningful contribution to diaspora and urban studies by demonstrating how religious festivals serve as dynamic sites for negotiating belonging and pluralism within contemporary metropolitan contexts.



(OpenAI, 2026)

Implications of the Study

This study carries significant theoretical, sociocultural, and policy-oriented implications.

Theoretical Implications:

The research advances diaspora studies by demonstrating that diasporic identity is not a fixed inheritance but an ongoing, negotiated process shaped by ritual practice, spatial adaptation, and institutional mediation. By situating Kali Puja and Durga Puja within frameworks of cultural memory, imagined communities, hybridity, and social capital, the study reinforces the idea that religious festivals function as active sites of identity production rather than mere preservations of tradition. It contributes to urban sociology by illustrating how ritual place-making reshapes public space and embeds diasporic presence within the lived geography of the city.

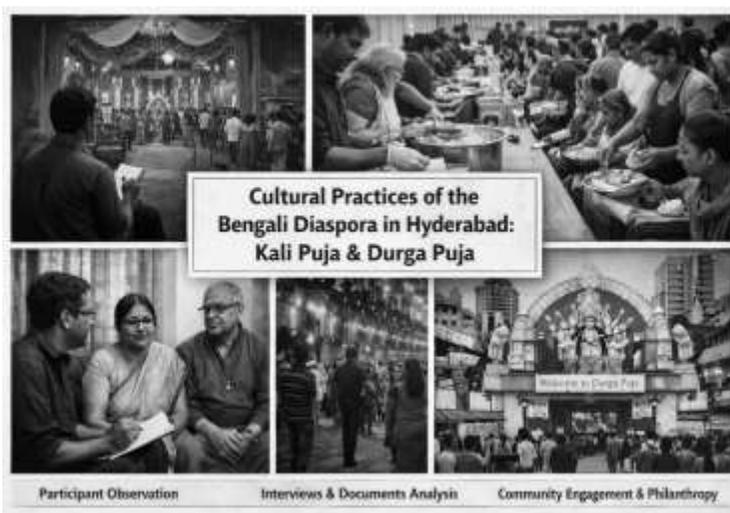
Sociocultural Implications:

The findings highlight how religious festivals facilitate intergenerational continuity, enabling younger members of the diaspora to engage with language, values, and collective memory despite geographical distance from the homeland. The study also demonstrates that multilingual competence and cultural hybridity support integration without erasure of distinct identity. This suggests that multicultural urban contexts can sustain plural identities when supported by inclusive civic environments.

Civic and Policy Implications:

The emphasis on philanthropy and associational life underscores the role of diaspora communities as active contributors to urban development and social welfare. Community organisations act as bridges between tradition and civic responsibility, strengthening both bonding and bridging social capital. Policymakers and urban planners may draw from these insights to foster inclusive cultural policies that recognise religious festivals as platforms for intercultural dialogue, civic participation, and social cohesion.

Overall, the study implies that diasporic religious practices are integral to the making of pluralistic urban cultures, shaping not only community identity but also the broader social fabric of metropolitan life.



(OpenAI, 2026)

Conclusion

The theoretical perspectives employed in this study demonstrate that Bengali religious and cultural practices in Hyderabad are not static traditions transplanted unchanged from the homeland but dynamic, context-sensitive processes shaped by memory, space, language, and institutional mediation. Through ritual performance, cultural hybridity, and civic engagement, the Bengali diaspora contributes meaningfully to the pluralistic character of Hyderabad while continuously renegotiating its own sense of belonging.

The growth of Kali Puja and Durga Puja celebrations in Hyderabad thus represents more than a religious phenomenon; it reflects the complex processes through which diasporic communities assert cultural presence, adapt traditions, and negotiate belonging within urban multicultural contexts. Festivals serve as crucial sites of intergenerational transmission, enabling younger members—many without direct experiential ties to West Bengal—to engage meaningfully with their cultural heritage.

Importantly, community associations emerge as key mediators between tradition and civic life. Through institutional organisation, philanthropy, and public cultural programming, these bodies extend the relevance of religious festivals beyond symbolic identity affirmation to active participation in the social and moral economy of the city.

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Authors' Bio

1. Dr. Paromita Nandy is an accomplished scholar and teacher. She is currently employed as an Assistant Professor of English at B.V. Raju Institute of Technology (BVRIT), affiliated with the Jawaharlal Nehru Technological University, Hyderabad. She received her M.A., and M. Phil. in Linguistics and Ph.D. in Sociolinguistics from the University of Kerala. She also qualified for UGC-NET and was a Junior Research Fellow (JRF). Her areas of specialisation and interest, inter alia, are General Linguistics, Sociolinguistics, Pragmatics, Semantics, Cultural and Diaspora Studies, Communicative English, Business English, Professional Skill Development, Teaching English as a Second Language, etc. Dr. Paromita Nandy has published research papers in academic journals of national and international repute, and also contributed book chapters to edited volumes. She has also presented at academic conferences in India and abroad. Together with others, she holds a patent regarding a method of teaching non-verbal communication to EFL students.

2. Dr. P. Veerraghava serves as Assistant Professor of English at B. V. Raju Institute of Technology (BVRIT), where Dr. Veerraghava advances students' linguistic proficiency and professional communication skills. Dr. Veerraghava holds a Ph.D. in Linguistics from the English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU), with expertise in language acquisition, applied linguistics, and contemporary pedagogy. Dr. Veerraghava's academic focus includes English language teaching, communicative competence, and learner-centered methodologies that connect theory with practice. Certified in Linguaskill and IELTS training, Dr. Veerraghava mentors students pursuing internationally recognized language qualifications, supporting their academic and professional growth. Beyond teaching, Dr. Veerraghava contributes to curriculum development through innovative, outcome-based strategies aligned with global standards, fostering academic excellence and a dynamic learning environment at BVRIT.