



**Recruiting the ‘Tirupathi’ in Serampore: The Policy of Telugu Migrants to
Construct an Ethnic and Cultural Identity for themselves in the face of
Bengali Domination**

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The aim of this paper is to analyze the role played by the spatial construction of religious practices, the public display of religion, and inter-religious (also, intra-religious) interactions in determining the ways in which religion functions as an appropriate medium for working class migrants to subvert the exploitative measures of the host society and constitute their own religious and ethnic networks and identities as part of the social picture of Serampore, a town of varied cultural and economic importance in West Bengal, India.

Serampore’s contribution to the economic development of colonial India lay in providing an ideal site—owing to its strategic location near the local jute and cotton market and as an efficient transportation route via the Hooghly river and G.T. Road—for the establishment of the first jute mills in the country (Ray 1974). By the nineteenth century, the township had already established its own religious heritage in the country through the famous Mahesh *Rath Yatra* of Jagannath Temple¹ and the *Rash Yatra* of Radhaballav Temple,² both of which had developed elaborate networks with Calcutta by drawing rich indigenous devotees from the city (Mitra 2013). The construction of Serampore’s social and religious spaces was interlinked with the ways in which the working-class, which migrated to the town from other regions of India, was excluded from such spaces and forced to inhabit the fringes of residential neighborhoods.³

The logic behind emphasizing on the importance of religious practices lies in the fact that religion and religious dynamics have proven, through my own research of inter-social relations between resident communities of Serampore, to be one of the most important media for the working-class migrants to strengthen their social position and resist the social domination of the

¹Editor’s Note (*hereafter Ed. N.*): Rath Yatra is the oldest and biggest chariot pulling festival in Bengal, India. Idols of Lord Jagannath, Balaram and Subhadra are placed on a 45 feet high chariot and devotees pull it along the sacred journey line.

²Ed. N.: Celebrated on the full moon day in *Kartik masaam* (Hindu calendar month that typically overlaps October and November), the Rash Yatra is a procession of clay deities of Lord Krishna and Radha. The *Yatra* (journey) is preceded by a month long *Rash Mela* (fair) in West Bengal celebrating the divine love of Sri Krishna and Radha. The Rash Yatra of Sri Krishna is mentioned in the Bhagavata Purana and in the Vishnu Purana.

³The working-class migrants to Serampore from outside West Bengal generally arrived from the states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar (or the United Provinces as they were called), Orissa, and Andhra Pradesh. More information on the areas of migration is available in the Report of the Royal Commission on Labour in India. (1931). Elaborate discussions on the living conditions of working class can be found in Municipal Proceedings 26-27. (1889), and Miscellaneous Files M 1-M/8 1. (1896). WBSA.

host society, but have mostly remained unanalyzed in India's labour history. In charting the economic and social relations of jute and cotton mill workers to the factory administration and amongst themselves, the seminal works⁴ on the labouring class took a significant step in bringing to the forefront the importance of the consciousness and agency of the worker while being a part of the concerned social and economic structure, how such an agency operated through mutually interactive factors like caste, class, and gender to constitute multiple identities for the worker, and how it connected the workspace of the worker with his/her lived space to create a fluid identity for him/her.

None of these works, however, even after innumerable case studies of economic conflict with mill authorities or occasional cases of intra-class or inter-caste skirmishes, could move beyond portraying the worker, even after a century or more of his stay in these townships, as essentially migrants. One reason for that could be that such works have mostly focused on homogeneous working-class neighborhoods inhabited primarily or entirely by the working class who mostly lived in clusters based on regional ties for having migrated from the same village or through the recommendation of the same *sirdar*⁵, thus there has hardly been any social communication between such clusters (Chandavarkar 1994, Fernandes 1997). In other words, due to cluster like existence where problems concerning only the inhabitants of the cluster were attempted to be solved through the channels of the *sirdar* and without any strong social communication between the groups, the literature on labour conditions were unable to portray a strong sense of belonging or affinity or a claim to include the ethnic or religious identities on the part of the worker for the township. Within the enclosed homogeneous spaces of the mill lines and with little or no social interaction, the workers remained as migrants who lived in their own closed spaces of the cluster, trying to preserve their identity within that space rather than expanding outside it.

I propose to add a separate dimension to this literature through my case study of the social life of jute mill workers of Serampore, by placing them outside of the homogeneous enclosed spaces of the mill to a heterogeneous neighborhood where the resident workers experienced class, caste, and religious discrimination on the basis of everyday life at the hands of the host society and used their own religious practices as medium to subvert the measures taken by the host society and at the same time laid claim over the public spaces of the township. Unlike the enclosed spaces of the mill quarters, the workers residing at Nanilal Bhattacharyya Street in Serampore (hereafter, NBS) formed a part of the same neighborhood as the host society of middle-class Bengalis and were engaged in multiple social, economic, and land relations with the latter. Being a part of the same social structure, which constituted the identities of the working class through various exclusionary measures, the working class too reproduced such a structure

⁴This is in reference to the research of various labour historians and anthropologists on the jute and cotton mills of India. Most significant among them are Dipesh Chakrabarty's work on the jute mills of Howrah, Rajnarayan Chandavarkar's work on the cotton mills of Bombay, Leela Fernandes' work on the jute mills of Howrah, and Arjan De Haan's work on the jute mills of Titagarh. For further reference kindly see Chakrabarty, Dipesh. (1989). *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal, 1890-1940*. Princeton: Princeton University Press; Chandavarkar, Rajnarayan. (1994). *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working-Class in Bombay*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; De Haan, Arjan. (1994). *Unsettled Settlers: Migrant Workers and Industrial Capitalism in India*. Hilversum: Verloren Publishers; Fernandes, Leela. (1997). *Producing Workers: The Politics of Gender, Class, and Culture in the Calcutta Jute Mills*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

⁵Ed.N.: (Variant of sardar) A person of high rank (such as hereditary noble) especially in India, source: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sirdar>

by subverting such measures. I also borrow from Doreen Massey's argument about heterogeneous space-time trajectories to show that the migrant residents of Serampore contested the attempts of the Bengali middle-class to produce a singular and homogeneous upper-caste social and religious trajectory of the town by forming elaborate social networks of their own that spread beyond the spatial limits of Serampore and included members of the same migrant community who lived at Serampore but have now travelled to other spaces/cities and inhabit their own individual space-time trajectories through discourses of nostalgia and attachment, thereby strengthening the ethnic identity of the migrant (Massey 2005).

Now I shall focus on the techniques and spatial strategies adopted by the Telugu migrant communities at Serampore to transform their religious occasions into public spectacles. Standing in the space between the two long queues of devotees gathered to make offerings to and receive blessings from Tirupathi Balaji, whose large and majestic idol decorated the makeshift pandal in one of the rows of line no. 18 of the India Jute Mill workers' quarters, Devendra Rao, president of the local *Shri Vinayaka Balabhakta Samajam*, remarked pointing towards the queue, "... we are glad that the popularity of Tirupathi puja has increased in Serampore. We consider this as Serampore's own festival and a scope for the Telugu people to make their presence felt."⁶ Devendra's statement had a tone of accomplishment at being able to confidently associate Tirupati Puja with Serampore's religious heritage that has generally been credited to Durga Puja,⁷ celebrated by the local (middle-class) Bengali population and the historically popular festivities of Jagannath *Rath Yatra* and the *Rash Yatra* of Radhaballav (both incarnations of Lord Vishnu). Traditionally, these festivals have been ethnically dominated by the Bengali communities in Serampore and administrative powers of the latter (*Rath Yatra* and *Rash Yatra*) remain with the upper castes (Ray 1974; Mitra 2013).

By qualifying Tirupathi puja as "Serampore's own festival" Devendra wished to spatially and symbolically expand the religious and cultural characteristics of the carnival or gala from the socio-spatial boundaries of the Telugu community in Serampore to the entire realm of the town. Such gestures also constitute the assertion of their religious, ethnic, and cultural identity in Serampore. His words "Serampore's own festival" were chosen very consciously and carefully and juxtaposed with "scope for the Telugu people to make their presence felt" to hint at how these two factors constitute each other. The everyday life practices and stories, problems and grievances of the migrant mill workers mostly went unrecognized at the local municipal and social level, except for at the local level of constituting neighborhood relations where the resident Bengali communities tend to exclude them by spatially and symbolically delimiting neighborhood boundaries.

The claim "Serampore's own festival" attributes gala or celebration status to the migrants' religious occasions. In contrast to an ignored past, such gesture reproduces in turn the

⁶Line no. 18 is one of the main residential quarters, given by the mill management, for the labourers of the India Jute Mill in Serampore, located at Nanilal Bhattacharyya Street itself. Constructed by the mill management in the early twentieth century, it is located adjacent to the jute mill. It has four separate but interconnected rows (the term 'line' is derived from these rows) where the workers are provided with quarters, where they stay mostly with their families or by themselves. These four rows together constitute "Line no. 18." . The Tirupathi Puja is organized in the common spaces of these rows.

⁷Ed. N: It is a celebration of the goddess Durga's triumph over the buffalo demon Mahisha. Usually, it is a week-long festival that features elaborate temples and stage decorations, scripture recitation, performance arts, revelry, and processions.

town's socio-religious space by making the puja practices a part of its religious identity. This making or process of becoming should be interpreted as an act of resistance against the cultural and religious dominance of the upper-caste Bengalis by occupying, using, and reproducing the same public space that had previously been the exclusive domain of the latter. Hence, the popularization of previously little known religious practices to reorient Serampore's religious diversity is inextricably linked with the assertion of a religious and ethnic identity that has been mostly and majorly excluded through the creation of exclusive social spaces for the upper-caste middle-class Bengalis of Serampore.

Parthasarathy, in his analysis of public and community festivals of migrants from other states in Mumbai, argues that such festivities and their use of public space have given rise to "... conflicts between activists of chauvinist and nativist political parties and "outsiders", a term he borrowed from S. Patel (Parthasarathy 25). The category of "outsiders" was produced by the nativists to not only create a homogeneous space for themselves but to expand the domain of such space using violent means against migrants and forceful occupation of public spaces to disallow them from laying a claim upon the city. Parthasarathy argued that in the face of such chauvinist measures and movements to counter "... the very public violence against north Indians in Mumbai," the intensity and scale of their religious celebrations escalated (Parthasarathy 25). Giving the example of *Chhatt Puja*⁸—celebrated mainly in rural Bihar and Uttar Pradesh—in Mumbai, he portrayed how the observance of religious practices through gradually expansive use of public space can be used as a tool of resistance against nativist movements and at the same time reproduce it in turn with the aim of asserting a religious and ethnic identity.

There is, however, as Parthasarathy mentioned, a class/caste and rural angle to the conflict between nativists and "outsiders" in Mumbai. The nativist movements were mainly aimed at the slum dwelling migrants in Mumbai who were believed to be crowding the city and polluting its environment and cultural ambience, basically thought to be taking over the streets, and not the upper middle-class who had respectable professions and stayed in apartments, keeping mainly to themselves and observing their rituals privately. It established a social and cultural distance and lack of communication between migrants based on class/caste and social status that even religious customs and practices were not able to overcome. Serampore may not have witnessed public violence between migrant workers and upper-caste Bengalis because of increased public display of religious rituals and festivities. There has, however, been considerable resentment among a major section of the latter group for what they interpreted as loss of control over the affairs of Serampore's public space.

In March 2017, The *Shri Vinayaka Balabhakta Samajam* of the India Jute Mill line no. 18 celebrated their thirty-sixth year of Tirupathi Puja. It also turned out to be the year of Lord Tirupathi Balaji's 'marriage,' also known as '*Kalyanam*,' the biggest ritual of the puja. The '*Kalyanam*' is held in the line every twelve years. It therefore became an occasion for the display of religious ceremony as a spectacle, a show of how significant the puja was for the Telugu communities residing in Serampore, to the other resident communities of the town. Tirupathi Puja of line no. 18 had become by 2017 a well-known religious festival in Serampore and among the Telugu communities residing outside the township. The objectives of the spectacle therefore

⁸Ed. N: It is a Hindu festival, dedicated to the Sun god and his wife Usha. It is mostly observed in the states of Bihar, Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh. Usually, its rituals are observed over a period of four days that include fasting, holy bath, etc.

lay in displaying their ability to conduct the ritual ceremoniously at a place where the Telugus have migrated at different periods in history and in asserting their religious and ethnic identity in the socio-cultural milieu of Serampore, rather than spreading the knowability of the festival.

The pandal in front of line no. 18 was majestic, being four story high and decorated lavishly with various types of handiwork. Parts of NBS and the entire New Gate Street (situated at right angle to NBS) up to the main five-point crossing area called *Bat-tala* where the Grand Trunk Road passes through were decorated with arches made of light depicting various scenes from Hindu mythology. Although such grandness and lavish expenditure are not witnessed every year, the year of '*Kalyanam*' is a time for the Telugu people of the mill lines to alleviate the standard of their religious festival through various structural and symbolic constructions that influence the religious diversity of Serampore.

One crucial factor in the organizational structure of Tirupathi festival in Serampore is that it had a central core committee, a singular root or organizational source (a part of the *Balbhakta Samajam*) based in a place from where multiple operational branches spread out which are nonetheless strongly linked to the core. The core committee or source comprises of selected inhabitants from line no. 18 and plays an operative role in taking all the decisions regarding the management of different aspects of the festival. It also distributes the various duties of several aspects of the Puja among the multiple volunteers who then carry out the functions accordingly and report back to the organizational core. While the main site of the festival is the private space of the mill lines, where idols are set up and rituals are accomplished in all their elaboration. Other things like the distribution of *prasad*⁹, organization of entertainment programs, and decoration of the streets happen outside and is spread to other areas within the locality. Each of these responsibilities is given to specific volunteering groups which move out of the line and carry out their respective operations in a systematic way, and report back to the central committee. The main cause of such a systematic and methodical arrangement and correspondence between the functioning branches and the central core lies in the compactness of the structure of such a core committee that intends to involve Telugu and other resident communities of the mill line and at the same time develop intra and inter-state networks with other Telugu communities to bring them into the domain of the religious festival.

The *Shri Vinayaka Balabhakta Samajam* is formed out of the residents of line no. 18 that includes Telugus as well as other migrant communities of the line. As Devendra Rao, the President of the *Samajam*, mentioned to me, "Tirupathi Puja is not just a religious festival for the Telugus but of the entire line. This puja is of our home and we all stay together, and therefore we all celebrate it together." By referring to the festival as "puja of our home," Devendra attributed a familial character to it. He distinguished their Tirupathi Puja as belonging to the private space of the line, as their own puja with which all inhabitants of the line bore personal attachment. Like the Bengali families organizing their own Durga Puja, they also organized the puja jointly through active participation as family members. The *Balbhakta Samajam*, according to Devendra, was a product of such inter-familial and inter-social relations between the resident communities of the mill line that evolved within its private sphere and condensed the cooperative relation between the migrant communities.

⁹Ed. N: Food that is taken out for religious offering in Hinduism and is usually consumed by the devotees.

The process of condensation and unification of the migrant families of line no. 18 for the interest of Tirupathi Puja started happening from the inception of the *Samajam* itself. Devendra described the primary driving force behind the united effort of the line residents as “*pachhapatam*” or what he called a total lack of jealousy and self-centeredness on the part of the residents, and in turn the willingness to participate in the organization of the puja. In what ways did such “*pachhapatam*” come into shape, given the way it functions today among the migrant communities? Kesava Rao, one of the earliest founders of the *Balbhakta Samajam* explained the history of its formation. Thirty-six years ago, when the plan to conduct the puja for the first time was laid before the residents of the line, four major heads from four Telugu families—one of them being Kesava Rao himself and the other, A. Y. Poley, now an octogenarian veteran—took upon their shoulders the responsibility of collecting funds and making all arrangements for the puja. However, problems regarding shortage of funds and lack of manpower arose and consequently the four managers appealed to other resident communities of the line to contribute physically and monetarily towards the puja.

Kesava Rao while describing this event probably realized that his narration gave a sense of willingness on the part of the Telugus to welcome other communities into the fold of the puja only after a shortage of funds and manpower was experienced. As a result, he instantly clarified his position saying, “...a puja on such a large scale was unheard at that time among the migrants and we were initially confused about the whole plan.” He further continued, “Our salary was very little and given our socio-economic position, it was almost an audacious attempt by us.” But it seems all their apprehension was clarified by the other residents of the line who themselves extended a helping hand and offered to assist Kesava Rao and his group., Kesava Rao said, as if he could still recall every bit of the event, “...the first act of ‘*pachhapatam*’ came from those residents of the line and for that we have been forever grateful. That created a bonding and Tirupathi Puja became as much of the Biharis and Oriyas as of the Telugus.”

Why did the other communities offer to help at that time? On this question Devendra intervened, “Everybody in the line realized that Tirupathi Puja could become a platform for the migrants to unite socially and express their culture and religion. Tirupathi Puja could become the voice for other ethnic communities from the line like *Oriyas* and *Biharis* as well.” Devendra’s words were proof of the fact that the other migrant communities made Tirupathi Puja their mode of religious and cultural expression because it brought in a difference in the socio-religious milieu of Serampore and acted as a platform for the minorities to make a united effort to lay claim to and reproduce the social space of the neighborhood.

Kesava Rao’s words articulated a sense of apprehension, fear, and doubt on the part of the Telugu people to initiate a religious program for themselves in a neighborhood space that was socio-culturally dominated by Bengalis. What Kesava considered an “audacious attempt” was the introduction of an alternative religious practice meant primarily (if not exclusively) for the migrant communities. It was a medium for them to assert their religious and ethnic identity, and to produce an alternative socio-religious space through elaborate rituals and other associated secondary activities at a place that had till then been historically dominated by *Gaudiya Vaishnavism*¹⁰ and Durga Puja celebrations in Bengali households. Such an effort necessitated

¹⁰Ed. N: It is a religious movement inspired by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486-1534) in North India. “Gaudiya” refers to the Gauda region (present day Bengal/Bangladesh) and “Vaishnavism” is one of the major traditions within Hinduism that worships god Vishnu. Other main traditions are Shaivism and Shaktism.

emotional and physical support. The migrant mill workers who had till then been subjected to (and thus being at the receiving end of) exclusionary neighborhood politics in everyday life and the exploitative treatment of mill managers and political parties, found for the first time the scope to step to the forefront, practice their religion at liberty the way they preferred, and in turn reproduce that very public space from which they were constantly excluded, by bringing it into the sphere of puja activities. To perform their rituals within the private sphere of the mill lines not as socially excluded and culturally disconnected singular entities but as part of a neighborhood in open awareness of other residents and to exercise the right to public space, the migrants had to challenge the mechanisms of social exploitation in the neighborhood and construct a social identity by rejecting their own habituation to social exclusion.

The *Balbhakta Samajam* was a channel through which a collective identity for the migrant communities of line no. 18 was formed through the shared experiences of socio-cultural exclusion and shared ideas of religious and cultural expression. Its main aim was to strive constantly to be able to integrate socially into the neighborhood by retaining and expressing their ethnic identities, and to make their lived spaces a part of the neighborhood so that they could rightfully demand equal facilities and conditions of living as the resident middle-class Bengalis. For thirty-six years, economic changes and modes of cultural contact caused certain alteration in the density of migrant communities. This affected the presence of many members of the *Samajam* within the line as residents, even though they exist officially as members of the committee. The *Samajam* despite the physical distance created with such members, tried to maintain a constant link with such people. They did this by weaving a narrative of nostalgia and attachment towards the puja and the line and a necessity to keep the collective identity of the migrant residents intact. As a result, through regular visits to those staying in other parts of the township and through phone calls and letters to those staying away, such narratives were articulated as a reminder for the duty towards the arrangements of the puja.

Kesava himself now stays at Srikakulam in Andhra Pradesh, and despite being sixty-five years old, manages to take a few days off every two years from the school where he teaches to attend the Tirupathi Puja of line no. 18 in Serampore. To put it in his own words, "I had to attend the puja this year because of the '*Kalyanam*.' '*Kalyanam*' takes the puja to a new height altogether and as you can see the puja this time is of a huge budget (reportedly of Rs. 25 lakh). I travelled for almost twenty-four hours at my age just to attend the puja and participate in all its activity." Kesava Rao felt the urge to participate in the '*Kalyanam*' and the puja as he had been one of the founders and required no persuasion on the part of the *Samajam* apart from a formal letter detailing the puja activities. However, in certain other cases, the *Samajam*, with narratives of nostalgia and memories of sociality of the mill line had to reach out to those residing outside that private space.

The *Samajam* tries to accomplish this in two ways: one, as I have described above, by trying to retain that collective identity of the mill line by reaching out to those who left the line for various reasons and two, by forming intra and inter-state networks with other Telugu communities through common friends and relations. In case of the second, a vital means of strengthening such networks is by appealing to the religious sentiments of Telugu migrants residing in other parts of West Bengal. Another means is to blend such narratives with emotional colors of fellow-feeling, shared ethnicity, and pride at the fact that as ambassadors of their religious and cultural activities, the migrants have acquired a strong foothold in other states.

Such narrative structures are common in publicizing the puja through various channels in other states as well.

Madhu, one of the young volunteers for the puja and a resident of the line described the process of reaching out physically to other Telugu communities, "We go as far as Kharagpur to collect donations for the puja. There is a big Telugu community there. We also go to Titagarh, Barrackpore, Kharda, Jagaddal, Gondalpara, and other nearby factory areas to collect donations. We also invite them for the puja and many of them visit us and have *bhog prasad* (holy food) as well." Madhu's statement was a perfect example of what I described earlier as multiple branches moving out of the central core committee, each of them (consisting of volunteers) operating according to instructions given by the core committee.

The aim of reaching out thus was not just to acquire donation for the religious ceremony but to strengthen the social and cultural networks that were gradually forming between the spatially separated Telugu communities. Madhu himself confirmed this saying, "Many of these places, we have been visiting for quite a few years now. They know us well by now and take pride in the fact that we have been able to maintain this so successfully for such a long time. And this has led to a bonding of trust and friendship." But why did they provide donations and come from such faraway places to attend the puja at Serampore when they probably could start their own Tirupathi Puja at their respective places? To this question Madhu was quick to point out,

The Telugu communities of Rampuria Cotton Mill and Bangalaxmi Cotton Mill (both located in the Mahesh region of Serampore) both organize their own Tirupathi Pujas, but they are recent, having sought inspiration from us. But the larger Telugu community based at Mahesh prefer to attend our puja since they have been doing so for a long time and have become well acquainted with the residents of this line.

The fact that Madhu was not exaggerating the terms of their relationship was further accentuated by Sudhakar Rao and Aleti Dharma Rao, both residing at Mahesh, who came to attend the puja on the day of the '*Kalyanam*.' While Sudhakar Rao works as a senior full-time worker in the Wellington Jute Mill at Rishra, Dharma Rao is an officer at the Punjab National Bank, a government owned bank in India, where he has been working for the past thirty-three years. To put it in Sudhakar's own words, "Bangalaxmi and Rampuria cotton mills both organize Tirupathi Puja, but they do not do it as well as it is done here." For Dharma Rao, attending the puja every year at that time in March is more important than playing Holi which coincides with the puja each year. He has been attending the puja at line no. 18 ever since he shifted to Serampore in 1996 with his family from Titagarh after his father retired from a jute mill there. According to him, "The Tirupathi Puja here unites us all. It is a time for us all to come together. We don't play Holi at this time. We enjoy the puja of Lord Balaji. It unifies us all, whether they live here in line no. 18, at Mahesh, or at Titagarh."

How did Dharma come to know about the puja in the first place? Dharma Rao explained that he already knew about the puja before settling at Serampore through other people from Titagarh who had been attending the puja each year. However, he rarely got the opportunity to attend it since his father, a jute mill employee in Titagarh, did not have strong connections with the residents of the line. And since he himself had always been a bank employee, he never previously developed any connection outside of Titagarh, among the Telugu communities working in the jute and cotton mills of Serampore. After having settled at Mahesh, Dharma Rao

formed networks through common channels with the members of the *Samajam*, especially with Kesava Rao, and had been attending the puja ever since. Dharma Rao said, “There are common ties through old friendship and familial relations between the communities and that is how the network has gradually spread.” Then after a brief pause he said, “Actually, they both look out for each other. Balaji is the god that unites us all.”

Dharma’s statement highlights the fact that just as the migrant communities of line no. 18 had felt the necessity to unite in common interest of religious and cultural expression and the necessity to assert their identity, they had similarly realized that this process of assimilation had to expand for a larger socio-cultural bonding among the Telugus of Serampore whose benefits would certainly percolate down to a better financial arrangement, better management, and more publicity for the Tirupathi Puja. On the other hand, the Telugu families residing at Mahesh had also been struggling to establish their ethnic identity and equal rights for the use of public space.

For such people, identifying themselves with a religious festival specific to their own ethnicity along with the intended desire to assimilate into their own ethnic community was important since that would also become a platform for their religious expression and cultural production. Thus, the festival of Balaji got precedence over Holi, as the former was religiously and culturally more specific to their interests and intentions. It is also interesting to note the ways in which such intra-state and inter-state networks were formed keeping line no. 18 as the base for operations. Since the lived space of the committee coincided with the space for the festival—which was a strategy for the committee to draw attention towards the presence and position of the working class migrants as part of that space and include it as part of the social spaces of Serampore and not disconnected from it—such networks were extended from the line itself so that it brought back those people to the space of the mill lines during the festival and consequently the spatial attachment to it remained strong.

Such a networking system attempted to create homogeneity out of the varied trajectories of space-time of multiple individuals with different experiences of migration, a homogeneity that was not aimed at effacing the individuality or heterogeneity in the socio-spatial trajectories of the people but in finding a common ground for the propagation of a strong ethnic and cultural identity for the migrant (Massey 2005). Thus, Kesava or Dharma Rao’s trajectories of space-time (with different experiences and stories of migration and settlement across time) were different from each other and from that of the residents of line no. 18 whose own trajectories differed from each other as well. However, the network that was formed by connecting and bringing such multiple individuals and groups into the setting of the puja produced a common platform for cultural and religious manifestations in the form of Tirupathi Puja by keeping intact and in fact using the ethnic heterogeneity of the migrants as a unifying factor.

Apart from Telugu Hindus, Line no. 18 also comprises of Oriya, Bihari, and Hindustani Hindus (migrants mainly from districts of Uttar Pradesh). Each community has their own trajectories of space-time that interacted with others everyday. The social spaces of the line are constituted through regular social and cultural exchange among them, thereby transforming them into a collective unit, albeit their ethnic identities are retained in the process. The gala celebration of Tirupathi Puja became, also for these other ethnic identities, a medium to express an alternative mode of religious practice that became representative of the lived and social spaces of the migrants. Thus, just as migrant Telugus from outside the mill line with their own trajectories of space-time responded to an appeal of strengthening their ethnic identity in Serampore through

their “own religious festival” and used their own trajectories to spread the social network even further, the resident migrants of the mill line too projected their ethnic diversity by participating in the puja (what Kesava called “*pachhapatam*”) and producing a collective socio-spatial and cultural identity for the mill line (Massey 2005).

The intention of the *Samajam* was dual: the preservation and progression of the puja as a private affair of the line on one hand and, drawing as many Telugu communities outside the line as possible to strengthen the social and cultural base of the festival in a space where they had always been socially marginalized. Such actions would therefore gradually lead to pose resistance to marginalization and use the expression of faith as a show of strength. The committee, therefore, did not maintain a strict dichotomy between the ‘public’ and the ‘private’ while visitors from other places (designated as the “public,” “guests,” and/or “public devotees”) could cross into the private space of the line at all times during the puja without interruption. The puja also came to be spatially designed in such a way over the years. The use of public roads to set up flamboyant arches made of light as far as two hundred meters away from the actual puja site or the spectacular construction of the puja pandal bore the character traits of opening the puja up for the larger public and creating a symbolic mutuality between the ‘public’ and the ‘private’ such that even when people were physically present on the public road they had symbolically entered the space of the puja.

The puja of the line was transformed into a puja for the public with the private space of the line becoming public in the process. In addition to this, alluding to the spatial organization and arrangements of a public religious site, like a temple, specific portions of the public space across the mill lines are occupied to make specific counters for the deposition of footwear before entering the puja space (people are only allowed to enter barefoot), or are transformed into temporary stalls where the residents of the line sell materials for puja to the incoming public and thus make a small income on the days of the puja.

This brings us to the question of inclusivity of the ‘public’ into the space of the puja as well as part of the administration of the committee. Did the *Balbhakta Samajam* attempt to regulate this processual publicizing of the puja? In fact, who qualified as ‘public’ and in what ways? Through various actions the *Samajam* drew boundaries regarding how far the ‘public’ (both as people and space) could traverse into the private space of the line. The construction of such boundaries is carried out on one hand through the regulation of crowd in and out of the puja space, and on the other through the control of the core committee over the role/responsibility to be assigned to people that their networks brought within the domain of the puja.

The responsibility of managing the various affairs of the puja lies strictly with those who reside in the mill line. As Ayush Rao, the Junior Secretary of the *Samajam* noted, “There indeed is a serious lack of manpower among the Telugus of line no. 18 since there are only 15 to 18 Telugu families left here right now. The number of adults who can carry our serious labour for the puja is 25. But we do not take help for such labourious work or for management from people outside the *Samajam*.” Upon being asked why the Telugu communities from Mahesh or Titagarh—where at least a few of them were known to the puja committee—were not asked for help, Ayush labelled them as guests or visitors who upon being invited (or not) were welcome to attend the puja proceedings and eat the prasada or could carry out any tertiary task associated with the puja if any help was sought from them at all. Such communities were not given the liberty to volunteer for the management of the puja or to become a part of the organizing committee. Their

identity as guest or member, and their position inside or outside the domain of the puja along with the parameters of such position were determined by the *Samajam*. In the process of such determination, their movement inside the space of the line was regulated by the committee.

What role did the Bengalis play in the proceedings of Tirupathi Puja? The term ‘Bengalis’ here denotes those who stay in the same neighborhood as the residents of line no. 18 as well as those who live in other parts of the township. Depending on the spatial proximity that they shared with the residents of the line, the knowledge and reaction of the Bengali communities and their involvement with the puja differed. What, however, remained common between those who attended or participated in the puja was the reason behind their participation. Unlike the migrant communities for whom the puja was a medium for social assimilation and cultural expression, almost all the Bengalis claimed to participate “... out of a sense of devotion towards Lord Balaji” and the quick justification that came afterwards for it was that Balaji was another incarnation of Lord Vishnu (the Bengalis usually used the name “Krishna”), one of the supreme gods of the Hindu pantheon. This justification was almost like a clarification on the part of the Bengalis to show that the god they were worshipping was not really alien to their own culture but was rather in line with the religious tradition in Serampore of worshipping various forms of Lord Krishna (like the idols of Radhaballav and Jagannatha).

One such visitor, Sudhir Ranjan Mitra, from Potuapara located to the north of Serampore said that he had been visiting the puja every year since the last seven years. Upon being asked what interested him in the Tirupathi Puja of the Telugu community to participate on a regular basis, he replied with a serious expression on his face, “It is not a puja of the Telugus. It is a puja of Serampore. We are all residents of the same town and we are all Hindus. So how can a Hindu god be different for all of us? Also, Balaji is the incarnation of Krishna. So, you see, we are not worshipping a different god, different from ours.” Similar sentiments were echoed by another worshipper named Ashok Chatterjee who came to attend the puja along with his family on the evening of *Kalyanam*. While Ashok’s mother and wife stood in one queue with the offerings in their hand and Ashok in another, he said, “We regard this as Serampore’s puja. It is attended by all communities and without this the puja would not have been successful.” Ashok’s mother Chaya Devi said, “... the rituals here are observed with purity and devotion. Purity and devotion are the only things that bring me here.”

Through Sudhir Ranjan and Ashok’s statements two dominate attitudes of the Bengalis of Serampore towards the religious practices of migrants came to the forefront. One, as I have argued above, was a clarification of their own religious position so that they did not cross the social and religious boundaries that were set by practices of class and ethnic superiority. This was practiced through the dissemination of narratives of religious interpretation by alluding to a larger Hindu mythology by which the religious specificity or difference of the Telugu communities were intended to be subsumed. Such a practice was coupled with expressing a feeling of devotion for a god that was not different from their religious choice. ‘Devotion’ was therefore employed as a political strategy by the Bengalis through which their religious choice was expressed. Two, the process of subsuming the religious specificity of the Telugu communities under a larger “homogeneous” religious tradition of Serampore also intended to deny the latter’s right to cultural expression and the assertion of their ethnic identity (Massey 2005). There is no doubt that the migrant communities too wanted to be included as part of Serampore’s religious paradigm. However, that should not have come at the cost of shedding

their ethnic identity and religious specificity. The fact was that Tirupathi Puja belonged first and foremost to them and that it was a medium to express their religious identity.

For the Bengalis who stayed close to line no. 18 like in the same neighborhood bore similar justifications of purity, devotion, and Balaji as Krishna's incarnation regarding their visit to the puja. However, those who experienced the various proceedings of the puja based on the everyday owing to sharing the same neighborhood space or the same locality could not deny the fact that the puja belonged primarily to the Telugu community. The reason for this was not any deep involvement with the puja or good social relations with the residents of the line but the fact that the Bengalis of the neighborhood were either not keen on knowing much about the festival because they thought that it was celebrated by those belonging to an inferior class, or their experience about the puja was bitter.

The power-relation between the resident working-class migrants and middle-class Bengalis concerning the religious expression and assertion of social and ethnic identities of the former operates at multiple levels. On one hand most Bengalis of the neighborhood attempt to create an upper-caste religio-cultural homogeneity in the neighborhood space by dismissing or ignoring the religious/cultural practices of the Telugu migrants. On the other hand, their acceptance of Tirupathi Puja comes through a process of filtering the religious activities of the migrants to what suited or corresponded with the upper-caste religious tradition of Serampore, so that its inclusion into the religious tradition of the town occurred *after* it received sanction from upper-caste Bengalis.

The actions of the Bengali community, however, to include Tirupathi Puja as part of Serampore's religious tradition, to efface the cultural and ethnic specificity of the festival, or to dismiss such practices altogether were consequences of the effort made by the Telugu community to make an impact on the existing social dynamics between the Bengali and migrant communities. Thus, even though the Bengalis attempted to create a religious homogeneity in the town through discourses that upheld their socio-cultural superiority, the Telugus ensured through elaborate socio-spatial networks and strategies that the Puja served a dual purpose. It first signified and kept intact its spatial root which was the mill line and by doing so highlighted the presence and everyday lives of the migrants and, second, through the spatial expansion of the elements of the Puja (as public spaces were occupied extensively and covered with illustrious light and pandal décor) and that of the social networks of the migrants, it also expanded the knowledge of religious and cultural potential of the Telugus, establishing the presence of the communities in Serampore and strengthening them exponentially.

The Telugu community of NBS stressed on the power of visibility of the spectacle, even in the face of denial or inclusivity by the Bengali society, by reproducing public spaces through multiple practices that signified the active presence of the Telugu society in Serampore and highlighted the importance of their religious identity and practices. Although the Bengali community attempted to negate the religio-cultural specificity of Tirupathi Puja, the strategy of the puja committee to limit the involvement of "outsiders" (that is, people not related to Line no. 18) in the management of puja activities shows the policy of the management to primarily project the puja as a religious practice of the Telugus and then as a religious tradition of Serampore. My research on the Tirupathi Puja suggests that the efforts of the *Balabhakta Samajam* to assert the ethnic and religious identities of the migrants appear to outrun the efforts of the Bengalis to control it.

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