

Emotion, Identity and Tradition: Community Narratives of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Jagadhatri Puja Festival in India

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The Asian Conference on Cultural Studies 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The Jagadhatri Puja festival represents a rich and enduring form of intangible cultural heritage yet remains largely understudied within broad research domain cultural heritage studies. With origins traced back to 300 years ago under the zamindari (landlord) system, the festival has gradually transformed from an elite section of society to a community-organized public festival. The city, Chandernagore, reflects an evolving tradition of illumination, moving from hand-held lanterns to contemporary lighting technologies. The festival portrays its ritual expressions and upholds its unique cultural identity through several distinctive cultural elements. The term Jagadhatri, literally “Bearer of the World,” symbolizes divine power, where community members collectively perform roles imbued with deep cultural significance. Considering this context, the main objective of this research is to examine how emotions, memory, and cultural pride are transmitted across generations and embedded within cultural practices of the festival thus bridging the academic gap of this research domain. The study employed mixed research methods by adopting a “Big Q” reflexive approach of thematic analysis complemented by sentiment analysis. The findings reveal that community emotions play a crucial role in shaping cultural identity and sustaining heritage continuity. It also demonstrates how Jagadhatri Puja in Chandernagore functions as a living cultural system amid rapid urban change. The research contributes to broader domain on intangible cultural heritage, urban cultural identity, and the emotional geographies of festival traditions in contemporary India.

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Introduction

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) represents living cultural expressions transmitted across generations through ritual, performance, craftsmanship, and collective memory. The research domain of cultural heritage has already established that cultural heritage comprises of the sets of tangible and intangible resources which are developed, transmitted, distilled to essence and enhance economic landscape of a territory (Lenzerini, 2011). Urban heritage research increasingly recognizes the dynamic relationship between the physical fabric of cities and the cultural practices that shape community identity. Festivals constitute an important component of intangible cultural heritage because they embody collective memories, cultural practices, social relationships, and emotional attachments (Gwerevende & Mthombeni, 2023). It enables communities to express cultural identity and maintain continuity amid social change. Jagadhatri Puja, celebrated extensively in Chandernagore, India offers a remarkable example of such a living heritage tradition. With a history extending over three centuries and shaped by the unique socio-cultural context of the former French colony, the festival has evolved into one of the most significant cultural events in eastern India.

Unlike conventional approaches that focus primarily on rituals or economic aspects of festivals, the present study examines the emotional and identity-related dimensions embedded within community narratives. Lexically, it explores how residents, devotees, artisans, organizers, and visitors perceive Jagadhatri Puja as a cultural symbol that fosters belonging, continuity, and collective pride. The central argument is how emotion, identity, and tradition are articulated through community narratives of Jagadhatri Puja. The present study examines the ways in which lived experiences, shared memories, and cultural practices contribute to the continuity and safeguarding of the evolving heritage tradition.

Conceptual Framework

The study is grounded in four complementary theoretical perspectives. UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage framework defines heritage as living traditions and practices recognized by communities and transmitted from generation to generation. Social identity theory suggests that individuals derive a sense of self and belonging from membership in social groups. Collective memory theory emphasizes the role of shared remembrance in shaping community identity, while affective heritage studies highlight the importance of emotions and sensory experiences in heritage engagement. Combining these perspectives allows Jagadhatri Puja to be understood not merely as a religious celebration but as an evolving heritage system sustained through emotional attachment, collective memory, and social participation. The framework also provides a lens to examine how communities negotiate continuity and change in an urban setting.

Objectives of the Study

The study aims to map the spectrum of emotions associated with Jagadhatri Puja and examine how feelings of place attachment are embedded within community narratives which contribute to the construction of urban cultural identity. It further explores the role of intangible cultural heritage in sustaining the intergenerational transmission of traditions and cultural values. By analyzing the interplay between emotion, identity, and heritage, the study seeks to generate insights that can support sustainable cultural planning and heritage management in alignment with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11, which promotes inclusive, resilient, and culturally vibrant cities and communities.

Methodology

The research adopts a mixed-method case study approach. Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted during the 2024 and 2025 festival celebrations. Participant observation covered major ritual events for five days from Ghot Sthapan to immersion processions. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with priests, artisans, local historians, youth volunteers, puja committee members, residents, and visitors. Historical documents, newspapers, committee records, and archival materials were also reviewed.

Qualitative data were analyzed through thematic coding to identify recurring themes related to emotion, identity, place attachment, tradition, and heritage continuity. Quantitative sentiment analysis was additionally conducted to capture emotional perceptions among host communities and visitors. Principal Component Analysis (PCA) and quadrant mapping were employed to identify dominant emotional dimensions and generational differences in festival experiences.

Emotion as Heritage: The Affective Landscape of Jagadhatri Puja

Figure 1

The Affective Landscape of Jagadhatri Puja



One of the most significant findings of the study is the central role of emotion in shaping community engagement with Jagadhatri Puja. Rituals, processions, devotional songs, illumination displays, and immersion ceremonies collectively generate powerful emotional experiences. Community members frequently described feelings of devotion, joy, pride, fulfilment, and belonging during the festival. At the same time, immersion rituals evoke profound sadness and nostalgia associated with the departure of the goddess.

Narratives surrounding Bijoya Dashami reveal a complex emotional spectrum. Expressions such as “tears of sorrow,” “my heart refuses to understand,” and “do come again” reflect the emotional climax associated with the goddess’s departure. The emotional experience is not simply one of loss but represents a cyclical process in which grief is transformed into hope through anticipation of the next annual celebration.

Sentiment analysis further demonstrates that positive emotions dominate community perceptions of the festival. Variables such as serenity, blessing, faith, loving attachment, communal euphoria, social cohesion, and belonging emerged strongly within the emotional structure of the festival experience. Simultaneously, emotions such as melancholy, sadness, grief, and nostalgia appeared primarily during immersion rituals, thereby illustrating the coexistence of joy and sorrow within the heritage experience.

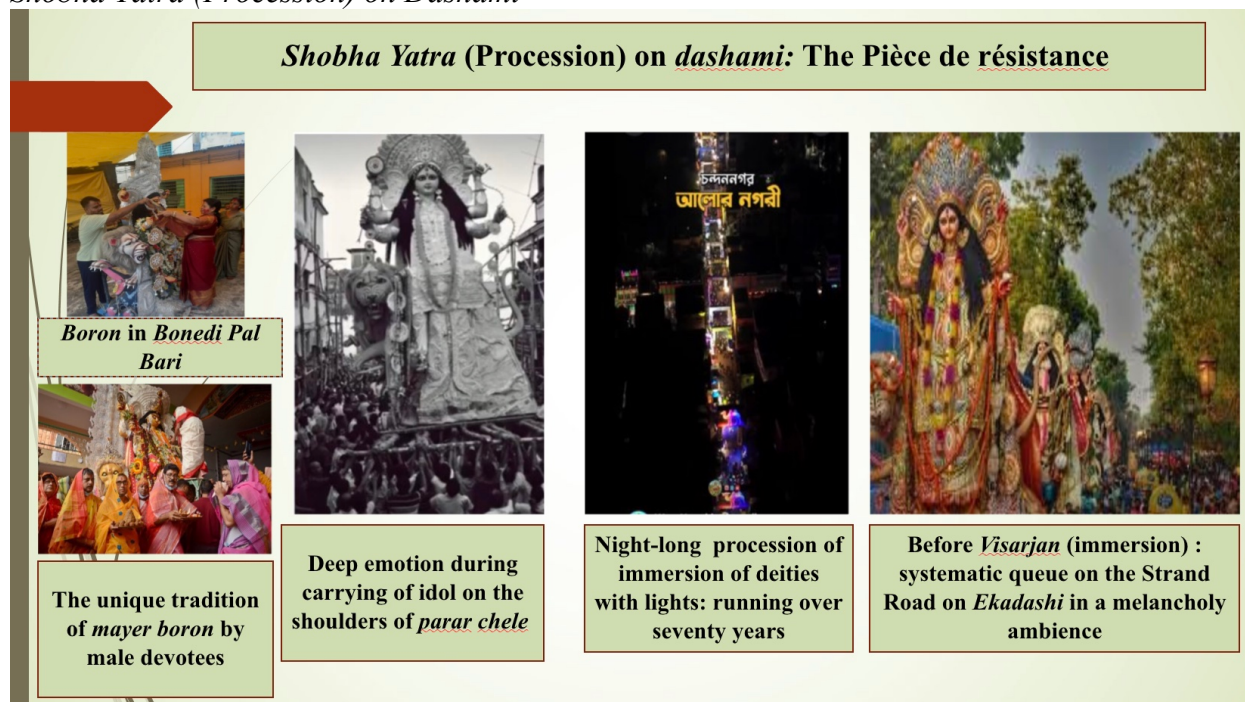
These findings support the argument that emotions are not incidental outcomes of participation but integral components of intangible heritage itself. Emotional experiences strengthen collective memory and motivate continued participation in cultural practices.

Place Identity and Urban Cultural Belonging

Community narratives reveal a strong relationship between Jagadhatri Puja and place identity. Residents frequently personify Chandernagore as a unique and exceptional cultural space. The festival serves as a symbol through which local identity is expressed, reinforced, and celebrated (Strandberg & Styvén, 2024). Community members associate the city's distinctiveness with its illumination displays, disciplined processions, artistic excellence, and long-standing traditions.

Figure 2

Shobha Yatra (Procession) on Dashami



The concept of place attachment emerged strongly from interview narratives. Many respondents described Chandernagore not merely as a geographical location but as an emotional homeland deeply connected to the festival. Pride in local heritage, historical consciousness, and collective guardianship were recurring themes. The findings suggest that Jagadhatri Puja contributes significantly to the construction of urban identity. Through ritual participation, community members reaffirm their relationship with place, thereby transforming cultural heritage into a lived experience of belonging.

Tradition and Intergenerational Continuity

A defining feature of Jagadhatri Puja is its capacity to transmit cultural practices across generations. The festival encompasses a sequence of rituals including *Ghot Sthapan*, *Kumari Puja*, *Pradip Daan*, *Dhuno Porano*, *Boron*, *Sindoor Khela*, immersion ceremonies, and subsequent religious observances. These ritual practices function as mechanisms for preserving and reproducing cultural knowledge.

Figure 3

Rituals: Upholding Tradition Across Generations



Intergenerational participation was evident across all aspects of the festival. Elders play a crucial role in transmitting ritual knowledge, while younger generations contribute through volunteer activities, cultural performances, digital promotion, and organizational support. Community-based practices such as *alpona* (floor art) creation involve participants ranging from senior citizens to children.

Figure 4*Ritualistic Floor Art (Alpona): An Evolving Expression of Intangible Cultural Heritage*

The study found that tradition is not understood as rigid preservation. Rather, community members actively reinterpret and adapt practices while maintaining their symbolic significance.

Modernization and Adaptive Heritage

An important dimension of the study concerns the interaction between tradition and modernization. Chandernagore's famous illumination displays illustrate how heritage practices evolve through technological innovation. Historical lighting methods involving torches and early electrical systems have gradually been replaced by LED technologies and computerized three-dimensional animations. Despite these technological transformations, the cultural meaning of illumination as a defining feature of the festival remains intact.

Similarly, contemporary concerns regarding environmental sustainability have influenced festival management. Measures such as banning plastic, restricting fireworks, prohibiting excessive sound pollution, promoting lead-free materials, and strengthening waste-management practices demonstrate how heritage traditions can adapt to modern environmental challenges.

These developments indicate that cultural continuity is achieved not through resistance to change but through selective adaptation. Community stakeholders actively negotiate modifications that preserve the sacred essence of the festival while addressing contemporary social and environmental concerns.

Generational Variations in Festival Experience

The quantitative analysis revealed notable generational differences in emotional engagement with Jagadhatri Puja. Younger participants, particularly Generation Z and multi-generational families, reported high levels of happiness, fulfilment, and excitement. Boomers associated the

festival primarily with peace and serenity, while millennials emphasized faith, spirituality, and reflective engagement. Generation X participants displayed strong involvement characterized by happiness and emotional stability. PCA quadrant analysis resulted that different age groups derive distinct meanings from the festival. For younger participants, visual spectacle and collective celebration were central attractions. Older generations, by contrast, valued spiritual reflection, continuity, and cultural memory. The oldest generation occasionally experienced anxiety associated with crowds and changing festival dynamics. These findings indicate that although emotional expressions vary across generations, the festival remains a shared cultural platform capable of accommodating diverse experiences while maintaining social cohesion.

Conclusion

Jagadhatri Puja represents a vibrant example of living intangible cultural heritage in contemporary urban India. The study demonstrates that emotion, identity, and tradition form interconnected dimensions through which the festival is experienced, interpreted, and sustained. Community narratives reveal that rituals, processions, illumination, *alpona*, and devotional participation collectively generate strong emotional attachments and reinforce place-based identities.

The findings further suggest that heritage continuity depends on active community participation and adaptive modernization. Rather than existing as a static tradition, Jagadhatri Puja continuously evolves through technological innovation, environmental awareness, and intergenerational engagement. Emotions such as pride, devotion, nostalgia, and belonging serve as cultural resources that strengthen collective memory and social cohesion.

As cities face increasing pressures of globalization and cultural homogenization, safeguarding intangible cultural heritage requires greater recognition of community narratives and emotional experiences. Jagadhatri Puja demonstrates how living heritage can simultaneously preserve tradition, foster urban identity, and contribute to sustainable cultural development. In this regard, the festival stands as a powerful example of how intangible cultural heritage continues to shape contemporary urban life while ensuring cultural continuity for future generations.

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