

## THE ONLINE DURGA

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### Abstract

*The paper focuses on the role of the new ICT technologies in the creation, formation and maintenance of a Diaspora identity among the Kolkata intellectuals. Among the Kolkata intellectuals migration has been a common feature since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In contemporary Kolkata, almost every family in this category has one or several relatives living in the Diaspora. Satellite TV and the ICT technologies that entered the arena during the last decades have got an increasing importance among those groups. The new technologies affect the flow of ideas and gives way to new global forms of interaction. Access to new forms of communication alters identities and social forms, the relationship to the home country changes. The flow of religious and cultural expressions increases. Kolkata Websites have become the major channel for news, information and contact. Virtual communities and networks have appeared. Religious and symbolic forms of expression alter and are re-configured. For example the Durga puja ritual has become a major icon for Diaspora unity and identity among the Kolkata intellectuals. Pictures from all the puja sites in Kolkata are displayed and anjali offerings to the goddess are performed online. The paper is based on fieldwork made in Kolkata in 2000-2001.*

### Introduction

This paper will explore the role of the new ICT technologies in the creation, formation and maintenance of a Diaspora identity among Kolkata intellectuals.<sup>1</sup> In the 90ies the new information and communication technologies exploded. Satellite communication, private TV, the Internet entered the arena. The ICT technologies have got a great impact. The flow of information increases and the world of communications is condensed. The dependence on place and locality obtains a diminishing importance. Patterns for social organisation, social action and relationships are transformed. It becomes possible to interact at distance in real time across geographical national, cultural and social boundaries. The new technologies enter into people's life worlds in a variety of ways. It has become a vehicle of contact and communication, a means for transmission of ideas, information, culture and tradition. The nature of online communication affects processes of social and cultural formation. Interaction takes new configurations in the intersection between the on line- off line social arena.

Cultural, traditional and religious features and ideas might take on new expressions and symbolic meanings and the configurations alter. Among Diasporic groups, satellite TV, Internet, email and websites have got a central role in the processes of group formation and identification. It enhances interaction on a global and transnational level and transforms the relationships between the Diasporic groups and the place of origin. On line interaction and Diaspora websites become arenas where life in the Diaspora is explored, reflected upon and the notion of belonging and identity is debated. In the terms of Rosa Tsagarousianou (2004) media forms spaces of communication where the discourses of Diasporic identity is negotiated and constructed. (Tsagarousianou, R, 2004)

I will here elaborate a bit on the role and function of the new technologies among the Kolkata intellectuals with a focus on the relationship to the Diaspora populations and the way that a Diasporic identity is constructed. The ICT technologies were introduced in India in the 1990s and during the last decade, the new forms of media and communication have got an increasing importance. Among the Kolkata intellectuals, Media and especially the ICT technologies has become a means for communication with family and relatives in the Diaspora. For the Diaspora population, Kolkata Websites have become a major channel for news, information and contact. I will start with giving a brief overview of the Kolkata intellectuals, the specific conditions that have shaped the intellectual category and some of its implications. I will continue with the relationship between the intellectual category and migration, life in the Diaspora, the construction of tradition and the notion of home. The next section will deal with Diasporic medias and their significance as forms of communication. In the last section I will elaborate on how Diasporic medias are used to create an online community and a virtual culture that has the effect of unifying and uniting the Diaspora populations around a common identity. I will suggest that a framework developed in phenomenology will enhance the understanding of the dynamics and processes played by media in identity formation among the Diasporic communities.<sup>ii</sup>

### The Kolkata intellectuals and migration

Kolkata is considered to be an intellectual centre in India. Well-known Bengali intellectuals are for example Ram Mohun Roy, Rabindranath Tagore, Satyajit Ray and Amartya Sen. Kolkata is a colonial product. The British founded the city in 1690 as centre for the East Indian Company's trade. It soon became the headquarters of the British administration in India and the second city in the British Empire, "the brightest jewel in the crown". Kolkata became the entrance-point for the British colonialism and the colonial hegemonic discourse. It

also became a focal point for criticism and contesting discourses among the Bengali population. The Bengali renaissance, the reform movements and the early nationalist movement have affected the arena. After independence Kolkata became marginalised in the Indian context something that led to a strong position for the communist movement and during the last 30 years the state have been run by CPI (M).

The Bhadrakalok category, the category of modern Bengali intellectuals, emerged in the middle of the 19 century.<sup>iii</sup> The category was formed in the specific historical, political and cultural context of colonialism and in the interaction between the colonial power, the local elite and the lower groups in the society. The Bhadrakalok consisted of upper and middle class Bengali Hindus, mostly belonging to the administrative occupational groups and educated in the recently introduced British educational system. The concept Bhadrakalok is defined as “respectable society”, “respectable people” or “society of the civilised” and it is often compared with groups denoted as “intelligentsia” “literati” and “petit bourgeoisie” in western society. The concept came to denote a way of living and it existed certain defining criteria, norms for behaviour, a common diet, language and culture. A certain economic income and form of housing was included. The group got an intermediate position, in-between the colonial power and the indigenous population. The Bhadrakalok introduced new dominating forms of culture, social institutions, discursive forms, criteria for social respectability, esthetical and ethical norms and new forms of political mobilisation. (Chatterjee 1993, Banerjee 1989, Karlekar 1991) They delimited a specific social and cultural formation with a characteristic way of living, which became typical for the Bengali population. The distinct intellectual culture and discourse became formalised and it crystallised into its specific form of “bengaliness” in the contemporary social universe of Kolkata. In Gramscian terms, they emerged as organic creations of social and political interests formed in specific historical relations.

In the contemporary social universe of Kolkata the intellectual category might be defined in a wide sense as the Bengali Hindu community consisting of the three castes of bramans, kayesthos and badias. The distinction between different castes is not very strong and there is no dominating caste. The category is internally differentiated and in terms of occupational categories, the intellectual community is diversified. The rapid growth of industry, technology, modern business and media has led to an expansion and diversification of occupational categories. It is not uncommon that affiliation to the different subcategories overlaps and they are not mutually exclusive.

The Kolkata intellectuals occupy a social and political space between the state and the civil society, and between the economic elite and the lower groups in the society. They dominate organised political and cultural life but not the economic activity. They have a long tradition of radicalism. They were leaders in the movements of political liberation and they constitute the leadership in the communist party. During the last ten years the leftist power has diminished in the city and the intellectuals have got less influence in the government and e.g. the educational system.

The intellectual discourse among the Bengali Hindus in Kolkata is constructed in tradition and context. The Bengali tradition, its normative connotations, orientations and ideals provide worldviews and ethos. They constitute “principles of being that locate and orient human beings within their existential realities”. (Bruce Kapferer 1989) The parameters of intellectualism are found in the matrix of Bengali Hindu institutions, organisations, culture and the discourse around family and kinship. Assets as family belonging, illustrious lineage, educational title, cultural awareness, verbal facility, aesthetic preferences and scientific knowledge are important criterions. The contradiction between intellectualism, religion and tradition is not emphasised and it is not uncommon that an intellectual discourse is combined with for example Hindu or Brahma beliefs and practices.<sup>iv</sup>

The Kolkata intellectuals have had an extensive interaction with external centres. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century education abroad became common. Further, the British often used the well-educated Bengali intellectuals for administrative purposes in other parts of India and other colonial countries. The small Indian community in Britain before 1939 included many Bengalis and after the independence the elite groups with a good education were demanded in Britain, Canada and Australia. (Tinker, 1977) During the last decades migration has increased significantly. The opening up of the Indian economy in the 90ties and withdrawal on restrictions on currency convertibility has enhanced the options to migrate. The west provides long term opportunities for Indian professionals and education abroad and foreign degrees are ascribed a high value in India. Recently, the IT sector has appeared as a new arena. The migrants are mainly settled in the USA, Canada and UK. There also exist patches of Bengalis in European countries. Many of them have become citizens and settled down in the foreign country. Today some of them are the second and third generation living abroad.

Contemporary migration in West Bengal consists mainly of professionals, academics and students going abroad for higher education. It is difficult to get information on the number of Kolkata intellectuals in the Diaspora. There are no records and the visa records are destroyed after five years. One of my informants stated that many of the medium standard families, the

educated middle class, have relatives living abroad. Almost every family in this category has one or several relatives living in the Diaspora. The family of one of my informants illustrates the issue. He lived together with his five brothers in the family house in south Kolkata. They lived in a joint family although the different family units had separate economies. In this joint family, three out of six nuclear units had members living in the Diaspora. My informant's daughter, her husband, the two grand daughters and the husband's mother lived in Australia. One of the brothers had a son that worked in Dubai and another brother's son was studying in the USA, in a PhD programme in computer science. He had got a full scholarship and had spent five years in USA.

### The notion of home

Tradition and nostalgia are ascribed an important function among the Kolkata intellectuals. The intellectual discourse is firmly rooted in the Bengali tradition. During the colonial period and influences from the strong external powers Bengali customs and tradition were reinforced in the sphere of home and family. The realm of family became a discursive arena and an independent space where the traditional order became emphasised. In the public sphere and in the interaction with the British they adapted to the foreign rule. They kept the two worlds that they had to negotiate separate and behaved appropriately in each of the spheres of their lives. (Walsh, J 1995 p 357) The compartmentalisation between the "traditional" Bengali family and the public sphere is maintained. Family rituals are frequently preserved and adherence to traditional beliefs is quite common in the sphere of private life and in the interaction among Bengalis. In the outer sphere, social interaction have adapted to the new political, social and financial circumstances. (Mukerjee, V 1994, Bagchi, J 1995, Nag 1995)

Among the NRIs adherence to tradition and custom seems to be quite common. One of my NRI friends had grown up in the USA. She and her sister had both gone through the three rituals that are customary for this period of life and in her terms, maybe even more than the people living in Calcutta do. A second generation NRI in the USA states that the Bengali traditions and culture were maintained and transmitted in the home and the family. It was important for the parents to maintain certain familial and communal traditions, to keep and preserve the meaning of being Indian. The relationship to the place of origin played a significant role. One of my informants explained that even though everyone wants to go abroad today, they do not want to settle permanently abroad, they want to keep some kind of relationship with the home country. Another one explained that her parents continued to see India as their home. They never felt at home in the new country. They had strong social ties to other Indians living abroad and the

family made frequent visits to Kolkata where they had extended family and roots back through previous generations. (Lahiri J, 2002) The adherence to tradition and norms fluctuates and it might alter between the generations. In one family living in the Diaspora the members had adapted to life abroad in different ways and to different degrees. The couple had been married in a traditional negotiated marriage within the same caste. The two daughters that were born in the Diaspora had adapted well to the new culture while the mother in law lived a traditional Indian life as a widow and followed the prescriptions appropriate for that status. For example she only took one meal per day and prepared the food herself.

Adherence to tradition and custom has a significant position, but the concept also includes a great amount of fluidity and adaptability. Transformation, negotiation and reflection on the traditional context are common. The significance and meanings of traditional features and norms are depicted as fluid and they can easily be transferred to different situations. An old academic that had been teaching in the USA for 30 years and then returned to Kolkata, showed me his puja room in the residence in Kolkata and proudly told me about how they had brought their family gods with them to the Diaspora and how his wife had performed the puja for them every day. Now the family gods had returned home to Kolkata together with them. The question of marriage illustrates further the fluctuations and adaptations inherent in tradition and custom. Traditionally, the marriage is negotiated and it should take place within the same caste. Among the Diasporic groups, marriage is often made up with persons from the home city. Marriage ads for NRIs are common in Kolkata newspapers and it has appeared numerous marriage websites for NRIs. Often the ads request a partner from a specific community and social frame. Jumpha Lahiri, Pulitzer Prize winner 2000, and second-generation immigrant in the USA came back to Kolkata for her marriage. She married an American born Greek in a traditional Bengali marriage. Jumpha's maternal uncle and his wife took care of the preparations for the marriage and it followed every detail of a typical Bengali wedding, except for the fire ritual, the homa. In Kolkata the marriage became front-page news. The Kolkata population tried to make Jumpha into their own. She was depicted as being "Bangla mein", Bengali girl. Her Bengali background and ability to speak the language was emphasised. Among the Diaspora population, debates appeared on Kolkata web sites whether or not the marriage was valid since they did not perform the homa oblation.

My informants commonly described life in the Diaspora in the terms of transformation, negotiation and reflections on the tradition, the place of origin and the new context. Jumpha Lahiri describes it as an ongoing cultural translation, a simultaneous translation in both directions. As second generation NRI she did not translate so much to survive in the world

around her as her parents had done, but to create and illuminate a non-existent one. (Lahiri, J 2002) Tradition and the notion of home are constructed in a dynamic process of meaning making. The concept of tradition includes nostalgic links and memories. It also includes a construction and exploration of new ways of living. Meaning is defined in the intersection between the relationship to home, the meaning of tradition at home and life in the new settlement. Debates and negotiations about how to interpret the meaning of the traditional features in the place of origin and in the new environment are undertaken. The appropriate way of living in the place of settlement is established through looking back, defining the real way of living, how it used to be and the significance of traditions, customs and social relations. But meaning, significance and memories are created and constructed in the here and now, in the specific Diasporic setting. Tradition and the notion of home becomes a myth, “a dynamic process, through which people debate and contest meaning”, (Elisabeth Bird, 2005) Or as Kapferer (1989) states, the meaning of the past is constructed in the present. Myths constitute a framework through which the experiences of the world achieve significance. Myths are treated as historical facts or having foundation in fact and can be seen as embodying the ultimate truth. (Bruce Kapferer 1989, pp 47-48)

### Diasporic media

Among the Diasporic groups media as literature, film, satellite TV and the ICT technologies have come to play an increasing role. In the contemporary film industry a focus on the Diaspora populations has appeared. The commercial Hindi film is produced for the Diaspora population as well as the local audience. The interest for Diaspora filmmakers, depicting and illustrating the conditions in the Diaspora, has increased both in India and on international film festivals. The “hybrid” authors, the generation of Indian authors living abroad, writing in English but still adapting to an Indian tradition in their literary forms, discuss and explore tradition and reflect on the new situation. Satellite TV channels as Star TV and zee TV that came in the 90ties provide the Diasporic populations with news and culture from the home. The new technologies have become “Diasporic medias”, media, Institutions, practices and organisations used, supported and sustained by Diasporic groups. (Tsagarousianou, 2004) The most influential Diasporic media is the new ICT technologies and the Internet. Internet was introduced in India in 1987 and in 1995 commercial Internet access was established. In Kolkata the outreach and development of the new technologies have been quite slow. In 2000 Kolkata had three ISPs and the user base was 70-80 000 Internet subscribers. This should be compared with a total population of 10-15 millions. Kolkata is considered to be more

conservative than the other major cities and the city is in an economic backwater. The level of education is high but the infrastructure is underdeveloped. The Bengali Hindus, with their intellectual background, are interested in the new technologies but they don't have the economic possibilities to develop it. Internet is relatively expensive and a limited number of people have computers at home. There exist a commercial use of Internet among high tech and multinational companies and it is often available in offices and to a certain extent in academic institutions. The first cyber café in Kolkata started in the end of the 90s. The number has increased rapidly and in 2000 it existed 450 cyber cafes and places for browsing. The customers at the cyber cafés were predominantly male, from all age groups but the younger generation dominated. Some common user categories are job seekers trying to find a job abroad and college students looking for information about overseas universities. During the last couple of years, the interest for Internet has raised and people have got a growing awareness about it. The young generation is becoming more and more computer literate and some of the schools have computer studies integrated in the curriculum, mainly the more exclusive English medium schools. But factors as the language issue, the infrastructure, the costs, lack of literacy, basic computer skills and technical equipment are restricting the development. The family structure and adherence to traditional values are other factors that make it difficult to get a break through in the use of Internet.

Email is slowly becoming popular. Kolkata online, one of the first email services in Kolkata, was started in 1996 by a private owner. This was at an early stage in IT development and the purpose was to provide possibilities for people in Kolkata to communicate with relatives and others abroad. The email service had no funding and maintenance and infrastructure was relying on Hari's computer company. Kolkata online took a small charge for the email service. Later on it became possible to meet ends. In 2000 the email service at Kolkata online was used by 200-persons/ day, mainly for communication among family members. One of my informants, a 76 years old well-educated Bengali Hindu, had started to use Calcutta online in 1997. He lived alone in south Kolkata. His only child, a son, had moved to the USA in 1978 and the wife was dead. The son, who had friends that used Kolkata online, had told him about it. My informant explained that Kolkata online is running very well, it is reliable and it helps in the budget. It is cheaper than a telephone call. Usually, he typewrites his messages in English and then delivers it to the office at Kolkata online. They computer write it and send it to the son. When the reply arrives from the son, the staffs at the Kolkata online office delivers it at his house. It is also possible to book the sending of email in advance. He would prefer to

have email facilities in his own place but it is too expensive to buy the equipment and he only uses it for about one hour a week.

The initial purpose of Kolkata online was to provide the Kolkata population with an email service, but It soon developed into a website supplying the Kolkata population in the Diaspora with contact, news and information from the home. A news section was introduced in 1996 and later on the gift section and other services developed. About 5000 persons/day visited the website. On festive occasions the site had about 10.000 users/day. The users came mainly from USA, Canada and UK. Most of the people used it at the office. It was possible to see when the lunch hour came in different parts of USA, due to the number of users on Kolkata Online.

Kolkata online and the email service gave the common man, "the man in the street" benefits from Internet. My informants considered email to be a very convenient form of communication although the nature of online communication was sometimes questioned. Communication online was described as lacking the emotional aspect. Talking and face-to-face communication conveys values and the attitude and gives a greater understanding. The content of an email message might easily be misinterpreted. Another point that they took up was the importance to be able to communicate in the native language. One of my informants asked why the email service that he used didn't scan the messages. If they scanned it, it could be sent in its original form and in his own handwriting. Another informant told me about a small email service run by a single person in South Kolkata that used scanning. In this way it was possible to send a letter in the mothers' own handwriting.

Kolkata online diminished the gap between home and the groups in the Diaspora. Online communication and email has become the major means for communication with and among the Diaspora populations. The new technologies have got an important role in the formation of relationships and community integration. The new communication forms gives way to new forms of interaction. Interaction on a global and transnational level has been initiated and new ways of coexisting and experiencing together proliferate. The new communication forms cut across traditional and national communities and transcend geographical boundaries. Diasporic groups become connected in networks including a multiplicity of locations across geographical and cultural borders. Global networks, online communities and associations have been formed and numerous websites with a focus on the Diaspora population have appeared. The websites and networks cover most of the topics of interest for the Diasporic groups. The Diaspora websites have become forums that play an important role in unifying and coordinating the population in the Diaspora. They form" spaces of communication where

remote localities and their experiences come together and become synchronised into complex landscapes characterised by multidimensionality and multiplicity of flows”. (Tsagarousianou, R, 2004, p. 61- 62)

### The celebration of Durga

Online activities and interaction have become part of the daily life among the Diaspora population. It has become a means through which they express and represent themselves. Diaspora websites form arenas where life in the Diaspora is explored, reflected upon and debated. Cultural and traditional meanings are created, reproduced, transformed and contested online. Tradition and the meaning of the myth of the home is negotiated and constructed. The notion of belonging and identity is defined. I will give an illustration of the processes of negotiation and creation of tradition and cultural meanings through the Durga puja. The Durga Puja is the main religious festival among the Bengalis Hindus. In the year of 2000, approximately 1200 community pujas were held in the city of Kolkata and hundreds of old family pujas were celebrated. The joke runs that if a couple of Bengalis get together, they will be sure to set up at least three Durga Pujas. The Durga puja is the celebration of Durga, the ten-armed goddess of fertility and the third embodiment of the Devi. The Durga puja is celebrated in the autumn at the end of the monsoon. The puja spans over ten days. The rituals are elaborate and the preparations start long before. The making of the Durga idol is governed by a series of rituals closely related with the holy river Ganga. The interpretations of the Durga mythology are rich. Literally, Durga means the remote and Inaccessible Goddess. She is also given the epithets mother goddess or Shakti, the primeval source of divine power and cosmic energy, the Ultimate Warrior Goddess, Satta or the highest form of consciousness. In Bengal the worship is based on the Tantric text the ‘Kalikapuran’. The Bengali mythology describes the Durga as Uma, the wife of lord Shiva living in Kaliasha. Uma and her children come back to the earth during Durga Puja to visit her parent’s home. But evil forces are present and she has to kill the Mahisur, the demon. After four days, she returns with her family to her husband Shiva. Just as Bengali customs prescribes married daughters to visit their parents for a few days of the year.

The first recorded Durga Puja took place during the Mughal Empire in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. At that stage the Durga puja was celebrated by the old Bengali Hindu families that functioned as banaians and dewans for the British. The puja was performed in the family and the worship included relatives and occupational categories related to the family on a hereditary basis. The puja had an extensive nature and included elaborate rituals performed with large-scale

celebrations. The different families competed in grandeur and splendour and the performance of the puja became a status symbol. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century a new element was added to the festivals. The Durga Puja became a form of business entertainment. High British officials as Clive and Hastings were invited to celebrate the puja in the families. The guests took part of the festivities but they were not allowed to enter the thakur ghar, the site for the Durga image. The old family pujas still has a strong position in Kolkata, although the celebration of the puja has diminished in grandeur. For many of the families, the situation has changed and they have problems financing it.

Community pujas appeared in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At that point it was restricted to a limited number of Bengali Hindu castes. Later on it developed into a community festival including all groups in the society. The community pujas got an important political role. During the Swadeshi and the nationalist movement, the community pujas became nationalist forums and bases for resistance. For example, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, the all time Bengali freedom hero, was leader of one of the well-known community pujas. One of the participants in the puja describes how the Mahisasur (the demon) was made up like a British, Ma Durga was Bharat Mata (mother India) liberating India from colonial Rule. The police stalled the puja and the idols were destroyed. (Debamitra Mitra, Netguru)

The community pujas are organised and funded through the collective effort of the people of the neighbourhood, the para. Often politically influential men in the community have a leading position in the puja committees. The budgets for the big community puja organisers are enormous. A competitive element has been integrated and awards are given for the construction of the pandals, the lighting works, the image of the Durga, management, creativity, aesthetics and ambience. The group of functionaries includes a variety of ritual specialists, artisans and craftsmen. Different commercial communities as fruit sellers, people dealing with public address systems, grocers and merchants are involved.

The Durga Puja has a great social significance in the Bengali Hindu community. The puja celebrations renew kinship with friends and family. Relatives and NRIs come to visit. Good food is prepared and Gifts are exchanged. Usually people go “pandal hopping” and meet friends and neighbours at the different pandals. Huge crowds of people come from the suburbs and there is a large influx of tourists to the city. Cultural activities play an important part in the puja celebrations. Music albums and films are released. Puja magazines, puja Barshiki, are published. Musical soirees, cultural shows, exhibitions and poster displays are highly valued. The last day of the puja is a grand community celebration ending up in the

immersion of the Durga in the Ganga. The Durga returns back to her husband Shiva, but she will be back the next year.<sup>v</sup>

### The online puja

The Durga puja has continued to increase in importance and adapted to changing times. In the late 60's Durga images were flown overseas. Now Durga Puja websites have become very popular among the Diaspora population. The number of puja sites is big, making a quick scan on the net I stumbled on 25 sites focussing solely on the Durga puja in Kolkata and numerous sites for overseas pujas in USA and Europe. Some sites were focussed on Durga puja greeting cards, some on cooking and the specific puja recipes. One site displayed a Durga image exhibition at an art gallery in Delhi. Bangalinet.com had one of the most elaborated sections for the Durga puja. Bangalinet.com is a general website for overseas Bengalis. The site is described as "a home away from home" and it covers a great deal of issues relevant for the Diaspora population, news, information about overseas Bengali organisations, education, a Bengali Marriage site, the Bengali calendar, astrology and a lot of other sections. The Durga puja section is well structured. The section covers the myth and legends of the Durga, date and time schedule for the puja according to the Bengali almanac, the preparations for the puja and a section on the craftsmen and ritual specialists that are involved in the puja. The specific rituals that are performed during the puja are described. A section on ritual accessories notes down the items that are used in the different rituals, such as indur (vermillion), Panchabarnar guri (5 coloured dust), A dhoti (for Vishnu), and so on. Another section displays the Durga puja cuisine and the recipes of the old traditional houses. Old family pujas and famous Durga pujas in Kolkata are presented. Further it is possible to download mantras and the sound of the dahks, the drummers, wallpapers and screensavers. The "Anandutsav Durga puja portal", run by a well-known newspaper, offers virtual pandal hopping at Kolkata pujas with slide shows from the different puja sites. The section includes community pujas and apartment pujas, the pujas held by the communities in the recently constructed housing complexes. West Bengal and the rest of the world are displayed. The site of the world included 15 pages and 170 albums with pictures from Durga pujas all over the world. Video clips illustrate the proceedings of the celebrations in Kolkata. The section puja songs give the viewer the possibility to enjoy the Aagamani songs with a well-known singer. The songs celebrate Uma's return to her paternal home in the company of her children. As the pujas come to an end the songs express sadness over Durga's departure. The fun and game section includes cartoons depicting different aspects of the myth of Durga and games adapted to the Pujas. It is

possible to play ping-pong with Mahisasur, the demon, or to Help Kartik, Durga's son, to overcome several obstacles in his mother's battle against Mahisasur. The download zone presents wallpapers and screensavers made by well-known artists. It also includes downloads for cell phones. Free E- Greeting cards are distributed. Some of the websites offer possibilities to perform rituals on the net. Bangalinet.com provides E-Puja on "this auspicious occasion of Durga puja". They describe it as a unique way of worshipping. It is an interactive presentation where the devotee can offer flowers, light the lamps, play the dhak, and do aarti. Through the click and drag mechanism in the site it is possible to garland the Durga with flowers, make the usual rituals for the Durga, including offerings of flowers and ghee, the use of the lamp and incense. The ritual is accompanied by mantras and drumming. The site "the holidayspot.com" also offers e-puja. Here it is named virtual puja and it is possible to make worship for the wellbeing of someone. The puja site is a bit simpler than bangalinet.com, but it also includes virtual prasada, received after having performed the worship. Prasada denotes the leavings of the gods, and it conveys blessings to the devotee. Durgapujas.com gives a good illustration of the management of a Durga puja site. The team consist of members spread across the globe, India, UK, USA and Europe. The website is supported by BBC and Voice of America. The management of the site is said to engage thousands of participants and the site has millions of viewers from over 50 countries.

### The Virtual community

Kapferer states that Human beings work with the cultural material that they have at hand. (Kapferer 1997 p 268) I agree to this statement and I also would like to add the sense that human beings work in the way of reshaping, reforming, rejecting and attaching new meanings and also integrating new aspects to the cultural material. The Durga puja sites give elaborate descriptions of the Durga mythology. The different rituals and the prescriptions for performing them correctly are displayed. Old family pujas and other famous pujas in Kolkata are described. The usual puja entertainments are available online. The viewer can listen to the agamani songs, play puja games and get the new puja releases of music and puja magazines. Puja recipes are displayed and discussed. The viewers are invited to an active participation through virtual pandal hopping. It might be possible to make a virtual visit to the puja and pandal in the para, neighbourhood at home, where the rest of the family celebrates. Virtual rituals are performed. The Durga is garlanded, flowers and ghee are offered to the goddess with the correct mantras and the sound of the dakhis in an online setting. Bruce Kapferer (1989, 1997) suggests that myths, rituals and symbols might be charged with the meaning and

import of the present. Meaning and value is constructed in an ongoing process of discursive practices. (Kapferer 1989, 1997) The Durga puja has adapted to online conditions and virtual celebrations. Religious and symbolic forms of expression have been reformulated and are re-configured. The Durga puja, the tradition and its symbols have been charged with the meaning of the present situation. The meaning and value of the ritual and the ritual actions are constructed in the discursive practices of making sense of the world, the here and now, the life in the Diaspora.

On the Durga puja sites tradition and the myth of the home are explored, reflected upon and debated in a dynamic process of meaning making. The websites form "spaces of communication" connecting Diasporic groups in networks including a multiplicity of locations across geographical and cultural boundaries. They constitute arenas where life in the Diaspora is negotiated and where Cultural and traditional meanings are produced. The notion of belonging and identity is defined. As Rosa Tsagarousianou (2004) states, Diasporic communities are "imagined communities" continually created, reconstructed and reinvented. Diasporic identities are formed at the Intersection of connectivity and cultural reinvention and reconstruction. (Tsagarousianou, R 2004) In phenomenological terms, the world is constituted and structured by the subjects. The constitution of the world is depending on the subjects' experiences and cultural background. The world is constituted through intersubjectivity. The subject adapts to other subjects through interactions in the world. They share things and a world in common and come to conceive of the world as a common world. It affects not only the conception of what there is but also the conception of what has been and what will be. Time, space, history, past, present and the future are intended by the subjects. It entails the constitution of a worldview and socio-historical and cultural life worlds.<sup>vi</sup> On the Durga puja sites, the meaning and significance of tradition and the notion of home are contested and illuminated. Consensus is reached on the significance and the different elements become formalised. The Durga puja is made into an icon of identity, uniting and holding together the Diaspora population. They form an online community defined by a sense of belonging and a specific virtual culture. The virtual community engage in a common interpretation of identity and a common notion of the life world.

The online interaction and encounters among the Diaspora communities make sense in relation to offline social, political and cultural contexts, in relation to peoples daily life. John Postill (2005) states that the electronic media contribute to the emergence of a new social field of local community building that might change the way that face-to-face interaction is embedded, organised and conceptualised. Local relations might be reconstructed and placed

in a new social field, a field in the making, including fluidity and diversity of social formations. (John Postill 2005) Through the methodologies elaborated in micro sociology and micro history, Diasporas might be described as the microcosms, the lens through which the wider social, political and economic arena might be explored. Or in Kapferer's (1997) terms, as the life world, the particular lived sites of the everyday world, the realities of human construction. The life world is formed in the actualities of experience, historical complexes, local and global forces, historical, economic and political events. The forces of actuality affect the everyday life and the realities of human construction. (Kapferer 1997, pp325-326)

### Conclusion

Among the Kolkata intellectuals, media as film, literature, satellite TV and the ICT technologies have got an increasing importance. The ICT technologies give opportunities for interaction on a global and transnational level. The new forms of communication have become a vehicle for contact and transmission of ideas, cultural forms and tradition and they play a significant role in the formation of relationships and community integration. The category of modern intellectuals in Kolkata emerged in the colonial encounter. The intellectual discourse has been formed and shaped by the specific characteristics of the Bengali Tradition, context and culture. The Kolkata intellectuals have a long tradition of interaction with external forces and centres and in this category migration has been frequent since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Among the groups of Bengali Hindus in the Diaspora, tradition and the relationship to the home was described in the terms of transformation, fluctuations, and reflections on the changing context. The myth of the home was made up in the intersection between relationship to home, the perception of the meaning of tradition at home and the conditions in the new settlement. Online communication and Email has become the major means for communication with and among Diasporic groups. The Diaspora websites have become forums that play an important role in unifying the Diaspora population. Diaspora websites constitute arenas where life in the Diaspora is explored, reflected upon and debated. Tradition and the meaning of the myth of the home is negotiated and constructed, the notion of belonging and identity is defined. The place of settlement, the place of origin and Diasporic groups in other localities become connected in networks across geographical boundaries. Their experiences come together and become synchronised. Cultural, traditional and religious features and ideas might get an encompassing force and permeate identity, social formations and the life world among the groups. For example, the Durga puja has been made into an icon of identity, uniting and holding together the Diaspora populations beyond geographical

boarders and constraints. Through the Durga puja websites the tradition has been transmitted and conveyed to the new environment. The puja has adapted to online conditions and virtual celebrations. Religious and symbolic forms of expression have been reformulated and re-configured. The different elements become formalised and consensus is made up over the significance. The Diasporic groups are unified as an online community defined by a sense of belonging and a specific virtual culture. In phenomenological terms, they share things and a world in common. It affects the conception of the present and the conception of what has been, the past, and what will be, the future. A common identity is constructed in cyberspace. It entails the constitution of a worldview and socio-historical and cultural life worlds. It refracts a similar interpretation of identity and every day life among the Diaspora communities. The online interaction and encounters among the Diaspora communities make sense in relation to offline social, political and cultural contexts, in relation to peoples daily life. It affects and shapes the lived sites of the everyday world, the life world, the realities of human construction from which human beings continuously form and reform their realities.....

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<sup>i</sup> The ideas and the material in this paper mainly stems from my PhD work on intellectuals in Kolkata and my ten months of fieldwork among Kolkata intellectuals in 2000-2001. (Kerstin Andersson, “*Intellectual Movements in Bengal*”, PhD thesis, Department of Social Anthropology, University of Gothenburg, Sweden, (forthcoming) )

I integrated research on the implications of satellite TV and ICT technologies among the Kolkata intellectuals as part of my PhD work. The research covered several different areas, technical aspects, infrastructure, the spread and outreach of the media, the extent and the purpose of the use and the specific problems and requirements encountered in the field. Studies of websites and other online archival resources constituted one subfield of interest.

<sup>ii</sup> For an elaboration of a phenomenological approach in Social anthropology, see Bruce Kapferer 1983, 1989, 1997.

<sup>iii</sup> My definition of the intellectual field in Calcutta includes what is commonly called “modern intellectuals”, the intellectual category that emerged in the interaction with the colonial system of knowledge, the English speaking intelligentsia. This should be contrasted with what is commonly called “traditional” intellectuals. Malik (1977) defines the traditional intellectual as existing alongside of the English speaking intelligentsia. Traditional intellectuals express themselves in the native language. In the middle Ages and the pre British period the traditional intelligentsia espoused religious values and provided entertaining works for the aristocracy and the masses. During the period of the British rule in India this group gradually acquired the attributes of a modern and secular intelligentsia. According to Malik the importance and significance of this segment of Indian intellectuals has increased in the post independence period. They function as agents of modernisation and synthesiser of western and eastern ideas. They play an important role in bridging the gap between the traditional and modern value systems and provide a bridge between the English speaking and westernised political elites and the masses. (Malik 1977) I also will point out that I have no intention of denigrating the existence of an intellectual category in pre British Bengal. I.e. Mukerjee points out the role of the Bengali intellectuals during the Muslim period when they served at the Muslim court. (Mukerjee 1994)

<sup>iv</sup> In the west, intellectual pursuit and religious affiliation has often been seen as contradictory and mutually exclusive. Regarding the Indian intellectuals, the pluralistic and heterogeneous character of The Hindu tradition has often been emphasised. I.e. Nehru, Tagore and Gandhi argument against religious intolerance and emphasised the pluralistic nature of the Indian tradition. See i.e. Sarkar 1996, Beteille 1977, Nandy 1977, Thapar 1977

<sup>v</sup> The material in this part is based partly on field material and also on texts by Banerjee, B.1973, Chaliha, J. Gupta, B. 1990, Chakraborti, S 2001, Das, I 2003

<sup>vi</sup> For an elaboration of the phenomenological approach in philosophy, see e.g. Macintyre, A. 1985, Lubcke, P. 1987, Craig, E, 1998, Embree, L 1998, Follesdal, 1998, Sokolowski, R. 1999, Jolliffe, D. 2001

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