

Kalighat Temple in Kolkata: Celebrating the Place for Ritualistic Perception and Togetherness

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ABSTRACT: Kalighat Temple is one of the most important places of celebrating ritualistic behaviour of people with diverse socio-economic background. The temple is located at Kolkata (earlier Calcutta) in West Bengal state and is considered as a significant cultural heritage site with the association of the Goddess Kali and the *Shakti (Sati) Peetha* tradition according to Hindu religious belief. People's ritualistic perception attached to this temple spread from the temple's inner sanctum and extends into the wider arena of the entire city.

The present study aims to identify the various aspects related to the nature of infrastructure and also investigate to explore the ritualistic perception that are linked to the religious activities of the Kalighat temple. Based on qualitative method of study, the present research reveals that, the Kalighat Temple represents a different significance for different people with diversity in social groups and economic classes and their continuous interactions and interdependencies. The study also points out that, the temple offers numerous possibilities to local people depending on daily, special and ceremonial temple functions both socially, economically, culturally and spiritually.

KEYWORDS: Kalighat, Temple, Ritual, Activities, Togetherness

INTRODUCTION

Kalighat Temple, located at Kolkata (earlier Calcutta) in West Bengal state, is recognized as an important religious and cultural heritage site with the association of the Goddess Kali and the *Shakti (Sati) Peetha* tradition. Religious life at Kalighat is not confined to the temple's inner sanctum but extends into the surrounding streets, riverfront, markets, other public spaces and holistically the entire city. Historical evidences such as the discovery of Gupta-era coins and references of Kalighat in medieval Bengali literature demonstrate the long-standing significance of the site. According to Hindu religious tradition, the temple is regarded as a "*Sati Peetha*" as is believed to be the spot where the last three toes of the right foot of Goddess *Sati* fell. In a wider sense, apart from serving the community as a worship epicenter for the Goddess Kali, the Kalighat Temple also creates a place of pilgrimage, ritual devotion and the site for community interaction through ritual cycle.

BACKGROUND

According to Hindu mythology, Daksha was a king whose daughter, Sati, undertook rigorous penance in order to win Lord Shiva as her husband. She married him against her father's wish. Sometime afterward, Daksha organized a grand yajna (sacrificial ritual) and invited every deity except his son-in-law, Shiva. Sati heard about the ceremony from the sage Narada, who also remarked that a daughter needs no invitation to visit her father's house. Persuaded by this, she resolved to attend uninvited. Shiva advised against it, but she did not heed his counsel and went to her father's home. There she received no welcome; instead, Daksha publicly humiliated her and spoke disparagingly about her husband. Unable to endure such disrespect toward Shiva, Sati sacrificed herself. When Shiva received news of her death, he became furious with uncontrollable anger. From a lock of his hair, he created Virabhadra, who beheaded Daksha and cast the head into the same sacrificial fire. Shiva then wandered across the earth, carrying Sati's lifeless body in his arms and performing the Tandava, the dance of destruction. To spare the universe from his wrath, Vishnu released his Sudarshan Chakra and severed Sati's body into pieces. These fragments fell at various locations across the Indian subcontinent, and each site came to be revered as a Sati Peetha. Wherever her body parts fell, a temple was erected to commemorate different

manifestations of Shiva and Parvati and became a Hindu pilgrimage. These temples are scattered around different parts of India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Pakistan.

The present study revolves around the operational structure of Kalighat temple focusing on the infrastructure, organization, religious performances and ritualistic perception that helps in maintaining the functionality of the temple. The study, thus, aims to identify the nature of infrastructure and to illustrate the ritualistic perception that are linked to the religious activities of the Kalighat temple.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

From the earlier days of the development of Kolkata (former Calcutta), the Kalighat Temple in South Kolkata is considered a place where religious life and everyday urban life have become deeply interconnected. This place is one of Kolkata's oldest neighbourhoods, developed around the famous Kali Temple and the Adi Ganga, a paleochannel of the Hooghly River (Biswas, 2025). In present day, to provide a sustainable working environment, restoration of terracotta tiles and other decorative elements of the Kalighat Temple in Kolkata is mentioned in the works of some scholars. A reflective and detailed account of the restoration work of the temple provides devotees not only a place of religious worship but also an important expression of Bengali faith, cultural identity and artistic craftsmanship (Bhattacharya, 2024). Researchers provide useful descriptive information about the architectural heritage, terracotta ornamentation, and restoration of Kalighat Temple, although it is primarily a reflective account rather than a formal academic study of temple administration or government intervention. Biswas (2025) examined the geographical and historical development of Kalighat as a religious and pilgrimage site in Kolkata and focuses on the belief that the Kalighat was considered as a sacred location long before the construction of the present Kalighat Temple in 1809. The study was descriptive in nature and drew upon mythological texts, medieval Bengali literature, historical accounts and old cartographic materials. Modern geographical tools such as QGIS and Google Earth Pro are also used to produce maps and support the geographical interpretation of historical evidence.

After the construction and development of the present temple structure in 1809, many additions have been made in its structure like the *Nat-mandir* and nearby Shyam-Rai Temple, which were later added to the main temple structure (Ganguly, 2026). Some other researchers like Chakraborty and Ji (2023) examine the heritage significance and conservation challenges of the Adi Ganga–Kalighat precinct in Kolkata, with particular emphasis on the relationship between urban development and the protection of cultural and historic heritage. The researchers focus on the Adi Ganga, which is historically associated with the Kalighat Kali Temple and has played an important role in the religious, cultural, economic and social life of the area. The study argues that rapid urbanization and inadequate management have significantly altered the historic character of the precinct. The researchers use Heritage Impact Assessment (HIA) as a systematic approach for identifying and evaluating the effects of urban development on cultural heritage. The study also connects heritage conservation with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11.4, which focuses on protecting cultural and natural heritage, and SDG 8.9, which promotes sustainable tourism and local culture.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Under the perspective of functionalism, religion is perceived by Émile Durkheim (1912/1995) as more than just the body of beliefs in the supernatural. Rather, religion can be described as the social fact and a system of practices based on the duality of sacred and profane, with the ultimate purpose of unifying individuals into one moral entity through collective consciousness. In the instance of Kalighat Temple, religion has accomplished this very objective, as the temple serves as one of the important places of pilgrimage in the city of Kolkata and site for community interaction through ritual cycle. Among all the festivals celebrated in the temple, Kali Puja proves to be the most important festival. Celebrated on Amavasya night in Kartik month of Bengali calendar, corresponding to Diwali, Kali Puja draws the highest number of devotees than other festivals organized in the temple. Unlike the celebration of Durga Puja which is a multi-day event with pandal construction in the entire city and special arrangements made for it, Kali Puja in Kalighat is an overnight celebration dedicated to Bhavatarini, who is a form of Kali and the main deity of the temple. Bhavatarini adorns herself in the flowers of red hibiscus, which is very sacred to her, and she is offered bhog, which is peculiar to a Hindu temple, as she is offered fish and rice besides sweets and fruits. Apart from Kali Puja, some other festivals performed in the temple include Durga Puja, Diwali, Snan Yatra and Poila Boishakh, which marks the Bengali New Year Festival.

Objectives and Methodology

The main objectives of the study are

- 1) To identify the nature of infrastructure of Kalighat Temple and
- 2) To illustrate the ritualistic perception that helps in maintaining the functionality of the Kalighat Temple

The study is qualitative and is based on the researcher's field observations, supported by historical sources and academic literature.

Kalighat Temple: Nature of Infrastructure

Historically, Kalighat is described as an area that was once marshland and later developed into an important settlement and pilgrimage centre. The establishment of the present temple is dates back in 1809 (Biswas, 2025) encouraged the growth of pilgrimage and commercial activities around the site, creating a religious-urban economy. Architectural and cultural development of the neighbourhood also explain how different cultural influences became incorporated into its environment. The Kalighat Temple can be seen as an example of Bengali Aatchala-style architecture, which is a traditional temple design of Bengal with an eight-sided, slanting roof. The eight-sided roof is constructed by placing a small four-sided roof structure on top of a comparatively four-sided roof base. At the centre of the temple lies the "Garbha Griha," or the sanctum sanctorum, which holds deep religious meaning. The seven steps leading down towards the goddess are seen as a symbol of the bond between a mother and child in the womb, representing the sacredness of birth. The temple also holds special importance as it is regarded as a "*Sati Peetha*" believed to be the spot where the last three toes of the right foot of Goddess *Sati* fell. These sacred remains are preserved in a silver box placed under the "*bedi*" (altar), on which the idol of Maa Kali has been established. Inside the sanctum, the deity is depicted in her fierce form, adorned with a garland of skulls and a protruding tongue, symbolizing the victory of good over evil. Together, this long establishment and carefully built sacred architecture make Kalighat Temple one of the most important religious structures among Hindu religious believers that is located in Kolkata.

Kalighat Temple has a well-organized system of management, led by a Trustee Board and a temple committee that oversees its day-to-day functioning. According to Chandrashekhar (2024), the temple follows a hereditary tradition of priesthood, where the role of the priest passes down through generations within the same family from grandfather to father and from father to son - with each priest performing duties according to his status and position within this hierarchy. Every year, around 10 to 12 thousand priests take their turn in conducting rituals and worship at the temple. Beyond religious duties, the Kalighat Kali Temple Committee plays a wider role in preserving the temple's cultural and spiritual heritage. It organizes cultural programs such as classical music and dance performances to educate younger generations about Bengal's traditions, runs healthcare services including free medical camps and check-ups in collaboration with hospitals, and carries out charitable activities like distributing free meals, clothes and blankets, along with providing educational support to underprivileged children, orphans, and the elderly. The committee also stays closely engaged with the local community through regular meetings, and steps in with resources and volunteers during natural disasters or crises. Looking ahead, the committee plans to renovate and modernize the temple premises while preserving its traditional charm, and aims to expand its outreach in healthcare and education, ensuring that the temple continues to serve as both a spiritual centre and a pillar of community welfare. Sky walk is constructed near the premises of Kalighat Kali Temple to facilitate the devotees for reaching the main gate of the temple.

Ritualistic Perception

Importance of the Kalighat site starts with its designation as a holy site in the traditional meaning of this term as applied to religious studies. It includes the understanding of a site set apart through time for the purpose of being a place of convergence between the world of people and the world of God, irrespective of the physical form of the building standing at this site. The temple belongs to the category of 51 *Sati Peethas*, places considered to mark spots where different pieces of *Sati's* body fell to the earth after her dismemberment following Vishnu's action with his discus to stop Shiva's dance of sorrow; according to tradition, the toes of *Sati's* right foot fell to the earth at this very site. This mythology existed centuries before the present-day temple was built, thus bestowing a sacred nature upon the site that is in principle independent from the existence of the building – and this is why the site has managed to withstand all the successive reconstructions and mediatic developments without losing its sacred nature.

According to the priest from Kalighat temple regular offerings are modest and repetitive- coconuts, cloths, small sums of money placed daily by ordinary visitors, while special offerings are richer and occasion-bound, including non-vegetarian food served to the deity across all three meals of the day, in contrast to the largely vegetarian offerings made at the adjoining shrine within the same complex. Sociologically, this layered system illustrates Durkheim's (1912) distinction between the sacred and the profane, since

ordinary objects become sacred only through the act of ritual transfer, while the coexistence of vegetarian and non-vegetarian offering streams under one roof reflects religious syncretism, in which seemingly contradictory moral and dietary codes are absorbed into a single sacred economy rather than resolved into uniformity, echoing Robert Redfield's (1956) idea of a "great tradition" folding multiple "little traditions" into itself.

In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), Durkheim explained that the emergence of a ritual can be linked with physical proximity of the actors and their reciprocal action in the "collective consciousness". It followed that all the rituals related to Kalighat temple performed in connotation of collective involvement of pilgrims of the temples. On ordinary days the temple keeps a fixed rhythm, opening at four in the morning with an invocation and closing at nine at night with a final offering, drawing what the priest described as a moderate flow of devotees. On special festival days, however, the deity is ceremonially relocated to a separate hall, and the temple becomes densely crowded. To Durkheim (1995:217) gathering as an act should be seen as a powerful stimulant for creating a "sort of electricity" from sheer togetherness. This is highly attractive for generating collective consciousness. This emotive pleasure and intellectual intensity arise the sensation of the divinity. This strength acts as a force to bind the group together with the religious bond. This bonding ultimately enhances the internal power of the group.

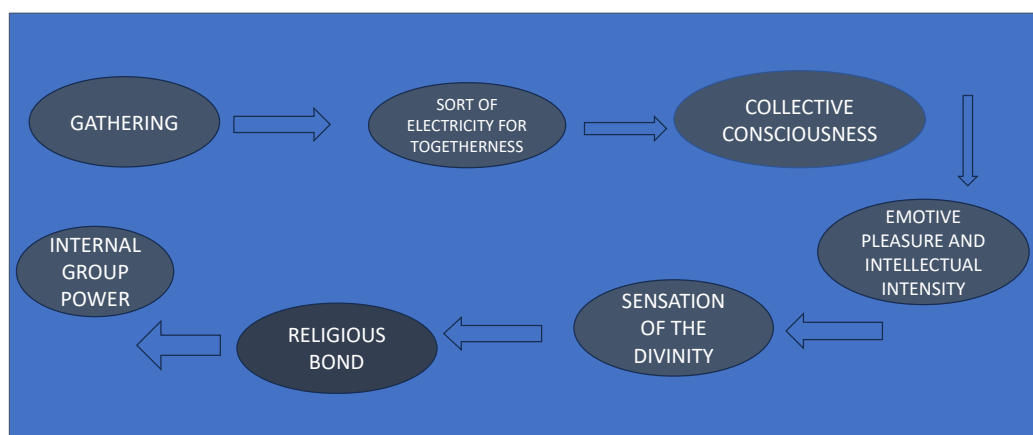


Diagram 1: Process of creating Religious Bond following Durkheimian discussion [Diagram is prepared by Researchers]

In Kalighat temple this type of collective consciousness can be linked with sensation of the divinity which creates religious bond. This bond ultimately makes the internal group power. Thus, religious bonding relates the group power directly. Now it can be said that religious power enhances the cohesive force within the community.

Prasad, the consecrated food returned to devotees, is distributed differently depending on the day. On regular days, small and largely uniform portions are given out after each of the day's fixed prayer times, whereas on special or festival days both the type and volume of prasad expand considerably, often distributed at multiple points through the day rather than at set intervals, in step with the larger crowds and the intensified festive economy of giving.

The priest's description of a guardian deity treated as structurally necessary for the shrine to be considered complete, the practice of animal sacrifice, and a sacred water tank tied to fertility rites places the temple within a broadly Tantric tradition, distinct from more Sanskritic, strictly vegetarian modes of worship found elsewhere. The fertility ritual itself, in which women bathe and then bow repeatedly with offerings, exemplifies Victor Turner's (1969) idea of liminality, marking a transitional passage between one social identity (childless) and a hoped-for future identity (mother), enacted communally at a threshold between the mundane and the sacred. Elsewhere in the complex, a wish-fulfilling tree draws devotees who tie threads and stones to mark a wish and later return to untie them once it is granted, while a separate shrine to a consort deity, complete with its own kitchen, supports a distinct stream of offerings. The guardian shrine, standing apart from the main sanctum, was described by the priest as indispensable to the site's completeness and protective function.

The analysis revolves around the evaluation of the perception and impact of the Kalighat Temple, in particular, the relationship between the Kalighat Temple and the local festival, cultural promotion, souvenir business, and change in perception of the devotees in an era of technological advancement.

CONCLUSION

The study reveals that, the Kalighat Temple represents a different significance for people from different social classes and their continuous interactions as well as their interdependencies. The area is developed based on various temple functions both socially, economically, culturally and spiritually. In this regard, constant negotiation is highly necessary among all the stakeholders including the *sewayets*, the government, reformers, vendors and pilgrims from different parts of the world who are also dependent on this institution. During every festival and ceremony, the temple becomes an organization that brings people together, making it a unique place of celebrating togetherness. Thus, besides spiritual performances, this temple also offers scope to devotees and local people to perform socio-cultural and economic activities and these practices may be seen as ritual solidarity, community togetherness and social bonding –aiming to showcase the bridge between tradition and modernity.

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