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Promoting sustainable development in festivals through ritual revisions

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ABSTRACT

This study takes a process-oriented approach to answer the research question: how may long-standing religious festivals promote sustainable development by modifying various ritual elements? The contribution of one-time events to overarching long-term sustainability goals may be hindered predominantly by their transitory nature. Based on a case study, this research examines a 400-year-old annual Hindu festival, *Durga Puja*, as a potential contributor to sustainable development. The data comprises online news articles on the *Durga Puja* published between 2002 and 2022 in the Indian daily, *The Times of India*. Based on a thematic data analysis, the research findings highlight three processual themes related to altering various ritual elements: artefacts, scripts, performance roles and audience. These themes include subverting the patriarchal, adopting a proactive approach to invitation and facilitation, and incorporating visual storytelling. The study's findings have theoretical implications regarding the broader discussions on sustainability, such as sustainable development goals (SDGs) and the potential of festivals to contribute to them through ritual modifications. As such, festival organisers, policymakers and practitioners may find the study helpful in promoting sustainable development through ritual changes in festivals.

Introduction

Festivals have been integral to human history, serving as public cultural events and religious celebrations (Duffy & Mair, 2018). Broadly, a festival is a congregation of people with different ethnic, linguistic, religious, and historical affiliations and a shared worldview who engage in various activities associated with the festival (Falassi, 1987). Exploring festivals can offer valuable insights in the field of events and tourism, as people's motivations for attending festivals often overlap with those that drive them toward other tourist activities (Duffy & Mair, 2021; Crompton & McKay, 1997). Festivals and tourism offer opportunities for self-exploration and identity formation through performances, rituals and playful practices (Picard & Robinson, 2006). Religious festivals are particularly suitable for studying tourism, as demonstrated by research on religious tourism (Rinschede, 1992) and sustainable religious tourism (Romanelli et al., 2021).

Festivals have been widely recognised and celebrated as places that promote sustainability across various dimensions. Scholarly literature has recognised and extolled festivals for their

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role in promoting environmental sustainability (Collins & Cooper, 2017; Andersson et al., 2013), economic sustainability (O'Sullivan & Jackson, 2002), cultural sustainability (Suntikul, 2018) and social sustainability (McClinchey, 2017; Black, 2016). However, a recent study by Mair and Smith (2021) suggests that focusing solely on making individual events sustainable may overlook the broader potential of events to promote sustainable development. According to the Brundtland Commission report published in 1987, "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development, p. 43).

Events may raise awareness and promote sustainable lifestyles. However, Mair and Smith (2021) express concerns about transient events' long-term contribution to sustainable development, mainly due to their temporary nature. In addition to raising this concern, Mair and Smith (2021) suggest adopting a "systemic perspective" that focuses on the processes involved in event production rather than just the outcomes of events (Mair & Smith, 2021, p. 1744). The present study addresses the issues the authors raised by examining a 400-year-old traditional Hindu religious festival. The research focuses on the festival's ritual modifications, which require significant preparation and forethought. In the context of social change, emphasising the importance of rituals is crucial. Rituals serve as a way of reinforcing social bonds and keeping social groups united. As Bell (1989) notes, ritual is an essential part of how social groups maintain their identity and adapt to change. In the case of the former, a ritual can be viewed as "the expressive deployment of the symbolic structures that undergird a group's common world view" whereas in the latter case, "ritual is seen as integral to the way in which the ideals and traditions of the social group are adapted to changing circumstances" (Bell, 1989, p. 32). The present study aims to answer the question: how may long-standing religious festivals promote sustainable development by modifying various ritual elements?

To explore this idea further, the research centres on the case study of *Durga Puja*, a Hindu religious festival held in honour of the Mother Goddess *Durga*. The festival is among the most popular religious festivals in India and attracts a large number of tourists. In 2019 alone, an estimated 1.48 million domestic and international tourists arrived in Kolkata, West Bengal, *via* various transportation modes to participate in the *Durga Puja* festival, according to a report commissioned by the British Council on behalf of the Department of Tourism, Government of West Bengal (British Council, 2019). Due to its immense social and cultural significance, UNESCO recently added the festival to its Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (UNESCO, 2021). This article uses the festival as a case study to demonstrate how modifying traditional rituals can effectively promote sustainable development. Drawing on a corpus of news articles published between 2002 and 2022 in the Indian daily, *The Times of India*, the study identifies three processual themes—subverting the patriarchal, adopting a proactive approach to invitation and facilitation, and incorporating visual storytelling—related to the modifications in various ritual elements such as artefacts, scripts, performance roles and audience (Rook, 1985).

The article is structured into different sections. It begins by providing a brief overview of festivals, rituals, sustainability, and SDGs. The ensuing methodology section describes the *Durga Puja* festival and the data collection and analysis methods. The paper then presents the research findings related to the different processes involved in ritual alterations. The article concludes by discussing the implications of the study and suggesting potential avenues for future research.

Theoretical framework

Festivals and rituals

The study of festivals is not exclusive to any discipline; several disciplines share it. As Falassi (1987) points out, there are many types of festivals, such as religious festivals, rural and urban festivals, and those based on "power, class structure, and social roles" (p. 3). Importantly, festivals,

unlike special events that are one-time affairs, are "public, themed celebrations that are held regularly" (Wilson et al., 2017, p. 196). They represent polysemic and "complex cultural practices" (Quinn, 2003, p. 345), offering a (re)interpretation of several social and community aspects of our everyday lives (Turner, 1969). Festivals are phenomena of "existential richness", as opposed to monetary wealth (Pieper, 1965, p. 15), with the potential to develop communitas (Wu et al., 2020). They have served as key sites to celebrate victories (Roy, 2005), perform rituals (Turner, 1969), display cultural heritage (Cudny et al., 2012), encase spiritual and secular stories (Quinn, 2003), foster collective cohesiveness (Ozouf, 1975), sustain a community's sense of self (Derrett, 2003), provide significant social and educational benefits (Yolal et al., 2016), develop sustainable local economies (O'Sullivan & Jackson, 2002), generate social capital (Arcodia & Whitford, 2006), and enhance local creativity (Quinn, 2006).

According to anthropologists, festivals may include "feasting and rituals" (Svoboda, 2010, p. 774). Rituals are "a type of expressive, symbolic activity constructed of multiple behaviours that occur in a fixed, episodic sequence, and that tend to be repeated over time" (Rook, 1985, p. 252). As in the present case of *Durga Puja*, rituals can also be constituent elements of festivals. Rituals, myths and symbols, such as in the case of Burning Man, often characterise festivals (Pike, 2011). Put differently, festivals can be sites of important rituals. During the time they take place, festivals may provide the experience of "ritual ecstasy" (p. 156) through which participants are "cleansed, renewed, and initiated" into a reality different from their everyday life (Pike, 2011, p. 159). In the pressing crowds of festivals, individuals merge into the collective, becoming part of the "mass body" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 255). In this sense, festivals may involve the spirit of a carnival with no distinction between actors and spectators, free from social hierarchies, and where "life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 7).

Sustainability, SDGs and festivals

Sustainability is a concept encompassing three fundamental pillars—environmental, economic and social—that aim to achieve balance in resource consumption and regeneration to ensure the long-term sustainability of human life (Holmes et al., 2015). Although sustainability is commonly associated with environmental and ecological concerns, the concept extends far beyond that, referring to a sustainable society capable of persisting and thriving over time (Mair & Smith, 2021). Towards this broader sustainability agenda that essentially entails sustainable development, it is imperative to eradicate poverty, efficiently manage natural resources of the Earth, create inclusive communities that are free from violence, address the needs of the impoverished and vulnerable people, achieve gender equality, and maintain a mutually beneficial relationship between science, technology, and nature (UN, 2015). The United Nations announced 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), some pertinent to this study's context:

SDG 5.5: "Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life" (UN, 2015, p. 18)

SDG 10.3: "Ensure equal opportunity and reduce inequalities of outcome, including by eliminating discriminatory laws, policies and practices and promoting appropriate legislation, policies and action in this regard" (UN, 2015, p. 21)

SDG 11.4: "Strengthen efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage" (UN, 2015, p. 22)

SDG 11.7: "By 2030, provide universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities" (UN, 2015, p. 22)

From the social sustainability perspective, festivals are "mediators for social change" (Picard, 2016, p. 600) and present a valuable occasion for fostering a sense of community while disseminating knowledge and showcasing "sustainable behaviour in practice" (Mair & Laing, 2012, p. 693). They can

influence "local cultural production and consumption" and function as a platform for education and outreach initiatives, fostering social inclusion (Carlsen et al., 2007, p. 10). For example, multicultural festivals provide emotional and sensory experiences that help migrant festival participants "feel like they belong, contribute to their self-identity and collective well-being in a shared space" while they seek validation of their presence in a new place (McClinchey, 2017, p. 415). Small-scale local festivals in rural areas contribute to social sustainability "through a balance of consistent and innovative connections with the culture, heritage and people of a place" (Black, 2016, p. 183). Besides, music festival organisers promote social inclusion in different ways, such as through consumption (by facilitating access to education and acquiring new skills), production (by leveraging community-based organisations and local suppliers), political engagement (by advocating for social justice and social change), and social interaction and communities (by fostering an environment of inclusivity and tolerance) (Laing & Mair, 2015). Involving schools, expanding volunteer opportunities, diversifying board membership, providing discounted tickets, and fostering business partnerships are ways festivals can increase community engagement (Rogers & Anastasiadou, 2011). Other scholarly works have also proposed the public staging of festivals to promote inclusivity and encourage social engagement (Quinn et al., 2021).

From a radical activist perspective, festivals serve as sites for transformative social action. Festival activism involves using festivals to promote social justice and raise awareness about important social issues. Lesbian and Gay Pride Day (LGPD) festivals, for example, offer a space for a "collective coming out" (Kates & Belk, 2001, p. 40) and have been intimately engaged in queer activist concerns (Qin, 2022). Similarly, Caribbean carnivals have long been involved in social justice movements, employing the "double entendre of the Kaiso songs and the themes of their masquerades to oppose and remind us of the horrors of slavery" (La Rose, 2022, p. 15). Film festivals have significantly represented human injustice and suffering in cinema (Tascón, 2015; Rapoová, 2019). Some festivals have underscored green issues by adopting a vegetarian approach, e.g. by permitting the consumption of only vegetarian cuisine within the festival (Andersson et al., 2013). Others, such as Helsinki's World Village Festival, have provided new ideas on "tolerant multiculturalism, development cooperation, and sustainability in a transnational context" (Németh, 2017, p. 57).

Methodology

As noted previously, this research is based on a case study of the *Durga Puja* festival. A case study is a comprehensive scientific investigation of a real-life phenomenon in its environmental context (Ridder, 2017; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). The intensive approach of a case study method has the potential to generate rich insights into the social phenomenon being studied (Swanborn, 2010). Furthermore, studying sustainability through historical approaches like case studies can reveal different processes over time, while also providing a historical perspective of the case (Sofield et al., 1998). The present research employed a case study approach as a choice of what to study, rather than a methodological choice (Stake, 2005). Nonetheless, the *Durga Puja* festival's historical context and physical and cultural setting are detailed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the case. The choice of *Durga Puja* was carefully made to shed light on the intricate processes that go into creating a festival, as opposed to the conventional focus of event research, which is on happenings during or after event (Mair & Smith, 2021).

A brief overview of the Durga Puja festival

The worship of the warrior Mother Goddess, *Durga*, is the most prominent religious festival in the Indian state of West Bengal. It is an annual five-day autumn festival and begins on the sixth day of the nine-night festival, *Navaratri* (Rodrigues, 2003). The timing of the festival is

subject to variation and may fall between mid-September and late October, depending on the projections of the Bengali religious calendar known as *panjika* (Mukherjee, 2022). According to Hindu mythologies and cosmic lore, *Durga*, portrayed as the feminine divine riding a lion, was created by the three male Hindu Gods (*Brahma*, *Vishnu* and *Mahesh*) to slay the buffalo demon, *Mahisasura*. The mythic lore says that *Mahisasura* deceived the Gods into granting him quasi-immortality, such that only a woman could kill him. With this blessing of partial immortality, *Mahisasura*, through his atrocities, destabilised and threatened the divine order. This necessitated the creation of the divine goddess, *Durga*, who is portrayed as a powerful figure with ten hands holding different weapons. Essentially, this "corporeality of the goddess … engenders the lived-out cultural experience of the festival" (Ray, 2014, p. 336). *Durga* represents both "devotees' strong mother-figure and the sacred daughter-figure" (Sarbadhikary, 2022, p.1).

The festival commemorates *Durga*'s yearly autumnal homecoming with her four children in Bengal (McDermott, 2011) and culminates in a *Visarjan* (immersion ritual), where the clay *Durga* idol is immersed in the holy water. Notably, in contemporary times, *Durga Puja* has evolved into something more than the traditional worship of the Mother Goddess. It is now infused with social reflections addressing a variety of societal issues. It has transformed into a true bricolage, with disparate artefacts used to construct the *Durga* idol and the *pandal* (temporary shrines) (Ray, 2017). Contemporary *Durga Puja* is themed around the mundane problems of life and pressing social issues that engulf us, rather than rendering images of utopias. The fact that the *Durga Puja* festival has evolved and changed over time, including novel ways of devotion and imagery to fulfil the requirements of the community and adherents, gives the festival its distinctive character (e.g. Kapoor et al., 2022; Mukherjee, 2022). This study offers evidence of how the *Durga Puja* festival has attempted to modify various ritual elements to foster sustainability.

Methods of data collection and analysis

This case study data is based on 10,548 online news articles on *Durga Puja* published between 2002 and 2022 in the Indian daily, *The Times of India*. *The Times of India* has the highest weekly reach (offline) in India, according to a 2022 Reuters report (Newman et al., 2022). Using the search terms 'Durga Puja' on *The Times of India* website generated 10,548 articles, published between 2002 and 2022. The articles before 2002 were archived and could not be accessed. Using Rook's (1985) structural model of rituals, this study focuses on the four ritual components: artefacts (i.e. products), scripts (i.e. the behavioural sequence in using artefacts), performance role(s) (i.e. performers of ritual scripts), and audience (i.e. whom the ritual is aimed at). A 'theoretical' thematic analysis approach was taken to conduct an analytically driven analysis of the data related to ritual changes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). Out of 10,548 articles, 129 were related to some form of ritual change. In the first round of coding, the articles were broadly divided into four ritual components: artefacts, scripts, performance roles and audience. A review of the articles helped identify the distinct processes involved in ritual modifications. These are discussed in detail below.

Findings

The data analysis revealed three processual themes: subverting the patriarchal, adopting a proactive approach to invitation and facilitation, and incorporating visual storytelling. The theme of subverting the patriarchal involves challenging traditional gender norms and oppressive power structures. The theme of adopting a proactive approach to invitation and facilitation highlights the importance of creating safe spaces for diverse voices to be heard, valued and amplified. Finally, the theme of incorporating visual storytelling underscores the power of visual aids as effective tools for sustainable development. These themes are discussed in relation to the four structural components of rituals: artefacts, scripts, performance roles and audience (Rook, 1985).

Subverting the patriarchal

A patriarchal social structure is one where men hold a dominant position in various aspects of society, exerting their power and influence over others (Ortner, 2022). This structure perpetuates the notion of male privilege by systematically exerting control over and subjugating women (Johnson, 2005). It may also encompass a set of discourses deeply rooted in institutional practices, such as "deeply sedimented" cultural practices in religion (Walby, 1989, p. 214). In Indian Hindu society, women and those belonging to lower castes have historically faced humiliating living conditions because of deeply entrenched cultural practices, mainly through the power of religious traditions (Chakravarti, 1993). In India, it is still not uncommon to find "nearly hegemonic … systems of ideas/ideologies" that dictate conventional expressions of sexuality, categorisations of women as either virtuous or deviant, and mechanisms for controlling women's access to economic resources and religious institutions (Bannerji, 2016, p. 11). However, this study highlights significant changes to the ritual scripts and performance roles of the *Durga Puja* festival, challenging the patriarchal structure that has dominated the festival and society for decades. The changes are discussed below.

Changes in ritual scripts

Pushpanjali mantra (or sacred chant with flower offerings)

Participating in a floral offering called *pushpanjali* is a significant rite for attendees to worship *Durga*. After performing a handwashing ritual, devotees collect purified flowers from a basket that the *purohit* (priest) passes around the crowd. They then repeat a Sanskrit devotional verse that the *purohit* utters before lavishly showering the flowers on the *Durga* idol (Rodrigues, 2003, p. 29). The verses or *mantras* are sacrosanct and cannot be altered, mispronounced or invented. They say that when done incorrectly, it can result in misfortune (for such examples from Indian myths, see Rodrigues, 2003, p. 34). The *pushpanjali mantra* modifications were a significant step towards subverting the patriarchal order and creating gender awareness and equality.

Even today, patriarchal attitudes in several parts of Indian society favour having male children. A seemingly minor alteration to a long-held ritual script of chanting the *pushpanjali mantra* was in fact an attempt to question people's deep-seated prejudices against female offspring. Traditionally, the *pushpanjali mantra* chanted during the *Durga Puja* have included the words *Putran dehi*, a plea for a male child. This was modified to *Sanatan dehi*, which means a prayer for any child, not just a boy (Sinha, 2019). A similar shift toward gender sensitisation and neutrality was observed at another *Durga Puja pandal*. In this case, changes were made to the sacred chant, *Mahalakshmi Stuti*, where instead of saying *Putran dehi*, the words *Santan dehi* were used (Jha, 2019). Modifying the ritual script of chanting to reconcile the contradiction between the veneration of a female deity and the aspiration for male offspring represents a notable endeavour in challenging patriarchal norms. As noted in the "Sustainability, SDGs and festivals" section, changes such as the above-described ritual modifications that challenge discriminatory practices and ensure equality closely align with the United Nations' SDG 10.3.

Changes in ritual performance roles

Kumari Puja (or virgin worship)

Kumari Puja, an auspicious *Durga Puja* ritual practice in India, is generally performed on the eighth or ninth day of the festival, where nine prepubescent girls, called *kumaris* (also referred to as *kanjakas*), are worshipped as living forms of *Durga* (Rodrigues, 2003). It is believed that a virgin (*kumari*), budding with fertility, symbolises "purest bliss and fortune" (Pant, 1986, p. 179). The *kumari*, "not far from the onset of her menstrual cycle and the power to engender

life, incarnates the form of the newly awakened and fully manifest Goddess" (Rodrigues, 2003, pp. 60–61). This auspicious *Durga Puja* ritual practice has progressed significantly towards inclusion. Three recent ritual changes broke all strictures and bounds imposed by age-old patriarchal traditions. The *Kumari Puja* ritual practice usually involves worshipping a girl from a Brahmin family who has no physical 'flaws' to perform the ceremony (Niyogi & Mitra, 2019). However, in a Kolkata *Durga Puja*, a seven-year-old girl with autism was worshipped as a *kumari*. The idea of worshipping an autistic girl as *kumari* was supported by drawing an allusion to *Ganesha*, *Durga*'s 'special' elephant-headed child (Niyogi & Mitra, 2019). Worshipping an autistic girl as *Kumari* is in accordance with UN SDG 11.7, which focuses on providing secure and inclusive environments for individuals with disabilities.

A second instance was when 600 underprivileged girls were offered prayers at the *Kumari Puja* (TNN, 2017). This took place in the northern Indian city of Ludhiana, where several micro-rituals within the broader *Kumari Puja* ritual were carried out; the girls were offered food, their feet were washed, *kumkum* (red powder) was applied to their foreheads and flower petals were showered over them (TNN, 2017). A third extreme case of subverting the patriarchal order occurred when a girl of a different religion, a five-year-old Muslim girl, was worshipped as a *kumari* in a rite that traditionally only Hindu Brahmin girls can perform and participate in (Chakraborty and Roy, 2019). These changes reflect how *Kumari Puja* challenged rigid hierarchies of caste and religion and promoted social harmony and gender equality (see SDG 10.3).

Sindoor Khela (or vermillion ritual)

Sindoor Khela, performed on the festival's final day, involves married women smearing vermillion on the faces of each other and the *Durga* idol, signifying sisterhood (Das, 2020). Women begin by applying *sindoor* to the forehead and feet of *Durga*'s idol and offering her sweets and *paan* (betel leaves) (Chakraborty, 2018). For the first time in 2018, a 400-year-old traditional ritual was challenged (Sah, 2018). #noconditionsapply *Sindoor Khela* restructured the traditional ritual script and broke stereotypes, making the *Durga Puja* celebration a major vehicle for social change. A traditional rite reserved for married women was opened to single mothers and unmarried women, divorcees, LGBTQ + people, and widows in *Durga Puja* celebrations across several Indian cities (Sen & Purkayastha, 2018; Nair, 2018; Sen, 2019; Dasgupta, 2018; Sen, 2018). Even though the barbaric custom of *sati* (the Hindu practice in which a widow burned and killed herself on her dead spouse's funeral pyre) was made unlawful in India in 1829, a Hindu widow's social value and stature seems to end upon her husband's death, with many regarding her as a sign of inauspiciousness (Gilmartin, 1997). Even today, in many parts of India, the death of a husband is marked by divestment rites such as breaking the wife's red glass bangles, rubbing the vermillion from the widow's forehead and dressing the widow in a white sari. According to UN Women research, widows in countries like India, Nepal and Sri Lanka continue to be labelled as "unwanted insiders", facing a triple burden of "stigma associated with widowhood, severe constraints on access to resources, and sexual vulnerability" (UN Women, 2014). By eliminating conventional restrictions on who might perform these rituals, these examples made a powerful effort to overthrow the patriarchal system, thereby fostering sustainable development (see UN SDGs 5.5, 10.3).

Beating the Dhak (or the drumming ritual)

Dhak, an essential part of the *Durga Puja* festival, is the sacred drumming that is believed to set the mood for the triumphant *Durga*. The drum "is hung from the drummer's neck and played on its right side with two sticks, while the left side provides necessary booming feedback" (Sarbadhikary, 2022, p. 2). Paradoxically, though *Dhak* is a vital component of the *Durga Puja*, "dhakis [drummers] are placed low in the hierarchized and classicized mother goddess worship"

because they belong to "the lowest, untouchable castes" in contrast to the upper-class Brahmin priest (Sarbadhikary, 2022, p. 3). Traditionally, *dhakis* were men who made strict promises of restraint and control to worship Lord *Shiva*, a male Hindu deity who is the consort of *Durga* (Sarbadhikary, 2022). However, many *Durga Pujas* lately had female *dhakis*, dismantling all social biases and long-standing reservations (Chattopadhyay, 2022). Sometimes, *dhaks*, typically 10–12 kg heavy instruments, were made lighter so women wearing saris could play them (Chakraborty, 2019). Both modifications, which involve the inclusion of women in the conventionally male-dominated rituals of beating *dhak* and reciting *mantras* traditionally performed by male priests (discussed below) uphold UN SDG 5.5: "Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life" (UN, 2015, p. 18).

Chanting of mantras by purohits (or male priests)

The worshipping of the *Durga* idol has historically been the purview of male Brahmin *purohit* with extensive training in Vedic *mantras* and ritual practices (Rodrigues, 2003, p. 24). However, recent years have witnessed a significant shift in the traditional roles of ritual performance, with women and transgender people also taking on the mantle of priest. In Kolkata, four scholarly female priestesses led a *Puja*, setting a new precedent (PTI, 2019). This particular *puja* themed the *pandal* '*Mayer Haate Mayer Abohon*' ('Mother Goddess will be worshipped by mothers'). In another *Durga Puja*, a transgender priest conducted the *Puja* rituals challenging the patriarchal order of the festival (Chakraborty, 2018). By doing so, these *Durga Pujas* have questioned long-held, prejudiced traditions.

Adopting a proactive approach to invitation and facilitation

The festival of *Durga Puja* exhibited a proactive approach by extending invitations to marginalised and stigmatised sections of society, thereby enabling their participation in performances or attendance at the festival. As discussed below, these performances were distinct from conventional ritualistic performances. Initiatives were also undertaken to ensure that individuals with disabilities could attend. The specifics of these modifications, which led to diversification of the ritual audience, are elaborated upon below.

Changes in ritual audience

Invitation to attend and/or perform

Some *Durga Pujas* invited older people from assisted living facilities, differently abled people and slum-dwellers (Sengupta, 2022). A *Durga Puja* in Orissa, an eastern Indian state, specifically welcomed transgender people to do *pushpanjali*, aiming to mainstream transgender people (Singha, 2017). It is worth noting that although the ritual script of chanting holds a sacred significance, it is accessible to all audiences in the *shorbojonin* (for everyone) *Durga Puja*, allowing them to engage in this practice. However, inviting and welcoming marginalised sections of society proactively adds a unique and special dimension of inclusivity, making them feel like esteemed guests rather than mere attendees. As previously mentioned, there has long been a stigma associated with widows in India. When solicited by Sulabh International, a social service agency, certain *Durga Puja* committees invited around 50 widows from the old-age care homes who had experienced lives of rejection and seclusion (Sinha, 2013). This finding of the present study—concerning the inclusion of elderly and bereaved women into the ritual audience—intersects with the body of research on events that examines the relationship between gender and ageing (e.g. Wood & Dashper, 2021) as well as the well-being of those who are elderly (e.g.

Wood et al., 2018). A specific instance of human rights violation exists among individuals with facial disfigurement, particularly acid attack survivors, who often experience social discrimination and unfair treatment (Asif et al., 2022). Acid attack survivors were given special invitations to attend the *Durga Puja* festival, where they shared their stories to raise awareness of the issues they experience (TNN, 2018). The festival served as a platform for promoting positive social change, aiming to mobilise people's awareness of important issues in society.

The significance of clay/soil from brothel doors in *Durga Pujas* is essential. A priest's perspective is noteworthy:

> The clay from the doorstep of a sex worker is used to make idols and for the *mahasnan* (sacred bath) of Goddess Durga on Saptami, Maha Ashtami, and Navami [the last three days of the *puja*]. This ritual is the key to the spirit of *Shorbojonin Durgotsav* [Durga puja for all]. It goes beyond caste, creed, and religious barriers … (see Bandyopadhyay, 2009).

Without delving into this contentious age-old practice, what is relevant to this research is the proactive invitation to sex workers from major red-light districts in Kolkata, an eastern Indian city, to participate in the *Durga Puja* celebration. Besides, one Kolkata *Durga Puja* themed their *pandal* on sex workers and depicted their sufferings through artwork and atmospherics (Das, 2022).

While everyone is welcome to attend and enjoy the *shorbojonin Durga Puja*, certain *pujas* went the extra mile to include society's underprivileged groups. Some showed special care for transgender people and invited them to perform at a cultural event organised by the *puja* committee (Sengupta, 2022). Children from underprivileged backgrounds participated in a *Durga Puja* in Kolkata that organised an event called 'Chhotoder Times Sharod Sreshtho', where children acted as judges for the top 20 community *pujas* in the city (TNN, 2019). The Santhal tribes (an ethnic minority), their lives and their land—untouched by growing urbanisation and still pollution-free and lush with flora—were the focus of another *Durga Puja*. A group from the Santhal tribes was invited to perform live to an audience at a *Durga Puja* (Jamal, 2012). Reminders of the remote Santhal tribes and their rich heritage resonate with the UN's SDG 11.4, which suggests strengthening efforts to protect and safeguard the world's cultural and natural heritage. Focusing on these now-forgotten tribes reminded people of their struggle, love for their motherland and eco-friendly lifestyle. As a result, proactive invitation to perform was another process related to diversifying the ritual audience.

In some places, local Henna tattoo design (also known as *mehendi*) contests were held with the theme of the endangered *haargila* stork species (Gani, 2018). That is, an innovative strategy to raise awareness of environmental protection was to hold competitions around creating embodied representations of endangered species. In villages and rural areas where people may not have access to education (and hence the resulting awareness about environmental conservation), playful practices like these local contests may be more effective. In several other *puja pandals*, children's art contests were held to raise awareness of environmental protection and cleanliness (Malhotra, 2015).

Facilitating access to the disabled

The *Durga Puja* festival in West Bengal has made significant strides towards promoting inclusivity and accommodating individuals with disabilities. People with disabilities were given access to wheelchairs and special ramps were built for them (TNN, 2014). Trained volunteers were also deployed at the *puja pandals* for those with physical disabilities (Niyogi, 2011). Collaborations with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), such as the Autism Society of West Bengal, facilitated the participation of individuals with autism in the festivities (Sen, 2019). Additionally, *pandals* have incorporated Braille inscriptions of *puja mantras* to cater to the needs of visually impaired visitors (PTI, 2018). In another instance, a *pandal* distributed tricycles to leprosy patients

to enable them to navigate the *puja* celebrations independently (Singha & Mohanty, 2022). These efforts have been instrumental in fostering a more inclusive environment. The overall ritual modifications involving the inclusion of marginalised sections of society align with the UN SDG 10.3, which advocates for equal opportunities and eradicating discriminatory acts. In addition, enabling those with disabilities to access resources readily concurs with the UN SDG 11.7.

Incorporating visual storytelling

A narrative or story comprises a series of events arranged in chronological order to communicate a distinct message or idea (Labov & Waletzky, 1997). Visual storytelling, specifically, refers to the use of visuals to convey non-verbal communicative language and "create a mood and set a tone for the audience" (Sandler, 2018, p. 2). According to Veland et al. (2018), storytelling plays a pivotal role in facilitating transformative processes toward sustainability: "transformative futures depend on an ability to story safe and desirable pathways away from dangerous and unjust outcomes, and toward dignified futures" (p. 44). Many *Durga Puja pandals* have used visual storytelling techniques to raise awareness about various social issues by modifying their ritual artefacts.

Changes in ritual artefacts

During the Covid-19 pandemic, many *Durga Puja pandals* adopted a visual storytelling approach to raise awareness about the dangers associated with the virus and to instil hope among the people (Kapoor et al., 2022). For instance, the evil character *Coronasura* (a spin on the name *Mahisasura*) that Durga defeated, resembled the delta strain of the Coronavirus (Ghosh & Bhadra, 2021). Elsewhere, *Durga*'s idol was represented carrying medical items such as hand sanitiser and wearing a mask to raise awareness about protection from the deadly virus (Mitra, 2021). In some *Durga Puja pandals*, a visual storytelling approach was employed to raise awareness for other societal issues. One *Durga Puja pandal* was created to raise awareness about the challenges faced by LGBTQ+people in India. The *pandal* used bandages and saline bottles to represent the "mental wounds" inflicted upon them due to social marginalisation (Samay, 2018). Despite legal changes, there is still a stigma attached to the community in India (Kapoor, 2023; Kapoor et al., 2020). Changes in ritual artefacts around the theme of LGBTQ+people strongly align with the UN SDG 10.3. Another pandal depicted *Durga* slaying the demon, where the demon was represented as a road-side loafer—the *Rakshasa* (or demon) in contemporary times—donning sunglasses, a thick gold chain, chic jeans and a t-shirt (Mani, 2013). Some stories woven around artefact modifications diverged significantly from standard portrayals of artefacts. For instance, in stark contrast to *Durga* slaying the demonic *Mahisasura* in battle, she was seen as a messenger of peace, clad in saffron-coloured Tibetan garb (Chattopadhyay, 2003). In this case, the 'absence' of the buffalo demon *Mahisasura* and a serpent preventing *Durga* from using her trident symbolised an idea of peace. That is, certain objects may replace artefacts in storytelling. Alternatively, the omission of a crucial artefact can convey its own story, as seen in the case of the buffalo demon's absence.

Several *pandals* have taken an eco-friendly approach during *Durga Puja* festivals. Some have altered the idol's attire to raise ecological awareness (Ghoshal, 2019). Others have sculpted the idol using bamboo sticks (Narula, 2017). Additionally, some *pandals* have showcased the idol's hair matted with tree bark, emphasising the need for forest preservation (TNN, 2016). Several artefacts have been recreated to narrate stories based on Hindu mythology. For instance, *Durga* was depicted holding her special child, *Ganesha*, who has an elephant head, to encourage people to accept third-gender and transgender people (Niyogi & Mitra, 2019). To spread awareness about the harmful effects of tobacco, one idol portrayed *Durga* slaying a crab, in reference

to the Zodiac symbol for Cancer (Yengkhom, 2018). Additionally, to raise awareness about the environment and pollution, *Durga* was depicted fighting a demon who was depicted as a polluting agent, with retro car engines affixed above his head and smoke flowing out of his ears (Ray, 2016). In another *pandal*, *Durga* was portrayed destroying a demon who was shown uprooting a tree (TNN, 2019). Similarly, to create awareness about the protection of animal and bird species, decorative artefacts of animals and birds were built in the *pandals* (Sengupta, 2010; Gani, 2018). Colours frequently have different connotations in different cultures, and one method to promote cleanliness was to modify the colour of the artefacts. For example, one *pandal* featured a white-clad *Durga* to connect with the theme of *Swaccha Bharat* or 'Clean India' (Malhotra, 2015).

Discussion, implications and scope for future research

The domain of events and festivals has been the subject of extensive research, and sustainability has emerged as a key concern. However, much of the current discourse focuses on enhancing the sustainability of specific events rather than addressing their potential contribution to the "wider sustainability agenda" (Mair & Smith, 2021, p. 1740). In response to this gap in the literature, the present study heeds Mair and Smith's (2021) call for a process-oriented approach, directing attention to the pre-event period, and answers the research question: how may long-standing religious festivals promote sustainable development by modifying various ritual elements? Specifically, this study uses the case of the Hindu festival of *Durga Puja* to examine the processes of ritual modifications as "tools for promoting, provoking and delivering sustainable development" (Mair & Smith, 2021, p. 1741). Few papers focus on festivals and how they contribute to social sustainability (e.g. Black, 2016; McClinchey, 2017; Laing & Mair, 2015). Besides, examining ritual changes within the framework of religious festivals and sustainable development has received limited attention. In a recent study, changes in some rituals in religious festivals in Bhutan were observed (Suntikul, 2018). These changes, however, were implemented to ensure the cultural sustainability of a traditional religious festival itself. As Bell (1989) notes, rituals act as "a mechanism of continuity to resist forces that could fray the fabric of the community" (p. 32). The present study observes ritual changes in religious festivals for broader sustainable development.

The study's findings uncover the processes used to modify the different ritual elements, namely artefacts, scripts, performance roles and audience (Rook, 1985). One processual theme identified in the modification of ritual scripts and ritual performance roles was subverting the patriarchal order historically ingrained in Indian society. Another approach to inclusivity was proactively inviting marginalised individuals and providing access for those with impairments, resulting in changes to the composition of the ritual audience. A third process of adopting visual storytelling facilitated modifications to ritual artefacts. Together, these ritual-modification processes offer a fresh perspective for examining systemic processes in pre-festival preparations to promote broader sustainable development, as highlighted by Mair and Smith (2021). Besides, the study's findings show that several rituals have been revised to align with the United Nations' SDGs. For instance, revising traditional patriarchal ritual practices to encourage the active participation of women aligns with UN SDG 5.5. Similarly, including marginalized sections of society, such as LGBTQ+ people and widows, in the festival is a step towards achieving equality, as outlined in UN SDG 10.3. Moreover, enabling festival access for those with disabilities is in line with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 11.7. Finally, the ritual changes to mainstreaming certain disappearing tribes align with UN SDG 11.4.

Examining religious festivals, which are likely to continue (unlike one-time, transient events), may be more conducive to the broader sustainable agenda in the long run (Holmes et al., 2015). Some of the findings broadly support other studies by Laing and Mair (2015) and Rogers

and Anastasiadou (2011) that highlight the significance of festivals in fostering community involvement. Furthermore, the research's findings on actively extending invitations to older individuals align with the insights from previous studies on well-being and ageing in the context of participatory arts events (Wood, Jepsen, & Stadler, 2018). However, using different ritual elements and modifying them for social and environmental sustainability, as demonstrated in this study, presents a novel vantage point.

According to Ortner's (2022) explanation, patriarchy is not limited to just sexism. It can be observed in various spheres of society, including family dynamics, religion, sports and governance. The findings of this study suggest that modifying certain aspects of rituals may help challenge deeply ingrained patriarchal structures, promote inclusivity, raise awareness, amplify voices and foster discussions about sustainable development. Some of the study's findings, especially in the context of marginalised and underprivileged communities such as widows, sexual minorities, people from lower castes, individuals with facial disfigurements, those living in poverty, and sex workers also echo feminist political ideologies concerning sustainability and gender that have emphasised gendered environmental knowledge, politics, rights, responsibilities and grassroots activism (Rocheleau et al., 1996). Therefore, the theoretical implications of this study may extend to feminist discourses on ecology and ecofeminism (Shiva, 2010, Gaard, 1993).

Though the present study uses the case of a religious festival, examining ritual alterations in events and festivals, both religious and secular, holds significant importance for future academic inquiry and presents potential avenues for promoting sustainability. Modifications to non-religious festivals may be a lot simpler than modifications to traditional religious festivals. This study's findings can be applied to other festivals to determine which ritual components can be adjusted to foster sustainability goals and the benefits such changes can produce. As the study relied on media portrayals, it was challenging to determine the motivations of *puja* organisers behind significant ritual changes. Nonetheless, the bold departure in traditional religious rituals from society's deeply entrenched patriarchal norms must not be dismissed as tokenistic. Such changes come with significant risks for those involved—both those leading the shift and those participating in it. Future studies could involve interviewing festival organisers and committee members to understand their perspectives on changing ritual components and their underlying challenges. Such studies could also explore the short- and long-term impacts of ritual modifications or alternative processes on the audience within the context of *Durga Puja* or other similar festivals and events. Additionally, examining changes in ritual performance roles could be approached from the standpoint of the effects on the well-being of the performers who have taken on these new roles.

As Veland et al. (2018) note, "For the world to change with us, rather than against us, we need better stories to pre-empt material changes, and direct social change" (p. 45). The present study's findings demonstrate that ritual artefacts can help construct the narrative for sustainable development. In this regard, the study provides empirical support for the use of visual storytelling as a means of modifying rituals. However, alternative types of storytelling, such as oral, written or digital, may also be employed with carefully chosen storytellers, depending on the specific festivals and events and their contexts. Feasibility analysis can help identify relevant stakeholders for partnerships. Festival-NGO partnerships are reported in this study; other festivals may have their own stakeholder relationships. Besides, to gauge and analyse the impact of ritual changes at festivals on society and its members, it would be beneficial to consider some "tools to monitor sustainable development impacts", as indicated in UN SDG 12b (UN, 2015, p. 23). Some of these monitoring tools could relate to employment generation, for example, in the context of potential new storytellers, as indicated in the paper, or the promotion of local culture and products in the context of the disappearing tribes exemplified earlier.

The practical implications of this study are noteworthy for festival organisers, policymakers and practitioners who seek to promote sustainable development through festivals. The study suggests that modifying traditional rituals can be an effective way to promote sustainability

and its social dimensions. The processual themes that the study identifies can help festival organisers, practitioners and policymakers promote the modification of ritual elements to foster long-term sustainable development. As previously mentioned, ritual modifications can serve as a critical vantage point to explore ways to promote sustainable development.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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