Synergic Relationship Between Culture and Politics in West Bengal: The Present Scenario

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***Abstract*—This paper examines how culture and politics in West Bengal mutually constitute one another in the current decade. It argues that cultural institutions—festivals (especially Durga Puja), neighborhood clubs (para clubs), film and celebrity networks, linguistic identity, and welfare-camp ecologies—operate as political infrastructures and imaginaries. Conversely, party competition and state policy actively shape cultural production, funding, and themes. Drawing on recent electoral outcomes, policy innovations (Duare Sarkar, Lakshmir Bhandar), heritage recognition (UNESCO inscription of Kolkata's Durga Puja), and high-salience events in 2024–25, the paper maps pathways of synergy, outlines benefits and risks (mobilization versus politicization), and proposes a framework for balancing cultural autonomy with democratic participation.**

***Index Terms*—Culture, Politics, Grants, DurgaPuja, Civic, Heritage**

1. INTRODUCTION: FROM "CULTURE AS SPHERE" TO "CULTURE AS INFRASTRUCTURE"

In West Bengal, culture has rarely been a passive backdrop to politics. From the Bengal Renaissance to the Left Front's cultural fronts and the Trinamool Congress (TMC)'s neighborhood club ecology, cultural forms—language, literature, theater, cinema, festivals, processions—double as organizational infrastructures and symbolic repertoires. In the present scenario, two reinforcing shifts stand out: (1) the operational turn, whereby cultural platforms (clubs, festival committees, celebrity circuits) deliver services, mobilize publics, and relay messages; and (2) the symbolic turn, whereby cultural themes encode positions on identity, welfare, and governance, and in turn shape political alignments.

This synergy is not merely instrumental. It is systemic: a dense network of para clubs, festival committees, cultural councils, studio systems, and influencer networks mediates between the state, parties, and citizens. As a result, cultural life can amplify inclusion (aid access to schemes, civic participation) while also intensifying competition (grant politics, theme wars, celebrity polarization). The following sections examine the contemporary political field, the festival-club nexus, celebrity/film circuits, linguistic identity politics, welfare-camp ecologies, and contentious episodes, before assessing implications for democratic culture.

2. CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL FIELD (2024–25): STAKES AND ALIGNMENTS

West Bengal remains a high-stakes arena for national parties and for TMC, which has governed the state since 2011. In the 2024 Lok Sabha election, official results show the All India Trinamool Congress (AITC/TMC) winning 29 of 42 seats, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) 12, and the Indian National Congress (INC) 1—an outcome that shaped political discourses and contestations running into 2025. These results anchor current strategies around consolidation, welfare narratives, and identity/culture signaling by all sides.

The post-election period has seen charged exchanges on voter rolls and booth outcomes, illustrating how political contestation permeates local social worlds that are often organized around clubs, committees, and cultural spaces. Such conflicts—visible in the ongoing TMC–BJP rhetorical and legal tussles—reverberate through the same neighborhood institutions that stage festivals and social services.

3. DURGA PUJA AS CULTURAL–POLITICAL PLATFORM

3.1. Heritage, scale, and symbolic capital

Durga Puja in Kolkata—inscribed by UNESCO in 2021 on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity—confers global prestige on Bengal's largest public festival. The inscription's own description emphasizes the collaborative ecosystems of artisans, organizers, and neighborhoods, which together produce a city-scale cultural phenomenon with economic, aesthetic, and social dimensions. This heritage status adds further symbolic capital for political actors seeking cultural association.

3.2. Grants, concessions, and club economies

The state has, for years, provided honoraria/grants and electricity concessions to registered Puja committees—an explicit policy interface between government and festival infrastructure. In 2025, the Chief Minister announced an increase in the grant to ₹1.10 lakh for about 40,000 organizing committees, plus an 80% electricity concession—moves that supporters frame as cultural support and opponents frame as politicized patronage of club networks. News coverage in 2024–25 also documents thousands of committees applying for funds and, notably, some committees refusing grants in protest in 2024, demonstrating how cultural funding becomes a site for political signaling.

3.3. Themes as civic speech

Pandal themes—already known for artistic experimentation—have increasingly foregrounded social commentary and identity politics. Reports in 2025 point to pandals highlighting migrant struggles, Bengali pride, and the stigmatization of Bengali-speaking citizens, effectively turning the festival into a platform for debating national and regional belonging. Here, cultural dramaturgy operates as soft political discourse—neither party propaganda nor "neutral art," but a civically legible language of grievance and pride.

3.4. From ritual to arena

Scholarly work has charted the evolution of Durga Puja from ritual to political–artistic arena, especially since the 2010s, when local governance and party society intersected more visibly with puja management and publicity. This historical arc helps explain why grants, police permissions, and theme choices today carry embedded political meanings.

4. PARA CLUBS AND THE NEIGHBORHOOD STATE

4.1. The "party–society" hinge

In Kolkata and many towns, para (neighborhood) clubs are not just leisure spaces; they are hubs for blood donation camps, sports, relief drives, and festival organization. Analysts describe a "party-society" formation: the club as hinge between civic life and political machinery. Club reinvention has coincided with the routing of welfare and administrative contact through these spaces, making them semi-formal arms of public engagement.

4.2. Everyday governance by "non-political" clubs

Urban studies scholarship shows that clubs often imagine themselves as non-political while taking on tasks of everyday governance—crowd control, cleanliness during festivals, local dispute mediation—blurring boundaries between civil society and political organization. This layered governance intensifies in the puja season, when committees liaise with police, power utilities, and district administrations.

4.3. Benefits and risks

The synergy yields benefits—localized service delivery, rapid mobilization for relief, and thickened participation. Risks include patronage dependency, politicized access to public resources, and pressures on committees to align with powerful actors. The 2024 instances of grant refusals on principle show that committees can also push back, using their cultural legitimacy to make political claims.

5. CINEMA, CELEBRITIES, AND CULTURE WARS

5.1. Electoralization of Tollywood

Since at least 2011, Tollywood (the Bengali film industry) has supplied candidates, campaigners, and cultural legitimacy to parties. By 2021, reportage documented visible splits—with marquee actors and directors aligning across the TMC–BJP divide—illustrating how star power and industry networks are instrumentalized by politics and vice versa.

5.2. Artistic freedom and state–culture frictions

Flashpoints in 2025 show how film promotions and cultural events can become sites of contestation over artistic freedom, legality, and propriety, with both

government actions and industry responses framed in democratic terms. These episodes feed into larger narratives about censorship, moral panic, and state capacity, and are amplified across party ecosystems.

5.3. Language pride, industry solidarity

In 2025, a national-level language row—sparked by an official phrasing that referred to "Bangladeshi language"—elicited sharp reactions from West Bengal's film fraternity and political leaders, who rallied around the dignity of Bangla as an Indian language. The incident shows how cultural workers and politicians can converge in defending linguistic identity, using platforms of celebrity and office alike.

6. LANGUAGE, IDENTITY, AND BELONGING

Language has long been a cornerstone of Bengali nationalism and federal identity. In the current scenario, linguistic pride resurfaces in festival themes and celebrity interventions, while also shaping voter sentiment and party messaging. When pandals emphasize Bengali contributions or rebuff stigmas (e.g., being mislabeled "Bangladeshi"), they participate in a wider politics of recognition and dignity that transcends party lines but is inevitably read through them.

7. WELFARE, CAMPS, AND THE "CULTURAL" MEDIATION OF THE STATE

7.1. Duare Sarkar: Administrative innovation as social theater

Launched in December 2020, Duare Sarkar ("Government at the Doorstep") organizes time-bound outreach camps at ward and gram panchayat levels to enroll citizens in flagship schemes (Kanyashree, Swasthya Sathi, Khadyasathi, social pensions). The camps are ritualized administrative events, often supported by the same neighborhood infrastructures that run cultural life. In effect, the state uses a culturally legible format—camp, queue, certificate ceremony, public counsel—as a performance of proximity.

7.2. Lakshmir Bhandar: Welfare, gender, and political discourse

Lakshmir Bhandar provides monthly support to women (₹1,000 for most households; ₹1,200 for SC/ST households), positioning women as household decision-makers and political stakeholders. Beyond direct relief, the scheme has entered political rhetoric and identity debates; even critics and rivals are drawn into its gravitational field, attesting to welfare's cultural centrality. The policy's details and the public controversies around it in 2024–25 underscore how welfare is narrated and contested through cultural frames of dignity, dependency, and rights.

7.3. Clubs as service nodes

In many localities, the same committees that run festivals help communities navigate documentation, camp logistics, or grievance redressal. This "club-state" synergy makes policy legible and reachable. The flip side: dependence on intermediaries can blur accountability and invite allegations of preferential access.

8. CONTENTION, SAFETY, AND THE MORAL ECONOMY OF CULTURE

Cultural spaces and political spaces often coincide, which means contentious politics spills into cultural discourse. The Sandeshkhali episode in 2024, which combined allegations of violence, land grab, and sexual crimes, became a statewide political flashpoint with rallies, symbolic protests, and narrative battles—reminding us that the moral economy of protection, honor, and justice is inseparable from cultural imaginaries. While details of responsibility are sub judice or contested, the episode illustrates how cultural frames (dignity of women, safety, village honor) animate political mobilization

9. PATHWAYS OF SYNERGY: HOW CULTURE AND POLITICS CO-PRODUCE ONE ANOTHER

1. Resource Flows and Patronage:

State grants, fee concessions, police facilitation, and corporate sponsorships route through festival committees and clubs, binding cultural production to policy calendars and political signaling. The 2025 increase in Durga Puja grants (and earlier cycles of ₹85,000 support) exemplifies this entanglement.

- Organizational Interlock:

Club leaders, festival organizers, and ward-level actors often overlap with party functionaries. This interlock expedites permits, scheme access, and crisis response but also risks partisan capture of civic space.

- Symbolic Encoding:

Pandal themes, celebrity statements, and language rows encode positions on dignity, memory, migration, and belonging—turning art into civic speech and shaping voter affect beyond manifestos.

- Welfare as Cultural Narrative:

Schemes like Lakshmir Bhandar are narrated in cultural idioms (Lakshmi, grihalakshmi), casting women as moral centers of the household and, by extension, civic life; the resulting political debates revolve as much around cultural dignity as fiscal design.

- Heritage and Global Attention:

UNESCO inscription amplifies the stakes of managing Durga Puja not only as a local festival but as a world-watched cultural performance, encouraging state patronage and tighter event governance.

- Mediated Publics:

Social media and vernacular media translate festival imagery and celebrity interventions into political talk; controversies become cultural lightning rods that reconfigure alliances.

10. BENEFITS AND DEMOCRATIC PAYOFFS

- Civic Participation at Scale:

Festivals and clubs draw millions into public spaces, lowering barriers to engagement and creating a habitus of collective action. Duare Sarkar camps further normalize bureaucratic access as a public event.

- Cultural Economy and livelihood:

Artisans in Kumartuli, lighting designers, stage carpenters, musicians, security and crowd managers—all benefit from an expanded cultural calendar which, aided by state facilitation, sustains thousands of livelihoods. The UNESCO tag adds tourist and donor attention.

- Local Problem-Solving:

Para clubs, with their thick local knowledge, can coordinate relief, crowd control, and dispute mediation faster than distant bureaucracies, especially during peak festival periods.

- Public Discourse and Social Pedagogy:

Theming around migrant rights, language dignity, or environmental stewardship turns celebrations into civic classrooms, upgrading cultural consumption into political literacy.

11. RISKS, DISTORTIONS, AND ETHICAL CONCERNS

Politicization and Partisan Capture:

When grants, permissions, and stage time pivot on political allegiance, cultural autonomy erodes and dissenting voices self-censor or are excluded. Controversies around program clearances and film events highlight the fragility of artistic freedoms in a charged environment

- Patron age Dependencies and Inequity:

Club ecosystems can become gatekeepers of state benefits and sponsorships, risking uneven access and reinforcing local hierarchies.

- Moral Panics and Polarization:

High-conflict episodes (e.g., Sandeshkhali) can be subsumed into polarized narratives, overshadowing due process and survivors' needs with symbolic battles. Cultural idioms of honor and shame can both empower and endanger.

- Entification of Governance:

The camp-and-festival mode of delivery may privilege spectacle over systemic reform (e.g., digitization, grievance timelines), creating expectations that governance appears primarily in performative cycles.

12. COMPARATIVE AND HISTORICAL NOTES

While cultural–political synergy is not unique to West Bengal, the density of festival culture, club networks, and language pride yields a distinctive ecology. Earlier scholarship on Bengal's politics and culture has tracked these entanglements over centuries; what is new is the administrative formalization of cultural infrastructures (grants, concessions, camp cycles) and the algorithmic amplification of themes and celebrity voices. The "para" as a governable and governing unit exemplifies how the social grammar of Kolkata's neighborhoods has long prefigured today's party–society.

13. FRAMEWORK FOR BALANCING CULTURAL AUTONOMY AND DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

- Transparent Cultural Funding:

Publish timely, searchable lists of grant recipients, criteria, and independent audits. Rotate juries for awards and grants to include artists, administrators, and citizen-jurors.

- Arms-Length Cultural Councils:

Create or strengthen quasi-autonomous cultural councils to buffer festival committees and artists from day-to-day political pressures while maintaining public accountability.

- Club Chartering and Ethics Codes:

Require publicly posted charters for registered clubs/committees with grievance mechanisms, conflict-of-interest disclosures (e.g., office-bearers with party posts), and transparent sponsorship records.

- Artist Rights and Event Protocols:

Standardize protocols for event permissions, security, and cancellation to protect artistic freedom and reduce ad-hocism. Independent mediation boards can address disputes.

- Plural Theming and Public Pedagogy:

Encourage thematic diversity through micro-grants for counter-hegemonic, ecological, and inclusive narratives—recognizing that festivals are civic classrooms.

- Welfare Access Beyond Event Cycles:

Institutionalize service access (digital and in-person) so that Duare Sarkar complements, not substitutes, year-round delivery—reducing the eventification of governance.

- Data and Dignity in Welfare:

For schemes like Lakshmir Bhandar, pair disbursement with financial literacy, grievance redressal, and periodic independent evaluations; frame communications in dignity-affirming terms to avoid paternalism.

14. CONCLUSION

In contemporary West Bengal, culture and politics are not adjacent domains—they are coextensive infrastructures. Durga Puja's UNESCO-recognized grandeur doubles as a field of grant politics, civic pedagogy, and identity discourse; para clubs embody a neighborhood state that governs, celebrates, and mobilizes; film and celebrity networks are active political actors; language pride is a shared symbolic currency across parties and artists; and welfare schemes are narrated and contested in cultural idioms. This synergy energizes civic life, supports livelihoods, and multiplies forums for voice. It also risks patronage dependency, artistic constraint, and polarization.

A democratic settlement for Bengal's cultural–political ecosystem would treat culture neither as a mere policy instrument nor as a sacralized sphere beyond politics. Instead, it would design transparent interfaces where cultural autonomy and political participation can flourish together: arms-length funding, ethical club governance, robust artist rights, and welfare systems that are universal, de-eventified, and dignifying. Harnessed with care, Bengal's cultural abundance can deepen, rather than distort, the practice of democracy.

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