

The Narratogogy of Durga Puja: Conceptualising the Pedagogical Practices of Festival, Myth and Narrative

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Abstract

Durga Puja is commonly understood as a religious and cultural festival associated with the worship of Goddess Durga. However, its educational significance extends beyond devotional practice. The festival constitutes a complex cultural learning environment in which mythology, narrative, ritual, visual symbolism, artistic production, collective participation, intergenerational communication and social interaction converge. This paper introduces the concept of Narratogogy to conceptualise this distinctive pedagogical phenomenon. Narratogogy is proposed here as a culturally situated mode of learning in which individuals and communities acquire, negotiate, reinterpret and transmit knowledge through narratives, myths, symbols, performances and participatory experiences. From this perspective, Durga Puja can be interpreted as a living pedagogical ecology rather than simply a ceremonial event. The paper develops a conceptual model in which myth becomes narrative, narrative becomes symbol, symbol becomes ritual, ritual generates participation, participation stimulates interpretation, and interpretation contributes to cultural learning. It further examines the festival through the perspectives of situated learning, experiential learning, social learning, cultural-historical theory, narrative cognition and informal education. Particular attention is given to the pedagogical role of the Durga narrative, the visual architecture of the idol, pandal-based cultural environments, intergenerational transmission, collective memory and contemporary technological transformations. The paper argues that the educational significance of Durga Puja lies not merely in what the festival communicates but in how cultural knowledge is experienced, reconstructed and narrated by its participants. Narratogogy consequently provides a conceptual bridge between mythology, cultural practice and contemporary learning sciences.

Keywords: Narratogogy, Durga Puja, Mythology, Cultural Pedagogy, Narrative Learning, Situated Learning, Experiential Learning, Indian Knowledge Systems, Cultural Memory, Learning Sciences

1. INTRODUCTION

Education is frequently conceptualised through the institutional architecture of schools, colleges, universities and formal curricula. Such an understanding, however, represents only one dimension of human learning. Much of what individuals learn about values, identity, culture, community, history and meaning is acquired outside formal educational institutions. Families, festivals, rituals, stories, artistic traditions, public spaces and collective practices constitute important environments of informal and cultural learning.

Within this broader understanding of education, festivals can be interpreted as pedagogical environments. They provide opportunities for observation, participation, imitation, communication, interpretation and reflection. Among the major cultural festivals of Bengal and the wider Indian cultural landscape, Durga Puja offers a particularly rich example of such an environment.

Durga Puja is not constituted by a single activity. It involves mythology, ritual, sculpture, architecture, music, literature, food, clothing, social interaction, artistic innovation, community organisation and public participation. The festival simultaneously operates through multiple modes of communication. A child may learn the narrative of Durga through a story told by a family member, encounter the narrative visually through an idol, experience it spatially through a pandal, hear it through music or recitation, and reinterpret it through contemporary artistic representations.

This raises an important educational question: Can a festival itself function as a pedagogical system?

The present paper responds to this question through the concept of Narratogogy.

The term is proposed to describe a form of pedagogy in which narrative becomes an organising mechanism for learning. Narratogogy does not reduce learning to the passive reception of stories. Rather, it conceptualises learning as a process of entering, experiencing, interpreting, questioning and reconstructing culturally meaningful narratives.

Durga Puja therefore provides a significant context for exploring how mythology can become pedagogy.

2. CONCEPTUALISING NARRATOLOGY

The concept of Narratogogy is derived from the intersection of narrative and pedagogy. Narrative is one of humanity's oldest mechanisms for organising experience. People frequently understand events not as isolated facts but as sequences involving characters, contexts, conflicts, actions and transformations.

Traditional pedagogy often asks:

- What should be taught?
- Narratogogy additionally asks:
- What story organises the learning experience?

This distinction is important because narratives provide more than information. They provide context, sequence, emotional engagement and interpretive possibilities.

Narratogogy may therefore be defined as:

«A culturally situated pedagogical process through which individuals and communities construct, transmit, interpret and reconstruct knowledge through narrative, myth, symbolism, performance and lived participation.»

Narratogogy has at least three interconnected dimensions.

- The first is narrative transmission, through which stories and cultural accounts are communicated.

- The second is narrative participation, through which learners enter the cultural environment represented by the narrative.
- The third is narrative reconstruction, through which learners reinterpret inherited narratives in relation to contemporary experiences.

Consequently, narratology is not simply the pedagogical use of stories. It is a broader conceptualisation of learning through participation in narrative worlds.

3. DURGA PUJA AS A CULTURAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The contemporary learning sciences increasingly recognise that learning occurs across multiple environments. Learning is distributed among people, artefacts, technologies, institutions and social contexts.

Durga Puja illustrates this principle remarkably well.

The festival creates a temporary but highly sophisticated learning environment. The pandal becomes a spatial classroom; the idol becomes a symbolic text; mythology becomes a narrative curriculum; ritual becomes embodied practice; community participation becomes collaborative learning; and intergenerational communication becomes cultural transmission.

The learner does not necessarily sit in front of an instructor. Instead, learning occurs through seeing, hearing, participating, asking, imitating, discussing and interpreting.

A child accompanying parents to a Durga Puja may simultaneously encounter mythology, sculpture, architecture, social organisation, music, economics, technology and community life. Such learning is multidimensional because the festival itself is multidimensional.

The pedagogical environment can therefore be represented as:

Space + Narrative + Symbol + Ritual + Community + Participation = Cultural Learning Ecology

This formulation shifts the discussion from the idea of the festival as an object of cultural observation to the festival as an environment of learning.

4. MYTHOLOGY AS PEDAGOGICAL NARRATIVE

The mythology associated with Durga provides the narrative foundation of the festival. At its most recognisable level, the narrative centres on the confrontation between Durga and Mahishasura and the restoration of cosmic order.

From a narratological perspective, the educational importance of this narrative does not depend exclusively upon accepting a literal interpretation of mythology. Mythological narratives can function as cultural texts whose meanings are interpreted differently by different communities and generations.

The narrative contains several pedagogically significant elements: conflict, challenge, agency, transformation, collective responsibility and restoration.

The learner can therefore move from:

Narrative reception → Narrative questioning → Narrative interpretation → Contemporary reconstruction

This movement is particularly important for education because it transforms mythology from something merely remembered into something interpreted.

For example, the figure of Durga may be interpreted through different conceptual frameworks—divine power, feminine agency, ethical resistance, symbolic order, cultural identity or artistic representation. These interpretations do not necessarily have to be mutually exclusive. Narratology accommodates multiple readings because the pedagogical value of narrative partly lies in its capacity to generate interpretation.

5. THE IDOL AS A PEDAGOGICAL TEXT

The Durga idol can be interpreted as a multimodal pedagogical text.

A conventional text communicates primarily through linguistic symbols. The idol communicates through visual and symbolic representation.

The multiple arms, weapons, lion, Mahishasura and accompanying deities constitute a visual vocabulary. Their meanings are transmitted through cultural memory and social explanation.

For a learner, the idol therefore produces questions:

- Why does Durga possess multiple arms?
- Why are particular weapons represented?
- Why is the lion associated with Durga?
- Why is Mahishasura represented in a particular form?
- Why are Lakshmi, Saraswati, Ganesha and Kartikeya represented alongside her?

These questions transform visual observation into inquiry.

Thus:

Observation → Question → Interpretation → Meaning-making

becomes a fundamental narratological process.

The idol consequently operates not simply as an object of worship or artistic representation but also as a symbolic learning artefact.

6. PANDAL AS A SPATIAL PEDAGOGY

The contemporary Durga Puja pandal introduces another significant dimension: spatial learning.

Pandal architecture increasingly incorporates historical, ecological, technological and artistic themes. Visitors encounter knowledge through movement across physical space.

The conventional classroom generally establishes a relatively fixed relationship between learner, teacher and instructional material. The pandal can produce a different relationship in which the learner moves through an environment and discovers meanings sequentially.

The educational structure becomes:

Entry → Encounter → Exploration → Discovery → Interpretation → Exit

This resembles an experiential learning pathway.

The pandal may therefore be conceptualised as a temporary pedagogical landscape.

Its architecture can communicate historical narratives, environmental concerns, indigenous traditions, technological innovation or contemporary social themes. In this sense, festival architecture can function as a form of public pedagogy.

7. RITUAL AS EMBODIED LEARNING

Narratology also emphasises the importance of embodiment.

Learning is not exclusively cognitive. Individuals learn through bodily participation in social and cultural practices. Rituals provide precisely such embodied experiences.

Participation in rituals involves movement, sound, gesture, timing, sensory experience and social coordination. Individuals learn the structure of ritual through observation and repeated participation.

A child may initially participate without fully understanding the symbolic meaning of every practice. Over time, explanation and reflection can transform participation into understanding.

This suggests a progression:

Participation → Familiarity → Explanation → Interpretation → Internalisation

Such a process illustrates how cultural knowledge can move from embodied practice toward conceptual understanding.

8. INTERGENERATIONAL NARRATOLOGY

One of the most significant dimensions of Durga Puja is intergenerational learning.

Grandparents, parents, elders and community members often function as informal cultural educators. They explain stories, rituals, family traditions, artistic practices and memories associated with the festival.

The pedagogical relationship therefore becomes distributed across generations.

The child is not merely a recipient of information. Through questions and reinterpretations, younger generations can also modify how cultural narratives are understood.

Narratology is consequently bidirectional.

Older generations transmit narratives.

Younger generations reinterpret them.

The resulting process can be expressed as:

Transmission → Reception → Questioning → Reinterpretation → Retransmission

Culture therefore remains dynamic rather than static.

9. DURGA PUJA AND SOCIAL LEARNING

The festival also represents a powerful context for social learning.

Individuals observe the behaviour of others, participate in collective activities and acquire social norms through interaction. Community organisation requires cooperation, role distribution, communication and shared responsibility.

Children observing adults organising a festival may learn forms of collective participation that are rarely explicitly taught in classrooms.

They encounter informal lessons about:

community organisation, cooperation, responsibility, communication, creativity and social participation.

These forms of learning are often tacit. They emerge through participation rather than direct instruction.

Durga Puja therefore demonstrates the principle that social participation itself can become a pedagogical mechanism.

10. NARRATIVE, EMOTION AND MEMORY

Narratives possess a distinctive relationship with memory.

Information embedded within meaningful stories may be experienced differently from isolated factual information because narrative provides context and emotional structure. Durga Puja combines narrative with sensory and emotional experience, creating a powerful cultural memory environment.

Music, smell, visual imagery, family gatherings, rituals and stories become associated with particular moments of the festival.

Consequently, cultural memory is not simply stored as abstract information. It becomes episodic, embodied and emotionally situated.

This can be conceptualised as:

Narrative + Emotion + Sensory Experience + Social Participation → Cultural Memory

Narratology therefore provides a useful conceptual framework for understanding why cultural knowledge can remain persistent across generations even without formal curricular instruction.

11. FROM MYTHOLOGICAL LEARNING TO CRITICAL LEARNING

A major educational possibility of narratology lies in moving beyond passive cultural reproduction. A narrative can be inherited without being critically examined. Education, however, requires questioning.

The narratological learner may therefore ask:

- How has the Durga narrative changed across historical periods?
- How have different communities represented Durga?
- How are gender, power and agency represented?
- How have artists reinterpreted the Mahishasura narrative?
- How does contemporary society reconstruct traditional symbolism?
- What happens when traditional mythology encounters modern technology?

Such questions transform cultural participation into critical inquiry.

Narratology therefore does not require mythology to remain fixed. Instead, it creates a pedagogical space where inherited narratives can be preserved, questioned and reconstructed simultaneously.

12. DIGITAL DURGA PUJA AND EMERGING NARRATOLOGY

The digital transformation of Durga Puja has introduced another dimension to the pedagogical process. Social media, livestreaming, digital photography, virtual tours and digital archives allow narratives associated with the festival to circulate beyond geographical boundaries. The learner can encounter a Durga Puja narrative without physically being present at the festival.

This produces a transition:

Local narrative → Networked narrative → Digital cultural memory

Digital media also allows younger generations to become cultural producers rather than merely consumers. They photograph, document, edit, comment upon, remix and disseminate cultural narratives.

The contemporary learner therefore participates in a networked narratology.

The festival becomes simultaneously physical and digital.

13. NARRATOLOGY AND LEARNING SCIENCES

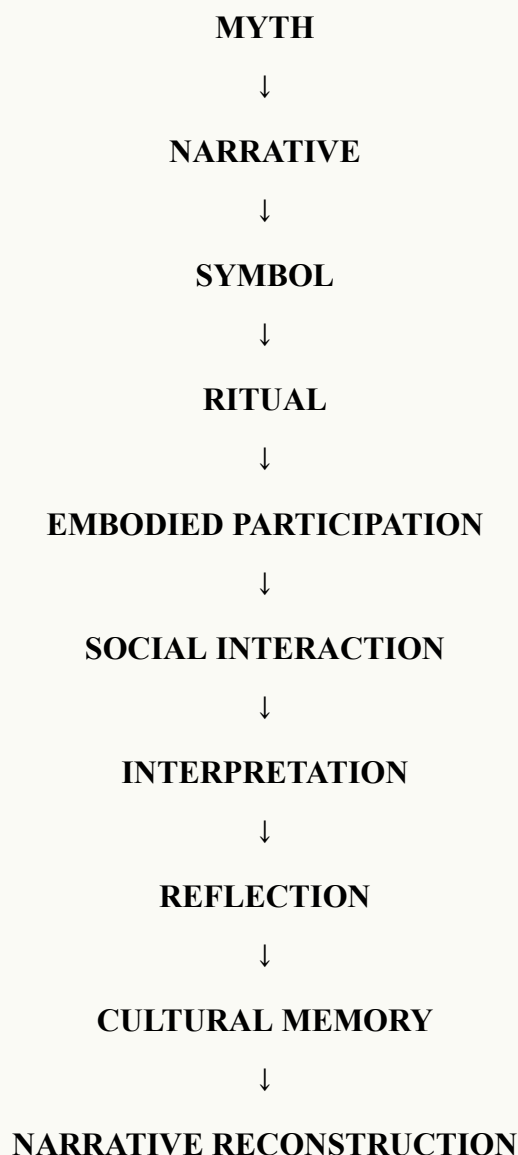
Narratogogy can contribute to learning sciences by highlighting an often-underexplored dimension of learning: cultural narrative as an epistemic environment. Learning sciences generally examine how people acquire, construct, regulate and apply knowledge. Narratogogy adds another question: How do culturally inherited narratives organise the conditions under which people make meaning? This question connects Narratogogy with several established approaches.

- From constructivism, it shares the idea that learners actively construct meaning.
- From social learning theory, it incorporates learning through observation and participation.
- From situated learning, it recognises the importance of authentic cultural contexts.
- From experiential learning, it emphasises learning through experience and reflection.
- From cultural-historical theory, it acknowledges the mediating role of cultural tools and social practices.
- From narrative cognition, it recognises narrative as a mechanism through which experience is organised and interpreted.

Narratogogy therefore functions as an interdisciplinary bridge between cultural studies and learning sciences.

14. A CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF THE NARRATOLOGY OF DURGA PUJA

The proposed model can be represented as follows:





NEW LEARNING

The circularity of the model is important.

Learning does not terminate with cultural transmission. Once learners reinterpret the narrative, they may contribute to its future reconstruction.

Thus, the final stage returns to the beginning:

New Learning → New Narrative

This makes Narratogogy fundamentally dynamic.

15. THE NARRATOLOGICAL CYCLE

On the basis of the preceding discussion, a five-stage Narratogological Cycle of Durga Puja may be proposed:

- Encounter
The learner encounters the cultural narrative through the festival environment.
- Experience
The learner experiences mythology through visual, auditory, spatial, ritual and social forms.
- Interpretation
The learner attempts to understand the meaning of symbols, stories and practices.
- Reflection
The learner relates the narrative to personal experience and contemporary contexts.
- Reconstruction
The learner develops a new interpretation and potentially transmits the narrative in modified form.

The cycle may therefore be expressed as:

Encounter → Experience → Interpretation → Reflection → Reconstruction

This distinguishes narratogogy from simple storytelling.

16. EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

The concept of Narratogogy has implications for culturally responsive education and Indian Knowledge Systems. Rather than treating indigenous cultural practices merely as supplementary cultural material, educational institutions could examine them as potential sources of knowledge about learning, memory, identity, symbolism and social participation.

Durga Puja can provide interdisciplinary learning opportunities connecting education with literature, history, sociology, anthropology, psychology, visual arts, architecture, technology and environmental studies.

The pedagogical objective should not be to transform a cultural festival into a conventional classroom exercise. Instead, education can learn from the festival's existing mechanisms of meaning-making.

This distinction is essential.

The question is not:

How can teachers use Durga Puja to teach the curriculum?

A deeper question is:

What can educators learn from the way Durga Puja itself produces and transmits knowledge?

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