

Democratizing the Sacred: Female Agency and Gender Dynamics in Bengal's *Itu Vrata*

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Abstract

The longstanding tradition of household rituals in many Eastern cultures has historically been characterized by a clear gendered division of religious roles, with male priests, or purohits, occupying the central position of spiritual authority. These men act as the sanctioned intermediaries between the divine and the family, while women typically assume peripheral roles as participants or observers. This gendered hierarchy in ritual practice reflects broader patriarchal structures that limit women's agency in religious and domestic spheres. However, exceptions arise where in certain household religious rituals, locally known as the vratas, the woman takes the space of the 'male priest' and carries out the ritual performance. While both men and women may participate in such rituals, most vratas are traditionally women-centric. This paper critically examines the subversion of such gendered religious roles through the lens of *Itu Pujo*, one such Bengali household ritual celebrated during November and December to mark the onset of the harvest season. *Itu Pujo*'s month-long observance is deeply embedded in local folk traditions and is believed to bring health, happiness, and prosperity to the family. A woman's role as the 'worshipper-priest' challenges traditional notions of sanctified ritual space and priestly agency, thereby offering a unique site to explore female empowerment and identity construction within the household. This role reversal is not merely symbolic but constitutes a form of embodied agency, where women actively engage in the spiritual well-being of their households.

Drawing on the theory of the sacred and the profane, this study views *Itu Pujo* as sacralising the domestic space, traditionally profane, by women performing priestly duties, thus collapsing the divide between sacred authority and everyday life. This sanctification through female-led ritual performance elevates the home into a site of spiritual power, enabling women to embody the sacred and assert religious authority typically reserved for men. Applying the theory of performativity, these ritual acts construct women's identities as empowered religious agents, contesting gender norms and challenging male-dominated spatial hierarchies, thereby democratizing spiritual power within the household through women dominated sanctification.

Beyond the individual level, *Itu Pujo*'s female-led ritual fosters family unity and collective identity. The ritual's folk origins emphasize the fluidity and adaptability of religious traditions, highlighting how localized practices can serve as critical sites for examining intersections of gender, power, and spirituality. By foregrounding women's agency in ritual performance, the paper sheds light on the transformative potential of folk traditions in reshaping cultural narratives and social structures.

The performance of *Itu Pujo* by women not only reconfigures ritual hierarchies but also affirms women's agency in both domestic and religious spheres. This study contributes to broader discussions on gender, religion, and power by illustrating how ritual performances function as a potent medium for identity formation and social negotiation in patriarchal contexts. It invites further scholarly attention to domestic rituals as spaces where marginalized voices can assert presence and influence, ultimately challenging and reshaping established cultural paradigms.

Keywords: Ritual, Performance, Agency, Sacred, Folk traditions

Household rituals, deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of many Eastern societies, often reflect and reinforce broader social structures, particularly those related to gender and power. Across various religious traditions in Bengal and beyond, the enactment of spiritual authority has historically been dominated by men, usually priests or purohits, who serve as sanctioned intermediaries between the divine and the laity. Women, in contrast, have typically occupied more peripheral roles within these ritual contexts, participating as observers or assistants rather than as central performers or agents of sacred power. This entrenched gender divide in religious practice mirrors and perpetuates patriarchal norms that confine women's agency, not only in the spiritual domain but also across domestic and social spheres.

However, the tradition of *vratas*, household rituals that involve vows and observances during specific occasions presents important instances where women step beyond these conventional limitations. In particular, *Itu Puj*o (also known as *Itu Vrata*) in rural Bengal offers a unique ritual context in which women assume the role of the worshipper-priest, conducting elaborate ceremonies traditionally associated with male religious authority.

*Itu Puj*o, also known as *Itu Vrata*, is a distinctive and longstanding folk ritual predominantly practiced in Bengali rural households, especially by women. Celebrated during the Bengali month of *Agrahayan* (falling between November and December), the ritual spans approximately a month, culminating on the Sankranti (last day) of *Agrahayan*. The term *Itu* is derived from *Mitra*, the ancient Vedic Sun deity, symbolizing light, fertility, and prosperity. Over time, this solar worship evolved locally into a folk agrarian ritual deeply connected to the rhythms of the agricultural cycle in Bengal.

The ritual is traditionally women-centric, with women - often without the need for Brahmin priests, taking full initiative in performing the ceremonies. A central symbolic element is the sacred *Itu Ghot* (pot), filled with water or grains and often adorned with seeds of various crops such as paddy, barley, sesame, turmeric, and leafy vegetables. This pot represents fertility, abundance, and the life-giving energy of the Sun goddess, whom women worship as a source of prosperity for the household. The ritual includes daily prayers, fasting, and offerings that invoke blessings for the health, happiness, and successful harvest of the family.

*Itu Puj*o's rituals are deeply interwoven with Bengal's agrarian lifestyle. The timing of the ritual marks the end of the main harvest season and heralds the time to sow certain winter crops, highlighting the community's gratitude to natural forces like earth and water. For example, an earthen bowl filled with soil and a water pot symbolize the fundamental elements necessary for agriculture and life. These rituals reflect intimate respect for nature's cycles and the hope for continued fertility and abundance. Moreover, the ritual's folk lineage preserves myths and narratives such as the story of two sisters, Umno and Jhumno, who, according to local lore, perform *Itu Puj*o to secure wellbeing after facing hardships. The ritual thus embodies a rich cultural memory that blends mythic, agricultural, and spiritual significance.

Critically, *Itu Puj*o's performance by women, independently of male priests, challenges the traditional patriarchal structures of ritual authority found in institutionalized Hinduism. It creates a sacred space within the household, traditionally considered profane, where women enact priestly roles and spiritual agency, offering protection and prosperity for their families. The ritual sustains a matriarchal thread within

Bengali culture, underscoring women's crucial role in agricultural sustenance and spiritual leadership at the domestic level.

This unique blend of solar worship, agricultural thanksgiving, folk traditions, and female-centred religious practice makes *Itu Pujo* an essential cultural and religious phenomenon in Bengal. Its study not only illuminates gender dynamics in local ritual life but also showcases how folk religious practices adapt and uphold indigenous knowledge systems within a patriarchal framework.

This ritual phenomenon disrupts dominant spatial and gender hierarchies by sacralising the domestic sphere, a space conventionally deemed profane - through female ritual performance. By reclaiming priestly agency within the household, women participating in *Itu Pujo* challenge the patriarchal religious order and negotiate new identities and power relations. This paper critically examines these dynamics, situating *Itu Pujo* as a powerful site of female agency where gender norms are actively contested and spiritual authority is democratized.

To analyse these processes, this study engages with a multidisciplinary theoretical framework incorporating sociological, feminist, and ritual studies perspectives. Émile Durkheim's seminal theory of the sacred and the profane provides a foundation for understanding how ritual performance can transform the meaning and significance of everyday spaces. Judith Butler's concept of performativity offers insight into how repeated ritual acts construct empowered female identities that destabilize conventional gender roles. Feminist theories illuminate the intersections of power, agency, and resistance in religious contexts, while ritual theory from scholars like Victor Turner and Catherine Bell helps unpack ritual's role in social transformation and cohesion. Additionally, perspectives on folk religion and localization shed light on how traditional and localized ritual practices become dynamic arenas for cultural negotiation and change.

Through this theoretical lens, the study explores how *Itu Pujo* exemplifies the transformative potential of folk religious rituals to challenge patriarchal spiritual hierarchies and foster new forms of collective and individual empowerment. This study contributes to broader academic discourses on gender, religion, and power by highlighting the intricate ways domestic rituals serve as critical sites for identity formation, social negotiation, and democratization of sacred authority.

The Sacred and the Profane: Sacralising the Domestic

Durkheim's classical sociological theory defines the sacred as those things set apart from the ordinary, profane aspects of everyday life, invested with collective meaning and requiring ritual respect (Durkheim, 1912). Traditionally, religious institutional spaces and figures, such as temples and male priests in many patriarchal contexts embody the sacred, while domestic spaces and women's roles within them are often relegated to the profane.

The *Itu Pujo* ritual fundamentally challenges this dichotomy by sacralising the domestic through women's ritual performance. In performing priestly duties within their households, women blur the boundaries between the sacred and the profane. Their worship elevates the domestic space, transforming it into a site of spiritual power and authority (Durkheim, 1912). This sanctification of the home contests male monopoly over sacred ritual spaces and roles, highlighting a grassroots form of religious democratization.

The application of Durkheim's theory underscores how social meanings of the sacred are not fixed but socially constructed, adaptable, and deeply intertwined with local gender dynamics. As women sacralise

their homes through *Itu Pujo*, they redefine the cultural geography of sacred power, suggesting that the sacred can be negotiated and relocated through ritual practice.

Ritual Performativity and Identity Construction

Judith Butler's theory of performativity elucidates how gender and identity are not inherent or static but constituted through repetitive acts that signify and enact social roles (Butler, 1990). Rituals, as repetitive and socially normative practices, serve as potent sites where gender identities can be performed, affirmed, contested, or transformed.

In the case of *Itu Pujo*, women's ritual acts are more than symbolic gestures; they are performative acts that construct female identities as empowered religious agents. By taking on the role of the worshipper-priest, women enact and embody a form of agency that directly challenges patriarchal gender norms and spatial hierarchies within religious practice.

This performativity is not limited to interior identity formation; it publicly challenges and negotiates the gendered division of spiritual labour by making women's priestly agency visible and legitimate within the household. Hence, *Itu Pujo*'s female-led ritual practice exemplifies how rituals function as arenas of identity construction and social negotiation, aligning with Butler's insights on the power of performative acts to destabilize hegemonic gender norms (Butler, 1990).

Perspectives on Agency and Power

The gendered division of spiritual authority in patriarchal societies often marginalizes women's roles, limiting their control over religious and domestic spheres. Feminist theory provides a critical lens for understanding how gendered power structures operate within ritual contexts and how women resist and transform these dynamics.

The female priestly role in *Itu Pujo* represents a reclamation of spiritual agency that disrupts traditional hierarchical structures privileging male priests. Feminist scholars highlight such practices as forms of embodied resistance where women assert control over culturally sanctioned religious knowledge and practice (Ahmed, 2017). This agency is not only symbolic but practical, as women actively mediate their households' spiritual well-being.

Moreover, feminist theory emphasizes intersectionality, recognizing that *Itu Pujo*'s significance is compounded by its embeddedness in local folk traditions, rural contexts, and specific sociocultural settings. Women's empowerment through ritual must thus be understood within these intersecting axes of gender, religion, and locality, which shape both constraints and possibilities for agency.

Agency Theory and Negotiation of Power in Ritual Spaces

Agency theory in anthropology and sociology frames individuals as actors who navigate, negotiate, and sometimes transform social structures. Rituals are key sites where agency is exercised, contested, and manifested. *Itu Pujo* exemplifies how women strategically use ritual performance to carve out spaces of power within seemingly restrictive patriarchal frameworks.

Within *Itu Pujo*, women's role as ritual performers is a form of embodied agency—a physical and spiritual enactment of authority. It challenges dominant male priestly roles while enabling women to

negotiate social recognition and authority within their families. The ritual space becomes a contested arena where traditional power dynamics are reconfigured, and women's voices gain prominence.

This understanding aligns with views that see rituals not merely as static traditions but as dynamic practices where identities, power relations, and social roles are continuously produced and reproduced through negotiation (Giddens, 1984; Ortner, 1978).

Symbolic Interactionism and the Construction of Meaning

Symbolic interactionism is a sociological framework that focuses on how people actively construct, interpret, and negotiate social reality through everyday interactions involving shared symbols, such as language, gestures, objects, and rituals (Blumer, 1969). Unlike large-scale social theories that emphasize structures or institutions, symbolic interactionism probes the micro-level processes whereby individuals create and modify the meanings attached to things in their social world.

In ritual contexts like *Itu Pujō*, symbolic interactionism helps illuminate how the ritual performance by women acts as a powerful symbolic process. The woman's enactment of the priestly role is not merely a prescribed traditional action but a meaningful interaction packed with symbolic significance related to gender roles, authority, and spirituality. Through the ritual, women and their family members engage in a shared process of constructing new meanings that renegotiate established binaries such as sacred/profane, male/female, and authority/agency.

Such ritual interaction involves social communication where symbols (e.g., the sacred pot, offerings, prayers) are imbued with collectively recognized but also contested meanings. For instance, in a patriarchal context where priestly authority is traditionally male, women performing these roles symbolically contests that norm. As family members witness and participate, they interpret and respond to this role reversal, contributing to the gradual redefinition of women's spiritual legitimacy and power in the household.

The meanings generated at this micro-level ritual interaction do not remain confined to individual households but are embedded in broader familial and community narratives. This embedding enables cultural shifts by legitimizing women's agency in religious performance and reshaping collective understandings of gender and sacredness. Thus, the symbolic construction occurring in *Itu Pujō* exemplifies the mutual constitution of individual agency and collective culture emphasized by symbolic interactionism.

In this way, symbolic interactionism provides a nuanced understanding of how *Itu Pujō*'s female-led ritual constitutes both a social practice and a process of meaning-making that actively challenges and reshapes gendered religious authority.

Ritual Theory: Liminality, Social Cohesion, and Transformation

Victor Turner's and Catherine Bell's ritual theories emphasize ritual as a social practice that marks transitions, asserts social order, and enables transformation (Turner, 1969; Bell, 1992). Rituals create liminal spaces, thresholds between ordinary and extraordinary states - where social norms can be suspended or reimagined.

Itu Pujō occupies such a liminal space within household religious practice, where normative gender roles are temporarily inverted or suspended, allowing women to step into priestly authority. This liminality

enables both social cohesion, strengthening family unity through shared ritual and social transformation, by challenging patriarchal spiritual hierarchies.

The ongoing yearly observance of *Itu Pujo* reinforces collective identity and continuity, showing how rituals maintain social structure while also enabling negotiation and change. Thus, *Itu Pujo* exemplifies ritual's dual capacity to sustain and contest social norms.

Folk Religion, Localization, and Cultural Adaptation

Folk religion, localization, and cultural adaptation theories provide a vital lens to understand religious practices that exist outside the formal structures of institutionalized religions. These theories emphasize how grassroots, community-based traditions evolve within specific local contexts, adapting to the lived realities and social conditions of the people who practice them. Such practices often resist or reinterpret the dominant religious norms, creating spaces where local identities, experiences, and power relations are negotiated and expressed.

In the case of *Itu Pujo*, its origins as a folk ritual deeply embedded in Bengali rural households highlight the critical role of localization in shaping its practice and meaning. Unlike standardized, institutional religious rites led by male priests, *Itu Pujo* remains a predominantly domestic, women-led ritual that draws on local knowledge, agrarian cycles, and folk beliefs. This localization creates a distinct spiritual economy within which women perform priestly roles, exerting religious authority first-hand and fostering a participatory, embodied form of spirituality.

This domestic and folk context empowers *Itu Pujo*'s practitioners by providing an alternative to the homogenizing tendencies of institutional religion, where ritual authority and sacred knowledge are often centralized and male-dominated. By valorising indigenous practices, local myths, and culturally specific symbols, such as the sacred *Itu Ghot* (pot) and agricultural offerings the ritual sustains a vibrant cultural narrative that celebrates female agency and community continuity. It challenges the rigid hierarchies and gendered norms prevalent in mainstream religious institutions.

The dynamic interplay between local tradition and broader religious norms in *Itu Pujo* exemplifies how folk religion serves as a site of ongoing cultural negotiation and adaptation. This process enables the ritual to remain meaningful and relevant, responding creatively to social changes while preserving core values tied to fertility, prosperity, and familial well-being. The ritual's adaptability exemplifies the transformative potential of grassroots religiosity, where ritual forms both reflect and shape the community's collective identity, resilience, and empowerment.

Conclusion

The study of *Itu Pujo* illustrates how localized household rituals can serve as powerful sites for contesting and renegotiating gendered religious authority. Drawing on Durkheim's theory of the sacred, Butler's performativity, feminist and agency theories, ritual theory, and perspectives on folk religion, this paper shows that women's ritual performance in *Itu Pujo* democratizes sacred power by sacralising domestic space and creating new empowered female identities.

Far from being peripheral participants, women in *Itu Pujo* enact priestly roles that contest patriarchal control, foster family cohesion, and reconfigure cultural narratives around gender and spirituality. This ritual

thus embodies a complex interplay of tradition and transformation, illustrating how folk religious practices can provide meaningful avenues for female agency and social negotiation within patriarchal contexts.

By placing woman's embodied ritual agency at the centre, the *Itu Pujo* ritual challenges established sacred hierarchies and invites reconsideration of how spirituality, power, and gender intersect in everyday life. It contributes to broader scholarly conversations about gender, religion, and social change, highlighting the importance of domestic ritual as a vital, contested, and dynamic religious space.

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