



**FLAME**  
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DISCOVER  
INDIA





# **KUMARTULI: A SLUM WITH AN IDENTITY**

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**DISCOVER INDIA PROGRAM**

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## Contents

S. No.	Particulars	Page Number
1.	<b>Acknowledgements</b>	v
2.	<b>Abstract</b>	vii
3.	<b>1.0 Introduction</b>	7
	1.1 Introduction	
	1.2 Historical and Geographical Overview	3
	1.3 Research Statement	5
	1.4 Aims and Objectives	5
	1.5 Pre field hypothesis	5
	1.6 Research Methodology	6
	1.7 Limitations	7
	1.8 Rationale	9
4.	<b>2.0 Literature Review</b>	10
	2.1 Tradition	
	2.2 Livelihood	17
	2.3 Government Policy	27
	2.4 Gender and Caste Monopoly	32
	2.5 Self-Organization and External Help	38
5.	<b>3.0 Field Findings and Analysis</b>	40
	3.1 Deviation from Rituals and Traditions	
	3.2 Implementation of Government Schemes	47
	3.3 Economic Government Policies and e-Commerce	51
	3.4 Existence of Gender Monopoly	56
	3.5 Working Conditions	60

6.	<b>4.0 Conclusion</b>	64
7.	<b>5.0 References</b>	69
8.	<b>6.0 Appendix</b>	76

## CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the work incorporated in this report entitled “*Kumartuli: The Slum with an Identity*” submitted by the undersigned Research Team was carried out under my mentorship. Such material as has been obtained from other sources has been duly acknowledged.

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## **Abstract**

The Kumartuli community is a region that has housed idol makers for generations. It has withstood a number of historical transitions and today remains an integral part of Bengali culture and identity. In India, Idols play an important role in terms of manifestations of faith and act as material metaphors for divine presence. Consequently, Idol makers play a very important role in the way Indians express faith, practice worship and show solidarity of community. Its ambiguous historical lineage and its linkage to constantly prevalent poverty suggest that this community has been cast in the shadows throughout its existence. This is Ironic considering the vital role they play in such an important cultural celebration.

The labor that goes into the craft and the exquisite result cannot be ignored and must be acknowledged and given due credit. This report seeks to highlight some of the current social-economic conditions of Kumartuli as a result of commercialization, globalization and capitalism. This report will elaborate on the given accounts of the community's history, following in depth qualitative data analysis in terms of certain gaps that we wanted to address. This report will focus on the proposed government schemes and their subsequent implementation, the deviation from rituals and traditions over time and the changes in the symbolism and depiction of Durga, the result of government policies in terms of GST and demonetization as well as the role of e-commerce, the working conditions of the idol makers, and the role of gender and caste in the community.

Our research was also aimed at investigating the kind of external and official help the Kumartuli community gets. On-field interactions with Samithis and members of the community helped us understand the current socio-political climate the idol makers are facing.

This report is an effort to generate awareness on the realities of craftsmen/women in India and hopes to garner appreciation for a beautiful art form that requires immense dedication, devotion and intent to learn.



## List of images, tables and maps

Image Number	Caption
1	Map of Kolkata(1690)
2	Artisan painting final touches on Kali idol
3	Year-wise increase in the number of Durga pujas in Kolkata
4	Bodies of the clay idols
5	Adding ornaments to finished idol
6	Lack of space cause artisans to share workshops
7	Community of Kumartuli represents variety of traders apart from idol makers
8	Artists work in unsanitary work spaces and with potentially hazardous chemicals
9	Ancillary vendor in Kumartuli sits idle on a slow day of orders
10	Clay worker commissioned to make Prabha's statue from Bahubali worth 1crore
11	Artist makes a fresh mix of paints to apply once the idol is dry
12	Artist resorts to working on the streets due to lack of space.
13	Ornaments and decorations is an industry in itself within the Kumartuli community
14	Unskilled laborer working the clay for the artisans.
15	Poorly maintained streets of Kumartuli street
16	Creating the structure out of straw and clay
17	Chyna Pal in her workshop
18	Artists now use readymade molds to create the idols head and hands
19	Delicate details being added to the head of the Durga idol
20	Thematic puja pandal based on the movie franchise 'Bahubali'
21	Thematic pandals keep getting more extravagant and expensive each year
22	Fiberglass idols ready for transport
23	Prodyut Pal, a market leader
24	Abandoned flour mill used as location for relocation of workshops
25	Sanjib Nag, Head of Department of architecture at JadHAVpur University
26	Ranjit Sarkar, secretary of Kumartuli Mritshilpa Samiti

27	Casual laborers employed to fix or mend damaged idols
28	Painting the face of Durga was once reserved for only the most respected and esteemed artists
29	Homepage of Prodyut Pal's online sales portal for idols
30	Idols left out to dry on the narrow streets of Kumartuli
31	Maya pal displays her proficiency in handling work life with professionalism
32	Kakoli pal in her home
33	Kaushik Ghosh, a leading artisan
34	Painting the body of the idol
35	Working on the corner of the road
36	Madan Mohan Mandir



# Introduction

## **1.1 Introduction**

In India, Idols of deities are visual and physical manifestations of faith. They have always been an integral part of Indian religious history, having withstood multiple social transitions. Today, they remain an incredible spectacle, even to non-believers. Various communities create diverse idols of Gods and Goddesses whose stories represent their own core values and beliefs. Correspondingly, The Bengali community believes that divine feminine energy takes form in the Goddess Durga. According to Hinduism, she is the cosmic mother or the protector of all that is good. Every year, during the month of October, the Hindu community celebrates her victory over all evil with special prayers and elaborate Pujas, hence the paramount role of the idol makers of Kumartuli.

A community of artisans situated in Kolkata, West Bengal, Kumartuli idol makers have been crafting meticulous representations of the Goddess for generations. Boasting rich cultural heritage and historical significance, it is one of Bengals most esteemed forms of art, recognized and revered globally. Every year during the time of Durga Puja, the global Bengali community welcomes the Goddess with great splendor featuring exquisite Puja Pandals with the Goddess as the centre of attention, thus, making Kumartuli and Durga Puja essentially synonymous.

What was originally a celebration of religious and communal belief is now a symbol of cultural identity and a platform for the community to come together. Clearly, the manner in which the annual event is celebrated is constantly changing. Therefore, these changes automatically impact the professional dynamic of the idol makers. As a result of keeping up with fluctuating demands whilst simultaneously trying to preserve the authenticity of the art, the Kumartuli of today is an interesting merge of urbanization and nostalgia.

## 1.2 Historical and geographical overview

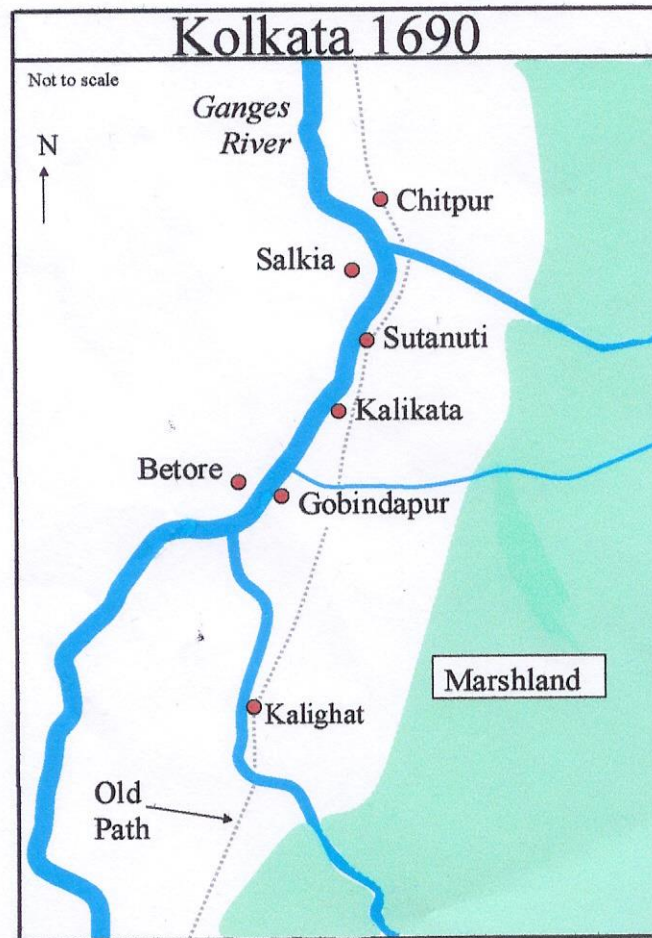


Image 1: Map of Kolkata

Situated In West Bengal, Kolkata, Kumartuli is a district designated to idol makers. It is located between Rabindra Sarani and the Hooghly river, thus increasing the convenience of acquiring clay for the idol making process.

What is today known as ‘Kumartuli’ is a result of various dialectic influences coinciding with the multiple historical transitions that this community has gone through. Most researchers

cannot agree on the ancestry of the Kumors due to missing empirical data. There are no historical references of the sociology of the Kumors in particular whilst there is a lot of existing literature on the trajectory of where they created idols. There are multiple historical accounts of how the settlement established but the exact origin of their lineage remains ambiguous.

However, it is commonly accepted that in the mid seventeenth century, potters from Krushnanagar came to Gobindapore, a fertile and prosperous village on the banks of the Bhagirathi, (now known as Hooghly), in search of better livelihood. Before that, they were mostly associated with agrarian work. Initially, idols were made only in the houses of Zamindars (Artistocrates) and not in Kumartuli. Artists were brought in by the affluent on a seasonal basis. When the British East India Company required that land for the construction of Fort William, they migrated further up river to Sutanooti. Since boats carrying materials constantly travelled up river, it made sense for the potters to settle on the banks of the river. As these three villages merged to form Kolkata, the British called it Kolkata. Potters from East Bengal (later known as East Pakistan) joined the original inhabitants of Sutanooti. Artisans along with their families migrated from Bikrampur (now Bangladesh) during the partition.

Durga Puja proceeded to become an annual event in Autumn in the houses of rich aristocrats, increasing the need for potters from Krishnagar. It was a metaphor for opulence by this point and only the casts that were favored by the British rule celebrated it. By the end of the eighteenth century, Durga Puja became an annual event even in the homes of commoners. In 1790, Friend of India (now known as The Statesman) recorded the first ever Durga Puja committee comprising of a group of Brahmins. They allegedly collected funds through punitive tax and got the idol made at Kumartuli. Durga Puja started to become increasingly symbolic and was associated with the destruction of oppression and evil, and, given the political climate of the time, it was also symbolic of Indian resistance against British rule. Ever since, idol making and Durga Puja has become a staple part of the livelihood of this community residing on the banks of Hooghly.

As of today, Kumartuli has grown into a more inclusive space representing members from diverse caste groups of varying origin and lineage. It is now home to a variety of traders, merchants and ancillary workers each with distinct specializations and unique styles.

Our literature review deals with existing research available on the idol makers of Kumartuli. It looks at the different aspects of the work that the members of the Kumartuli community do, and also looks at the important features of working conditions and their livelihood. Through the analysis of existing literature, the lack of research done on the effects of government schemes and social changes taking place will be focused upon.

### **1.3 Research Statement**

“What are the effects of government policy and social change on the traditions and livelihoods of the idol makers of Kumartuli?”

### **1.4 Aims and Objectives**

- To check the effect of government policy and neglect on the livelihoods of the workers
- To understand how the workers have responded to economic changes over time – imposition of GST, currency demonetization and emergence of ecommerce
- To examine the extent to which they have strayed away from traditional production techniques
- To investigate the lack of institutional funding and the resulting self-dependence in raising capital
- To understand the role of gender and caste monopoly in the Kumartuli community

### **1.5 Pre-field Hypothesis**

After research using secondary sources of information, we found that the socio-economic aspects of the community have not been researched upon, specifically, the effects of GST implementation and demonetization on international trade, raw material costs and wages. There was a lack of information on the various government schemes for the welfare of the community, the funding options from various financial institutions, the steps taken by NGOs for the betterment of the community, and most importantly, follow up information on the same. We also found out that caste monopoly has faded away from the community, but there is an existing gender disparity in the community with only two female working artisans. We assume that there is prominent government neglect of the community and that the gender problem is one that the

community has not even acknowledged yet. Another assumption is that the artisans are not aware about the different funding options present for them, and the actions that the government and the NGOs are supposed to be taking in their interest. Lastly, due to a lack of information we accepted that there were no positive effects of GST implementation and demonetization on the community; however, this was something that we hoped to explore further.

## **1.6 Research Methodology**

In order to fulfil all our aims and objectives, our research methods were mostly qualitative. Our approaches are mainly evaluative and explanatory in nature. The two key methods that were implemented were- interviews, by techniques of semi structured interviews, unstructured interviews and focus group discussion, and the observation method, by the technique of non participatory observation. Apart from this, we intended to use quantitative research methods to determine the change in the economic trends of the community, however the lack of availability of uniform, substantial data hampered this. We targeted different audiences in our research, the most important one being that of the artisans. Our aims were structured in such a manner that was imperative for us to interact with different groups of individuals. Our main target groups were:

### **1.6.1 Artisans and unskilled labourers**

The artisans were the most important target group in our research. We conducted personal semi structured interviews with them, to gain their insights on the community. We aimed to find out about the effects of GST implementation and demonetization, the competition among the artisans, their take on the government's involvement in the community's well-being and their views on the lack of working female artisans. We aimed to conduct a focus group discussion amongst artisans, but this task was not successful because artisans were free at different times and it was tough to co-ordinate. For unskilled workers, we conducted a focus group discussion and chiefly relied on personal unstructured interviews.

### **1.6.2 Market leaders**

The market leaders as such were actually a subset of the artisans, however operating more comfortably in their spheres. We used semi structured interviews with these market leaders, who run their own workshops. Our expectation of this target group was chiefly to help us gather some



understanding on the role of e-commerce in the community along with the dynamics of international trade, and the change in the process of production of the idol over the years. Since these market leaders have been in the idol making business for decades, and are a part of the business due to family tradition, they helped us understand the change in the community over the years culturally, socially as well as economically.

**1.6.3 Community scholars, historians and government officials** For this sample, we used semi structured interviews, to get information on the history and significance of the community. These perspectives chiefly helped us understand external influences and changes in depiction of the idol over the years. We will also gain insight on the government and the NGO's involvement in the community, along with the various measures taken for the welfare of the same.

#### **1.6.4 Banks and NGOs**

We planned to use semi structured interviews with the banks and NGOs; we had aimed to get information on the different loans and schemes designed for the artisans. However on-field we discovered that there were no such schemes from banks in particular. In fact, we did not visit the banks due to time constraints. Information from NGOs eased our questions about banks after which there was no palpable need to visit them. The NGOs provided us with useful information regarding the different schemes for the benefit of the community. We also aimed to understand the involvement of the NGOs, as middle men.

#### **1.6.5 Schools**

We conducted semi structured interviews with the principals of the schools. We thought they would be able to provide us with information on their curriculum, along with understanding the scope for the artisans and alternate job opportunities for them. However, the role of the government school was quite different than what we expected it to be and it wasn't very relevant to the functioning of Kumartuli.

### **1.7 Limitations to gathering data**

We did encounter many impediments in our data collection. The most prevalent hindrance was the language barrier we faced in Kumartuli. Most of the artisans were familiar with Hindi,

but weren't as fluent in it as they were in Bengali. As a result, we had to conduct most of our interviews with artisans and workers in Bengali. Kanish sir and Utathya were fluent in Bengali and led most of these interviews. There were very few English and Hindi based interviews,

Before going to Kolkata, we tried to contact the Government school of Art in Kolkata however no one answered the phone. At the time of our visit, we found out that it was closed for Diwali and did not end up interviewing the principal on that day. We had to return next week to interview the principal because of this lag. This was one change to our proposed plan. We also shifted our artisan interviews to Day 3 as opposed to the Day 2, and then paid visits to the samitis on those instead.

We intended on paying a visit to banks which offered credit schemes for artisans. However, on field we were informed that such co-operative banks were obsolete and there was no special scheme for artisans. However, after interviews with some of the artisans we found that they did not actually take loans from these banks but chiefly depended on personal loans from Bank of India and the State bank of India, under no specific schemes designed for artisans. As a result of this and time constraints, we did not visit the banks

Another problem faced was the lack of participation of certain artisans and workers in our interviews. Mintu Pal in particular rejected an interview with us and instructed his workers not to pay heed to us. Mintu Pal was part of our pre-field research and is an important fiberglass artisan who we did not interview. The reason as to why he did this was not too clear, but one of his workers claimed that they were too busy. Other artisans also rejected us on the pretext of having too many orders pending and a shortage of free time. Some artisans even seemed overwhelmed as we carried out our research in Kumartuli and as a result shied away from interactions.

Our fieldwork began after Durga puja got over, however Kali puja was on the 19<sup>th</sup> of October. Many of the owners and workers had very little free time to interact with us because Kali puja was around the corner and there were a lot of unfinished idols and customers pouring in. Many artisans refused to see us at all because they were failing to keep up with their set timelines for Kali puja. \

## 1.8

### **Rationale**

Idol worship in India, or *idolatry*, plays a very significant role in society. It is deeply embedded into our lives, with us being constantly reminded of its presence. Its function is not singular, as it plays a role in the contemporary world's economic, political and social aspects as well.

Kumartuli, a community in Northern Kolkata, upholds the tradition of idol making even today. It is involved in the production of religious idols, along with the exporting of the same. This community is one of its kinds and is the heart and soul of the Durga Puja festival in Kolkata every year.

Although there has been research done on this community, it has been filled with nuances and gaps. There are certain aspects of the community, pertaining to the livelihoods of the artisans working there that have been ignored. It appears that Kumartuli has been neglected by the government, as well as other welfare institutions, leaving it in a diabolical state.

We intended to take on this research project initially, due to our fascination with the glorious idols that are produced there, and the wonderful way in which this community fits into the culturally rich city of Kolkata. We chose to undertake this topic for our research to understand the cause and effect relationship between government policy and neglect, and the livelihood of the community. Since we are already aware of the ethnic significance of the community, we intended on delving into what affects its functionality.



# Literature Review

## **2.1 Tradition**

### **2.1.1 Changes in depictions of Durga Puja over the years**

Durga Puja is the biggest religious celebration of the Bengali Hindus. Observed every year in the fall month of *Aswin* (mid-September to mid-October), the four main days of the puja bring out a universal occasion spirit and the festive air in West Bengal and particularly in its capital city, Kolkata (Ghosh, 2000). Plenty of pandals (alternative bamboo material and canvas shelters) are set up throughout the city, where the deity is housed amid the celebration. Worship is done consistently amid the celebration in the pandals by Brahmin priests, and the stage on which the idol of the goddess and her children are set, procures the holiness of sacred space amid the celebration. (Ghosh, 2000). The pandals are usually situated in any open space in the neighborhood. Recently, the absence of such spaces can prompt some pandals being situated on the roads or carriageway, in this manner affecting a temporary closure of the street for traffic amid the times of the celebration. The transformation of public space into ceremonial and ritual space makes Durga puja an exceptionally public celebration (Ghosh, 2000).

Durga Puja in its present form of a yearly celebration was started in 1580 by Raja Kansanarayan of Taherpur. He was soon imitated by Raja Jagatnarain of Bhaduria in the Rajshahi region (Ghosh, 2000). In the rural territories of Bengal before the coming of the British, puja was an event to reaffirm the social solidarity of the town and division of work among the distinctive castes. The intricate arrangements required for the puja drew in the endeavors of a huge family, and individuals were allocated tasks as well as had a share in the puja. Public celebrations related with the Durga Puja have risen in the course of the most recent 200 years. Prior to the British conquering Bengal in the mid-eighteenth century, Durga puja was a rural organization principally which was seen inside the family unit regions of the rural gentry. Be that as it may, as the port city of Kolkata turned into the capital of the British Empire in India, urban social life blossomed. The rising urban comprador first class who flourished through their administrations to the British soon organized the Durga puja among their family unit ceremonies (Ghosh, 2000).



*Image 2: Artisan painting final touches on Kali 1*

These practices have not stayed consistent but rather experienced change as they have been appropriated and challenged by the marginal collectivities to address distinctive purposes. Hence, as the key celebration of the Bengali upper caste Hindus - Durga puja has progressively turned into a secular and hybrid entity, consolidating across the board mainstream participation from different caste and classes, and empowering ladies to rise up out of the confinement of their residential sphere to possess public spaces amid the time of the festival (Ghosh, 2000). The popularity of the festival has improved its festive perspective while disintegrating its ritual features. This has to a degree "secularized" the worship of a Hindu goddess into a cosmopolitan festival. Further, it has dislodged the elite imagination from constituting the festivities exclusively in its own image. The properties of conspicuous consumption, display, and status have now been appropriated by the non-elite segments of society also (Ghosh, 2000).

The transition from household worship of Goddess Durga to (public) worship was made in the last decade of the eighteenth century when twelve brahmins framed a committee to direct their own Durga Puja. The committee gathered public memberships from the neighboring towns

and played out a sparkling ceremony alongside different sorts of entertainment like *swang* (mimicry), puppetry show, *Jatra* (folk theater) and *half akhrai* (a type of bawdy singing). There was a solid relationship of public entertainment with public worship of the goddess and Durga Puja progressively turned into a period of festivity. Durga Puja was completed with grand ceremony and display in the family units of the urban elite in Kolkata (Ghosh, 2000).

Year	No. of community pujas
1954	300
1962	650
1968	759
1969	901
1977	1003
1979	990
1994	1104
1995	1120

Table 1: Year-wise increase in the number of Durga pujas in Kolkata

### 2.1.2 Commercialization of the process of idol making

In this community of the *kumbhars*, which is Kumartuli, it wasn't so much the commercialization of idol making as it was the commercialization of caste. Idol making was always a source of livelihood for these *kumbhars*, which only grew as the demand grew and this community of *kumbhars* increased in numbers as well. This oldest community of artisans (idol-makers) have been known for what they do. They believe Idol making and craftsmanship to be a part of them since birth, and that "it runs in their blood." This generations long profession of this community has become a caste. There is a famous saying in Bengali which says that the one who makes idols belongs to the *kumbhar's* family (caste). The authenticity of the *kumbhars* became a trademark of their work. For the longest time, they were a "secluded group, untouched by modernity", in the aspect of the change in their idol making practices. However, over time they had developed a European spirit of Enlightenment and Capitalism with their entrepreneurial

practices considering which, it would not be incorrect to say that they were a highly modern community in this respect. (Heierstad, 2017)



Image 3: Adding ornaments to finished idol 1

The caste of the *kumbhars* became a brand, that they used as a marketing strategy for their work. It was therefore, the caste of the *kumbhars*, was actually the one which was being sold, in addition to their work. This commodification of the caste of the *kumbhars* is an important aspect of the commercialization of the entire idol making business.

Over time, the “change in the form and characteristics of the buyer” also brought about a change in the making of the Durga idols. Earlier, the consumers preferred the traditional Durga idols, in their authentic designs that had been existing for centuries. In recent times, however, the consumers tend to prefer a more artistic and innovatively made idols instead of the traditional ones which, although can be found if looked for, are not made as much they used to be. During the time of Durga Puja, there are also competitions in Kolkata, which have prizes for the most artistic idols. The change in the community, in the process of idol making and its modernization is very evident from the above observations and instances. (Heierstad, 2017)

It would seem from the timing of the increase in demand, that it was only for mimicking the majestic traditions of the higher classes of the society. However, it was not only for the grandiose



and status statement that these idols were bought; it was also the religious dedication of people to Durga, because of which these idols saw an increasing popularity and demand much before they were being bought as a statement of status.

Sudipta Garai, in her paper, '*Commercialization of Durga puja in Kolkata*' says that secular and technological developments, although they do not completely eliminate the need for religion, do change the dynamics of it to compensate the modern notions of market in it. She also notes that "secularization may lead to an immense shrinkage in the scope of the sacred in reality," since it is an idea derived from Weber's idea of 'disenchantment'. With secularization, the nature of religion changes to include social contexts which may be out of the scopes of religion itself, while also changing the nature of the sacred that humanity has known so far.

However, as secularization represents a plumage in the traditional idea of the sacred, at the same time, sacralization marks and increase in the idea of sacred in a different form and at a different level. The commodification of the religion through this modern notion leads to the festivities becoming a grandiose exhibit, which aids the commercialization of not only the idol makers, which acts as a marketing strategy for them; but also, the media which gains business by featuring this 'traditional' extravagant cultural and religious tradition (Garai, 2017).

The focus on the relevance of the artist and his influence on art will be a very crucial thing to keep in mind, while researching about this community in Kumartuli. Although the demands have changed over time, it would also be very interesting to talk to the locals about their choice and preference of the kinds of Durga idols that they would like to buy. since, it is quite evident that with the changing times and the increasing standards of the people in commodities including extravagant tastes, especially the elite parts of the society, buying idols from generation old artisans who have been making idols in a similar fashion like they have been for multiple decades, if not centuries in the past, may in ways decrease the 'classy' touch that, that part of the society may prefer; with malls and boutiques coming up in today's day and age. As it not only the product that reflects its extravagance, but also every step that the consumer comes in contact with while achieving the product. This may have a negative impact on the business of the *kumbhars* and it would be interesting to find out what these *kumbhars* do to maintain their business in cases like these.

Originally, the idol-makers used to consider the art of idol making to be a sacred act, entrusting it to the most trustworthy dedicated artists in the community. They considered their

tools and clay-working to be sacred often attaching ritualistic practices to it. With regards to the traditions of the craftsman, one of the most significant questions to be raised is whether today's craftsmen still follow the same tradition. Also, the craftsmen were given a fairly good position in society and were considered to be very important factors in terms of worship of God, along with the saints. It is unclear whether a craftsman today is still seen as one with God, and as someone who is a true artist. Sudipta Garai, in her paper, *commercialization of Durga puja in Kolkata* says that secular and technological developments, although they do not completely eliminate the need for religion, do change the dynamics of it to compensate the modern notions of market in it. She also notes that "secularization may lead to an immense shrinkage in the scope of the sacred in reality,"



Image 3: Bodies of the clay idols

The information provided about the history of the religious image in India is very vast. This could be seen as very fruitful, but unfortunately, it does not seem to be. As a result of this, most of the information is very overlapping. None of the sources mention the actual production process of the idol, for example, the materials used and the technique applied. In the present day, fiberglass idols have become very prominent, which signifies a change in the medium of idol making. Information on the emergence of fiberglass use is absent. Another aspect to be further

looked into would be the relationship between fiberglass idols and the use of ecommerce, which also deviates from tradition. Most of the idols sent abroad are made of fiberglass as opposed to clay. Is there a correlation between the use of fiberglass and increased ecommerce use? Also, as a result of the materials being revolutionized to suit technology, is it indeed causing a rift in the idol making community- between those who value the traditional production practices and those who are willing to modernize with fiber glass and ecommerce use?

As a part of changing traditions, commercialization of idols is a big factor. The commodification of the religion through this modern notion leads to the festivities becoming a grandiose exhibit, which aids the commercialization of not only the idol makers, which acts as a marketing strategy for them; but also the media which gains business by featuring this ‘traditional’ extravagant cultural and religious tradition. (Garai, 2017). However, the possible negative implications that changing demands could have on these *kumars* have not been studied yet, as to how they adapt their operations to demand fluctuations.

## **2.2 Livelihood**

### **2.2.1 The working conditions and working hours**

During the process of initial research, a large number of blog posts were found on the Kumartuli community. The write ups consisted of observations by the respective bloggers of the Kumartuli area along with individual interviews with the artisans. The general narrative of majority of these blog posts were the working and living conditions of the idol makers were not ideal. They were described by various bloggers as cramped, bearing the signs of poverty and squalor, littered with trash overstuffed with idols and the lanes are described as dingy and unkept. Through one on one interviews with the artisans, bloggers claim that multiple pleas have been made to the government for housing reform. In fact, the government had promised a more “modern” housing plan along with improvements such as community art studio. This would be a vast improvement considering the artisans living space and studio are the same. Bloggers claim that the poverty and ghastly working conditions would be apparent to any visitor witnessing Kumartuli for the first time.



*Image 4: Lack of space causes artisans to share 1*

An online news forum called DNA (Daily News Analysis) claims that several workers have had to return to their respective villages due to Malaria and accumulation of stagnant water in the Kumartuli area. The same website interviewed Gobindo Pal, the joint president of the Kumartuli Mritshilpa Karigor Samiti claims that studio proprietors do not pay idol makers enough money to hire out a decent place to live, therefore they have to cram themselves and their numerous idols in the making into very small spaces that do not handle rain or any other harsh weather conditions well. Bapu Pal, another spokesperson of the Kumartuli Mritshilpa Sanskriti Samiti says that every year, elections come and go and numerous promises are made but none of them are implemented upon. The main demand of the idol makers is to improve on studio infrastructure. The demand for bigger ideals is increasing and in their current studio set up, artisans are facing problems when trying to keep up with such demands without accidents occurring.



*Image 5: Community of Kumartuli represents variety of traders apart from idol makers*

The rains and the lack of space are major reasons that the artisans are forced to let go of orders they would have otherwise been able to take. The studio proprietors do not pay them enough money for them to have a decent place to live and work out of. Because of these financial restrictions they are forced to live in wet and soaked places because of which diseases like malaria spread forcing many workers to return home to their villages. “Another reason that they cannot afford better working and living quarters is because their sales have not increased whereas their workforce has. Fifty years ago, there were 100 artisans but now there are more than 1000.” (Banerjee, 2011). Due to the lack of sales the artisans earn very little with which they have to take care of their workers, purchase raw materials, ornaments and so on. Another problem that the artisans in Kumartuli face is the coming up of other suppliers of idols which are nearer to Kolkata. Because of this the already less number of people who are buying idols from Kumartuli decreases further which further reduces the income of the artisans. “Even the Puja organizers want to pay as less as possible for the idols and spend more non-puja affairs.” (Banerjee, 2011).



*Image 6: Artists work in unsanitary work spaces and with potentially hazardous chemicals.*

A 2014 article in *The Hindu*, one of the idol makers explained that this business requires a significant amount of initial investment and that majority of their capital is obtained from the bank. He also goes on to explain that majority of the income generated goes toward paying off debts and costs for labor wages and supplies, which leaves the idol makers with a very small profit. In a 2013 article in *The Hindu*, journalists quoted Gopalchandra Pal, a senior artist who has been crafting idols since 1964. He says that he does not want his two sons to pursue idol making because he genuinely believes that there is no future in this business. Apart from that, younger generations do not want to be subjected to the horrible working conditions and underwhelming pay. It would seem as though the future generation have keenly observed how the state treats the Kumartuli community and have gained a clear understanding as to what their art means to the government.

### **2.2.2 Scope for idol makers**

A common problem faced by the artists is the issue of capital acquisition before the season begins to purchase raw materials for their work. The 200-odd artisans here usually work on an

annual bank loan, the size of which is determined by the number of idols each can produce for the festival. Traditionally, the artists would take out small loans from their zamindars at high interest rates for this purpose. In 1970 the United Bank of India came up with an objective to fix these practices.<sup>1</sup>The loans provided by the banks however would arrive just prior to the peak season which created a time crunch for the idol-makers. Today, the SBI advances a total loan amount of Rs 1 Crore, approximately, as a co-operative loan and interest rates vary between 8 and 10% according magnitude of the loan taken. Due to delayed payments, an inescapable cycle of debt is created that the artists profits even post-season cannot cover the cost of.



*Image 8: Ancillary vendor in Kumartuli sits idle on a slow day of orders*

Faced with a multitude of these problems, craftsmen have been forced to adapt to the changing markets to earn profits through differentiated mediums. Diversification is an important aspect of the small scale and cottage industry today. The traditional handcrafted items are being given new forms and usage so as to appeal to a wider mass and increase the volume of business.

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<sup>1</sup> According to a Study Report prepared by Kolkata Municipal Development Authority in 1977 on the 'Clay Modellers' Community in Kumartuli'

Instead of focusing primarily on the depiction of Durga for large puja pandals that have proved to be a challenging task in the current economic climate, many traders have chosen to branch out into smaller more specific avenues of idol making. Some artists are now focusing on idols of goddess Kali, Annapurna, Lakshmi, Saraswati, Saint Loknatha and even Ganesh. The production of these small items does not need a huge labor force and hence the profits reaped from their sale all go to the individual sculptor. Additional projects that are unrelated to religious and traditional practices are even being taken up by the sculptors solely for the purpose of profit. For example, this year a man named Subhadra crafted a clay idol of the famous south Indian actor Prabhas from the 'Bahubali' franchise worth 1 lakh.



*Image 9: Clay worker commissioned to make Prabha's statue from Bahubali worth 1 crore*

<http://nowbreaking.in/india/kumartuli-baahubalis-biggest-gift-coming-from-kumartuli-with-love-india-news/>

Clay model involves the clay supplier with his numerous agents in different districts from where he procures clay, the hay supplier, the cloth trader, the jewelry designer who indirectly



involves the workers from rural areas, even women of the household. These laborers often seem to migrate from other districts. They were seen to migrate to the city from Nadia and Burdwan in search of semi-skilled/unskilled work. Upwards of 4,000 migrant labor arrive at the district to work every year. Now however it is being observed that more and more idol-makers in Bengal are migrating south and transferring their skills into Ganesh idol making as it yields more profits than selling to Durga puja pandals in Bengal. The Kumartuli district is approximately 1,000 workmen short this year. These numbers include novices that take up hard labor jobs like splitting bamboo and collecting clay, hence workforce for menial jobs is shrinking as well and this hinders production and delivery considerably. In fact, a few years ago, apprentices were paid about Rs 2,000 per month, the present asking rate has gone up by at least Rs 1,000.

The Mahathma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Act which provides 100 days of unskilled labour and work with pay has been doing relatively well in Nadia and Burdwan districts. In Nadia district's Krishnanagar I and II blocks, 16,781 households have been given employment this fiscal, out of the 16,789 households that had made the demand. 'Hence they are becoming more reluctant to travel to the city and toil for work in the Kumartuli community when they are getting adequate pay for unskilled work close to their homes and family'; Babu Pal of the Kumartuli Mritsilpi Sanskriti Samity. Hence MNREGA is encroaching on the potential labor-force of the artists.



*Image 10: Artist makes a fresh mix of paints to apply when the idol is dry*

The Kumartuli idols have a considerably large international market for their goods. Most large-scale idol makers in Kolkata claim to make most of their revenue through the export of their idols to United States, South America, Bangladesh and even parts of Kenya. Potters have also equipped themselves with a facility to book Durga idols online from Kumartuli. Now a day's idols of glass, fibers, bronze, stones are also made and exported. The demand from abroad is now for durable light-weight idols that have minimal transport cost<sup>2</sup>. Hence certain artists have also been specializing only in the production of fiber-glass idols and even panel and mural work that they pack and send. More so, the motivation to craft these idols stems from the fact that the prices of fiber idols have remained almost fixed in the last 10 years. However, since the cycle of immersion for these items is long (each idol can be worshipped for 7-10 years depending on its quality) the scope for increasing availability of orders from the same customers becomes somewhat limited.

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<sup>2</sup> Post GST export rates have increased by 18%



*Image 11: Artist resorts to working on the streets due to lack of space*

The ancillary ornaments industry is also a large part of the community at Kumartuli. There are craftsmen in Kolkata that specialize in the production of jewelry, crowns etc. They then distribute the sales along body of idol makers to produce decent revenue to support themselves. This work might not necessarily require the level of skill possessed by the sculptors but still provide a large enough market for sale. Recently however, the plight of the jewelry designers not only arises from the changing tastes but also because of the availability of cheaper substitutes. The bullion and zari work is increasingly being replaced by the cheaper variety of rolex (golden papers). Similarly, the sola or pith work is replaced by polystyrene.



*Image 12: Ornaments and decorations is an industry in itself within the Kumartuli community*

The community has even innovated a way to earn funds for themselves through the current ticket system in place at the gates of the idol-making complex. A nominal amount is fixed for daily, weekly and monthly charges that visitors, researchers, students and tourists alike must pay to view the workings of the artists. The funds collected from the foot traffic then goes into funding infrastructure and wellbeing of the artists.

One of the most overt elements of our research was the discrepancy between the specifics of the working hours of the Kumartuli workers. Different websites and research articles, report working hours that are inconsistent. It has been stated that the amount of hours that they work change with regards to the season, however, the particulars of this are very vague and generalized. Along with the inconsistencies of the working hours, there is also a large contrariety between the reported wages of the workers. It is believed that they have different wages according to time of year and the roles played by them. However, to what extent this is true, and the empirical data for this, is not present. Another important factor in this conversation is whether or not the workers believe that they are fairly compensated for their work and time. Is there anything that they wish to change with regards to their working hours and the compensation for the same?

The livelihoods of the workers in Kumartuli, are largely compromised. Although it is safe to state that their working conditions are poor, the extent of deterioration of workshop infrastructure is unknown. The workers' opinions on their workspace and whether or not they view it as substandard is another factor that must be taken into consideration. The process, of adaptation and acclimatization of the workers to the lack of space and basic resources in the workspace, is unmapped. What role does the government play in this? Are the samitis doing enough to improve these working conditions? Are there are new or recent redevelopment plans for the community, and have these plans been translated into action?



*Image 13: Unskilled laborer working the clay for the artisans*

## **2.3 Government Policy**

### **2.3.1 Government welfare schemes**

It doesn't seem like the government has provided much aid or subsidies to these artisans as the only relevant piece of news regarding this topic comes in September 2016, when it was reported

that the artisans of Kumartuli were to be provided with extra kerosene for the completion of idols. The artisans need to give finishing touches to their idols a week before Durga Puja but face problems due to heavy rains during this period, which delays the drying up of the idols. As a result, the artisans use blue flame oil burners to dry up their idols and require a high quantity of kerosene for this. They used to receive the same allotted amount as the rest of the people which was insufficient for their needs and hence brought this to the notice of the MLA and the state women development and social welfare minister, Dr Sashi Panja, who in turn approached the state food and supplies minister Jyotipriya Mallick, requesting her to supply to them the extra kerosene. “The artisans will start getting 5 litres of kerosene per week ahead of the Puja and it will continue till Jagatdhatri Puja” (Basu, 2016).

There have been various programs and schemes that have been formulated however they have not been implemented effectively. “The civic agency – Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority (KMDA) has prepared an urban rejuvenation scheme for Kumartuli, supported by the flagship ‘Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission’ (JnNURM) which was under implementation in the year 2016” (Burra, 2014).



*Image 16: Poorly maintained streets of Kumartuli*

“The Jawaharlal Nehru Urban Renewal Mission (JnNURM) project worth Rs.260 million was supposed to have been implemented in 2006 by Sudhanshu Singh who was a MP of the state’s ruling communist party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) after the plan was conceptualized in 2005 and was delayed because of talks between the government and the artisans over land and rehabilitation issues.” (DNA India, 2007). According to this plan “The Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority (KMDA) was supposed to implement the project, 35 percent of its cost being borne by the central government, 15 percent by the state government, and the remaining 50 percent being arranged through loans. The KMDA was going to construct houses for the artisans over five acres of land at Kumartuli on the ground-plus-three-floors pattern. It would also build an art gallery for artisans to showcase their creations.” (DNA India, 2007). However, this project was not implemented correctly and because of “lack of security to the artisans, basic necessities, community participation it was not successful.” (Burra, 2014). These schemes were planned well and if they had worked they could have helped to solve the problem of living conditions in Kumartuli but they were too central and everything had to be approved by the central government which caused unnecessary delays. “The government had decided to raze it down altogether and rebuild under the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission, or JnNURM. But the project announced almost three years ago is hanging fire because the state government could not arrange land where the artisans’ workshops could be moved.”(Roy, 2008). “We were taken to Cossipore, Dhapa and Bagbazar but for some reason or the other, they all fell through,” says Mintu Pal, president of the Kumartuli Mritshilpa Sanskriti Samiti—the potters’ association. “Now, they want us to resettle on the banks of the Hooghly between Bagbazar and Sovabazar Ghat (in north Kolkata), but the local people have opposed it.” (Roy, 2008).

“The two quotes show how the project to rehabilitate and relocate the artisans of Kumartuli fell through because of various reasons. However, “the Union Urban Development and Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation Minister (HUPA), M. Venkaiah Naidu, who assumed office in 2014 said that a new mission would be launched and it would focus on the modern concept for cities based on GIS-based planning and would have solid and liquid waste management to develop clean cities.” (The Hindu). The JnNURM scheme was replaced by AMRUT in 2015. The AMRUT scheme is a 2 lakh crore rupees investment and it focuses on digitization and Wi-Fi zones in cities to improve urban governance. It aims to rejuvenate 500 cities and towns.” (Prasad, 2015).

The false promise that these artisans complain about is of the Kumartuli Urban Renewal Project of the West Bengal Government. The Project was approved by the Government of India in 2007 and was allocated Rs. 260 million and was to be carried out by the Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority [KMDA]. The KMDA was supposed to construct houses for the artisans over five acres of land at Kumartuli on the ground-plus-three-floors pattern. It was also in charge of building an art gallery for artisans to showcase their creations (DNA, 2007). Ten years on, they are yet to deliver on this promise and as a result, these artisans have lost their faith in the Government. This project would've gone a long way to help the artisans as they face problems of poor living conditions and water-logged streets.

Furthermore, it doesn't seem like any initiatives have been undertaken to educate these artisans on modern trade practices, essential to carry out business today and help these people maximize their profits.

Government policy would include demonetization, imposition of GST and projects undertaken by the government where the idol makers are major stakeholders. The key government aid received was in the form of subsidies on kerosene. However with respect to welfare projects as such, there is a serious fracture in the literature reviewed. The only key government project that came which was launched was the Kumartuli Urban Renewal Project of the West Bengal Government, which did not eventually go through. The project was approved, a blueprint was made, budget was allocated and a committee was formed to overlook the project but in spite of all this, the project was scrapped. It is unclear as to why this did not happen.

It's been reported that these artisans face problems with procurement of certain raw materials. As a result, the Government provided subsidies for kerosene and plastic sheets. Again, the effectiveness of these subsidies hasn't been measured. There is no substantial record of government propositions to the community, other than the Urban renewal project. It will be important to identify why there is a lack of involvement of the government in the sustainability of the community. The next aspect is the GST, of which only negative effects have been documented. It would be important to know if its imposition has affected them in any way which was not detrimental. The negative effects of demonetization are elaborate, the contesting opportunity cost of standing in lines to exchange notes against working on the idols. However,



there is ambiguity in the manner in which the idol makers dealt with the problem and the role of samithis, banks and governments in it, if there was any.

### **2.3.2 Effects of GST**

According to the idol makers, this new tax is difficult to understand and implement as the workers are still recovering from the impact of demonetization. The prices of materials such as false hair, kajal, arms made of aluminium and steel, and sari have gone up. Due to this confusion in GST, customers' budget on Durga idols has also come down this year (Financial Express, 2017).

Not only clay idols, these artisans make fiber idols, which are mostly sent to foreign countries. The potters are at a loss over the offshore delivery.

To countries like the US, some in Europe, the artisans deliver fiber images. They tie up with transport agencies who ferry these idols via cargo ship. But after GST, there was an increase in service tax (18%) and consequently the extra delivery charges were forwarded to the customer offshore. This then created confusion in terms of logistics. The idol making and delivery is usually at full swing at this time of the year, but it has taken a downfall because of the newly introduced GST. As the city gears up for the mega autumnal carnival, many artisans and representatives anticipate a loss due to GST. Many say the money they make during this season sustains them through the rest of the year and thus less income during the Puja season means lower living standards for the rest of the year.

The possibility of higher electricity bills also worries the artisans. Most of them work in low lighting. With the monsoon in full swing in Bengal, they need to use fans, heat guns and lights to dry the idols faster. Cost of clay has gone to Rs. 200-250 when compared to Rs. 150-175 previously. While bamboo and straw are priced between Rs. 800 for 20 pieces, which is higher than the previous year as well. Other miscellaneous costs on paints, garments, and adornments also make them wonder how to balance expenses. Around 60 fiber idols had been readied this year but only a few were delivered. The rest are awaiting transport. Once the customers abroad are made aware of the hike, the artisans hope they will agree with the required payment (Financial Express, 2017).

As for domestic demand of idols, there would be an impact on the orders placed by other states. For the idols that will be transported to states like Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, there will be an increase in the service tax and so the overall budget will increase. As for the demand in West Bengal, there will be no such effect. There are about 450 idol makers in Kumartuli, many of them are run by families that have been into idol-making and pottery for generations. They claim to have seen a decrease in quality of idols as prices for raw materials have gone up drastically. GST appears to be a mixed bag with certain necessities getting cheaper, while the other necessities are likely to disturb household budgets by getting more expensive. On the other hand, GST will simplify the process of tax collection and credit, however the multiple GST monthly returns will also make the whole process very cumbersome initially. Non-compliant vendors will create friction in the process. Any direct gains (savings in material costs) will be offset by indirect losses (additional manpower and machinery to manage GST issues and additional tax on services). The GST on other materials like clay, sand and decorations is the higher side and hence the cost will not come down much unless manufacturers are able to optimize their product pricing after adjusting for GST themselves. The GST on services is also higher than before hence that will also lead to minor inflation (Hindustan Times, 2017).

## **2.4 Caste and Gender Monopoly**

### **2.4.1 Significance of caste**

Several locations around West Bengal were distinguished based on occupations or castes. This changed during the 19th century where a greater intermixing of castes was witnessed. According to this paper, the few castes which were present in Kolkata were;

Jogipara, the weavers

Telipara, the oil pressing community

Kansari, the bell-metal utensil manufacturers

Naipits, the barbers and

Pataus, the painters.

Kumartuli was however the dominant caste amongst all of these especially after independence as large religious ceremonies were conducted in a manner of celebrating with the

community. Initially the demand for statues increased due to lavish puja preparations which were also a symbol of a person's wealth and hence a status symbol. The Kumartuli however was a caste "dominated by men of the Kumar caste" (Goldblatt, 1981).

Organizing lavish pujas was no more a status symbol and towards the later 19th century these lavish puja preparations by individuals died out however this brought together the majority of the population who then organized the kind of public puja pandals witnessed today. Since the Kumar caste is where the idol makers have emerged from, it is significant to know that clay idol making was initially just a family occupation. With rising demand for idols, the art of idol making turned into a proper market where for the first-time wage employment was seen, which according to Marx is very significant because it "distinguishes capitalism from all other forms of economic organization" (Goldblatt, 1981).

Kumartuli is unaffected by Kolkata's otherwise long-established caste or occupation based localities. Kumartuli itself emerged because of the distinguished Kumar caste and till present day dominates the image making industry. This however does not limit the entry of other caste workers into the Kumartuli. For example, there are Kayasthas, Brahmins and other artisan caste members among the shop owners. Various scheduled castes are also represented in the work force. A common assumption is that specialist castes often have monopolies which are rarely ever attacked. This assumption is proved wrong in this case where the monopoly of the Kumar caste was so high that it in fact attracted other castes to join the art of idol making regardless of their traditional backgrounds. This however is contrary to the idea of the notion that caste members will "jealously guard entry" to an income source which they regard as their own special preserve (Leach 6; Gough 34; Srinivas 34). The castes are also segregated as 'wrong' castes or 'clean' castes. This major diversion among caste is the major reason for any caste discrimination not just in former Kolkata but also around the country itself. However as mentioned earlier, several castes have entered the profession of idol making in Kolkata. One must hence note the importance of the location where such intermingling of caste indeed prevails without conflict. The paper goes on to talk about the importance of skill and negligence of caste in the manufacture of images or clay idols. In conclusion of this paper we understand that the major driving factor of the intermixing of the castes is actually an economic phenomenon more than a social phenomenon. Since caste and occupation is so integrated and related, if one occupation

loses importance, a person still needs to survive which pushes him or her towards other occupations or castes. This kind of “erosion of caste monopolies” is a factor of mostly urban growing areas rather than rural areas.



Image 15: Creating the structure out of straw and clay

The existence of caste and gender monopoly in the community would date back to its origin. However, most researchers cannot agree on the ancestry of the Kumars. Tracing the lineage of the Kumartuli community has not received due consensus because there is a lot of empirical data missing. The history about the community has been recorded in two versions and both of them could be partially correct, possibly complimenting each other. Much of the sources elaborate on how caste held importance for only a certain period. With increasing demand of idols and a relatively static supply, the capitalistic nature of the developing region allowed the caste distinctions to break down. If caste monopoly could fade away from the profession, how come gender disparity still exists?

Many of the texts referred to, do not have a mention of the ‘gender’ disparity existence, however certain *conceptions* do exist in the current community. It must be noted that the potter’s quarter is mostly in reference to the men who create idols. “Kumars” itself is a term to identify with men. The biggest irony is that Durga is a female deity. Ever since the caste has emerged itself, it has been elaborately emphasized that the occupation is just for men. The surprising aspect is that

even when caste barriers are being broken, gender barriers still remain. For example, the first mention of women found was in regard to Brahmin widows trying to enter the occupation in order to find a means of livelihood without their husbands. The aspect of widow brings me to significant observation that is, the very few women who actually work in Kumartuli also initially entered this occupation due to the loss of either their father or their husband. The four impactful women in Kumartuli are Mala Pal, China Pal, Kanchi Pal and Kakoli Pal. China Pal built an “unusual Durga idol ‘Ardhanarishwar’ (Milaap, 2016) in regard to the transgender community. It was the first time ever such a sculpture was built. Several workers working below her actually left because their pride was too big to be working under a woman. (Ghose, 2016) China was also greatly criticized for hurting sentiments of many by breaking boundaries of gender. How much does gender matter in an idol making business? Such experiences are witnessed only from the perspective of male workers who have been conditioned to think in a manner that only justifies men working on god idols. Apart from societal pressures, what remains unanswered is what other limitations hamper the entrance of women to enter this industry- are they overlooked, could it be the working conditions?

## **2.5 Self-Organization and External Help**

As a part of self-organization, the biggest efforts made by the idol makers of the Kumartuli has been the use of ecommerce. This would generally umbrella; online advertising, online communication and sale of products for the idol makers. Advertising through the various social media platforms, communication through emails, online hubs etc. and online sale through online portals and websites. It was in the early 2000s that the idol makers were exposed to the internet. This review will examine the manner in which ecommerce has benefitted the idol makers and moreover their early response to the access to the internet.

In 2004, the apex body of artisans in Kumartuli hosted a website to sell idols to overseas clients (Kolkata: Metro, 2004). Though the association wanted to go on-line during the Pujas 2004, the website could not be developed. However, after much delay, some artisans of the region did end up going online successfully in 2006 like that of the Ghosh and Pal family.

The production of idols is a commodity production, which involves a direct exchange and has a specific use value. The consumers are distributed throughout the world in almost all places where there is a concentration of Bengali population. Some websites on Durga Puja list the pujas

that are celebrated outside Bengal and India, and it shows that it is celebrated as far as in Kenya and Nigeria. By having an online presence, international markets opened up, chiefly in the continents of Europe and North America. In Europe the countries where the idols are chiefly exported are U.K., France, Germany, Denmark, even Switzerland and Finland. In North America the chief destinations are New Jersey, Washington, Boston, New York, California, Chicago etc., in USA and Ontario, Toronto etc. (AMARNATH GHOSH & SONS DURGA PROTIMA,2014). The cyberworld has helped them find new markets. In fact, for the Ghosh family, markets have opened up in the Fiji Islands as well. Amarnath Ghosh claims that his company is the number one Idol Exporter from Kumartuli, Kolkata, who export more than 20-25 idol per year to the overseas. Babu Pal, secretary of the Kumartuli Mritshilpa Sanskriti Samiti shared that in the year 2011, 45 idols were sent out from Kumartuli (Kolkata idol makers e-sale Durga idols, 2009).

However, in order to be able to enjoy the benefits of ecommerce, there would also be certain adjustments made by the idol makers, to be able to supply through an online presence. One of these adjustments was changing the materials of idols. Traditionally, a Durga Puja idol is immersed in water and allowed to float away after the 10 day festival. But there is little need for Bengali communities outside of India to purchase clay idols, since their local environmental laws prevent them from immersing their idols in water. Instead, they keep them to worship year after year. Fiberglass, which is more durable, making it a viable investment.

In the words of a worker, “Instead of the usual clay idols, foreign clients prefer idols made of fiberglass or papier maché as these are light and unbreakable and they use the same idol for five to seven years because of the high cost of procurement and the difficulties of performing the immersion in foreign waters.” (Kolkata idol makers e-sale Durga idols, 2009).

Mr. Ghosh and his father broke with tradition a decade ago, by taking their business online and began making fiberglass versions of the idols (McLain, 2012). It appears that the use of ecommerce is heavily linked with the use of fiberglass amongst idol makers, who realize that fiberglass idols fit the ecommerce selling model well, over clay idols which are sold locally. This seems to be causing a rift amongst workers, who are preferring to modernize with the use of fiberglass over the traditional clay methods.

In terms of online selling, it is done online through websites. Prodyut Pal, an idol maker describes the process of selling online to be really simple. Earlier, organizers of Durga Puja abroad had to come down personally or contact the sculptors through relatives or intermediaries in the city. However, now he states that foreign customers just log onto the website, go through the catalogue and gallery of idols and then e-mail the artisans their orders. Once it is done, the artisans ensure the delivery of the idols to the specified place. (Kolkata idol makers e-sale Durga idols, 2009). In fact, it is the younger generations that have been promoting the use of ecommerce, since the already existing, old artisans follow rigid practices. The earlier mentioned Amarnath Ghosh himself states that it was his son who insisted on the creation of a website for easier communication in overseas markets. (Kolkata idol makers e-sale Durga idols, 2009).

Through e-selling, the idol makers have full control over the audiences they can reach and they feel the exclusion of ‘middlemen’ is one of its biggest advantages. According to Mintu Pal an artisan, they strive to reduce their dependence on middlemen, who take away the cream, as they have all the information regarding the buyers (Kolkata: Metro, 2004). Since they could not contact their customers directly, they would not get a fair price for the idols. According to him, the margins are higher as well since middlemen are eliminated completely and the artisans have complete control over their marketing.

From the current research it can be inferred that the initial use of ecommerce has been beneficial to those makers that have adopted it, by gaining access to overseas markets, through easier communication and a new medium of sale. However, the extent to which it is utilized in the present day is not clear. It could be possible that those makers choosing to go online, would be deviating from the traditional clay production methods of Kumartuli, by switching to fiberglass.

Since the government aids the community in a very narrow way- chiefly through kerosene subsidies, the artisans either have to turn back to themselves for additional help or the role of NGOs and banks augment in importance. Much of the literature throws light on the role of NGOs Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) the Indian Foundation for the Arts (IFA). Their primary goal is to spread awareness amongst the public of our shared cultural heritage. However, there is very little mention of NGOs solely associated with welfare of

the idol makers. The known 'samitis' are Mahila Seva Samiti, Mritshilpa Sanskriti Samiti and Kumartuli Seva Samiti. Their role in particular isn't elaborated on, but these samitis do mediate communications between the government and the community regarding idol maker rights and welfare. Puja associations exist, which run to preserve the Kumartuli culture and Durga puja celebrations. However, it is unclear as to whether they support the workers in ways other than consuming idols, in terms of raising funds, rights etc.

In an attempt to be self-organized, co-operative banks have been founded- the Hooghly District Co-operative bank, Bankura District bank and the Balagaria central co-operative bank. However, intricacies of eligibility and procedures for loans remain unknown. There is some mention of the existence of 'moneylenders' but the extent to which artisans resort to them or even the possible pit-falls of such transactions is yet to be probed into.

The role of middlemen in artisan's attempts to be independent is self-organized is crucial. Ecommerce serves as an outlet for artisans to build a new web of communication and sales, allowing them to be less dependent on middlemen. From the current research it can be inferred that the initial use of ecommerce has been beneficial to those makers that have adopted it, by gaining access to overseas markets, easier communication and a new medium of sale. However, the extent to which it is utilized in the present day is not clear. The most contemporary article that was referred to was published in 2012 (with respect to ecommerce), and information was gathered from the 2004-2012 timeline. During this timeline, the artisans were just getting acquainted with ecommerce and were enjoying its initial benefits. When visiting Kumartuli, an important task would be to examine the current relationship between ecommerce and the idol makers- is it only the biggest idol makers who venture into overseas markets like the Ghosh family or has its use spread, where almost every idol maker has been able to adopt it? What proportion of sales would ecommerce constitute to each idol maker? The exposure to ecommerce may not necessarily have had a positive impact on the idol-making community. The sources highlighted its benefits, but it could also be possible that the idol makers have been prone to the high risks of the ecommerce business and as a result become less independent?





## **Field Findings and Analysis**

For our field findings and analysis, we segregated our primary data in terms of our gaps of literature. Each subtopic umbrellas the primary data we gathered and its implications, in light of the secondary sources and our research aims.

### **3.1 Deviation from rituals and traditions**

Our knowledge of the rituals and traditions that the people of Kumartuli, and Kolkata as a whole practice when it comes to Durga Puja was limited. Our secondary sources provided no such information on the rituals and traditions itself, but also failed to consider that these would undergo changes over time. Our aim was to understand their practices with regards to Durga Puja and the creation of idols. We sought to find out the process of making the Durga idol from the acquiring of raw materials, till these idols were completed and then sold. We also wanted to understand the shift, if there was any, in the consumer behavior since we believed that the idol makers and the customers work in a binary.

We asked a lot of the artisans about the kind of raw materials they required, however, Pashupati Rudra Pal, the owner of a workshop in Kumartuli stated that they needed wood, rope, clay, mud, dhan of rice, edel mati, bele mati and padh. They also need a lot of colors to paint on the idols and also a lot of jewelry to put on the wrists, and neck of the Durga idols. Kaushik Ghosh, a market leader in fiberglass idols said that “the clay here in West Bengal is special and you will not find it anywhere else. I went abroad and worked with the clay there and it had chemicals. What we have here is natural”.



*Image 16L Chyna Pal in her workshop*

Chyna Pal, one of the few female artisans in Kumartuli described the rigorous process of making the head of the idol. To make the head, two kinds of soil need to be used. These need to be used in a proper ratio, which if not correct, will make sure the face cracks under pressure or while making it. The faces are not completely made by hand. They usually make a lot of heads, even for just one of the idols, since the faces need to be perfect.



*Image 17: Artists use readymade molds to make the head and hands*

There is a device inside which they put the two types of soil, tush and edel mati which comes from stagnant water and bele mati (sandy soil) which comes from the Hooghly river. So inside, there is a mixture of rice bran and soil, after which they use tush mati on top to cover the head. The device forms the shape of the head after they place the soil mixtures in it. However, the work is not over after this. They would still need to decorate the head, and get the dentures correct. For example, they need to work on the eyes and the nose. For the nose, they need to look at the nostrils, and the nose ring that Durga wears. These heads can be used for both, Durga idols and the Kali idols. However, there is a difference in design between the two which is only done after the structure is made. For example, the Kali idol's head, would have the tongue kept out and teeth visible. This means an extra effort to work on the teeth and the tongue. However, nothing of this sort has to be done for the Durga idols. They also have to put the hair on the idols towards the end of the process. The creation of the clay idols starts with adding straw. They use the hay from rice paddies, after which they cover the straw layer with the different types of clay. They then follow it up with the coloring of the idol into whatever color they want. Yellow for a

Durga Idol, and dark blue or black for a Kali idol. After the idol is painted, they add the finer details on the eyes and then dress her up with the cloth and ornaments.



*Image 18: Delicate details being added to the head of the Durga idol*

The consumer trend for Durga and Kali idols has changed drastically over the years. Not in terms of the number of people ordering it, but in terms of special requests. What we had learned was that “the British soon organized the Durga puja among their family unit ceremonies. Alongside custom observances, the puja offered to ascend to expand festivities and distinctive types of well-known entertainment in the evenings. Several people participated in the celebration listening to the bawdy tunes or folk performances. The urban celebration soon turned into a famous establishment of the Bengalis and a space for public contestation and performances. This transformation of public space into ceremonial and ritual space made Durga puja an exceptionally public celebration. However, the secondary sources did not delve into the specifics of the changes on the idol itself. Pashupati Rudra Pal assesses the market now as, “the thing is that people are moving away from previous idol-styles to newer ones. These ones are more thematic, the people want some kind of visual change in the depiction of the idol. Now you have

to think of the pandal, and then think of a Durga idol that would suit the theme of the pandal, and then make them to order”. The kinds of orders within Kolkata are different as well. According to him, “All of it has to be different in some way or another. It is made completely according to what the consumer wants. But more importantly, it has to be of a good quality, the same ones that people have been seeing from their births, who you can pray to, and smile to. That’s the important part”. There remain idol makers who do not believe in making thematic idols, but instead prefer making only the traditional ones. Chyna Pal is an example of this. Her design, described by her is “Purely traditional. We do not do artworks, or thematic based idols, just the normal traditional ones”. Prodyut Pal, a market leader in fiberglass idols and the owner of Kumartuli.com mentions that, “After the market of Kumartuli went down. Because the artists started making the pandals, and in the same theme, since it would be better understood by the same artists – they started making the idols as well.”



*Image 19: Thematic puja pandal based on the movie franchise 'Bahubali'*



*Image 20: Thematic pandals keep getting more extravagant and expensive each year*

Another deviation from the traditional Durga idols has been the emergence of fiberglass. The process of creating a fiberglass idol is similar to that of making a clay one. After the clay structure is complete, they coat the structure with fiberglass, and then color and produce artwork on the fiberglass itself. The market for fiberglass idols has started challenging the traditional and thematic clay idols. Prodyut Pal says, “The foreign market would usually buy one idol, use it for the puja for around 10 years. They did not have [a lot of] money to change it every year, and it’s a hassle trying to get it delivered over there consistently. Previously, people would take the idol in their hands and take it to the puja, but as things develop, you will see that there aren’t many more people who will do the job of carrying the idol around. It is extremely heavy. They thought that they should get lighter idols. That’s when we started receiving orders for lighter idols. The fiberglass idols are super light. Usually an idol which would be of 50 kilos, would become around 10 kilos. It takes a maximum of two people to carry it and to store it after the puja. This is how the change came. And around 95% of the idols going abroad now are made of fiberglass. The biggest Durga Puja in London involved with Lakhi Mittal, used to use mud idols till 2012. In 2013, we gave them a fiber glass idol. The chance of breaking while shipping is also reduced”.

He boils down the emergence of fiberglass idols in the market into two factors. The weight, and its durability. Both are extremely important factors for the consumer buying the product due to the reasons Prodyut Pal explained.



*Image 20: Fiberglass idols ready for transport*

Prodyut Pal's website, Kumartuli.com enables him to receive most of his foreign orders on the website itself. Prodyut pal said that he wanted to develop a new marketing strategy for the Kumartuli market after it went down with the emergence of thematic idols. The use of e-commerce brings out a shift from traditional methods of purchasing idols. According to him, "someone sitting in America can now give an order from there, as opposed to coming to Kumartuli and getting it done. Now, the person can view the status [of the delivery] from their homes". This is an advantage that only the internet can provide. There is an extremely high scope



for marketing on the internet, and the convenience in purchasing over the internet has become easier every year.



*Image 22: Prodyut Pal, a market leader*

### **3.2 Implementation of government schemes**

Through our secondary research, we gained a lot of information about the proposed government redevelopment schemes. The most prominent of these was the scheme developed by the Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority (KMDA), which was to be supported by the flagship Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JnNURM). This scheme was to provide the artisans with house with a ground plus three floors plan, and an art gallery. However, the KMDA scheme was completely abandoned. The reasons given for this were lack of security to the artisans, basic necessities and community participation. It was also stated that the plan required approved by the Central Government, which resulted in numerous delays. Another reason given for the failure was that the government could not arrange a new location for the workshops to be moved. Another aid that was to be provided by the government was that of extra kerosene. Since the idols need to be dried during the rainy season, the artisans use blue flame oil

burners for drying, which require kerosene. It was proposed that instead of two litres, the artisans would be provided with five litres each week. There was also a new scheme called AMRUT, which was supposed to begin in 2015. This was the scheme that replaced the JnNURM scheme, and was intended to improve urban governance in over five hundred cities and towns. This however, was also abandoned. The information we wished to gather on field, was the reasons for the government's lack of involvement in the sustainability of the community. We also wanted to know if there were any new plans that were being undertaken by the government for the welfare of the Kumartuli community. Lastly, we also wanted to explore, till what extent are the reasons that are given for the failure of the plan, true.



*Image 23: Abandoned flour mill used as location for relocation of workshops*

On field, we learned that the failure of the KMDA plan was acknowledged by all. The **HOD** claimed that it was mainly because the residents of Kumartuli did not participate. He also stated that the eastern zone in India has always been deprived. Kolkata has always been an experimental ground for rehabilitation according to him, and Kumartuli is “a slum with an identity”. According to **HOD**, the samitis are politically biased and with a new government, new plans will also have to be initiated. However, there are also no new plans in terms of

redevelopment of the area. The amount of kerosene that is provided to the artisans was supposed to increase up to five litres, which it did. However, there is also a severe problem of shortage of kerosene in Kumartuli. The aid has been taken away, and the artisans are back to receiving only two litres of kerosene. Even in the markets and the shops, kerosene has been coming in fewer amounts. We also came across a smaller community, located a few kilometres away from the main Kumartuli square. This community comprised of Kumartuli residents and had been uprooted from their initial homes. Before the KMDA scheme was abandoned, the government had begun relocating the residents and these individuals were shifted to an abandoned flour mill. Soon, the scheme was cancelled out and the residents were left without a home, still living in the said flour mill. We visited this flour mill and received first-hand information on this relocation plan, through the residents staying there.



*Image 24: Sanjib Nag, Head of Department of architecture at Jadavpur Universit*

The role of the samitis for the welfare of the community, if anything, is substantial. The representatives of Kumartuli Seva Samiti, claimed that the help provided by them is mainly in the field of healthcare. They have ambulance services for the entire Kumartuli community, and these amenities are not only restricted to the idol makers. Ranajit Sarkar, the secretary of Kumartuli's Mrit Shilpi Samiti, gave us a deeper insight into the working of the samiti. The main

aid provided by this samiti, is in the form of education, financial aid and health camps. There are numerous education workshops that are run by the samiti in accordance with a few government schools. The samiti acts as a middle man between the banks and the artisans. According to Mr. Sarkar, a few artisans were unable to repay the loans, and hence, Bank of India refused to give out loans for a period of time. However, this issue was resolved soon. Before receiving loans from the Bank of India, the community would take loans from the Union Bank of India. The samiti charges rupees 300 per year for membership, and are also open to providing financial aid for other personal reasons such as marriage, apart from business loans. Donations are mainly what run the samiti, and there are also advertisements put in newspapers by them asking for aid. The samiti also came up with the idea of charging a ticket for visitors to photograph the area, with prices such as a 10 rupees daily pass and a 50 rupees season pass. It was observed by us that the samiti takes great efforts for the welfare of the community in spheres of education, finance and healthcare. However, there is no aid provided by the samitis in the case of raw material acquisition and redeveloping the area. What is most important to note is that, the government does not help the samiti in any way. There is no financial aid provided by the government for the functioning of the samiti.



*Image 25: Ranajit Sarkar, secretary of Kumartuli Mritshilpa Samiti*

Our on-field research helped us the most in understanding the residents' sentiments towards the problem, rather than us receiving hard facts. The most crucial aspect of this was that we observed how the community has completely lost faith in the government. We believe that the community might have protested about moving for the sake of redevelopment, but those protests could only be based out of fear of losing their homes. It is evident that the people from Kumartuli want a change, but it is very difficult for them to trust the government wholeheartedly. There are constantly new plans being envisioned by the government, according to the Head of Department, but they are always rejected due to complications. According to Ranajit Sarkar, the government is concerned about the community's well-being, especially since Kumartuli receives a large number of tourists. However, the implementation of schemes is tedious, since working in harmony with the residents is troublesome.

### **3.3 Immediate effects of GST, Demonetization and the current extent of e-commerce.**

Based on our secondary sources, it was known that GST did begin to impact the idol-makers since imposition. There were also claims about traders, artisans, and consumers are clueless as to the nature of the GST. A couple of newspapers, the Financial times in particular, covered that raw material prices sore up drastically. However, with regards to demonetization, it was just known that "workers had a tough time last year dealing with it". In terms of e-commerce, it was known that the initial use of ecommerce had been beneficial to those makers that have adopted it, by gaining access to overseas markets, through easier communication and a new medium of sale. However, the extent to which it was utilized in the present day is not clear also the possibility that those makers choosing to go online, would be deviating from the traditional clay production methods of Kumartuli, by switching to fiberglass.



*Image 26: Casual laborers employed to fix or mend damaged idols*

Overall, our on-field research reinforced that GST did have a substantial impact on the workers and still does. One of the most prominent impacts of GST was that the artisans incur GST on all their raw materials but are unable to transfer the costs they pay onto the customers. Majority of the artisans were dismayed by this, because of inability to recover the newly incremented costs. The idols are an item the idol-makers cannot not charge GST on. The prices for clay, bamboo, straw- the three key materials had all increased. In an interview with Kaushik

Ghosh, he mentioned that for the clay idols GST is not much of a problem but for the fibre glass idols GST is a bigger issue, since the fibre glass inputs are costlier. Other miscellaneous costs like paints, garments, and adornments are also costlier. Electricity became costlier as an input for the artisans. According to the chief representative of the Mritshilp Samiti-Ranajit Sarkar, consumers too were unsure when it came to purchasing the idols because of the lack of clarity around GST being charged on the idol. Some government representatives approached the samithi of artisans to do a survey regarding the impact of GST. The artisans were worried over the paper work and other formalities involved with the GST as most of them come from rural backgrounds. The potters have been opposing the implementation of GST and have been demanding some form of practicality from the government in terms of it, or some exceptions. The samithi highlighted its cost problems, but nothing has been implemented thus far. Ranajit also shared that he felt it was too soon to see the revision of policy and claimed that only time would tell the difference. He went on about how the community as a whole, lost sales worth 10% due to GST as the amount of idols that were sent outside shrunk in numbers. He chiefly spoke about the universality of the tax, affecting both customers and artisans who have to pay 18 rupees extra for every 100 they spend on items. During GST the people who make the idols did not get affected too much i.e the labourers, but the workshop owners were inflicted with higher costs.



*Image 27: Mending idols while they are left out to dry*

More light was thrown on the impact of demonetization, which caused a temporary problem for the idol-makers. Demonetization had caused a credit problem for the artisans. The basic problem faced over a spectrum of artisans was that money got stuck with people, and customers who felt were ‘loyal’ took idols on credit. For example, a portion of the amount would be paid and the rest was said to be given later, due to the liquidity crisis. This was all compounded by the long lines in ATMS, the initial low withdrawal limit, that not only the artisans faced. However, all the artisans interviewed agreed upon the transient nature of demonetization, and confirmed that after the initial period, business was normal and the lost liquidity was recovered.



*Image 28: Painting the face of Durga was once reserved for only the most respected and esteemed artists*

The use of ecommerce is prominent in the community, chiefly used by the well-established idol-makers. From all the artisans we interviewed, Amarnath Ghosh and sons and Prodyut Pal were the ones involved with e-commerce. In an interview with Kaushik Ghosh, the son of Armarnath Ghosh and sons, he revealed that its use did begin around 10 to 12 years ago. Although his website revealed that they were the leading exporters for idols, he notified us that incomes generated online were sufficient but not enough to be the sole avenue for income. He recognized that the idol making business was one that did not fully exploit what ecommerce offers, and



highlighted its limitations to us as well. Clients cannot specify their demands through ecommerce, but can merely view pre-made designs. According to him, ecommerce is beneficial in dealing with overseas orders, where customers who do not have direct access to the artisans. Although the customers do not have access to actually purchase the idol online, they go to the websites, look at the idols and place orders through direct mail and telephones.

Prodyut Pal, the founder of 'Kumartuli.com' had similar take on ecommerce. He explained that his setup was the same as any other Kumartuli studio, except that he used the internet as a sales medium more than the others. He started his website in 2004 and after got an export license, since then he has been using it to send his orders overseas. He noticed a big opening in markets abroad. He decided to market on the internet as well, through emails and website ads. Now his customers are able to know the status of their idols from their homes.



Image 29: Homepage of Prodyut Pal's online sales portals for idols

Other than these two artisans, the rest of our sample wasn't quite acquainted with ecommerce. For example, the female artisans were not involved in any means of ecommerce. Other artisans like Pashupati Pal, told us that he had heard a lot about the simplicity of ecommerce however he hadn't gotten down to actually using it, because work was good anyway.

However, in order to be able to reap the benefits of ecommerce, the artisans did have to make certain adjustments. As questioned in the gaps in literature, the possibility of a relationship between fiberglass idols, abroad sales and ecommerce. This relationship does exist and with time,

the idols being exported abroad did start switching from clay to fiberglass. Amarnath Ghosh and sons, and Prodyut Pal both export fiberglass idols as per the foreign demand.

The imposition of GST clearly resulted in confusion amongst the artisans who were not familiar with the structure of the tax and were confused as its applicability on their idols. It was known to us that raw material costs had increased and our research confirmed this. However we were exposed the chasm between the organized sector of the economy and Kumartuli's operating expanse, how the idols were not in the GST brackets, being overlooked by the government. When compared to GST, demonetization seemed to have a trivial impact which was just temporary. None of them had a positive impact on the community in anyway.

It could be inferred that when tapped, ecommerce does have its benefits, such as easier communication and access to overseas markets, but it was limited due to the nature of the idol making business. Ecommerce locally did not make much sense, because local customers had access to the artisans to get their idols tailored to their needs. In this sense its scope was limited. Some workers noticed the breach and took advantage of it, but the others felt business was good as it was and do not feel the need to adopt it. The female artisans also weren't exactly clear on how they could use it and rely on direct selling and marketing methods.

### **3.4 Gender and Caste Monopoly in the Kumartuli community**

Before going on field, our hypothesis on the issue of gender disparity and cast monopoly was that domination of casts no existed but gender disparity was still prevalent. Idol making was traditionally a private, family occupation but as a result on increasing demands, in turned into a functional market. Caste distinctions were important initially, however, a change in consumer demands lead to an increasing inclusivity of all castes. Traditional idols were not the only way of generating capital and therefore, Kumartuli turned into an accommodating community, regardless of cast. The focus shifted towards utilizing multiple forms of idol making to cater to shifting consumer needs. Our notion of Kumartuli pre-field was of a male dominated professional space with a very few female artisans that we knew of. Our hypothesis was that idol making in Kumartuli was not a gender inclusive profession. Multiple travel blogs that we reviewed during our research period reported women facing gender discrimination in the

Kumartuli community. However, upon conducting multiple interviews and focus group discussions, we achieved more clarity on the role of gender and caste monopoly.



*Image 30: Idols left out to dry on the narrow streets of Kumartuli*

One of the few, but leading female artisans in the profession. She has been running her workshop for the past 21 years and produces purely traditional idols. She views herself an example of a successful woman in the field of idol making. Chyna first came to Kumartuli before Durga Puja and her father was extremely ill, rendering him incapable to work. She learnt through observation and eventually taught herself the craft. She also spoke of having no fear instigated by beliefs in any male dominated prejudices. Throughout the interview, she kept emphasizing on intent and the will to learn. She believes those are the only two criteria that are needed to succeed in this profession, regardless of caste or gender.

The timeline of her successful career in Kumartuli vouches against any notions of gender bias. We could assume that her method of producing purely traditional idols is indicative of the methods which she has grown up learning, further implying her familiarity with the craft.



*Image 31: Maya pal displays her proficiency in handling work life with professionalism*

The second female artisan we spoke to was Kakoli Pal. She had to take over the business from her father due to unavoidable circumstances. She also learnt by observation and claimed that she was guided by other artists, whilst being interested in learning the craft herself. She came into the family business due to circumstances and other pressures and also claimed that she could not think of any women who simply joined this profession. She stated that learning the craft is the only necessity to succeed in running a functional workshop. She did however mention a dynamic of jealousy amongst women and this could be a result of the fewer number of female artisans. The fact that Kakoli was guided by other male artisans dismisses previous hypotheses on gender bias. However, through her interview, we could propose that the women in the profession are there by circumstance and not by voluntary choice.

Kaushik Gosh, another leading artisan that we interviewed, pointed out the fewer numbers in female artisans is because these were the only women who had to take over the business from their father. This does not necessarily imply a gender bias but does confirm that the profession is male dominated. He also claimed that men and women should do equal work but the only criteria

necessary is that he or she needs to learn the craft from childhood. Through this claim, we could propose that any existing notions of gender bias are a result of misinterpretation of claims of authenticity and abiding by traditional methods.



*Image 32: Kakoli Pal in her home*

In a focused group discussion that we conducted in Shola Shilpa Mandir, a store that sells Puja ornaments and decorations made of Shola root, we spoke to the owner's wife. She claims that there is no distinction between the work women and men do either now or in the past. She did say that women mostly work on the parts of the procedure that are indoors and do not go outdoors. Perhaps we could consider this as a cultural norm rather than a gender bias.



*Image 33: Kaushik Ghosh, a leading artisan*

Considering all of the data we have on gender disparity and caste monopoly through interviews and focused group discussions, the issue of caste monopoly is no longer prevalent, and if so, it is an argument for traditional methods of idol making rather than a motive to discriminate. The small number of female artisans is evidence for the lack of awareness for the scope for female idol makers in Kumartuli rather than a gender bias and the few women who are in the business by chance account for the same.

### **3.5 No consensus on the specifics of their working conditions**

Before our on-field research, we knew that the working conditions of the artisans in Kumartuli were poor, and not ideal for an individual to work in. The overall view from these resources was that the Kumartuli lanes were narrow and cramped, and were also littered which resulted in a spread of malaria. It was stated that a number of pleas were made to the government, for the redevelopment of the area, and the government reverted with a few welfare plans. The government promised the community amenities such as a community art studio, and an art gallery, along with a few basic improvements like modern housing. However, the results of these plans were unclear. The state of the community's living conditions were said to be a direct result of the artisans' wages. We also knew that the workers in Kumartuli today did not want their younger generations to continue in the same line of business due to the poor pay and working

conditions. There were also discrepancies in the specifics of the workers' working hours, as some sources stated them to have seasonal contracts, while others stated that they worked all year long. The main questions that arose out of this information that we wished to cover on field, were whether or not the artisans believed that they are being fairly compensated for their wages, and what were the actual details of their working hours. We also wished to understand the role of the samitis with respect to the community's welfare.



*Image 35: Working on the corner of the road*

During our on-field research, most importantly, all of our information was confirmed. Everything that we had learnt through our secondary sources, we could authenticate. As we visited Kumartuli on a daily basis during our field research, we could gain first-hand experience. The workspace for the artisans was very small and crowded, with drains running on the sides of the narrow lanes. We observed how the artisans would work right outside their houses on the streets, or have workshops situated a few steps away from their homes. According to the information given to us by Robi Ghosh, an independent sole trader, there were approximately 174 houses in Kumartuli. These houses were mainly small buildings and single unit homes that were very old, and the architecture was also observed to be from the colonial times. We could see people bathing and washing clothes in the Hooghly River situated close to the area, and there

were numerous idols that could be seen on the river bank. Given the condition of those idols, we could see how they had been immersed in the river and had later been taken out. There were old and/or unused bamboo structures lying around as waste all over the area. Even the drying of the idol after completion takes place on the sidewalk itself. We also observed a lot of workshops in Kumartuli that were not related to the art of idol making, such as thread and garment workshops, and printing workshops. This gave us an idea of how the Kumartuli community was not strictly of and for the idol makers, but involved other small industries as well. We also encountered an old temple called Madan Mohon Mandir. This temple was built in the 1700s. After enquiring with the residents close by, we learned that it was an abandoned temple. The idol of the deity had been taken away, and this temple was now being used as a workshop, as well as living quarters, for the idol makers. However, we can state that this space is still considered to be sacred, as we were not allowed inside with our footwear. This temple-turned-workshop could be seen as a direct result of the overcrowding in the community that gave rise to a need of more workspace.



*Image 36: Madan Mohon Mandir*



The information we received on field, with respect to the specifics of the working hours and contracts, was very varied. Most interviewees, despite living in Kumartuli, agreed that the area was in absolute shambles and needed proper government aid. The problem of the drainage system was also agreed upon by various interviewees, and the need to fix the DC lines for electricity was stated by Prodyut Paul. He also mentioned how the business is tough, and he can manage to earn only enough to sustain himself. He would not want younger generations to follow him in the line of business and the investment, in terms of time and labor, is very high, whereas the returns are barely sufficient. We also learned that the samitis do not have a role to play in terms of redevelopment of the area, and the nature of the help they provide is mainly financial and health related. It is believed by a number of habitants of the Kumartuli area that a lot of promises are made to them, but nothing ever falls into action. This is mainly because each political party makes promises for better welfare, but do not deliver on this once the elections end. There is also no proper system for waste management in the community, and thus, it is mainly being thrown on the streets.

After comparing our secondary information, with our field findings and observations, we could reach the following conclusions. Firstly, the discrepancy in the artisans' working hours and contracts is because it varies from each employer. It completely depends on the artisan, and the employer. Since a few workshop owners work all year, they hire workers on a yearly contract, whereas, a few make idols during a specific time of the year, and hence hire workers on a seasonal contract. Secondly, the artisans believe that they are not fairly compensated for their work, but what is interesting to note is that, instead of wishing to solve this problem, they just hope to avoid the business altogether. Lastly, with our secondary sources, it was said that the artisans lived in bad conditions due to their low income, since they could not afford better housing. However, after interacting with the artisans and the residents of the community, we believe that even if a higher income would be provided to the artisans, the problem would not be solved. The artisans do not wish to move since there is a feeling of attachment that they have with the area. The artisans that come into the business mainly do so since their families have always been in it, resulting in the particular sort of familial feeling with the community, in terms of both, the area as well as the neighbors. Therefore, the idea of them moving out into a different area to work from there remains out of the question.



## **Conclusion**

One of the biggest things that our pre-field research from secondary sources showed us was that the government neglect in the Kumartuli area could be seen. However, there was barely any recent research, and neither had any of the people of Kumartuli spoken out about this issue previously. This led us to wonder what the exact extent to which the government neglect worked in Kumartuli. This became one of our biggest aims in Kumartuli, which was to find out the extent to which the policies and schemes of the government worked, or did not work in Kumartuli. Another thing that we realized would happen due to the way modernity's in the world work, is that we expected there to be a change in the traditions and rituals of the community. According to us, the Kumartuli community should have gone through some changes in terms of the way the puja is conducted, or the idols are created, however, we found no such information from our research on the secondary sources. The only changes in depiction showed were those which were political in nature. This led us to look into the social changes in Kumartuli, as opposed to the economic system for once. A majority of our research is not based around finding out the community's ethnicity and cultural background, but more about the functionality and the economic livelihood of the community. This is how we came up with our research question which is, "What are the effects of government policy and social change on the traditions and livelihoods of the idol makers of Kumartuli? As mentioned before, our greatest and most intensive research was done on the role of the government in Kumartuli, positive and negative.

Our on-field research helped us the most in understanding the residents' sentiments towards the problem, rather than us receiving hard facts. The most crucial aspect of this was that we observed how the community has completely lost faith in the government. We believe that the community might have protested about moving for the sake of redevelopment, but those protests could only be based out of fear of losing their homes. It is evident that the people from Kumartuli want a change, but it is very difficult for them to trust the government wholeheartedly. There are constantly new plans being envisioned by the government, according to the Head of Department, but they are always rejected due to complications. According to Ranajit Sarkar, the government is concerned about the community's well-being, especially since Kumartuli receives a large number of tourists. However, the implementation of schemes is tedious, since working in harmony with the residents is troublesome.

After comparing our secondary information, with our field findings and observations, we could reach the following conclusions. Firstly, the discrepancy in the artisans' working hours and contracts is because it varies from each employer. It completely depends on the artisan, and the employer. Since a few workshop owners work all year, they hire workers on a yearly contract, whereas, a few make idols during a specific time of the year, and hence hire workers on a seasonal contract. Secondly, the artisans believe that they are not fairly compensated for their work, but what is interesting to note is that, instead of wishing to solve this problem, they just hope to avoid the business altogether. Lastly, with our secondary sources, it was said that the artisans lived in bad conditions due to their low income, since they could not afford better housing. However, after interacting with the artisans and the residents of the community, we believe that even if a higher income would be provided to the artisans, the problem would not be solved. The artisans do not wish to move since there is a feeling of attachment that they have with the area. The artisans that come into the business mainly do so since their families have always been in it, resulting in the sort of familial feeling with the community, in terms of both, the area as well as the neighbours. Therefore, the idea of them moving out into a different area to work from there remains out of the question.

All of the judgments on gender disparity and caste monopoly that we have gathered through interviews and focused group discussions suggest that the issue of caste monopoly is no longer prevalent. Our data also suggest that any traces of it that remain are an argument for traditional methods of idol making and authenticity rather than a motive to discriminate. Through commercialization of the idol-making process, Kumartuli has turned into a caste inclusive space after identifying the change in consumer demands and subsequently realizing that even artists who aren't well versed with traditional production techniques can contribute and benefit from this business.

Our on-field research reinforced that GST did have a substantial impact on the workers and still does. The artisans' desire for some fairness in terms of GST crawls out of their already neglected state and lack of financial knowledge. We were made aware of the temporary credit problem demonetization posed for the artisans. The current extent of ecommerce was uncovered,

where there still exists a substantial number of artisans who are not ‘online’, the ones who noticed the voids in the market filled them, simplifying their selling process as well.

The current number of female artisans suggests the lack of awareness on the scope for female idol makers in Kumartuli rather than a gender bias. The few women who are in the business are in it circumstantially. Although some of them faced initial resistance, they have had long and prosperous careers in the field with an equal amount of opportunity. There are women who work as part of family business as well, however, they work on the aspects of the process that can be done indoors. This can be viewed as a cultural protocol rather than gender bias. This indicates that the community has progressed in terms of gender norms in their workspace and if there was any gender disparity, it has also faded away.

Kumartuli is currently stuck in the imbalance of losing its indigenous traits to the changeability of the customer trend. As a result of keeping up with fluctuating demands whilst simultaneously trying to preserve the authenticity of the art, the Kumartuli of today is an interesting merge of urbanization and nostalgia. One can clearly see the shifting consumer trends of the people buying Durga and Kali idols. The traditional banded, clay idol of Durga or Kali has been replaced firstly by thematic idols, which are more in tune with community and private requirements, while at the same time being more unique and artistic to look at. Another change that has become a trend is that of fiberglass idols. The lightweight idols are easier to manage logistics for and extremely durable, which makes it good for the long term. However, this could also become a drawback if the consumer does not return for 10 years, which is the average age for a fiberglass idol. Fiberglass idols are also easier to decorate since artisans will have more control over their artistry. Our secondary sources completely disregarded consumer trends and concentrated more on the political and social aspect of moving towards the usage of more public space for the puja. It talked more about changing trends as a change in terms of a political thought and not something that was having an economic effect on the idol makers.

By the end of our research project in Kumartuli we were able to grasp the very essence of the community in the way their livelihoods depended around their economy. Some of the ambiguity on the effects of government schemes to improve the area was clarified. It is safe to say that

Kumartuli has been completely ignored by the government after their most recent JnNurm proposal. According to the people of Kumartuli, no work ever really happened, and from passive observation from the first day to the last, we can confirm the same. We also sought the effects government policies such as GST and Demonetization had on the idol makers. The credit problem which they faced during the note ban was a mild issue, however, the financial strain on them which came because of GST was extremely hard on them. Their main problem was that they had to pay GST on the materials that were required to make the idol, however, they could not charge GST on the idol itself, thus making the profit margins even lower. Another point of inquiry was their extent of deviation from traditional means of doing things, and we found that there are many who still prefer the conventional market of buying and selling with clay idols. However, there are those who have taken advantage of the internet as a marketing and sales avenue. Better technologies have also helped in the emergence of the fiberglass model which is threatening to damage the clay idol market. One of the most important things we wished to understand about Kumartuli was their so-called “gender monopoly” which we saw existed from our secondary sources. In Kumartuli, we found three important female artisans, and they all have similar reasons for entry into the profession. An important member of the family was not able to run the business anymore for various reasons, and the female artisan took over the business after learning the art of idol making. This was the common pattern, and the only type of working female artisan we could find in Kumartuli. In an artistic sense, and culturally, the Kumartuli community is as rich as any in the world. Their artistry with clay and their rigorous job definitely give them their own identity. However, a community which is so important to one of the major festivals in India is being ignored by its own government, which is extremely disheartening to see. According to us, there should be a drastic change in policy for the members of the Kumartuli community. This should include subsidies and incentives, as well as a massive urban development project which would give the artisans a safe working space. This would naturally lead to more people wanting to join the profession, and happier artisans.

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## Appendix

PASHUPATI RUDRA PAL INTERVIEW DAY 2 (13:56) (MVI\_5914, 5915, 5916, 5917)

INTERVIEWER: For the record, what is your name:

INTERVIEWEE: Pashupati Rudra Pal

INTERVIEWER: What work do you do here?

PASHUPATI RUDRA PAL: I've been making idols, from a young age.

INTERVIEWER: So do you own a studio here?

PASHUPATI RUDRA PAL: Yes, I own the whole studio here.

INTERVIEWER: Did your father do the same thing?

PASHUPATI RUDRA PAL: Yes, he used to do the same thing. He came from Bangladesh in 1947 and upon arriving, got work and settled in Kumartuli. He used to make idols in Bangladesh too. He would also make containers for sweets (rasgulla, curd etc.). After coming here however, he dedicated himself to making idols.

INTERVIEWER: In the Kumartuli area itself, or do you mean Kolkata?

PASHUPATI RUDRA PAL: No, in Kumartuli itself.

INTERVIEWER: Did the people here work on idol-making even when you guys arrived in 1947?

PASHUPATI RUDRA PAL: Yes, there were a lot of workshops in Kumartuli before he arrived as well. I was born in 1964 and since I've been able to, I have been helping my father in his work. I would learn by looking at him, and then I became a member of the business.

INTERVIEWER: Is this your only occupation?

PASHUPATI RUDRA PAL: No, I do stage photography. I also make sculptures and models. So I have various jobs to do.

INTERVIEWER: If you don't mind me asking, what do you make more money from? The photography or the idol-making.

PASHUPATI RUDRA PAL: More than the money, it's about enjoying the work for me. Photography is a lot of fun, for example creating the photograph is a lot of fun.

INTERVIEWER: So for you, enjoying your work is more important than making money?

PASHUPATI RUDRA PAL: Yes, definitely.

INTERVIEWER: How long have you been working on the idols for this year's Durga Puja?

PASHUPATI RUDRA PAL: I started from December 2016 for this Durga Puja. The Puja was in September this year.

INTERVIEWER: Why does it take so long? Is it because of the quantity of orders you have to fulfil?

PASHUPATI RUDRA PAL: Yes obviously the quantity is high, but, the thing is that people are moving away from previous idol-styles to newer ones. These styles are more thematic. The people want some kind of visual change in the depiction of the idol. Now you have to think of the pandal, then think of a Durga idol that would suit the theme of the pandal, and then make them to order. For example, I'm thinking of one from Nepal and the Buddhist sculptures. Their requirements for the idol and the setup are completely different. That is what it is moving towards. In the Bakura district, the work is different. The work in Orissa is also different. That's why it takes time.

INTERVIEWER: Is the work different within Kolkata as well? For example, in separate areas of Kolkata? Also because it is celebrated on the streets and in private parties, so is there a difference in the style?

PASHUPATI RUDRA PAL: Yes, all of it has to be different in some way or another. It is made completely according to what the consumer wants. But more importantly, it has to be of good quality. The same idols that people have been seeing from birth, which they can pray to, and smile to. That's the important part.

INTERVIEWER: It seems like you get orders from a lot of places, you just mentioned Orissa?

PASHUPATI RUDRA PAL: Yes, we get orders from a lot of places. We get international orders as well.

INTERVIEWER: Which other countries do you get orders from?

PASHUPATI RUDRA PAL: From America, to places like Muscat. London as well.

INTERVIEWER: How do you send it?

[Pashupati Rudra Pal: By plane, or ship.

INTERVIEWER: For example, how will you send one to Pune? Would it be via air?

PASHUPATI RUDRA PAL: Yes, we can send it in any way depending on the customer's preference. Sometimes they want to come pick it up directly from here. We can accommodate that as well.

INTERVIEWER: From what I have understood, you just keep the idol ready, and then they can decide how they want to get it delivered to them?

PASHUPATI RUDRA PAL: Yes, that's correct. I just put it in a box and then pack it properly. I'll make a box the size of this cupboard (pointing at a cupboard nearby), and then pack it in that. There are agents who can pick it up from Kumartuli. We just pack it, according to accurate sizes and then sometimes the agent comes to pick it up.

INTERVIEWER: How do you get most of your orders? By phone or some other way?

PASHUPATI RUDRA PAL: Usually, people just call us. Sometimes they know people when they come here, or for example, you being from Pune, now know me. So one can build connections here and order through that, but mainly they just call.

INTERVIEWER: With the rise of the internet and Jio now in India, do you think you should look at that as an alternate avenue?

PASHUPATI RUDRA PAL: Yes, people have been telling me about it.

INTERVIEWER: Have you considered making a website?

PASHUPATI RUDRA PAL: No I haven't considered it yet although people have been telling me to look at it.

INTERVIEWER: We conducted some research before getting here, and saw that there were 2-3 shops with websites which you can order directly from. So what we are trying to understand is that if people here are willing to make the change to go online?

PASHUPATI RUDRA PAL: Yes, a lot of people are trying but work is good anyway.

INTERVIEWER: Did you face any problems when the government demonetized the 500 and 1000 rupee notes?

PASHUPATI RUDRA PAL: Yes, we did face some problems at that time. What happened was money got stuck with people and our older customers took the idols on credit. For example, they would give some and then say that they'll give us the rest later. So they weren't able to give it at that time, but it got fixed because everyone returned the money. But there's been more of a problem with GST. We are not



being able to charge GST on our products, although we have to pay GST for all the materials we buy. So that's a massive problem.

INTERVIEWER: What are the kind of materials you need for the idol?

PASHUPATI RUDRA PAL: Wood, rope, mud, dhan of rice, bele mati, padh. You need a lot of things. Colours, a lot of colours.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have to pay GST on these items?

PASHUPATI RUDRA PAL: Yes, some of these items, for example the colours, become a great expense.

INTERVIEWER: What is the cost of making an idol now? Has it become a lot more after GST?

PASHUPATI RUDRA PAL: It has definitely become more, but I don't know how much more exactly.

INTERVIEWER: Has there been a difference in the selling price?

PASHUPATI RUDRA PAL: No, there hasn't been much of a difference in the selling price.

INTERVIEWER: So GST is causing some issues?

PASHUPATI RUDRA PAL: Yes, definitely.

INTERVIEWER: I've heard there are 2 Samitis here. Could you please explain their role?

PASHUPATI RUDRA PAL: They all do work related to idol making only. It's just that when we sell, we sell through the samitis. It's more like a union. So there's a samiti for the owners, and one for the artisans. There are problems sometimes, so the samitis are also there to sort out those issues.

INTERVIEWER: Is there anything else that the samitis do?

PASHUPATI RUDRA PAL: Not really

INTERVIEWER: Does the samiti charge anything to you guys?

PASHUPATI RUDRA PAL: Not really. You just have to be a member of the samiti. It's like being member of a club. You get some benefits for example they'll get you a bank loan and things. So it's better that you go through them. Or some government negotiations or something else.

INTERVIEWER: So does the government help them with this?

PASHUPATI RUDRA PAL: No, so for example, if you have to take out a loan what do you do?

INTERVIEWER: I'll go myself to the bank.

PASHUPATI RUDRA PAL: So here, instead of us going directly, the president or the secretary of the samitis will go to the bank with us and negotiate a loan.

INTERVIEWER: How many samitis are there exactly?

PASHUPATI RUDRA PAL: Only the two - one for owners and one for the artisans.

INTERVIEWER: Name of the samiti?

PASHUPATI RUDRA PAL: Mritshilpa

INTERVIEWER: Okay, thank you for your time.

PASHUPATI RUDRA PAL: Okay, no problem

INTERVIEW WITH PRADYUT PAL (21:49) (MVI\_5981, 5982, 5983, 5984, 5985, 5986, 5987)

INTERVIEWER: We'll start with your name. So, what is your name?

PRADYUT PAL: Pradyut Pal.

INTERVIEWER: And what do you do?

PRADYUT PAL: I make idols

INTERVIEWER: How long have you been doing this?

PRADYUT PAL: This is a family business. At first, after passing BCom, I was in another line of work, and since 2001 I have come into this business. In 2004 I made my website, and after getting the export license, I got Kumartuli.com and since then I have been using it to send my orders abroad.

INTERVIEWER: How did you get the idea to make a website in 2004, given that at that time, the internet wasn't as popular an avenue as it is today?

PRADYUT PAL: When I started my business in 2001, it was very theme-based, and after the rise in theme-based idols, the market of Kumartuli went down because the artists started making the pandals in the same theme, as the one used in making the idols. That's when I wondered whether there was something else I could do? In the sense of marketing, I thought that the market abroad is open. Through emails, I got in contact with some people and then I made the website. I did more marketing through emails after that.

INTERVIEWER: So you're saying that since people wanted more theme based idols, you thought that you had to do something different to be profitable?

PRADYUT PAL: Yes, absolutely.

INTERVIEWER: Does your business run exclusively online now? Or do you employ other methods as well.

PRADYUT PAL: The family business runs in the same way that any studio in Kumartuli does. However, mine is on a website. I made my own company and got an export license. Now someone sitting in America can place an order from there, as opposed to coming to Kumartuli and getting it done. The person can also view the status from their homes.

INTERVIEWER: The transporting of the idol, is that your responsibility or the customers?

PRADYUT PAL: I ask them whether I should get it dropped to their house, or the nearest dock, or airport. So that's a pre-decided arrangement that I get done with the customer.

INTERVIEWER: Moving away from e-commerce, you guys would require a lot of material to make idols right? Where do they come from?

PRADYUT PAL: The mud and Earth is brought from the Ganga river.

INTERVIEWER: What about the ornaments and jewelry that Goddess Durga wears?

PRADYUT PAL: Those come separately. There are people who make that now, we used to make them before, but now we just buy the ones that the specialists make. And clothes and other things are bought directly from the market.

INTERVIEWER: Did you face any problems after GST? For example, have the prices increased?

PRADYUT PAL: Yes, after GST there was a pretty significant effect. This is because when we are buying, we are paying GST, but we don't get that money back from the customer since we cannot impose GST on our idols.

INTERVIEWER: What about demonetization?

PRADYUT PAL: Not that much, a little bit but not that much. Our Kumartuli market runs mostly on cash, not cheque or anything else so there were some problems in receiving payment and stuff, but it was all recovered.

INTERVIEWER: What is the situation with loans and stuff? I spoke to RANJIT SARKAR yesterday, the secretary of the Kumartuli Mritshilpa Samiti, and he said that there were some problems with Bank of India as they were not giving loans because they haven't been repaid.

PRADYUT PAL: I don't know most of the problem. I know a bit of it. At one time the bank gave a loan, but some members of the community did not repay the loans, so the bank decided not to give loans again.

INTERVIEWER: Leaving aside the banks, do you think the government is doing enough to help the members of the community? Durga Puja is a massive festival here in Kolkata, and anywhere there are Bengalis in the world. Since you guys are a community which makes most of the idols for such a festival, I feel like the government should be helping y'all. However, what we're hearing is that the government isn't doing that. What do you think about this?

PRADYUT PAL: I don't think the government helps the community at all. We do this work just to earn *roti* and to earn a living, and nothing more. There is nothing else you can earn from doing this work. The environment in Kumartuli is not good, as you must have seen. That's why the government undertook a massive project to completely redevelop the place. They'll make the rooms and studios bigger and the roads nicer, thus creating a better environment to work. A lot of foreigners come here so it's bad for them to see conditions like this too. But the whole project was shut down, and nothing ever took place.

INTERVIEWER: So what kind of help do you think the government can/should provide in case they decide to start helping?

PRADYUT PAL: The most important is to decorate the market well. Making the place cleaner etc. to change the way things work. If you see the pain these people are in, you have to take drastic measures. Creating a big building with studios for working and showcasing should be the first priority so that people can work in peace.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, we saw the studios. They were extremely small and narrow. It did not seem like a place where idols of such beauty and quality could come out of. Do you think your business will grow if the government undertakes a project like the one you want?

PRADYUT PAL: To develop any place, the area needs to develop, for example making the roads bigger and stuff. Making the structure is important. The electricity and lights and stuff are important too. But since the business here is old, the facilities from a long time ago have also remained. There have been no improvements. There remain DC lines from a long time ago which needs to be changed. The drains need to be fixed. There are still people here who, to drink water, need to pick up water from the roads and fill it to drink it. The things have remained as they were a long time ago. That's why there needs to be change. The project of the building never happened.

INTERVIEWER: Was this the JNURM project that was about to take place here?

PRADYUT PAL: Yes, it's the same. No work was done as a result of it.

INTERVIEWER: So when you guys make the idols, you guys must waste a lot of the material right? Where does that go?

PRADYUT PAL: Those are thrown in the dustbins, and then taken away. However, there is no proper system for it.

INTERVIEWER: Who takes these dustbins? The government or someone else?

PRADYUT PAL: The people hired by the government take them.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have any idea of where the waste is thrown?

PRADYUT PAL: No I don't really know.

INTERVIEWER: Does this happen daily?

PRADYUT PAL: Yes, this happens daily, at least during the time of the Puja it happens daily.

INTERVIEWER: When we went there, what we saw was mainly men working and not too many females. We saw two women, Chyna Pal and Kakoli Pal. Other than these two we did not really see too many women working in the studios or otherwise. Would you be able to tell me why?

PRADYUT PAL: Why only female? Even males are avoiding this business now. I want to make sure my son does not have to follow me into this business.

PRADYUT PAL'S FATHER: Right now no one is coming. They don't have anything to do anymore. I have become so old, but the conditions are the same from when I used to work there. There have been no changes. Nothing has happened. I have three sons. I came here when the partition happened holding my father's hand. There was nothing like this at that time. And there is nothing now either. There have been small changes though. I made my 3 sons join this business. We won't be able to eat food if we don't do this. I've done so much hard work in my life, released so much stuff in the market, we've taken out new designs and idols but we still are in this kind of a situation.

INTERVIEWER: So what you're saying is you don't want anyone from the next generation joining this line of work?

PRADYUT PAL'S FATHER: I don't want anything anymore. I have much sadness in my life because I haven't gained anything. Ten years ago, since my operation, I have been sitting at home. There was a chance that I wouldn't survive the operation. The situation in Kumartuli is really bad. The government also gives no help. We had hopes that there would be marketing and stuff like that. The previous government had made promises, but now there is nothing. There is no one wanting to join this line of work. Forget the new generation.

PRADYUT PAL: My father had an ailment 10 years ago. He needed an operation. However, my income from idol-making would not be able to cover that. It would not have been possible if my brothers were not in a different line of work because I wouldn't be able to afford it. All I can get from my income is food to eat, but nothing else at all. I want that the next generation make sure that they don't join this line of work.

INTERVIEWER: Even after doing well on an e-commerce platform, it isn't enough to cover anything but food to eat?

PRADYUT PAL: No, it's not happening.

PRADYUT PAL'S FATHER: In Kumartuli, the loans that they've been given, all the money is over, and no one can repay the money. Kumartuli the greatness is only in name. A lot of things are born from Kumartuli, especially the work we do. This would not happen anywhere other than Kumartuli. Now people are coming from all over into this business, and taking the market away from Kumartuli. The real work of the idol-making community is not happening. The work we have been doing from so long, from my birth, is not happening anymore. It has stopped.

INTERVIEWER: Lastly, I just wanted to ask whether it is true that the new fiber glass idols are sold more than the normal mud idols?

PRADYUT PAL: In the foreign market, they would usually buy one idol and use it for the Puja for around 10 years. They did not have so much money to change it every year, and it's a hassle trying to get it delivered over there consistently. Previously people would take the idol in their hands and take it to the Puja, but as things develop, you will see that there aren't many more people who will do the job of carrying the idol around. It is extremely heavy. They thought that they should get lighter idols. That's when we started receiving orders for lighter idols. The only thing lighter was paper pulp but even though the pulp was light, they wanted lighter. The fiber glass idols are super light. Usually an idol which would be of 50 kilos, would become around 10 kilos. It takes a maximum of two people to carry it and again store it after the Puja. This is how the change came and around 95% of the idols going abroad now are made of fiber glass. The biggest Durga Puja in London involved with Lakshmi Mittal, used to use mud idols till 2012. In 2013, we gave them a fiber glass idol.

INTERVIEWER: Are they happier with this one?

PRADYUT PAL: Yes, they are happier because it's lighter, and the work that can be done on it is amazing. Also, the chance of it breaking while shipping is reduced by a lot.

INTERVIEWER: Okay, thank you for your time.

INTERVIEW WITH RANJIT SARKAR (MVI-5959, 5960, 5961)

RANJIT SARKAR: We organize eye health camps and stuff also

INTERVIEWER: Do you take any help from the government while doing this?

RANJIT SARKAR: No, the government does not help us at all. We have people who help us through donations and stuff. We also have a local organization, that is the Kumartuli Seva Samiti. There's a medical bank as well.

INTERVIEWER: So you guys work here together to keep things running well?

RANJIT SARKAR: Not just to keep it running well, but if a man does not stay healthy and in a good atmosphere, he won't be able to get work done.

INTERVIEWER: So you guys work in terms of health, and what else?

RANJIT SARKAR: So for example, someone's daughter isn't getting married and he needs some money to get the wedding done. These are the kind of things we provide. There's an education foundation called 'perona'. They take care of any educational need, but the person needs to be perfect. If they can't afford education, this foundation takes care of it. We tied up with them just this year. They even donate medicines here.

INTERVIEWER: So you tied up with these guys to make sure that the children here whose parents can't afford education, are taken care of right?

RANJIT SARKAR: Yes, for example the multiple government schools. Their students do a lot of things. So they're trying to make sure to give children a space where they can come together and do activities such as painting or other things. We also have other things running. For example, the camera you are using, a lot of boys and girls come here with their cameras. Like a huge number. We don't take any help from the government, but we charge them a 50-rupee season pass to be able to freely click pictures here. We also have a one-day pass which is for 10 rupees.

INTERVIEWER: I feel like you can increase the amounts for that.

RANJIT SARKAR: Haha, I can't increase it. We have a committee that makes these kinds of decisions.

INTERVIEWER: So this money that is taken, where is it used?



RANJIT SARKAR: All for medical purposes. We have four medical camps in a year. Every pathological test is done for free. For example, thyroid, CCG, blood sugar - completely free. The samiti organizes this.

INTERVIEWER: I heard that there are two samitis, one for the owners and one for the artisans. RANJIT SARKAR: But we are the only samiti in Kumartuli that does not only the work of the mritshilpi, but also all the kind of work such as medical and educational. For example, there's a blood donation camp annually, we did that in this July. Also, before the Puja, the idols have to be loaded in the trucks and then the truck has to go to the various pandals. For the people who do this, we host a 4-day medical camp, day and night. Just for them. All the medicines are given by an expert who has worked in various places before but now we have hired him to work with us, and he provides great expertise. The samiti's doctor who sits, is a surgeon, and specializes in gynecology.

INTERVIEWER: I heard that the artisans need a lot of kerosene.

RANJIT SARKAR: The thing with kerosene is that we have not been receiving it for a year.

INTERVIEWER: What do you mean by not receiving it?

RANJIT SARKAR: Last year, every member of the samiti got 5 litres of kerosene. However, this year, it has become 2 litres.

INTERVIEWER: Why is this so?

RANJIT SARKAR: That I do not know. Maybe the government reduced the quota for oil to be given.

INTERVIEWER: Through what agency do you get this?

RANJIT SARKAR: Through the food commission that's here. We apply there.

INTERVIEWER: Do you apply there as a samiti or as individuals?

RANJIT SARKAR: As a samiti.

INTERVIEWER: Syou guys look after any subsidies that the government provides and things like that?

RANJIT SARKAR: They don't give us any subsidy. We buy at the rate of the market. Whatever is sold at a shop which sells kerosene, we buy at that same rate. We need a lot of kerosene, but since this year we're getting only 2 litres. This is an issue in the Centre, because the oil comes from there. The whole quota has been reduced, even the shops keep less.

INTERVIEWER: So what happens when an artisan doesn't have the money to make an idol. There must definitely be some starting capital that is needed?

RANJIT SARKAR: That is nothing for the artisans to fear. If I'm an owner of a studio or want to be, I have to arrange the capital for it. The artisans have to be paid on time, so this is not their worry.

INTERVIEWER: How is this acquired?

RANJIT SARKAR: Previously, we had a tie-up with Bank of India. However, the managers change, and every manager has his/her own ideas. So the bank told us that, if all the previous loans are not repaid, we will not issue any more loans. In 2009, there was supposed to be a development scheme.

INTERVIEWER: is this the JNURM one?

RANJIT SARKAR: Yes, the same. At that time, our situation with the loans was a bit haywire. We had elapsed the time for repaying it. Then the manager changed, so the rules also changed. We sorted that with a settlement. We get no help from the government, whatever help we need, we get it from outside or do whatever is within our capacities.

INTERVIEWER: So what do you do now that the banks wont give you loans? Another settlement or do you cover the money?

RANJIT SARKAR: We just do settlements over 6 month duration or a one year duration. So these will be sorted.

INTERVIEWER: Do the owners come to you and ask you for a loan or what is the procedure?

RANJIT SARKAR: All the loans are processed through the samiti only. Earlier, we used to deal with private banks, and they used to issue loans worth 1000 when the samiti started. Now they are worth 1 lakh. Whatever the capacity for the business is, they give loans according to that. Without the samiti, they won't be able to get the loans.

INTERVIEWER: So is there like a membership or something to be a part of the samiti?

RANJIT SARKAR: Yes, the membership is annual, for 300 rupees a year, and whatever facility or service the samiti can offer is available to all members of the samiti.

INTERVIEWER: So the main feature is that people can come to you and ask you to take loans from the bank?

RANJIT SARKAR: So far, that was the case, but now that's not happening because the bank is not issuing new loans and no bank will give loans because of the new system. The moment they enter the PAN card number, they can see the history of any debts or loans. So that's a problem.

INTERVIEWER: So you're saying that you guys are trying to fix this within the next year?

RANJIT SARKAR: Yes, a lot of the loans have been covered, there are still around 25 remaining. I have a list of the people.

INTERVIEWER: Do you guys deal only with Bank of India?

RANJIT SARKAR: First it was CBI, but their capacity was less so it became State Bank of India, and now it's Bank of India. There was a competition about who gave a better interest rate.

INTERVIEWER: When the note ban happened, or when GST was introduced, was there any problem? Did any of the members of the samiti raise an issue over this?

RANJIT SARKAR: Not only me, but a lot of people were affected. We were only able to take 2000 rupees per day and I had to give around 10000 rupees for work. I couldn't understand whether I should eat with my money, or give it to someone else. Lines at the ATM every day. However, when GST was introduced, the people who make the idols did not get affected as much as the others. They were wondering what would happen. The buyers weren't sure if we were going to impose GST on our products, so they were unsure about buying as well.

INTERVIEWER: What I heard was that the clay idols' materials' prices have increased and stuff?

RANJIT SARKAR: Yes, I'm getting to that. The sales I made before the year of GST were 10% higher than the sales this year, because of GST. The amount of idols we send outside, have become much lesser this year. The business has suffered. There were lot of things that had GST imposed on them. Now the buyers have to pay 18 rupees extra for every 100 they spend on it. That becomes a problem. If it affects one person, it affects everyone. Now for the idol-makers they said they had to pay 5% GST, but that's not the only expense. Colours, materials, cloth, etc. are also expensive. There's GST on all of these products.

INTERVIEWER: Was there any communication with the State or Central Government about this, requesting that at least for you people, there should be some special policy? Especially because you guys do very important work here, given that if you guys don't make the idols here, no other place would be able to replace the production of Kumartuli. And Durga Puja is a crucial festival for the people.

RANJIT SARKAR: Some government representatives came to us. When you introduce something new to the public, there's always going to be problems. They came to do a survey, and they'll do it again, and then hopefully make some changes. This year we can't really tell, but we'll be able to tell next year. Whatever happens will happen next year now.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that the research we publish is going to help you guys in anyway? We're making a report and a video. Obviously you haven't seen it yet, but do you think that this research could help you in anyway?

RANJIT SARKAR: The reporting that you're doing, a lot of people do. However, the better the project is, the more attention it gets. So I hope that your project does well, and you have understood where the problems are since it would only help anyway, not be a problem.

INTERVIEWER: How else do you guys make money? You said you hire doctors and stuff which must cost money.

RANJIT SARKAR: From the camera charge alone, we collected 55000 rupees this year. A lot of people who stay abroad, come to know and they donate. Even in the newspapers and stuff they see us, and then they want to donate. If we want help, we get it. We don't have to go to people and force them to donate money to us and stuff. We don't do that. There has been a rise in the number of people who now know about this place and a lot of them are willing to donate.

KANISH INTERVIEW 1 (8:25) (audio-171012\_002)

KANISH: We have come from an educational institution. We have a social project on Kumartuli - about how you guys work, and make idols and how things basically run here. This is an educational project, nothing to do with commerce or business. I am their teacher and they are my students. Just to know, here you guys are making idols, what is the budget for making such idols?

INTERVIEWEE: There is no fixed budget.

KANISH: Okay so what is the price of the idol that is right in front of us?

INTERVIEWEE: It still needs to be decorated and made completely. But even then, to give a rough idea it would be around 20,000.

KANISH: So what is the range of idols that you guys make, in terms of budget?

INTERVIEWEE: There is no fixed price range. We make it to whatever the order specifications are.

KANISH: So in case I want a bigger one, it would be more expensive?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes.

KANISH: And if I want one of this size?

INTERVIEWEE: I would only be able to tell you the price after the idol is clothed, the ornaments are placed, and when it is completely ready. I won't be able to give you a quote right now.

KANISH: Do you guys only make it to order or do you guys make idols otherwise also?

INTERVIEWEE: We make it otherwise also and we make personalized ones when we receive an order.

KANISH: So how many people work with you?

INTERVIEWEE: Fifteen people.

KANISH: Do you guys have any traditions, or do you guys take part in the Pujas that happen? For example, Kali Puja.

INTERVIEWEE: Sometimes we go for the Puja in the community. We have a storage area, in front of which is a space. We usually go there.

KANISH: Does this happen for all the Pujas?

INTERVIEWEE: No, not for all of the Pujas. Only for some of them.

KANISH: Is your family here?

INTERVIEWEE: No, my family stays in Bardhaman.

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KANISH: Oh, it is a nice place, you get good sweets there.

INTERVIEWEE: Have all your students come from Pune?

KANISH: Yes, they have

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KANISH: What is the budget for the raw materials that go into making the idols you guys are making here? Do you guys get some advance money from the customer?

INTERVIEWEE: No, we have to invest ourselves.

KANISH: So you guys get money only when you deliver?

INTERVIEWEE: We have been investing in this since March/April. The idols you see in front of you are being made since then.

KANISH: How much is the total investment?

INTERVIEWEE: We have to invest around 1 lakh for sure. Some of it is obviously borrowed.

KANISH: Is it easy for you guys to borrow money? In the sense, do people lend it to you easily?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, they do.

KANISH: Do you guys get any help from the samitis?

INTERVIEWEE: The samiti is there, but it won't be able to help in such matters. They can help in other things, like if there is some problem during the time of delivery, or during production. However, in terms of gathering materials and stuff, they don't help.

KANISH: Do you guys get any benefits by being members of the samitis?

INTERVIEWEE: Not really. We get some basic benefits. Being a part of the samiti gets us some medical camps and stuff like that.

KANISH: Do you guys get any health insurance or something like that?

INTERVIEWEE: No, not really.

KANISH: So you guys have to take care of that yourselves?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes.

KANISH: Does the owner of the studio and warehouse not take care of this for you?

INTERVIEWEE: No, it depends on how close he is with the artisans, or how well they work for him.

KANISH: So the owner keeps you guys based on a contract?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, a season contract. From March/April onwards till around December.

KANISH: And for the rest of the time?

INTERVIEWEE: During the other times we have Saraswati Puja.

KANISH: But after Saraswati Puja you guys would be free for a long time right?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes. We generally have work for all of the 12 months, but it is not possible to work for all the 12 months.

KANISH: What is the role of women in this particular profession and in the community?

INTERVIEWEE: Women are present now. However, before, they would not be a part of this at all, but now you can see.

KANISH: From top to bottom, do they take on all the roles that men generally do?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, they do everything.

KANISH: Including making big idols?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, even that.

KANISH: I heard that a lot of people don't like that, and showed their displeasure about the same.

INTERVIEWEE: No, nothing like that. I have been in this line of work for 10 years now, I haven't seen anything of this sort.

KANISH: How did you come into this line of work?

INTERVIEWEE: I had no interest or anything, but I had to do something. From a young age, I have always been around this, so I just did this. Now even if I wanted to go into another line, I wouldn't be able to because I don't have any other education.

KANISH: Do you like working in this profession?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, I like it

KANISH: I heard the government had some plans to help around here?

INTERVIEWEE: There was a plan, but it wasn't successful. Nothing happened here.

KANISH: Do you guys like it here in this area, or do you want to work somewhere else, in terms of locality, and area?

INTERVIEWEE: No, it's same wherever you go. It's actually easier here, since you can get things easily here.

KANISH: Where do you get your mud from?

INTERVIEWEE: Over here only. They all get it from the same place.

KANISH: Okay, thank you.

**KAKOLI PAL Interview summary**

KANISH: I saw the PC Chandra Jewelers' video about you, which is why we thought it was important to meet you. Can you tell us something about yourself, and how you came into this line of work?

KAKOLI: I became the owner of this workshop when my first daughter was 7, and my youngest one was 1. It was my father's workshop. During Kali Puja once, something happened (insinuating the death of her father), and I had to be able to earn so that I could eat. So, along with other artists, I started working.

KANISH: So how was your income at that time?

KAKOLI: There wasn't too much profit because he (her husband) likes eating a lot. So whatever the income was, we would eat worth more than that. We had an 8ft idol. I have learned the work, and I have learned the business, that's why I'm not worried anymore. I work for 12 months because I make all kinds of idols.

KANISH: How did you learn to make the idols?

KAKOLI: On my own. I would look at the other artists working, try myself and they would help me out saying, "Do it this way, or do it the other way". And also, if there's an interest from your own side, you will learn better at whatever you do, whether it's academics or anything else.

KANISH: When your husband had a brain stroke, I'm pretty sure the expenses were high.

KAKOLI: It was a bad situation. My sister had a wedding and I did not really have anyone to talk to so it was a pretty bad situation. I was shy and wouldn't get out too much when this happened. I would barely do anything. I had a 1-year-old girl, what could I do?

KANISH: How many other women do you know of in this profession? Do you think there will be more?

KAKOLI: There were some before as well, like Chyna and all, so it really hasn't changed too much. We came because we had our own reasons and family pressures to deal with. However, there aren't many I can think of who come in this profession (females) just like that. Nowadays, if you have learned the art, no one will stop you from working. We live in a lot of difficulties; we are content though. We can earn, the workshop is big and we make a lot of idols. There's a lot of jealousy though, women are jealous of other women who work and do well.



## **FGD TRANSCRIPTION**

NAMAN: So, has your workshop always been here itself?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes.

NAMAN: And you've never shifted?

INTERVIEWEE: No, I've been sitting here for 50 years. When we came, I was 10 and all of the shops and everything were mud, we made it like this.

NAMAN: Has the area changed from when you came, to what it is now?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, it has changed a lot.

NAMAN: Has it become bigger or smaller?

INTERVIEWEE: Our father taught 2000 people how to do this work. Every person has one work here which they have made themselves.

NAMAN: Do you think the number of artisans has grown or become lesser over the years?

INTERVIEWEE: Customers give a lot of demand, but we don't get a lot of raw materials. We have given ads everywhere on the papers, online and TV, but we get no help or increase in raw material acquisition.

KHUSH: Do you send it outside India as well?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes. Europe and London, we have sent to these places. And in Bombay also we go to work for a few days in a year. We don't do work with mud, just ornaments and other stuff. We have a lot of artisans for that stuff. The number of artisans over time has reduced though.

NAMAN: Why do you think the raw materials have decreased in number?

INTERVIEWEE: It is found in the Earth and water. Now because of the development and buildings and everything, the amount of material we can collect has reduced.

NAMAN: Can there be improvements?

INTERVIEWEE: My models and stuff can stay good for about 20 years, but the other ones made out of mud, will not even stay good for 20 months. They'll become bad because of the pollution and the material in general.

KHUSH: Are there places outside of Kumartuli where these things are made?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes, a lot of places. Not the idols, but the ornaments and stuff. Two hundred people work with us from outside, and we distribute from here. If it takes 20 to make, we sell for 22. They're happy, and our stomachs will be full. But now because of tax and stuff, we have to take more. We don't have too much protection though, everyone you see on this street makes the same things that we make. It takes a lot of time, and they all do it manually. At least a 1000 families run from one piece of work.

NAMAN: If you ever want more raw material, and you have less money, would it be a problem? Isn't that what the association helps you with?

INTERVIEWEE: Not really. The government does not help out either.

NAMAN: (possibly asking about GST)

INTERVIEWEE: It happened all over India; the customers were the most troubled. They thought if they're charging GST on everything, it would be charged on the idols as well. Although, we are not allowed to charge it on idols. There's no concession or anything either. When we sell, we cannot impose GST.

NAMAN: What all do you have to pay GST for?

INTERVIEWEE: For a lot of things, such as transport, electricity, materials, paint and stuff. Whatever orders are given to us, we make according to that. We don't make anything which is beyond our capacity, that's why most of our stuff is made to order. Over here we have a little less capacity. So whatever we can do in the shop we do, but most of our work is done elsewhere. We've had to teach a lot of people, whoever wants to learn. But in this generation people don't

really want to learn anymore. This is a political matter, I'll have to give you a full background. The government was doing a project, and imagine if you're an owner, and they were supposed to give you money but you only get 10% and the rest is given to others. Even those who are not involved with Kumartuli, get involved politically and then get the money. What do you mean by development? They should keep everyone in mind and happy when they do it, not by scamming or conning other people. If it's my house and I'm not the one getting money, that is not fair. The land distribution idea of the government was completely rigged. The government took the land that I owned and gave tax on. Okay I'm fine with the government taking it, but I am not being paid the way I should be paid for that land. And on top of that, I'm still paying some property tax. The government limits our money, and the house is not on my name anymore. Those who are working at their homes, even the females of the family help with the work. Earlier, even my mother used to work on this. Nowadays girls have a lot of education, it wasn't like this before.

Karina: You do a little work right? (to the woman)

INTERVIEWEE: Yes

KARINA: Do you like working here?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes. I work on the little details of the ornaments and stuff.

KARINA: Is there a distinction in Kumartuli, about the kind of work women can do?

INTERVIEWEE: No such distinction. It has never existed. However, our work is mostly outdoors, and the women are a bit ashamed to come outside, which is why they don't prefer it and they work from indoors if they do want to work.

### **Chyna Pal Interview Condensed**

I have been running this workshop for 21 years. When I first came here before Durga Puja, my father fell very ill, no one taught me at that time though, and I kept looking at the people working before Durga Puja, and then I tried myself and started learning. I never had the fear that I won't be able to do this work, or that this is a male's profession. That's why me and my workshop is doing so well, because I did not believe that this was a job that only male's could do.

Has some things to say on the technique used to make heads. Explains how they make it and stuff.

I kept trying and never gave up. If you try, you can do anything.

There are no restrictions anymore on women working anywhere. So I do not believe that this profession is only for males. I have become successful in this profession and so can other women. There are some workshops owned by women that have come recently. The only people who can learn this are those who really want to learn it. It is not academics, it is manual work with the hands, it is not difficult, but they should be willing. If you don't study, you'll fail. This is the same thing.

Keeps emphasizing on trying.

Me and my mom stay at home. The design is purely traditional. We don't do artworks, or thematic based idols, just the normal traditional ones.

VIDUSHI: How long have you been doing this work?

KAUSHIK GHOSH: I have been working for around 24 to 25 years. I am the fourth generation in my family doing this.

VIDUSHI: When did you start your website?

KAUSHIK GHOSH: Around 10 to 12 years ago

VIDUSHI: Has this profited you in any way? Do you think business is better online?

KAUSHIK GHOSH: No we don't generate a lot of income online. Whatever income we get comes through orders or through direct mail. There isn't much e-commerce activity.

VIDUSHI: Do you think Sales will happen easier through e commerce?

KAUSHIK GHOSH: No this isn't a business that benefits much from websites much. The client cannot be specific as to what they want through e commerce.

Vidushi: You just returned from London. What work did you do there?

KAUSHIK GHOSH: There was a Puja happening there and so there was an Idol being built. I had some work at London University and was also involved with multiple idol making demonstrations.

VIDUSHI: Tell us a little more about the work you do here

KAUSHIK GHOSH: We make idols here with clay, fiber glass and Shola. The idols that get exported are of fiber glass and Shola as these are both light materials and don't break easily

Vishush: What is Shola?

KAUSHIK GHOSH: Shola is a root. We call it Peeth. Its very light and is an underwater root like Joot.

VIDUSHI: Is there any specific place you get this from?

KAUSHIK GHOSH: Its specifically found in West Bengal and Bangladesh. The clay idols don't get exported because they break easily. The Shola and Fibreglass idols can be renewed for years.

VIDUSHI: What other work do you do here?

KAUSHIK GHOSH: We also make ornaments and decorations for Puja

VIDUSHI: Did the recent GST and Demonetization make a difference to your work?

KAUSHIK GHOSH: It did not make that much of a difference to us because we mostly work with clay and fiber.

VIDUSHI: Did the workers get effected by it ?

KAUSHIK GHOSH: No it did not make much of a difference to them either because the workers are paid in cash and whatever shops you see here all receive cash payments

VIDUSHI: So then there must have been a problem with demonetization

KAUSHIK GHOSH: Yes then we did have a big problem

VIDUSHI: Does the government play a role in your work? Do they take initiatives to help?

KAUSHIK GHOSH: The government doesn't help much. We have Samitis for that purpose. They give us Subsidized Kerosene.

VIDUSHI: Do you have any connections with any Samitis

KAUSHIK GHOSH: Yes everyone does

VIDUSHI: So most of the artisans and workers are men. So why do you think women don't do this work? Or are we not aware of them?

KAUSHIK GHOSH: There are a few women who do this work but it's because they have no other choice. This work is better suited to men?

VIDUSHI: Do you think both should be doing equal amount of work?

KAUSHIK GHOSH; Yes of course, all work should be equal. When it comes to idol making, one should start learning in their childhood and keeping learning throughout their adulthood ( I think what he's trying to say is that the women started working late because of circumstances and they won't be as good because they don't have as much practice)

VIDUSHI: Has Kumartuli changed

KAUSHIK GHOSH: We have always used clay and still do, except now we also use Fiber glass, Shola and rubber.

VIDUSHI: Has the way you acquired materials changed in any way?

KAUSHIK GHOSH: No it is the same. There are two types of clay. (Edel Matti) (Dele Matti). Edel Matti comes from the (he said old water I think he means like stagnant water) and Dele matti comes from the Hooghly river.

VIDUSHI: And its been like this for generations?

KAUSHIK GHOSH : Yes its always been like this. And the quality of clay that you find here (West Bengal) is special and you wont find it anywhere else. I went abroad and worked with the clay there and it had chemicals. What we have here is natural.

VIDUSHI: Can you tell us the difference between the process of making a clay and a fiber glass idol?

KAUSHIK GHOSH: For the clay idols we start with straw

VIDUSHI: Where does the straw come from?

KAUSHIK GHOSH: We use hay from rice paddies. Then we cover the straw with three layers of different types of clay, followed by the coloring. For Fiber glass we finish the clay structure and then construct the fiber glass idols before coloring them.

VIDUSHI: Are the materials easily available for the fiber glass idols?

KAUSHIK GHOSH: For the clay idols GST wasn't a problem but for the Fiber glass GST was an issue. That effected our work as well

VIDUSHI: Do you think any changes need to be made

KG: The infrastructure should definitely change. The houses are small and the area is very dirty.

VIDUSHI: Has anyone tried to make these changes happen?

KG: Yes we have tried to but there are a lot of politics. Some political parties help while other don't.

VIDUSHI: Can you tell us about these attempts that have been made? When were they made?

KG: Around 5 to 6 years ago.

VIDUSHI: Did one person attempt alone or was the community together?

KG: No, we as a community tried. The Samitis as well as government officials were involved. The government took land from Kumartuli and promised to improve the infrastructure while rehabilitating work-shops and residents. But no redevelopment happened and those people are still at the rehabilitation.

VIDUSHI: Is there any one party that helps more than others.

KG: No there's nothing like that. If one party does the other shuts it down.

VIDUSHI: Do you think our research is useful? Is there anything you think we can do to help?

KG: You can tell the public so the concerned people are aware

VIDUSHI: Do you think what we're doing is relevant

KG: Of course!

## **QUESTIONNAIRE**

### **Questions to ask the artisans (A)**

#### Market leaders (well established traders)

1. How long have you been doing this type of work?
2. How long have you been living in Kolkata, which parts of Kolkata?
3. People want fancier idols, more artistic. What is your take on this?
4. Would you say that the government and Ngo's are doing enough for the community's betterment?
5. Are you aware of the international sales of these idols through the internet? How does that make you feel? Do you support the act of buying these idols over the internet?

6. Would you want your children to continue in the same line of work?
7. Is your income enough for you to run your household?
8. Do you feel like an important member of society since you are a major contributor to the Durga Puja festival?
9. How does the atmosphere change in the society, as well as the workshops during the time of Durga Puja?
10. What types of idols do the customers usually buy- the classic design or the more modern ones?
11. Has the demand for more artistic and eco friendly idols increased and is the demand more than the demand for the classic murtis?
12. Has Durga Puja changed over the years? If yes then how?
13. Has it become difficult to find workers?
14. Where do you get your materials from? (specifically whom/where they get their bamboo, straw, paints, mitti)
15. What kind of change would you want in your work space?
16. Are you happy working here? If not, what would you change?
17. Do you think there is any competition from outside the settlement? How have the artisans kept up with competition from outside of the settlement?
18. What are your working hours? Is there a difference during offseason and puja time?
19. Do you work only on the Durga and/or Kali idols? What about idols like Ganesha etc?
20. Do you have any side jobs? If yes, what are they?
21. Have you ever considered taking a loan or have taken one? If yes, why? If no, do you know someone who has? Is it a common practice amongst the artisans?
22. Would you say that there are a few health hazards while making these idols?
23. Are there a lot of tourists and photographers that come to watch you work? How does that make you feel- like someone important, or like your personal space is being breached?
24. How have you adapted to demonetisation and GST personally as well as in your work sphere?
25. Have the ornaments changed? How about the expenditure on the ornaments? Is the goddess more heavily adorned with jewellery?



26. Would you consider switching occupations?
27. Do you think the samitis help you (do they understand your problems, do they try to help)?
28. Do you have a website for the sale of your products?
29. What is the crime rate in the area? Does it affect your occupation?
30. Do a lot of the unsold idols get wasted? How do you dispose of this waste?
31. Have the depictions of Durga and celebrations of Durga changed over years? If, yes, how and to what extent? If no, why do you think so?
32. Are there any women working here as artisans? If not, then how come?

### UNSKILLED LABOURERS

1. What is your occupation (artist, trader, casual laborer)?
2. Where do you live? Are you settled here or do you migrate? (if he migrates seasonally, is it worth it? What makes him migrate, since the working conditions are so bad)
3. What does your wife do? If she doesn't work, would you like it if she did? Any dependents?
4. How many generations of your family have been in this business?
5. How long have you been living in Kolkata, which parts of Kolkata?
6. Is your income enough for you to run your household?
7. What kind of change would you want in your work space?
8. Are you happy working here? If not, what would you change?
9. Do you think there is any competition from outside the settlement? How have the artisans kept up with competition from outside of the settlement?
10. What are your working hours? Is there a difference during offseason and Puja time?
11. Is the space given to you for your work enough? Any changes you would make?
12. What are the materials you generally use? Tools? Do you have a preference? For example, fibreglass over mud.

13. Are there a lot of tourists and photographers that come to watch you work? How does that make you feel- like someone important, or like your personal space is being breached?
14. How have you adapted to demonetisation and GST personally as well as in your work sphere?
15. Do a lot of the unsold idols get wasted?
16. How do they dispose of their waste?

### SKILLED LABOURERS

1. What is your occupation (artist, trader, casual labourer)?
2. How long have you been doing this type of work?
3. Where do you live? Are you settled here or do you migrate? (if he migrates seasonally, is it worth it? What makes him migrate, since the working conditions are so bad)
4. What does your wife do? (if she doesn't work, would you like it if she did?) any dependents?
5. Would you say that the government and Ngo's are doing enough for your betterment?
6. Is your income enough for you to run your household?
7. Do you feel like an important member of society since you are a major contributor to the Durga Puja festival?
8. How does the atmosphere change in the society, as well as the workshops during the time of Durga Puja?
9. Has Durga Puja changed over the years? If yes then how?
10. What kind of change would you want in your work space?
11. What are your working hours? Is there a difference during offseason and puja time?
12. Is the space given to you for your work enough? Any changes you would make?
13. Do you have any side jobs? If yes, what are they?
14. Would you say that there are a few health hazards while making these idols?
15. How have you adapted to demonetisation and GST personally as well as in your work sphere? ALL

### **GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS (B)**

TEACHERS and PRINCIPAL-

1. Have you worked personally with any of the artists?
2. What is the curriculum?
3. Do you think the diploma program is of help to the artisans?
4. What are the career opportunities that are available to the students after the program?
5. Has the school received any govt. Attention?
6. Have admission numbers gone up? Why do you think so?
7. What is the background of the majority of the students?
8. What is the crime rate in the area? Does it affect your occupation?
9. Do you think that our research can help you? Will awareness about your livelihoods make a difference to you?
10. Do you think there are any positive impacts of GST?
11. Have the depictions of Durga and celebrations of Durga changed over years? If, yes, how and to what extent? If no, why do you think so?
12. Are there any women working here as “artisans”? If not, then how come?
13. Why do you think mostly males work in this profession?

**NGO’S AND SAMITIS (C)**

1. Do the artisans receive any assistance from the samitis in terms of resources?
2. What is the criteria for membership?
3. Who are the members of these samitis?
4. Do you know about the AMRUT and JNNURM scheme? Thoughts?
5. Have you undertaken any programs to raise funds for community? If so what are they?
6. What is your level of involvement with the govt?
7. What is your level of involvement with the banks?
8. Do you think that our research can help you? Will awareness about your livelihoods make a difference to you?
9. Do you think there are any positive impacts of GST?
10. Have the depictions of Durga and celebrations of Durga changed over years? If, yes, how and to what extent? If no, why do you think so?

11. Are there any women working here as “artisans”? If not, then how come?
12. Why do you think mostly males work in this profession?
13. Is it difficult to create funds for yourself?

**BANKS (F)**

1. What is their policy on Employees co-operative credit societies (ECCS)?
2. What is the maximum limit to the loans offered to these credit societies?
3. On what basis do you provide loans to the idol makers?
4. What are the kinds of loans that are provided (rate of interest, length)?
5. What is the rate of defaulting people from this community specifically?
6. How many loan requests do they get every year from clay makers? Does it vary according to season?
7. Are there loan requests for housing and other personal reasons?
8. Do you think that our research can help you? Will awareness about your livelihoods make a difference to you?
9. Do you think there are any positive impacts of GST?