

From The Margins To The Mainstream: The Journey of Women in The Idol-Making Industry

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ABSTRACT

Idol making is an art form of profound cultural and religious significance, embodying the artistic heritage and spiritual practices of various communities. In the vibrant neighborhood of Kumartuli, located in Kolkata, India, this tradition is deeply intertwined with the celebration of Durga Puja, a highly revered religious festival in the region. For centuries, Kumartuli has served as the hub of idol making, primarily dominated by male craftsmen known as "kumars". However, a remarkable shift has occurred in recent years, as an increasing number of women have begun to make their mark in this historically male-dominated field. The primary objective of this study is to explore the evolving landscape of idol making in Kumartuli, highlighting the rising participation and influence of women within this artistic realm. By analyzing the power dynamics of women idol makers in this industry we aim to explore how these women preserve and shape the rich cultural heritage of this religious event. The study employed a qualitative approach utilizing in-depth interviews, participant observations, and case studies in-order to gather comprehensive data. The research focused specifically on female idol makers, allowing for an intimate understanding of their artistic processes, spiritual connections, and the social context in which they operate. Through direct engagement with these women, the study aimed to capture the richness and depth of their experiences within this traditionally male-dominated field of idol making. The findings of this study unveil a diverse tapestry of stories that showcase the determination and resourcefulness of women in idol making. These women exhibit a steadfast dedication to their art, striving to uphold the traditions while embracing creativity. The research also identifies several support networks and initiatives that have empowered these women, helping them overcome obstacles and establish themselves as talented craftsmen. Overall, the findings shed light on the resilience and ingenuity displayed by these women. It highlights the importance of acknowledging the talent of women in idol making and encourages the creation of a gender-neutral

atmosphere in such artistic pursuits. Furthermore, this research aims to facilitate cross-cultural dialogue and enhance our comprehension of the role women play in preserving culture and enriching religious celebrations.

KEY WORDS: Women, Idol making, Heritage, Power dynamics, Empowerment, Gender neutral.

INTRODUCTION

Durga puja in Bengal is just not a custom, tradition, or festival it has become a lifestyle. It is a carnival and an emotion that marks the time of happy tides. It is a five-long day festival that is celebrated on a grander scale, families immersed themselves in the gala of awesome food, pandal hopping, music, and cultural evenings. Kolkata cannot be outdone in its grandeur of the festive fervor, but people in the other city try to recreate that special euphoria that makes Durga puja, the cultural extravaganza that no Bengali ever wants to miss [1].

Idol making is an important part of Durga Puja, and Durga herself being a goddess, the representation of women in this field of idol making is very important to observe. Some years ago, for the male dominance, the women only engaged in household work possibly such prohibition would be derivative of the Hindu *Shastric* injunction against women reading religious texts. For a long Hindu religion worshipped women but kept them at bay from playing a decisive role in the performance of religious rites.



Figure 1: Woman idol maker carrying the face of the goddess Durga idol.

It is ironic to note that while we worship the demon-slaying Goddess in Durga Puja, the women of the potter's colony have found themselves in a gender-biased role. Traditionally, the making of idols was a male-dominated task, and women were usually discouraged from entering the working studios [6].

For decades, the field of idol-making has been a male bastion profession; the interference of women was strictly avoided, and for all these years, few women have challenged this monopoly. The women are actively involved in business work; however, they are indirectly prohibited from sitting at the studios, engaging in business activities, and gaining any profits.

They face many challenges, including social and cultural barriers that discourage them from entering the profession. However, in recent years, many women are breaking these barriers and are making a name for themselves in this profession. The emergence of women idol makers in Kumartuli is a positive development that reflects changing social norms and attitudes towards women in India. These women are shattering the glass ceiling and breaking gender barriers, paving the way for future generations of women to pursue their passions and excel in traditionally male-dominated fields [6].

LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, the celebration of Durga Puja in Kolkata has undergone a remarkable artistic transformation, blending contemporary and traditional elements. The festival's visual culture has evolved, becoming a unique and awe-inspiring experience that showcases the city's artistic vibrancy. With each passing year, Durga Puja scales new heights, attracting global attention and becoming a source of pride for Kolkata. The festival's evolution is a testament to the city's cultural richness, making it a must-see event for those seeking a blend of tradition and modernity [1].

In Kolkata's historical potter's quarter, Kumartuli, skilled artisans from the Kumbhakar caste craft intricate and exquisite idols of Goddess Durga and her progeny. Using clay, straw, bamboo, and other natural materials, they create a life-like appearance through a collaborative and meticulous process. Each idol is a breathtaking work of art, reflecting the unique style and skill of the artisan who crafted it [2].

In Kumartuli, besides the Kumbhakars, there are many migrant laborers from different castes crafting intricate clay sculptures of Hindu deities, not only for the Durga Puja festival but also for other festivals. The industry's aspects, including tenure, resources, gender discrimination, migration patterns, and economics, are explored in this article.

The shops vary in size, with some in business for over 200 years. Migrant workers come from other districts of Kolkata and states like Bihar, Orissa, and Uttar Pradesh, earning varying incomes. While shop owners exporting idols to foreign countries make significant profits, many workers hold temporary positions, leading them to take on other jobs [3].

Kumartuli's idol makers are renowned worldwide for their exceptional skills. To meet modern demands, some use fiberglass for more durable idols. However, the profession remains male-dominated, and female

artisans face challenges like limited space, lack of support, and balancing household responsibilities. Despite this, more women are making their mark in the industry [5].

Women's participation in the industry has been facilitated by changes in technology and work processes. The use of power tools has made it easier for women to perform tasks that were previously considered too physically demanding. Additionally, the increasing use of prefabricated elements and moulds has made it possible for women to create parts of the idols without needing to work with heavy materials. The increased participation of women in the industry has had a positive impact on their economic status and social mobility. Women who work in the industry have been able to earn wages and contribute to their family's income, which has increased their economic independence. Additionally, their involvement in the industry has challenged traditional gender roles and opened up new opportunities for women [4].

Kumartuli organized a photo walk, where the women artisans took part and introduced visitors to their studios and work as part of the One Billion Rising global movement. However, many women cannot work full-time and only work whenever they get time after housework. They do not sit in the shop or do any selling, as mostly male members of the family do it all. These women not only specialized in idol making but also make accessories for the idols like sequins, zari, beads, and mirrors. While there are some successful women idol makers like Mala Pal and China Pal, who get big orders and have studios of their own, they still face challenges. They have to employ laborers and also have to get back to their homes for household chores. However, despite all these challenges, these women are determined to break the stereotype of patriarchy and make their mark in this male-dominated profession [5].

METHODOLOGY

This research is based on primary data, which is collected through field research, interviews, observations, and case studies. Primary data provided first-hand information about the experiences, perspectives, and practices of the women idol makers.

In this particular research paper, the methodology chosen method is Qualitative Research through the Case Study method. Qualitative research focuses on exploring and understanding the subjective experiences, perspectives, and behaviors of these women. It is used for studying these women idol maker for complex social phenomena, including culture, social norms, and social interactions. Case studies provide a practical understanding and holistic perspective of these women, which enables the author to gain in-depth insights, uncover patterns, themes, and develop a comprehensive understanding.

The adoption of qualitative research methods through a case study design for studying the women idol makers of Kumartuli is justified for several reasons: Firstly, it allows for the exploration of cultural and social factors that shape the experiences and practices of these women, including gender norms, traditions, and beliefs. Secondly, qualitative research through case study generates new insights and hypotheses by collecting detailed data and uncovering new perspectives and theories. This information can contribute to the understanding of idol- making practices in Kumartuli. Furthermore, provided a practical and holistic

understanding of the women idol makers, identifying opportunities and challenges they face and informing interventions for their empowerment.

Sampling is an essential part of social research, involving the selection of a representative subset from a larger population of Kumartuli's potter colony. In this study, purposive sampling, a type of non-probability sampling, is used. Purposive sampling involves selecting participants based on specific characteristics or traits relevant to the research question. In the case of Kumartuli's women idol maker, participants are selected based on factors such as their experience, specialization, and reputation as skilled artisans. This approach allows for a focused and comprehensive study of this specific group.

The study area is Kumartuli, located in Kolkata, West Bengal, India. Kumartuli is known for its traditional craftsmanship in clay modeling and sculpting. The narrow lanes and closely packed buildings create a unique environment for the studios and workshops of the idol makers. Data collection for this study took approximately five months, primarily through semi-structured interviews that provided flexibility, in-depth information, captured participants' perspectives, and established a personal rapport between the author and the participants.

ORAL NARRATIVES BY WOMEN IDOL MAKERS

Mala Pal: Big Order, Woman

“The girls may know the work, but most of the time, their parents object to their working in the shop. But hopefully things will change if proper guidance is given to the young girls.”

Mala Pal was born into a family of traditional Kumartuli idol makers. However, as a woman, she faced initial skepticism and social stigma when she expressed her desire to join the family business. Mala Pal's father Dulal Chandra Pal never allowed her in the studio, but she used to imitate her father and make small replicas. He was a regular patriarch and quite naturally prevented her from entering the studio. She has been making miniature art forms out of clay since she was a kid she wanted to contribute to her father's idol making business but a woman coming to a workshop was frowned upon back in 1985 so her father chose her brother before her, but her brother knew she had knack for idol making but it was not until the death of their father in 1985 that she got a chance to practice the craft.

Despite the challenges, Mala persevered and became a renowned artisan in her field. She is now one of the few female idol makers in Kumartuli, and her creations are in high demand.



Figure 2: Mala Pal (left) with the author on one of the interview days.

Her expertise lies in creating miniature, foldable idols. These idols are particularly popular among the Indian diaspora and are also shipped abroad. Mala's idols are not only beautiful, but they are also durable and easy to transport. In addition to her artistic pursuits, Mala Pal is also dedicated to empowering other women artisans. She has conducted workshops and training programs to equip aspiring idol makers with the necessary skills and knowledge. Mala has also been associated with organizations like Bandhan Company, which provides loans to girls interested in idol making.

Mala Pal's journey is an inspiration to aspiring artisans. She has shattered stereotypes and become a role model for women in a male-dominated field. Her artistic excellence, social consciousness, and devotion to her craft have earned her a respected place in the Kumartuli community and beyond.

China Pal: “Dashabhujā”

“Maa Durga is a woman as well. Why should it be a problem if one woman is instrumental in creating another?”

China Pal is fondly called “Dashabhujā” (referring to Goddess Durga, who has ten hands) in her area as she is a multitasker and manages everything efficiently, be it making idols, managing her workshops, household chores, and taking care of her older mother. She has a band of workers and has even expanded her business to start a studio near Bagbazar, as her father’s workshop cannot hold the number of orders that she has to deliver every puja.

China Pal's unique style and dedication towards idol making have earned her recognition and fame. She is a master of the “Saveki” (traditional) and “ekchala” (common backdrop) style. She has also made an ardhnanarishwar (an androgynous depiction of Shiva and Parvati) for a transgender group which is one of her unique works.



Figure 3: China Pal carves the face of the idol with rapt attention.

Her journey was not easy, her father didn't approve of her presence in the studio, used to consider the art of idol making as a man's job, as the artisans have to deal with different customers, mostly men coming into the studio. Other artisans in Kumartuli did not respect her; many other artisans who assisted her in work left her studio as they couldn't stand the thought of working under a woman. The neighbors also did not support her if she kept an idol outside her studio, they would break the palm or twist the arm of the idol, but that did not stop her from achieving her vision. It takes years for women to prove that their "soft hand" are not only acquainted with dainty work they are also capable of handling bamboo, wood, and clay.

China Pal's talent and hard work have been acknowledged through numerous awards and accolades. She received prestigious awards like the Asian Paints Sharad Shamman and the Rajyapal Purashkar. Her work has been showcased internationally, including a workshop in China and exhibitions in Bhopal, Odisha, and Kashmir. She even visited China to showcase her art.

China Pal is an inspiration to many women who want to pursue a career in a male-dominated field. She believes that anyone can excel in any field with the right skills and dedication. She is a role model for women who want to break down barriers and achieve their dreams.

Kakoli Pal: An Artist Without a Studio

“There were other women who also used to work on idols earlier, but marriage and children take precedence in most cases, and they eventually stop working.”

Kakoli Pal is a talented idol maker who has overcome many challenges to become a successful businesswoman. She started her journey after the sudden demise of her husband, Asim Pal, who was also an idol maker. Kakoli had no formal training in idol making, but she was determined to learn the craft so that she could support her two young daughters.

Kakoli initially received assistance from her father and other male artisans and gradually learned the craft and overcame initial failures with persistence. Her customers and neighbors provided unwavering support. However, she faced challenges in expanding her business due to safety concerns in remote material-sourcing areas and the poaching of her artisans who assist her.



Figure 4: Kakoli Pal resorts to working on the streets due to a lack of space.

Kakoli Pal specializes in creating wide-eyed saveki (traditional) Durga idols primarily for household pujas. Despite lacking a dedicated studio, she manages to sculpt idols on a narrow lane amidst shanties, beside public toilets, and studios belonging to male artisans. She has repeatedly appealed to the local authorities to provide her with a studio for rent, to no avail. She has also given up on getting any form of financial help from the state government. Presently, she has another studio located in Bagbazar.

She makes all kinds of idols. The months before Puja are the most hectic. "At times I have to work till 3 am. I try to do most of the work myself, so I have to hire very few workers. It helps lower the cost of production." Her hard work and talent have garnered recognition and awards, including the Shilpi Guru Award and the Banga Bibhushan Award. She takes pride in her work, which brings her respect, recognition, and a steady income.

In the past, people used to sympathize with her and support her through misfortune, but now that her business is thriving and gaining recognition, some people cannot accept the fact that a woman can achieve such success. They may harbor jealousy and question how she can make significant profits, forgetting the tremendous effort she puts in, working day in and day out.

Kanchi Pal Dutta: “One Woman Army”

“There is a role in family lineage in the way things shape up, but those who have an eagerness for this craft will progress.”

Kanchi Pal is the toughest among the new generation artisans in Kumartuli, offering tough competition with her male counterparts in this trade. Her mother, Archana Pal, taught her the art; she stepped into the trade when her father, Nrishigha Pal, passed away. She is “one-woman army”, crafting the idols, supervising her laborers, and taking care of finances and business aspects.

Kanchi Pal began learning the art of idol making at the tender age of five. She has been honing her skills for over three decades and sells an impressive number of 50 to 60 Durga idols each year. Kanchi Pal's work has gained recognition both locally and internationally, and she has been awarded numerous awards, including the Biswa Bangla Sharad Samman, Nari Shakti Puraskar, Kalakar Award, Banga Bhushan Award, and Asian Paints Shera Shamman Award.



Figure 5: Kanchi Pal, at her Kumartuli studio, while interacting with the author

She specializes in crafting large, voluminous Durga idols, referred to as 'Arter Durga' or modern form, which include styles like 'Dobasi Bangla,' 'Khas Bangla,' and 'Ajanta Ellora Durga.' These imposing creations are predominantly showcased in pandals and clubs, with the Durga idols typically ranging from 12 to 15 feet in height.

Kanchi Pal faced significant challenges, with neighboring influential idol makers displaying their work outside her studio and preventing her from showcasing her creations. As a woman in the craft, she encountered numerous atrocities. Even locals unaware of the effort involved in making idols unintentionally cause harm or damage.

Minakhi Pal :

"The practice of idol making is often motivated by a deep passion for the art form, rather than just the desire for financial gain."

Minakhi Pal is a talented artisan who has established herself as a skilled idol maker since 2011. She learned the art from her father and now operates her workshop, creating idols for various festivals. She combines contemporary elements with traditional designs, earning recognition and accolades both in India and abroad.



Figure 6: Minakhi Pal at her studio delicately adding details to the eye of the Durga idol.

It's admirable that her father didn't believe in gender bias roles and allowed his daughter to come to the studio and play with clay, nurturing her creativity from a very young age. His support for her undoubtedly played a crucial role in her development as an artist and in her decision to carry on the legacy of idol-making after his passing. She has received support from both her artisans and customers throughout her twelve-year journey. The loyalty and satisfaction of her customers demonstrate that she has continued to uphold the quality and standards that her father had set for the business.

Additionally, the support of her artisans has undoubtedly been crucial in allowing her to maintain the business's legacy and success.

She likes to stick to the traditional style of idol making that is '*ekchala durga pratima*' (common backdrop). Her involvement in singing, NGO work, and feeding street animals showcases her diverse interests and compassion for her community, both human and animal.

Maya Pal :

“Devi means business for me.”

Maya Pal is a 68-year-old woman who has been making idols for over 40 years. Her story also highlights the importance of family support in pursuing one's dreams. Her husband Ram Chandra Pal and mother-in-law played a crucial role in helping her learn and excel in the art of idol making. She mainly works on the Bangla style idols that are '*Saveki Pratima*' or traditional and based on a single backdrop that is '*ekchala*' or common backdrop, which takes her 5 to 6 days to complete single-handedly.

Maya Pal's journey began when she was a young woman and her husband taught her the art of idol making. She initially faced resistance from her husband, who did not believe that a woman could be a successful idol maker.



Figure 7: Maya Pal displays her proficiency in handling work-life with professionalism.

Maya Pal defied traditional gender roles in idol making and received crucial support from her husband, mother-in-law, and community. Despite challenges, her determination and leadership earned her loyal customers and laborers. Her children's involvement reflects her ability to pass on skills and family pride. She also acknowledged that the pandemic had taught her to be more resilient and prepared for any future challenges that may arise in her business.

CONCLUSION

The life of women idol makers in Kumartuli, a traditional potters' quarter in Kolkata, India, is characterized by hard work, dedication, and creativity. These women have broken gender stereotypes and are making a mark in a male-dominated field.

Women idol makers in Kumartuli typically begin their day early in the morning and work for long hours, sometimes up to 12-14 hours a day, especially during peak festival seasons. They work with clay, bamboo sticks, straw, jute, and other materials to create the framework and final shape of the idols. They also use their artistic skills to paint and decorate the idols with intricate designs and ornaments.

Despite the challenging and physically demanding work, women idol makers in Kumartuli take pride in their craft and enjoy creating beautiful and intricate idols that capture the essence of the deities they represent. They also value the sense of community and companionability that exists among the artisans in Kumartuli and work together to meet deadlines and ensure the timely completion of orders.

These women, draped in elegant sarees, have bravely ventured into the male-dominated profession of clay modelling, driven not by choice but by unwavering confidence. Despite facing moments of doubt, they have persisted with determination and honed their skills in mixing clay to perfection, imbuing their intricately designed idols with utmost care. Through their hard work and resilience, these women are carving out a niche for themselves in this eccentric profession, blazing a trail that is slowly closing the gender gap in the craft and business of clay modelling.

The emergence of women idol makers in Kumartuli has also led to a positive impact on their social and economic status. They are now able to earn a livelihood and support their families through their work. The success of women idol makers in Kumartuli has also inspired other women to pursue their passions and excel in traditionally male-dominated fields.

Despite the long hours and physically strenuous work, these women have shown that they have the strength to complete their tasks with the same level of precision and dedication as their male peers. Women idol makers in Kumartuli are also giving stiff competition to their male peers by demonstrating their artistic skills and attention to detail in creating intricate and lifelike clay idols. They are known for their ability to capture the essence of the deities they represent and create idols that are not only visually stunning but also spiritually uplifting.

Women idol makers face economic struggles due to limited access to financial resources, unequal pay and pricing disparities, and a lack of market opportunities. They often lack sufficient capital to invest in materials and equipment, and financial institutions may be hesitant to provide support due to gender biases. Additionally, they may face lower pay compared to male counterparts, leading to financial difficulties. Limited market opportunities and biases in supplier and client relationships further restrict their economic growth. Balancing work with caregiving responsibilities adds to their challenges, limiting their availability for business expansion.

Women idol makers face multiple workspaces struggles that hinder their success in the industry. They often lack a dedicated workspace, being forced to work from home or in limited spaces, which negatively impacts productivity and scalability. Access to necessary infrastructure and specialized equipment, such as tools and kilns, is also limited, hindering their ability to create high-quality idols and expand their work.

Safety and ergonomic considerations are often overlooked, leading to potential health hazards and discomfort. Gender bias and discrimination prevail in their workspace, resulting in unequal treatment, a lack of recognition, and exclusion from decision-making processes. Limited networking opportunities further hinder their collaboration and professional growth, as male-dominated events and exhibitions make it challenging to establish connections. Balancing work and personal life is a significant challenge due to caregiving responsibilities and societal expectations, causing additional pressure and affecting overall well-being.

Moreover, the success of women idol makers in Kumartuli has led to greater social and economic empowerment for women in the community. They are now able to earn a livelihood and support their families through their work, which has challenged the traditional gender roles and expectations of women in Indian society.

As more and more women enter the profession of idol making in Kumartuli, there is likely to be a greater sense of community and camaraderie among them. This will help to create a more supportive and inclusive environment that encourages women to pursue their passions and achieve their full potential.

Their perseverance, hard work, and dedication to their craft have earned them recognition and respect, despite facing numerous challenges along the way. By breaking down gender barriers and carving out a niche for themselves in this field, these women have inspired and empowered others to follow in their footsteps, serving as a testament to the indomitable spirit of women. Their contributions to the craft and business of clay modelling are invaluable and will continue to shape and redefine the industry in the years to come.

As a field researcher, I have conducted interviews with women idol makers in Kumartuli. I am struck by their unwavering commitment and passion for their craft. Through their stories, it is evident that these women have overcome several obstacles, including limited opportunities for training and access to resources. However, their dedication and hard work have enabled them to master the art of clay modelling and create stunningly intricate and beautiful idols.

Furthermore, these women have not only made significant contributions to the craft of clay modelling but also to the broader cultural and economic landscape of Kumartuli. Their success has paved the way for other women to follow in their footsteps, thus slowly closing the gender gap in the field.

As a researcher, I am encouraged by the resilience and strength of these women and their commitment to pursuing their dreams and aspirations. Their stories serve as a testament to the transformative power of

determination, passion, and hard work and inspire us all to overcome our obstacles and strive for excellence in our chosen fields.

However, through these interviews, I can conclude that most of these women in this profession are here by circumstances and not by their voluntary choice. It is important to acknowledge and support the contributions of women idol makers, and to recognize their agency and diversity as part of a dynamic and inclusive cultural landscape. Further research and policy interventions could enhance their access to resources, markets, and networks, as well as their voice and representation in decision-making processes. Overall, the study of women idol makers of Kumartuli provides a rich and inspiring example of how women's art and labour can shape and enrich our world.

Their stories reveal a deep passion for their craft and a commitment to excellence that has driven them to master the art of clay modelling and create stunningly intricate and beautiful idols. Moreover, these women have not only made significant contributions to the craft but also to the economic and cultural landscape of Kumartuli.

Through their hard work and success, these women have inspired and empowered others to pursue their dreams and break down gender barriers in the field. Their stories serve as a testament to the transformative power of determination, hard work, and passion, and inspire us all to overcome our obstacles and strive for excellence in our chosen fields.

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