

# **IDOL MAKERS OF BENGAL: CASE OF KUMARTULI AND PATUAPARA**

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# **IDOL MAKERS OF BENGAL : CASE OF KUMARTULI AND PATUAPARA**

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## **ABSTRACT**

***India as a nation is made to worry about what makes it culturally unique, in the process of becoming a part of a globalized world. India holds a symbolic place in history, along with an efficient association with the iconic festival of Bengal, Durga Puja, and a long practice of artisans making clay idols. Idol making is one of the civic folk art in Kolkata and many people like potters, artisans, clay modellers, etc. are a part of the Idol industry. Kumartuli is the traditional home to clay artisans who work for the entire year to supply idols for various Hindu pujas. Plagued with unawareness and stagnation, this art form will soon be extinct. Through the historical example of the clay artisans of West Bengal, called "Kumars" (a Bengali word meaning potter) or "Patuas" (derived from a Bengali word 'Pota' which means an artist). This paper aims to show how the preservation of this art form depends on maintaining a balance between adapting to remain relevant and therefore economically applicable to a given culture, also preserving a connection to its historical roots by providing the artisans with required resources and infrastructure. In brief, the methodology deploys a detailed study of the idol makers, focusing on their aspirations and challenges, taking two prime stretches of Kolkata where idol makers have their workshops (Kumartuli and Patuapara) as case studies. By explaining the aspiration and problems of the Kumars of Kumartuli and the Patuas of Patuapara (the idol makers) and how they have endured and survived the cultural shifts of the past three centuries, this paper aims to highlight***

***the complex relationship between India and, and how folk artists make a living from their traditional art. Idol making, in every form, proves that the best way to preserve folk art is through adaptation.***

## **KEYWORDS**

***Idol Makers, Infrastructural Solutions, Design Thinking, Intangible Heritage, Learning Spaces, Inclusive Design .***

## **INTRODUCTION**

**Kumartuli and Patuapara are two of the most important centres of idol-making in Bengal. Both these areas are located in Kolkata and are home to hundreds of skilled artisans who create intricate sculptures of gods and goddesses for use in Hindu festivals and ceremonies.**



**Figure 1 : Image of idols in a workshop**

***Picture credit –Hirak Das***

**Kumartuli, a 300-year-old North Kolkata community of “kumars” meaning potter, built up their community in the alleys of North Kolkata. Kumartuli is located in the northern part of Kolkata and is the most famous centre of idol-making in Bengal. The area is home to around 550 workshops, where skilled artisans create idols of gods and goddesses using clay, bamboo, and other materials. The idol makers of Kumartuli are known for their exceptional skill and creativity, and their work is highly valued by devotees and art collectors alike.**

**Patuapara, on the other hand, is a lesser-known centre of idol-making in Kolkata. Located in the central part of the city, Patuapara is home to around 100 workshops, where skilled artisans create idols of gods and goddesses using clay and other materials. While the idol makers of Patuapara may not be as famous as those in Kumartuli, their work is no less impressive, and they are known for their skill and attention to detail.**

**The idol makers of Bengal are highly skilled artisans who create intricate sculptures of gods and goddesses for use in Hindu festivals and ceremonies. They are concentrated mainly in the areas of Kumartuli in Kolkata and Krishnanagar in the Nadia district of West Bengal. The tradition of idol-making in Bengal dates back several centuries and is closely associated with the annual Durga Puja festival, which celebrates the victory of the goddess Durga over the demon Mahishasura (Herbert, 1892). The process of making the idols involves several stages, including the creation of the basic structure using bamboo and clay, followed by the application of layers of clay, and finally the painting and decorating of the finished product. The idol makers of Bengal are highly respected and play an important role in the cultural life of the region. Their skill and craftsmanship are widely acknowledged, and their work is highly valued by devotees and art collectors alike. The idol-making industry also provides employment to many people, including skilled artisans and support staff. In recent years, the idol makers of Bengal have faced several challenges, including competition from mass-produced idols and environmental concerns over the use of non-biodegradable materials. Efforts are being made to address these challenges, including the promotion of eco-friendly materials and techniques, as well as the development of new markets for the products of these skilled artisans.**

**Durga Puja was inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2020. This festival is celebrated with great enthusiasm and fervour, especially in the eastern and north-eastern regions of India, including West Bengal, Assam, Bihar, and Odisha, as well as in Bangladesh and Nepal. During the festival, people offer prayers and perform various rituals to honour Goddess Durga, who is believed to symbolize female power and the triumph of good over evil.**

**The UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage tag recognizes the significance of Durga Puja as an important cultural tradition that is passed down from generation to generation, and its inscription on the list aims to promote its safeguarding and transmission to future generations.**

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

**In this research study, a mixed-methods approach was used, involving the use of three different types of surveys. The first survey was administered by architects, who were experts in the field of architectural design and were able to provide valuable insights into the construction of Durga idols. The second survey was conducted among individuals who frequently visit Kumartuli; specifically targeting students aged 18 to 26, who were likely to have a keen interest in the cultural significance of the Durga Puja festival. The third survey was administered directly to the idol makers themselves, who were able to provide unique insights into their techniques, materials, and cultural practices. By combining the perspectives of architects, visitors, and makers, this study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the complex cultural heritage of Durga Puja and its associated idol-making practices.**

## **HISTORY OF IDOL MAKERS OF BENGAL**

**The history of idol-making in Bengal dates back several centuries and is deeply rooted in the region's culture and traditions. The practice of creating idols of gods and goddesses for use in Hindu festivals and ceremonies is an important aspect of the region's religious and cultural life.**

**The tradition of idol-making in Bengal can be traced back to the 16th century, during the reign of the Mughal Emperor Akbar. At that time, many skilled artisans from various parts of India were brought to Bengal to work on the construction of buildings and monuments. Among these artisans were sculptors who specialized in the creation of idols. (Bumiller, 1985).**

**Over time, the art of idol-making in Bengal evolved and developed into a highly skilled and specialized craft. The idol makers of Bengal began to create elaborate and intricate sculptures of gods and goddesses, using a range of materials, including clay, bamboo, and plaster of Paris. (George, 1956) The idol-making industry in Bengal grew rapidly during the 19th and 20th centuries, as the popularity of Hindu festivals such as Durga Puja and Kali Puja spread throughout the region. The idol makers of Bengal became highly respected and their work was widely sought after by devotees and art collectors alike.**

**In recent times, the tradition of idol-making in Bengal continues to thrive, with skilled artisans working in centres such as Kumartuli in Kolkata and Krishnanagar in the Nadia district. While the industry faces challenges such as competition from mass-produced idols and environmental concerns over the use of non-biodegradable materials, efforts are being made to preserve and promote this important aspect of Bengal's cultural heritage.**

## **HISTORY OF KUMARTULI:**

**Kumartuli is a neighbourhood in the northern part of Kolkata, India, known for its traditional potters who specialize in making clay idols of gods and goddesses. The history of Kumartuli dates back to the late 17<sup>th</sup> century when it was established as a settlement for the potters who used to create clay idols for the Durga Puja festival.**

**During the British colonial period, Kumartuli expanded rapidly as the demand for clay idols grew not just in Kolkata but also in other parts of India and even abroad. The potters of Kumartuli also started making idols of other deities like Saraswati, Lakshmi, and Ganesha, apart from Durga. (Datta Roy, 2008)**

**In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Kumartuli faced a major challenge when a devastating earthquake destroyed many of the idols and workshops. However, the potters persevered and rebuilt their workshops, and the tradition of idol-making in Kumartuli continued to flourish.**

**Today, Kumartuli is not just a hub for traditional clay idol-making but has also become a center for contemporary art and sculpture. The neighborhood is a popular tourist attraction during the Durga Puja festival, as visitors flock to see the idols being made and take part in the festivities. The potters of Kumartuli continue to keep the tradition of clay idol-making alive, passing on their skills and knowledge from generation to generation.**

## **HISTORY OF PATUAPARA:**

**Patuapara is a historic neighborhood located in the central part of Kolkata, India. It is known for its traditional handloom industry and textile weaving. The history of Patuapara can be traced back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when the area was inhabited by weavers from different parts of Bengal who migrated to Kolkata in search of work.**



**The weavers of Patuapara used to specialize in weaving traditional textiles like sarees, dhotis, and lungis using handlooms. The textiles woven in Patuapara were known for their intricate designs and superior quality and were highly sought after not just in Kolkata but also in other parts of India and abroad.**

**During the British colonial period, the handloom industry in Patuapara faced a major setback due to the import of machine-made textiles from Europe. However, the weavers of Patuapara persevered and continued to produce high-quality textiles, catering to the needs of the local market.**

**In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the handloom industry in Patuapara witnessed a revival as the demand for traditional handloom textiles increased. The weavers of Patuapara adapted to the changing times and started producing textiles with modern designs and patterns, while still maintaining their traditional techniques and quality.**

**Today, Patuapara is a hub for traditional handloom textiles and weaving. The weavers of Patuapara continue to produce high-quality textiles, which are sought after by both local and international customers. The neighborhood is a popular tourist attraction, with visitors coming to see the weavers at work and to purchase the exquisite textiles that are produced here.**

## **INFRASTRUCTURAL PROBLEMS THE IDOL MAKERS FACE -**

**The idol makers of Kumartuli and Patuapara face several infrastructural challenges, which can impact their livelihoods and the quality of their work. Some of the major infrastructural problems faced by the idol makers are:**

**Poor working conditions:** The workshops of the idol makers are often located in narrow lanes and lack proper ventilation and lighting, making it difficult for the artisans to work for long hours. This can lead to health problems and impact the quality of their work.



Figure 2 : Image showing the streets of Kumartuli

Source – The Wire

**Lack of basic amenities:** The workshops of the idol makers lack basic amenities such as clean drinking water, sanitation facilities, and healthcare services, which can affect the health and well-being of the artisans.

**Insufficient raw materials:** The artisans often face problems in sourcing good quality raw materials at affordable prices. The lack of proper storage facilities can also lead to damage and spoilage of raw materials.

**Inadequate transportation facilities:** The transportation facilities to and from the workshops are often inadequate, leading to delays in the delivery of raw materials and finished products. This can impact the timely completion of orders and the profitability of the artisans.

**Lack of modern equipment:** The idol makers still use traditional techniques and equipment, which can limit their production capacity and the quality of their work. The lack of modern equipment can also lead to physical strain on the artisans.

Addressing these infrastructural challenges will require the government and other stakeholders to invest in the development of the necessary infrastructure, including workshops, storage facilities, transportation facilities, and basic amenities. This will help to improve the working conditions of the artisans, enhance the quality of their work, and support the preservation of their cultural heritage.

## **SOLUTIONS TO THE INFRASTRUCTURAL PROBLEMS THE IDOL MAKERS FACE-**

Infrastructure development can play a crucial role in improving the lives of idol makers in Kumartuli and Patuapara. Some of the infrastructural solutions that can be implemented include:

**Upgradation of workshops:** The government can provide financial assistance to upgrade the workshops of the idol makers. This can include the provision of better lighting, ventilation, and equipment, which can improve the working conditions of the artisans and enhance the quality of their work.

**Creation of a common facility centre:** A common facility centre can be set up to provide shared infrastructure and services to the idol makers. This can include facilities such as raw material storage, design support, quality control, and marketing support. This will help the artisans to reduce their costs and improve their overall efficiency.

**Provision of raw materials:** The government can set up facilities to provide the artisans with raw materials at subsidized rates. This

will help the artisans to reduce their costs and improve their profitability.

**Improvement of transportation facilities:** The transportation facilities to and from the workshops can be improved to ensure the timely delivery of raw materials and finished products. This can include the provision of better roads, public transportation, and logistics support.

**Provision of basic amenities:** The government can provide basic amenities such as clean drinking water, sanitation facilities, and health care services to the artisans. This will help to improve their health and well-being and create a better working environment.

By implementing these infrastructural solutions, the lives of the idol makers in Kumartuli and Patuapara can be significantly improved, and their artistic skills and cultural heritage can be preserved for generations to come

## **GENERAL PROBLEMS THE IDOL MAKERS FACE IN THEIR DAILY LIVES-**

Both Kumartuli and Patuapara face several challenges in the modern era, including competition from mass-produced idols and environmental concerns over the use of non-biodegradable materials. However, efforts are being made to address these challenges, including the promotion of eco-friendly materials and techniques, as well as the development of new markets for the products of these skilled artisans.

The idol makers do face multiple problems, from improper infrastructure to not availability of proper materials. The lack of government support makes it difficult for the artisans to modernize their production techniques or compete effectively in the market.

Despite these challenges, the idol makers of Kumartuli and Patuapara continue to play an important role in the cultural life of Kolkata and engal, and their work is an essential part of the region's rich artistic and religious heritage.

The idol makers of West Bengal face several challenges in the modern era, including:

**Competition from mass-produced idols:** The rise of mass-produced idols made from cheaper materials such as plaster of Paris has made it difficult for traditional idol makers to compete in the market. These idols are often sold at lower prices, which makes it hard for artisans to earn a living from their craft.

**Environmental concerns:** The use of non-biodegradable materials such as plaster of Paris in the creation of idols has led to environmental concerns, particularly around the issue of water pollution. The immersion of these idols in water bodies after festivals like Durga Puja has been known to cause significant harm to aquatic life.

**Lack of government support:** The idol-making industry is largely unorganized and lacks government support in terms of infrastructure and financial assistance. This has made it difficult for artisans to modernize their production techniques or compete effectively in the market.



Figure 3 : Image showing the condition of the workshops after cyclones

Source – The Wire



**Decline in traditional skills:** With the rise of modern technologies and changing consumer preferences, there is a risk that traditional skills and techniques used in idol-making may be lost over time. This could lead to a decline in the quality of the art form and its cultural significance.

Efforts are being made to address these challenges, including the promotion of eco-friendly materials and techniques, the development of new markets for traditional idols, and the creation of government support programs for the idol-making industry. These measures will help to preserve the rich cultural heritage of idol-making in West Bengal and support the livelihoods of skilled artisans in the region.

## **SOLUTIONS TO THE GENERAL PROBLEMS THE IDOL MAKERS FACE IN THEIR DAILY LIVES-**

There are several solutions that can help improve the lives of idol makers in Kumartuli and Patuapara:

***Diversifying their products:*** The idol makers can diversify their product range by creating new and innovative designs of idols, including idols made from eco-friendly materials. This will help them to reach a wider market and increase their income.

**Government support:** The government can provide support to the idol makers in terms of providing them with infrastructure and financial assistance. This can help them to modernize their production techniques and compete more effectively in the market.

**Market development:** Efforts can be made to develop new markets for traditional idols, including international markets. This will help to increase demand for their products and support the livelihoods of the artisans.

**Skill development:** The government and other organizations can provide training and skill development programs to the artisans, including training in new techniques and designs, as well as business skills. This will help to improve the quality of their work and increase their income.

**Promotion of eco-friendly materials:** The use of eco-friendly materials in idol making can help to reduce environmental pollution and protect the health of the artisans. Efforts can be made to promote the use of eco-friendly materials and encourage consumers to choose these products over those made from non-biodegradable materials.

By implementing these solutions, the lives of the idol makers in Kumartuli and Patuapara can be improved, and their rich cultural heritage can be preserved for future generations.

## **HOW CAN THE TAG OF INTANGIBLE HERITAGE TO DURGA PUJA BE BENEFICIAL FOR THE IDOL MAKERS –**

The UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage tag for Durga Puja has brought several benefits for the idol makers, who are an integral part of the festival. Some of these benefits include:

**Recognition:** The UNESCO tag has brought international recognition to the art of idol-making associated with Durga Puja. It has highlighted the craftsmanship, skills, and knowledge of the idol makers, which were previously not widely known or appreciated. This tag along with adding prestige to the festival of Durga Puja, will also bring acknowledgment for the artisans being the actual heroes.

**Economic Opportunities:** The recognition has also created economic opportunities for idol makers. The demand for their unique and traditional art has increased, not just in India but also



Figure 4 : Idol makers working in their workshops

Picture credit – HIRAK DAS

in other parts of the world, leading to more business opportunities and income for them.

**Preservation of Traditional Skills:** With the increased demand for traditional idols, idol makers are encouraged to continue practicing their skills and passing them down to future generations. This helps to preserve the traditional knowledge and skills that are unique to this craft.

**Increased Support:** The recognition has also led to increased support from the government and other organizations for the preservation and promotion of the traditional art of idol-making. This support includes financial assistance, training, and skill development programs, which help the idol makers to improve their craft and expand their business.

Overall, the UNESCO tag for Durga Puja has brought many benefits for the idol makers, including recognition, economic opportunities, preservation of traditional skills, and increased support from the government and other organizations.

There are several things that can be done for the idol makers after Durga Puja got the tag of UNESCO intangible heritage tag.

Some of these include:

**Providing Skill Development and Training:** One of the most important things that can be done for the idol makers is to provide

them with skill development and training programs. This can help them improve their craft, learn new techniques, and develop their business skills.

**Financial Assistance:** The government and other organizations can provide financial assistance to idol makers. This can include grants, loans, and other forms of financial support that can help them to expand their business and invest in new equipment and materials

**Promoting their Art:** The recognition from UNESCO can be used to promote the traditional art of idol-making associated with Durga Puja. This can be done through various channels, such as exhibitions, cultural festivals, and online platforms. This can help to raise awareness about the art and attract new customers.

**Encouraging Sustainability:** The idol makers can be encouraged to adopt sustainable practices in their craft. This can include the use of eco-friendly materials, such as clay and natural dyes, and promoting recycling and waste reduction.

**Creating Markets:** The government and other organizations can create markets for idol makers. This can be done by organizing fairs and exhibitions, providing them with marketing support, and creating opportunities for them to sell their products locally and internationally.

Overall, providing support to the idol makers can help to preserve and promote the traditional art of idol making, provide economic opportunities, and ensure that the craft is passed down to future generations.

## **CONCLUSION**

**In conclusion, Bengali idol makers, especially those in the communities of Kumartuli and Patuapara, are essential to the region's religious and cultural traditions. The reduction in demand for traditional idols and the emergence of less expensive, mass-produced substitutes are just two of the difficulties that idol producers must overcome. Establishing a museum that is devoted to the history and tradition of idol making and that displays the journey of idol makers and their contributions to the art form may be the best solution to this problem. Additionally, the museum can offer training for idol makers to improve their abilities and methods and transmit their legacy to the following generation. It is possible to plan the museum to give visitors a thorough and immersive experience while underlining the cultural and historical relevance of idol manufacturing and showing the distinctive methods and aesthetics created by many communities and areas. Visitors can learn more about the craft and participate in the idol-making process through interactive exhibits and demonstrations.**

**The museum can act as a training ground for the upcoming generation of idol-makers in addition to serving as a platform for the promotion and preservation of idol-making. The museum can provide new and aspiring idol makers with the knowledge and skills necessary to carry on the tradition by offering courses and training programmes.**

**Overall, a good way to preserve and promote the traditional trade of idol creation is to set up a museum with workshops where idol makers may teach the next generation and pass on their history. The survival and development of the art form as well as the chance for future generations to understand and appreciate the cultural and artistic value of idol-making can be supported in this way.**



## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT –**

**This research would not have been possible without the support of a number of people. I want to convey my sincere gratitude to the people listed below for their crucial contributions to this research project.**

**I would like to start by expressing my gratitude to my research supervisor, Dr.Rachna Khare (Professor, Department of Architecture, Head Design and Head CHCR), for her unwavering direction, inspiration, and support during the whole study process. She has helped me mould and improve my ideas, and I appreciate her knowledge, insights, and helpful criticism.**

**Also, I want to express my gratitude to my parents and my sister who so kindly contributed their time and insight. I would not have been able to conduct this research without their participation and efforts. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Ar. Gaurab Das Mahapatra (Ph.D. Scholar, Hokkaido University, Japan), Ar. Ayush Shrivastava (Architect), who provided me with the resources, facilities, and access needed to carry out this research, HIRAK DAS (System engineer at Infosys), Shivam Gupta (Music Producer, Sound engineer) and Oendrila Das helped me with the surveys and photography. Their assistance and collaboration were crucial to this project's success. Last but not least, I want to express my gratitude to my relatives, friends, and co-workers who supported, encouraged, and understood me as I conducted my research. Their unwavering support and belief in me were a constant source of motivation and inspiration. Once again I want to take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to everyone and specially the idol makers who has helped me with this study endeavour. I'm hoping that this research will increase our understanding of this subject and benefit other people's lives.**

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