

VOICE OF ARTISANS DURING COVID-19 PERIOD: IMPACT ARTISAN'S SECTOR OF KUMARTULI KOLKATA ARTISANS

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ABSTRACT

The pandemic of coronavirus disease (COVID-19), which originated in the city of Wuhan, China, already spread rapidly to different countries, with several cases registered globally. India's Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has raised awareness of the recent outbreak and has taken the steps required to monitor the spread of COVID-19. Several are taken by the central and state government's steps to accomplish this aim and the formulation of many wartime protocols. In the arts and cultural heritage market, the COVID-19 pandemic had a sudden and significant impact. Organizations in the arts and culture field have sought to maintain their (often publicly funded) mission of providing the community with access to cultural heritage; protecting the protection of their staff, collections, and the public; thus responding with an uncertain end to the sudden change in their business model. Kumartuli, a neighborhood in Kolkata, India holds a significant place in history, along with a strong association with the cardinal festival of Bengal, Durgapuja, and a long tradition of making clay idols. Idol art is one of the civic folk art in Kolkata and many people like artisans, sharpeners, potters etc. are involved in the Idol industry. In the paper, we mainly focus on how the potter colony that sculpts deities throughout the year in Kolkata's Kumartuli, desolate darkness during COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, the paper also highlights how cyclone Amphan, which devastated the city on 20 May 2020, affected the income of craftsmen who had already been heavily affected by the Novel Coronavirus lockdown (COVID-19). The objective of the work focuses the problem and prospect of well-known and not-well-known artisans in the situation of COVID-19, including women clay artists from Kumartuli, Kolkata. Through this article, the social and economic circumstances of artisans, financial crisis, job opportunities are enlightened through interview schedules, group discussions with idol makers and women clay artists wherever possible.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, Amphan, Kumartuli, Artisans, Financial Crisis.

Introduction

Clay pottery is an Indian antique craft. Therefore, the history of clay pottery is as old as the history of human civilization. The pottery has a special, tempting charm. It has added more meaning and a broader dimension to the connection with faith and its use in religious rituals. The traditional folk art of Indian Clay Pottery, particularly that of Bengal, is considered exceptional and the world's best. Archeological discoveries in Bengal have shown that Bengal potters have had the same degree of skill and excellence in those remote areas in the past (Agnihotri, 2001).

At *Kumartuli* in Kolkata, some of the most creative clay-pottery fashions in Bengal are the depictions of famous gods and goddesses worshipped in the state. The highlight comes every year in the autumn when *Durga* goddess idols are made. Some of them are also exquisite works of art. Some famous sculptors today sell their replica goddess *Durga* to non-resident Bengali Indians (NRIs) to decorate their homes in the United States and England with them. They usually start to make the frame from wood, bamboo, and straw. The clay is excavated from the river bed of the Ganges and taken to the Ghat in *Kumartuli* by boatmen, from where it is supplied to the respective workshops. For an idol to be sculpted and painted, it can take two months, and the handwork of dozens of artists. Fiberglass idols are airborne every year in the homes and cultural clubs of experts from *Bangalee* located around the world

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who remember the festivals back home (Banerjee, 2006). The researcher wants to explore the implications of globalization in the *Protima* industry through this research work. After the 1990s, the traditional art culture of the *Protima* industry changed because of the liberalization policy of the Indian Government. The investigators also intend to explain the efforts of the government to maintain the practice. *Kumartuli*, the main study area, falls under Ward No. 8 & 9 of the Municipal Corporation of Kolkata. The area is situated along the Hooghly River in the northern part of Kolkata. It is marked in the East by Rabindra Sarani, in the West by the Hooghly River, in the North by Durgacharan Banerjee Street, and in the South by BanamaliSarkar Street(Basu, 1970).

Current Scenario in Kumartuli

The scene at Kolkata's famous potter's quarter *Kumartuli* wears a different look this year as the Bengali community prepares for its biggest *Durga* puja festival. Usually, by July, most craftsmen have already earned their reservations, and they are already burning the midnight oil to complete their orders. However, the novel coronavirus pandemic and subsequent lockdown coupled with the severe cyclonic storm *Amphan* left a cascading impact on *Kumartuli*, the hub for craftsmen in the northern part of town. Yet, with the gradual unlocking, the artisans are desperately hoping for a turnaround, as states slowly limp back to normalcy. A *Kumartuli* idol maker has shipped an idol of Goddess *Durgato* Australia, becoming the first local artisan to send his artwork overseas amid the COVID-19 outburst.

Kolkata's *Kumartuli* – the potter colony that sculpts deities during the year – is these days a scene of desolate darkness. Cyclone *Amphan*– which ravaged the city on 20th May 2020 – has impacted the income of the craftsmen who had already been seriously affected by the lockdown to contain Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19).With a week to go to '*Bangla Nabobarsho*' (Bengali New Year), the air is gloomy in *Kumartuli*, the potter's hub in the northern part of town, which is reeling under mounting losses due to the cancelation of lockdown and COVID-19 pandemic idol bookings.

While hundreds of Basanti and Annapurna idols could not be delivered to households and clubs as the celebrations had to be cancelled at the last minute, thousands of small Ganesha idols, worshipped on New Year Bengali (April 14), remain half-finished, too.

Objectives and Highlight

The objective of the work highlights the problem and prospect of well-known and not-well-known artisans in the situation of COVID-19, including women clay artists from *Kumartuli*, Kolkata. Through this article we explore the social and economic circumstances of artisans, job opportunities during pandemic situations. We employ different interview schedules besides group discussions with idol makers and women clay artists wherever possible. The fieldwork will be conducted in the Kolkata area for collecting primary data. The researcher has decided to select three areas where most of these potters, who are engaged as a clay worker as well as artisans. The main study area, namely *Kumartuli* falls under Ward No 8 & 9 of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation as shown in Fig 1. The area is located in the Northern part of Kolkata near the Hooghly River (Agnihotri, 2001).

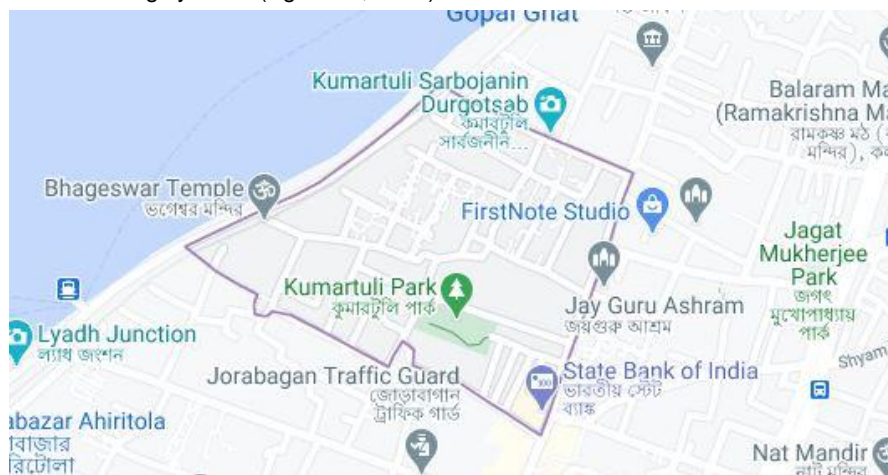


Fig 1: Area of study, *Kumartuli*, Kolkata (Source:<https://bit.ly/2IEaQft> accessed/retrieved/updated on 3rd February 2021)

The following are list of important questions discussed during interview, group discussion process:

- How does the state play's role of beneficiary for potters?
- Are they getting any economic help or loan from the Government?
- Does the Co-operative or Co-operative Society provide loans privately?
- Would it be okay to ask you questions about your COVID-19 related experiences today?
- Considering any changes that have taken place since March 1, 2020 (the start of the COVID-19 pandemic).
- Which of the following do you think are symptoms of COVID-19?
- In your opinion, how effective are the following actions for keeping you safe from COVID-19?
- Did a healthcare provider give you any of the following medications to treat COVID-19?
- Have your daily routines changed since March 19, 2020?
- Has your household income changed.
- How much has the pandemic impacted your day-to-day life?

The next section describes the artisan's voice both male and female of *Kumartuli* who are affected by the lockdown due to COVID-19 as well as desolate darkness due to cyclone *Amphan*.

Artisans Voice

During the visit of *Kumartuli*, I came across many renowned and not well known male and female artisans. Fig 2 shows the narrow empty lanes of *Kumartuli* during lockdown periods. In this section I narrate the voice of artisans who give the precious time during their work in the workshop.

- For the last 15 years artisan *Koushik Ghosh* has been making idols for organizers of *DurgaPuja* abroad. Among the NRI Bengalis his lightweight fiberglass idols are in demand. Before being shipped to Australia, Germany, Canada, USA, and UK the idol was sanitized. The order in Dubai and in Singapore is on hold. Kaushik Ghosh receives 30-35 idols every year but only received 9 orders due to COVID-19(Loiwal, 2020).
- *SwapanPaul* another artisan of *Kumartuli* has plenty of time said 10-12 orders for Basanti and Annapurna idols were cancelled at the last minute on March 25-26, 2020 with 7-8 idols near completion, two-three big-time *Durga Puja* organizers in town have now informed that they will opt for a policy of "waiting and watching" to see if the situation is improving.
- In *Kumartuli*, a large idol costs Rs 2.5-3 lakh and a smaller one can be between Rs 60,000 to 90,000. *BabuPaul* told that big time organizers had negotiated primarily for major idols just before the Janata Curfew and said they're going to confirm the agreement after 15 days, but due to pandemic they want more time to assess the economic situation and maybe even go for a much smaller idol. *Paul* said order for three idols has been cancelled for the USA, one of the worst corona-affected countries, leading to huge losses on his side.
- *Kanchi Paul*, a well-known model woman, said the extremely severe cyclone whipped her studio when it hit the city and its neighborhood ferociously on 20th May. Asked about *Kanchi Paul* work for *Durga Puja* festival, Paul said she was preparing to start working on five idols which she received orders from puja organizers during the lockdown. We are hoping to get more reservations on Rathayatra Day, which is considered an auspicious day to book the idols for *Durga Puja* organizers. The clay modelers, known worldwide for their lifelike signature *Durga* idols, are hoping the autumn festival will augured well for them.



Fig 2: Kumartuli during lockdown during COVID-19 pandemic

- As *Kumartuli* looks at *Durga Puja*, *China Paul's* nimble fingers, the first female professional idol maker in *Kumartuli* glided through one of the shortest *Durga* idols she's ever made. Many idols planned for festivities such as Vishwakarma Puja or post-summer Ganesh Puja are now full of cobwebs, keeping *China Paul* busy cleaning the dust gathered from hundreds of these idols left in her store and workshop. Instead of painting the idols, she cleanses them as she stares at this year's uncertain market of idols. She ties the jute threads to prepare the first skeletal structure for the idols which are usually in enormous demand before *DurgaPuja* every year. She has not received a single order from abroad and the local puja organizers are still waiting for confirmation. Nearly 200 foreign orders have dropped to less than 10 percent with not even 20 idols flying abroad. Even the weight of all five idols is around 200 kg, but this season the goal is to make them lighter to reduce the average price of about two lakh rupees (ANI, 2020).
- *Mala Paul*, another woman artisan, told me that she has been sending more than two *Durga* idols abroad every year but hasn't got a single order this year. There have been no orders from January in *Kumartuli*. They normally have to send offshore fiber *Durga* idols by July but this year nothing so far.
- Another idol maker, *Mintu Paul*, shared the challenges even before independence, having a family legacy of being in this business. He said this time the business is really bad. Every year they get orders from countries such as China, Canada, Australia, etc. They used to get orders for around 300-350 fiber idols. This year all orders were cancelled because of COVID-19. Costing has increased and revenue has shrunk dramatically. For more than three months, even those who have left or remained in neighboring districts do not come.
- *Kartik Paul* secretary of *KumartuliMritshilpiSamity* said that the 700 clay modellers who live and work in the area are optimistic that their studios will be abuzz with tourists and customers before the pujas. He said that 95 percent of the staff associated with various aspects of idol making is trapped in their district villages because of the lockdown. But whatever damage Cyclone *Amphan* has caused to the idols that we've made will be put right if we get orders from the puja committees like in other years. *Kartik Paul* also said 15-16 *Durga* puja organizers have assured him of bookings for idols. Nearly all clay modellers received inquiries from their old customers-puja committees and household pujas that showed interest in buying idols for this year's festival on a smaller scale. They think they (*Kumartuli's* clay modellers) will receive at least 80 percent of last year's bookings from small and medium puja organizers and pujas. He was not, however, optimistic that idols were ordered from *Amphan*-ravaged Sunderbans in areas such as Kakdwip, which is one of the places that rely on *Kumartuli* for the images of the deities.
- *Nimai Chandra Paul*, who heads the committee that hosts the major pandal every year in *Kumartuli*, claims that this season the potters will be losing out. The artisans in *Kumartuli* told me that in 2019 their collective business valued Rs. 40 to 50 crores. They used to have Rs. 30-40 lakhs on our budget. The funds also came from corporate sponsors.
- *Tapan Banerjee*, a member of the *Sarbojonin* Committee for *Kumartuli* Park, explained how they changed orders for *Durga* Puja this year. He said, the members of the *Sarbojonin* Committee for *Kumartuli* Park have agreed that we will have idols less than 10 ft instead of the 16-17 ft idol we have each year. They don't have any sponsors, it's incredibly difficult during these times to get sponsors and we don't have a lot of money so it's going to be a very easy puja just to maintain the *Kumartuli* Park legacy. *Durga* idols' national and international Orders have dipped badly. With a nearly 90% decrease in orders worldwide, the problems in *Kumartuli* for these craftsmen have increased in the midst of the pandemic.
- Puffing a bride, *Mrityunjay* (artisan) told that many of them had expected to receive orders on the Jagannath RathYatra Day – celebrated this year on June 23 – which is considered propitious for commissioning the idols of Goddess *Durga*. The banks no longer believe we are a viable enterprise. No one is offering us short-term loans. They have to invest around Rs. 7 lakh (every year) from our pocket, which is locked in for eight months [March-October]. So, they have about four months to earn and the whole year to survive on that. The pottery-made *Durga* idols vary in size and quality. A plain, 6-foot statue sells for about Rs. 30,000 for a household. Pandal are commissioning larger and more elaborately decorated idols for community worship in neighborhoods across the city. On average these are priced between Rs. 1 and Rs. 2 lakhs, about 10 feet tall.

- Apart from assistants and helpers, a large number of labourers would appear in *Kumartuli* around the time when idols were to be taken to pandals. Most of them are residents of the Sunderbans, Canning, Baruipur, Joynagar and their adjacent areas in South 24-Parganas, West Bengal. Each group of labourers would take Rs 5,000 from each organizer to pandalize the idols from a studio and place them on their perch. The labourers would appear in groups of 25-30 each and about 100 such groups would arrive in *Kumartuli* just before the Puja. They'd hang back and return home after immersion. This time about six or seven groups said they'd come in despite the corona virus risk. For their supplies of straw, clay, bamboo, dress materials, and ornaments, every artisan in *Kumartuli* depends heavily on different sets of people.
- In the villages of Nadia and Hooghly districts the beautiful ornaments on the deities are made. About 60-70 families are involved in the fabrication of the idols' artificial hair. They took a hit too. The mud for the clay comes through boats from the districts of Parganas East, Parganas North 24, and Maldah. Last year, approximately Rs 3.75 crore ornaments were used to deck out the idols. A family of four typically works on various kinds of ornaments and dress materials. Approximately 400 families work on shola or pith ornaments. Most of them are without order due to pandemic. The orders that came add up to a little more than Rs 1 Crore.
Finally, I analyze and sort out some important findings from artisans' voice:
- No big orders have come in this year *Durga* Puja. But many organizers still haven't placed orders this year. At the moment, everything is uncertain. The artisans are investing a part of their income to make new idols. They ask the government to arrange some loans or a relief amount for him so that they can survive and take on new projects. The *KumartuliMritshilpiSamiti* offers food twice daily to nearly 350 laborers who have been unable to return to their homes during the lockdown.
- Not only has the COVID-19 also had *Amphan*(Fig 3) effects a majority of potters now appeared to be losing their only means of livelihood. The cyclone and the subsequent incessant rains have destroyed many idols. Heavy winds blew away the roofs of several factories in *Kumartuli* and the idol makers suffered losses of a minimum of Rs. 3-4 lakh. That is in terms of the missing resources. Add to this the hard work this went into making idols and structures that are completed well ahead of *Durgapuja* and a large amount of losses in terms of money have not yet been calculated(Banka, 2020).



Fig 3. Amphan's Devastation on Kumartuli, May 20, 2020

- Artisans accept that the COVID-19 blow put them in the worst financial crisis in at least five decades. *Durga* Puja idols have received orders worth less than Rs. 15 Crores so far. Last year it had issued commands worth around Rs. 50 Crores(Kumari, 2020). *Kumartuli* earned only 30 percent of last year's revenue. Several big pujas had to slash their budgets as the economy was on a downward swing.
- Every year, over half of Calcutta's 4,500-odd group pujas buy idols from *Kumartuli*. The majority of the bookings are completed by July, latest by mid-August. Members of the committee will show up in hordes and search idols around studios before issuing orders. In general, the goddess would be at least 12 ft. tall but organizers are looking for 6-7 ft. high idols.
- Less orders and shorter idols mean less work for assistants and assistants at *Kumartuli*, who have a crucial role to play in forming idols. The majority are from Nadia, Howrah, East Midnapore and North and South 24-Parganas of West Bengal, India.

Conclusion

The livelihood of artists is not of interest to the younger generation, and instead they are heading to different kinds of other smart jobs where they can earn more after COVID-19 pandemic. Raw materials are very expensive with the opening up of the economy and for big tax reforms such as GST create problems for artisans. For further exploration of this sector to the international market, the government and NGO should take big initiatives.

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