



Gender and Craft in Kumartuli: The Changing Dynamics of Idol-Making in Kolkata

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Abstract

This paper examines the roles, contributions, and challenges of women artisans in the clay idol-making industry of Kumartuli, Kolkata. Historically a male-dominated craft embedded in caste and family hierarchies, Kumartuli has witnessed a gradual but significant entry of women into production, management, and pedagogical roles. Using qualitative observation, informal interviews, and secondary literature, the study investigates how women navigate the sexual division of labour, negotiate identity and recognition, and contribute to craft heritage. Findings reveal that women's work, while essential, remains undervalued, yet women are increasingly challenging traditional norms through leadership, training, and globalised production. The study highlights implications for craft policy, heritage preservation, and gender equity in informal artisanal sectors.

Keywords: Kumartuli, clay idol-making, women artisans, gender division of labour, craft heritage, identity formation, India

Introduction

Clay has been central to human civilization since its earliest days. The first cuneiform scripts were written on clay tablets, and ancient civilizations such as the Indus Valley and Mesopotamia used clay extensively for writing, idol-making, pottery, and construction. Clay served both practical and symbolic purposes, shaping daily life and religious practice. In India, clay continues to hold cultural and economic importance. From the diyas used during Diwali to archaeological remains at Harappan sites, its presence spans millennia. In both rural and urban India, clay idols became central to domestic and public worship. During the Gupta and post-Gupta periods, terracotta art flourished, especially in regions such as Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu. The Bhakti movement further expanded the demand for accessible icons of gods and saints, often made from clay and worshipped in temporary shrines.

With time, regional festivals began to incorporate large-scale clay idols. In West Bengal, Durga Puja led to elaborate idol-making traditions centered in places like Krishnanagar and Kumartuli. Today, India's clay industry encompasses both industrial ceramics and traditional craft sectors. The latter survive in specific regions where skills are passed down through families, often structured along lines of caste and community. Kolkata's Kumartuli (alternatively: Kumorpara, or "potters' quarters/neighbourhood") is one such hub of traditional clay idol makers. Here, artisans craft idols of gods and goddesses using straw, clay, and bamboo frames. These idols are central to major festivals and are exported across India and abroad. Despite their global reach, the working lives of Kumartuli's artisans remain shaped by local hierarchies, informal economies, and largely invisible systems of labor.

Historically, the craft has been structured by caste, tradition, and gender. Historically, the craft has been structured by caste, tradition, and gender. Male artisans (karigars) dominate public and managerial roles,



while women have been confined to supportive or invisible labour. However, the entry of women into prominent roles marks a shift in both labour practices and identity formation. This paper explores how women artisans navigate the intersections of caste, gender, and craft in Kumartuli, investigating the division of labour, the negotiation of legitimacy, and the preservation of artisanal heritage.

Literature Review

The clay artisans of Kumortuli primarily belong to the Kumbhar caste, traditionally associated with pottery and idol-making. Many trace their lineage to skilled craft communities from Krishnanagar and Shantipur (Saraswati, 1978). Sudhir Chakravarti (1985) underscores the significance of royal patronage in sustaining these artisanal traditions, particularly through festivals such as the Jagatdhatri Puja in Krishnanagar and Chandannagar, and the Rash Utsav in Nabadwip (Sen, 2015). Historical accounts also recount how Maharaja Krishnachandra of Krishnanagar invited artisans from Natore (present-day Bangladesh) to meet the increasing ritualistic demands of the time (Goldblatt, 1979). By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, some of these artisans migrated to Kolkata, laying the foundations of what is now known as Kumortuli.

Kumortuli's emergence as a prominent center for idol-making was not only shaped by patronage but also by its geographic and logistical advantages. Its proximity to essential resources, namely, timber from Shyambazar and Maniktola, clay from Diamond Harbour and Uluberia, and sandy soil from the banks of the Ganges made it an ideal location for the craft. Early artisans arrived from nearby towns such as Chandannagar, Srirampur, and Bally. Over time, aspiring craftsmen from different regions came to learn the techniques, transforming Kumortuli into a thriving center of traditional knowledge and folk artistry (Paul & Das, 2021).

Anthropological and ethnographic literature on Kumartuli has largely focused on caste hierarchies, spatial configurations, and collective cultural practices (Sen, 2015; Paul & Das, 2021). While these studies offer a comprehensive overview, they often overlook the personal narratives and everyday realities of female artisans. The caste-homogenous nature of the community, dominated by the Kumbhars, serves as social capital, promoting trust and collaboration. This cohesion forms part of the community's habitus, while the artisanal field of Kumartuli defines legitimate participation, authority, and visibility (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986). However, this cohesion is also a mechanism through which conventional gender roles are upheld.

Women, especially those born or married into idol-making families, are generally expected to conform to traditional supportive roles, performing essential but unacknowledged labour behind the scenes (Dutta, 2018). Despite these limitations, many women internalize caste-based gender expectations to gain legitimacy, respect, and social security. This negotiation between conformity and recognition shapes unique processes of identity formation among female artisans (Chatterjee, 2021). Journalistic accounts corroborate these trends, noting that only a small proportion of workshops are women-led, yet women increasingly occupy visible creative and entrepreneurial roles (Chowdhury, 2023; SheThePeople, 2021).

Methodology

Site Selection The study was conducted in Kumartuli, a neighbourhood in northern Kolkata under the Kolkata Municipal Corporation. The locality is known for its traditional potters' region, producing idols for goddesses such as Durga, Kali, and Saraswati. The area was selected for its comprehensive representation of the craft and its relevance for studying gendered labour dynamics.

Research Design This qualitative study employs an ethnographic-inspired approach, combining direct observation of workshops, informal interviews, and secondary literature review. Key informants included



senior male artisans, women artisans in leadership positions, and workshop assistants. Observations were conducted during pre-festival and festival seasons.

Data Collection Data were collected through participatory observation and informal interviews, noting task allocation, workshop layout, interaction patterns, and women's participation in production and training. Secondary sources supplemented field data, including journal articles, media reports, and online archives.

Analytical Framework Analysis drew on feminist labour theory (Mies, 1986), emotional labour theory (Hochschild, 1983), and Bourdieu's concepts of social and cultural capital to understand intersections of gender, caste, and craft. The built environment was also considered as a structural factor shaping labour practices and visibility.

Results

The Built Environment and Integrated Labour Spaces Workshops are narrow, elongated spaces serving as work areas, storage, and living quarters. Women perform domestic-adjacent tasks such as clay mixing, decorating, and cleaning, while men occupy front workshop areas for primary idol-making. This spatial arrangement reinforces traditional gender hierarchies and mirrors deeper cultural norms (Bourdieu, 1977).

Gendered Division of Labour Idol-making involves stages from frame construction to detailing and finishing. Men traditionally dominate large-scale modelling, while women's tasks are described as peripheral, including painting and decoration. Women increasingly lead teams, paint miniatures, and handle export orders, but men continue to dominate managerial roles.

Entry Pathways for Women Artisans Women have traditionally participated in almost every stage of idol-making, yet their contributions often remain invisible. From preparing straw and clay to decorating, painting, and finishing, women sustain the production chain but are rarely acknowledged. Their roles are often described as helping rather than creating, reinforcing their invisibility.

Long-held beliefs, such as "meyere maayer jaat" (women, being like mothers, should not engage in money-earning work), restricted public recognition of women's contributions.

During the 1990s, women like Mala Pal and China Pal emerged as visible artisans. Mala Pal began idol-making around age fifteen after her father's death, initially assisting her brother Gobinda Pal. She gained national recognition when invited to exhibit at the National Handicrafts and Handloom Museum in New Delhi. Today, she leads a team of seven to eight artisans, specialising in miniature Durga idols exported internationally. She also runs a weekend school to teach clay modelling. China Pal similarly took over her family's workshop, becoming a respected figure in Kumartuli. These cases show that while women have always been integral, only a few have transitioned from invisibility to leadership.

Recognition and Emotional Labour Women contribute significant emotional labour while their physical and creative contributions remain undervalued. Recognition is often tied to familial duty rather than independent achievement.

Discussion

The findings reveal that while women have historically participated in nearly every stage of idol-making in Kumartuli, their work has often been overlooked or undervalued. The built environment of workshops, where men occupy the front areas for sculpting and client interaction and women work in the interior sections on painting, decoration, or material preparation, reinforces this invisibility. This spatial division



mirrors deeper gender hierarchies within artisanal production and reflects the habitus internalized by artisans and the field's structuring of authority and visibility (Bourdieu, 1977).

Feminist labour theory (Mies, 1986) frames women's work as invisible productive labour. The gendered division of labour not only limits access to decision-making and market control but also shapes social perceptions of skill and authorship. Emotional labour, as discussed by Hochschild (1983), further extends women's contributions into the realms of care, coordination, and relationship management within workshops, where they often balance creative, domestic, and interpersonal responsibilities simultaneously.

Bourdieu's concepts of cultural, social, and symbolic capital explain women artisans' navigation of a male-dominated field. Technical skill represents cultural capital, familial and caste networks provide social capital, but symbolic capital, such as recognition and prestige, is limited (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986). Caste and kinship networks regulate access to training and legitimacy. The few women with visibility, like Mala Pal and China Pal, represent exceptions rather than the norm, signaling gradual change but incomplete transformation of structural hierarchies.

Caste and kinship networks continue to regulate access to training and legitimacy. While these networks provide continuity and material support, they also reinforce male control over workshop ownership and public representation. The few women who have gained visibility, such as Mala Pal and China Pal, represent exceptions rather than the norm. Their emergence signals a gradual but meaningful change, where necessity and skill have translated into recognition and agency. However, for the majority of women artisans, participation still occurs under familial names, with their creative labour subsumed within collective workshop identity.

Overall, Kumartuli remains a site of both continuity and contestation. Women's labour is central to the craft's survival, yet their recognition lags behind their contribution. Recent developments show that some women are beginning to move from invisibility to leadership, but the transformation of structural hierarchies remains incomplete.

Policy implications include the need for financial support, formal recognition, infrastructural aid, and gender-inclusive craft policies to support women's contributions and preserve artisanal heritage.

Conclusion

Women artisans in Kumartuli have always been integral to the craft of idol-making, performing essential but often invisible work that sustains production, quality, and continuity. Their roles span from clay preparation and ornamentation to painting and finishing, yet their labour has rarely been acknowledged as artistic or professional. For generations, their contributions were confined to the margins of recognition, overshadowed by the public prominence of male artisans.

In recent decades, a small but significant number of women have begun to move into visible and autonomous positions within the craft. Figures such as Mala Pal and China Pal have challenged entrenched social and cultural boundaries, transforming necessity into creative leadership. Despite these changes, systemic barriers related to caste, gender, and workshop inheritance continue to restrict most women's access to independent authorship and market visibility.

The persistence of undervalued and unacknowledged labour highlights the need for policies and institutional frameworks that formally recognise women's contributions to artisanal heritage. Financial support, training programs, and representation in cultural initiatives can help correct the imbalance between contribution and recognition. Sustaining the craft of Kumartuli therefore requires not only preserving its



artistic tradition but also ensuring that the women whose hands shape the idols are acknowledged as equal creators of Kolkata's cultural identity.

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