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Kumartuli: The God maker's abode

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Abstract

This paper aims to provide a new generation's perspective on how Kumartuli of Kolkata, West Bengal, has shaped a deep nostalgic meaning among the people, particularly during the Durga Puja festival. It also goes over the fascinating history of how this place came to be and what is seen here. This is one of the most popular places in the world for producing some of the finest unfired clay images of gods and goddesses for the various occasions celebrated by Bengalis worldwide. This sculptor colony offers a fascinating view of more than 400 artists etching through clay brought from the nearby Ganges River. It has evolved into a trade that supports many people's livelihoods. Many other services and people who have a deep respect for the workers of this place support this industry. However, this generation faces numerous challenges, which are also discussed in the paper.

Keywords: Sculptors, Idol-makers, Festival, Potters & Heritage

1. Introduction

1.1 Origin

Before we get into how this place has captured a memory of deep artistic value, it's important to understand how it came to be. Kumartuli is a well-known neighbourhood in Kolkata that is home to some of West Bengal's best potters. The origins of this location can be traced back to the Battle of Plassey in 1757. Raja Nabakrishna Deb, the founder of the Shobhabazar Raj family and a prominent zamindar during British India who was also a trusted confidante of Robert Clive, had invited a potter from Krishnanagar in West Bengal's Nadia district. His main goal was to have him create an idol for the occasion of Durga Puja. His incredible sculpting abilities demanded that he stay, and he had settled in the Kumartuli. He was the first potter to begin the Kumartuli legacy. His idol was used during the Durga Puja festival to commemorate the East India Company's victory at the Battle of Plassey.

Following their victory, the company established Fort William in Gobindapur, which became a popular destination for wealthy residents. They expressed a desire to emulate Raja Nabakrishna Deb's idea of celebrating Durga Puja. This necessitated the need for more Krishnanagar potters. While creating Maa Durga idols, all the potters travelled from far and settled in the zamindar palaces of their clients. However, the potters found it difficult to travel from Krishnanagar to their clients' homes, so a plea to settle somewhere nearby arose among them. John Zephaniah Holwell, a British India Company employee, took on the responsibility of constructing a workers' settlement. His interest in this artform led him to recognise its worth as well as its industrial significance at the time. He understood the potters' needs, which were primarily Ganges water, after careful consideration. It was a necessary component for clay sculpting. To alleviate their anguish, he assigned a location near the Ganges called the Rogo Meeter's Ghaat (now Baghbazaar Ghaat), which was renamed Coormartolly (now Kumartuli, meaning potter's colony) based on the occupation of the potters. As a result, the groundwork for this location had been laid.

1.2 What makes Kumartuli an intriguing place to visit?

Kumartuli has a rich and long tradition of clay idol making, which has a strong association with the Durga Puja festival, which is primarily celebrated in West Bengal. This festival is now celebrated all over the world, increasing the demand for Kumartuli

pottery's export business. These potters, also known as Karigars, consider this location to be their home. When you enter this colony, you will see rows of idols that can be as small as 3 feet and as tall as 20 feet. It is a fascinating view for anyone, and their magnificent work becomes ingrained in the minds of those who see it. This is a long and tedious process that requires a lot of patience and creative imagination. The passion of the workers and everyone involved in this process is the primary reason why this location has remained historically famous. Even in difficult times, they have successfully carried on their tradition. Their efforts extend to other festivals such as Saraswati Puja, Laxmi Puja, Ganesh Chaturthi, Diwali, and others. Such important festivals would not have the same feel without their contributions.



Clay idol Making, source image from Internet

Fig 1

2. A Story of their Process

People with the surname Pal make up the majority of the idol makers in Kumartuli. These idol makers' daily lives are extremely difficult because they lack technological advancements and rely on manual, hands-on labour. Their day begins early in the morning, when the labourers begin mixing and kneading the clay. This is a critical step because any errors in the mixtures disrupt the consistency of the clay that will be used to sculpt various items. It may not dry or hold properly. The labourers have been doing this for decades and have thus mastered the proper proportions for the mixing process. They use belemati (sandy clay) and etelmati clay (Humus clay). A sieve is used to remove all impurities from the mixture. Following that, they construct the basic structure of idols out of bamboo and hay, which is known as kathamo. This structure serves as a foundation for the clay mixture. The clay is used directly for smaller items such as diyas and pots. Late mornings are spent by primary artists shaping clay with a knife tool. After a short break in the afternoon, they return to work on the idols. The primary artists always focus on the details of the face because it is the most intricate part of making an idol. It must prominently depict the emotion of a God or Goddess. All of the other workers work on the rest of the figure and concentrate on proportions when sculpting the idols. The layers are then solidified by the workers using French chalk powder and jute strips. The women in these households contribute to the final decoration, which includes draping clothes and placing ornaments. This also serves a

useful purpose for women in that society, which is a commendable practise.



Clay idol Making-1, source image from Internet

Fig 2

3. A New Generation's Perspective

When someone enters Kolkata, the view that they are greeted with varies depending on the mode of transportation. If they arrive by plane, they are met with high-rise buildings, highways, and metros via Rajarhat and Bypass. If they travel by train, they will see the city's history, the Howrah Bridge, trams, markets, and the city's oldest roads. If this journey is taken during the Durga Puja festival, one is greeted with a breath-taking view of the entire city united in celebration.

There are trucks transporting idols to hundreds of pandals throughout the city, the entire infrastructure is illuminated, stage set ups for shows, people rushing to finish their shopping in markets, music everywhere, and so on. Every person is drawn to the sight of an idol being placed inside a pandal. After a year, it almost appears to mark the birth of a God in the city. Around huge idols of Maa Durga, the entire city chants "Bolo Durga Mai ki, Jay!" (Victory to Maa Durga). The power brought by these idols, which are religiously worshipped with great devotion, allows the city to thrive.

The 5 days dedicated to this festival are the most celebrated feelings of any Bengali. This entire tradition would not be possible without the help of the Kumartuli workers. Even in such bright light, darkness descends. Kumartuli is struggling to keep up with global advancements due to a lack of basic amenities, technology, employment, and other factors. It has become one of India's dying arts, saved by a small group of dedicated individuals. It is clear in this generation that their importance is gradually dwindling, especially because they are not provided with adequate resources to overcome difficulties.

The families of the existing workers hold the key to the future of this art form. However, their children appear hesitant to work in this field because they are dissatisfied with the compensation for their efforts. When one speaks with the workers, it is clear that even on such a joyous occasion, they are faced with situations such as unemployment, lack of education, insufficient food to sustain them, and so on. Even in these difficult times, this practise continues, and the

Workers of Kumartuli allow the rest of the world to celebrate their festivals.

4. Conclusion

Kumartuli will always be a special reminder of this one-of-a-kind art form. It is home to some of the world's best potters and clay workers. Their legacy will be remembered by all. This Bengali art and heritage is in the hands of the workers and their families, who will be able to seek justice and express their needs for material, financial, and basic support. This could be their last chance to save their profession and their integrity. Current and future generations must be able to enjoy this culture as much as the people did over several decades of British rule in India.

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