

# An ethnographic study towards globalization of the idol making industry of Kumortuli in Kolkata

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## Abstract

One of the age-old occupations in Kolkata is idol making. The tradition of idol making underwent a rapid change due to globalization and technological innovation, the recent increase of demand of idols for community festivals, change in the taste of customers towards theme-based Pujas. Thus, there has been an uplift of the standard of living of Idol makers and new income sources generated. Interaction with different communities at different level also increased due to the openness of the market and work sources. Nowadays Kumortuli the name itself become an identity its does not need any introduction and their idols were praised throughout the world. The present paper highlights the issues and role of the globalizing factors and their impacts on the Urban based age-old tradition and how the idol makers hold their traditionality in the changed world. For the purpose of the study, an intensive interview method was used.

## Introduction

Globalization is considered as a multifaceted phenomenon, which originated due to the revolution in information technology (IT). IT has made the market transactions open to the world. In fact, the world has come at the doorstep. Though the IT developed very fast, yet it is not so easy to say when the globalization has started. All the dimensions of globalization, e.g., economic, political, social and cultural, have not started simultaneously. Some scholars think that the plant of globalization has started in the late 1960s, when the world markets experienced a dramatic change. Giddens (1990) tried to define social aspect of globalization as, “worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa.” Similarly, cultural globalization refers to, “the intensification and expansion of cultural flows across the globe” (Steger, 2003). Robertson (1992, 1995) have first put forward the theories of globalization in anthropological sense in which Glocal (global-local), Cultural Hybridization or Cultural Homogeneity, Politicization of culture, Ethno-space and Ethno-scape are discussed in depth.

The aim and objective of the present study is to understand how globalization has influenced the traditions of the Idol making industry as well as the idol makers (Potters) in Kumortuli and to understand the issues and role of the globalizing factors and their impacts on the Urban based age-old tradition.

## Literature review: a brief outline

The important factors that drive globalization were transportation, migration, innovation, political globalization etc. Hebron and Stack (2008) particularly focused on the transportation, which reduce costs and time, tumid trade volume and agility of the activity of goods, expand of import and export. Later, Kherbash and Mocan (2015) consent about their opinion. Information and communication technology also play significant role to break geographical barrier in the form of television, internet, computer, mobile phones etc. Turner and Khondker (2010) tried to explain the labour movement throughout the country and how it driven the economic development, socio-cultural exchange and cultural diversity within the society. Postelnicu (2013) explored the connection between globalization and international migration by using statistical data and how that increases day by day among the countries. Edquist (1997) said that for the growth of any economy technological innovations plays important role to introduce new knowledge or modification of the existing knowledge. Manuel (2008) gave a detail description of innovation and invention and said that sometimes they were hard to distinguish from each other. Another aspect such as political globalization makes important contribution for the expansion of global and international politics. This makes the relation between countries strong and easy to trade.

## Methodology

The empirical data of the present study are qualitative in nature based on primary and secondary information. The primary information mainly consists of data collected through participatory observations. For the purpose of the present study, 101 potters' families were taken as samples.

The study is carried out in Kumortuli (also Kumartuli), which is the age-old abode of idol makers as well as potters in Kolkata, West Bengal. This place has a global repute not only for its tradition of making idols but also for the beautiful images prepared by the residents of Kumortuli. This area has gained its popularity worldwide over a long period for making fine clay idols. These idols are made by a distinct occupational caste community known as Potua or Poto or Kumor. Kumor initially meant the community who make earthen pots. Most of them have shifted to making idols as this has turned out to be more profitable.

## The Kumortuli and their potters: an overview and the global issues

### History of migration of kumors (potters as idol makers) at Kumortuli: a brief outline

It was the first decade of the 18<sup>th</sup> century when the people came here to meet the needs of the people inhabiting in the locality, on the east coast of the river Ganga. That time the earthen pots made by the Kumbhakar caste would have been extensively used for cooking and other familial purposes. The other castes would not take up this occupation because the caste based occupational guild was and still is the predominant characteristics feature of Indian culture. So, a few Kumor (potter) families from the places like Chandannagar, Srirampur and Bally came here for their own economic interest. That time the place was popularly coined after the caste name of the group of people. Kumor or Kumbhakar (potter) is the caste name of the people and Tuli or Tule means the area of the habitation.

In the first quarter of 19<sup>th</sup> century, four or five artist-families for clay modelling were brought from Krishnanagar and Shantipur in the district Nadia, by some rich Zamindars who had the good relationship by marriage or otherwise, with the king of Krishnanagar, Raja Krishna Chandra Roy (Saroswati, 1970).

There might be another cause for bringing these artists in Calcutta, that is, the English people required them to erect the statues in the Museum or to construct the cemented structures like, for example, the lion-image on the main gate of Governor's house, different statues in the private houses of the old rich families in Calcutta. In this way, the first concentration of artisan families in the area was brought about. Gradually the wide demand of the market draws more families of artists from Krishnanagar, Santipur and Navadeep area of Nadia district. Afterwards some families came from Bankura district also.

At the time of independence in 1947, India was divided into two countries based on religions. The Muslim dominated regions became separated from India and formed the country named Pakistan. The Hindu dominated part remained as India. There were riots that forced a large part of Hindus from erstwhile East Pakistan to come to India as refugees. Again, during the fight for Independence of East Pakistan from the clutch of Pakistan in 1971, many Hindus were forced to come to India. East Pakistan has become an independent country named Bangladesh. However, the flows of Hindus from Bangladesh continued. Part of reasons is for better prospects in India and globalization gave impetus to it. Thus, migration is one of the important aspects of globalization.

The immigrant Hindus brought with them their culture. Kumors belong to Hindu religion. It so happened that a group of migrant Kumors started living in Kumortuli, because the place by then earned a name for potters. The culture, dialect and customs of these migrant Kumors are distinct from those of Indian Kumors.

It is said that after the partition of Bengal a few artist families came from Vikrampur region of Dhaka district, which is at present in Bangladesh. In addition, these people from East Bengal have constituted a sizable part of the total population of Kumortuli area. Now it has been found that, the area of habitation of the artists at Kumortuli is divided into two parts like eastern and western parts, the people from West Bengal are living in the eastern part and those from East Bengal are residing in the western part. In short, this is the portrait of the history of migration of Kumors at Kumortuli.

There is another question lying behind the concentration of Kumors in Kumortuli. The selection of this place for the business of Kumbhakars is due to physiographic advantage of this place. They selected this place for their business purpose only due to some facilities for the easy availability of artists and raw materials. Initially, they were getting artists from Chandannagar, Srirampur and Bally areas. The wood for building and framing purpose was available from Shyambazar and Maniktola areas, the clay soil from Diamond harbour and Uluberia regions, the

sandy soil from the nearby bank of the river Ganges. This Kumortuli is at the central position from all these areas of getting raw materials and other requirements. Movements of several other people from different states and communities were also seen in Kumortuli. They approached here for learning the craft. By this way, the traditional knowledge behind idol making spread and Kumortuli become a learning hub of the traditional folk art.

The industry of idol making got an impetus when the Bengali people residing in the foreign countries started celebrating Durga puja. Since by that time Kumortuli established itself as the traditional Potters hub in Kolkata, people from other states and countries ordered idols from Kumortuli. The orders for making images came from UK, USA, Australia, Germany etc.

### **Commercialization**

One of the important aspects of globalization is expansion of business with the western societies is the increasingly worldwide dependence on commercial exchange. The concentrated potters of Kumortuli used to produce various items for sale as demanded by the common Bengali Hindu people. The business was confined in a few pockets and run by a few family members with huge number of outside members as helping hands. However, as the orders came from distant places, this business got a stimulus and moved towards more and more market oriented. The images are now being prepared according to the choices of the buyers. 'Themes' are being introduced. The banks also are involved in the transactions. The increasing commercialization of Idol making in Kumortuli is associated with several other trends: First, the Idol making business is becoming more and more mechanized. Second, the business is spreading to the communities other than Kumors.

Durga puja is gaining popularity in West Bengal for several decades and even one can say that it's a major festival in West Bengal. Now a days Durga puja is not limited to the people residing in West Bengal only, its being celebrated all over India and in foreign countries. Durga idols have become the major source of income of the artisans in Kumortuli. Durga idols are worshipped nowadays almost by all the clubs - big or small. Some Bengali Zamindar families are continuing worshipping the traditional Durga Puja at home, though it is becoming difficult to maintain it at present. Due to commercialization, the idol making is not confined to Kumors only; others are also becoming more and more involved in this business. In addition, it is spreading in several other places in Kolkata as well as in Bengal. This makes the competition to survive in the market tougher than before and the idol makers continuously try to make innovation in this traditional folk art.

### **Technological innovations**

Due to commercialization, a major transformation has taken place in the material of the traditional folk art and technology of the idol making in Kumortuli. So, there is a techno-cultural relation which grows due to globalization. For the opening of the global market, the idol makers started to make idols on Shola. These Shola idols were easy to transport but not long lasting. Therefore, the shola idols were replaced by fiber idols that are very easy to transport and also long lasting for several years and it is more profitable in comparison with the clay work. Durga idol or other Gods and Goddesses are worshiped seasonally. However, fibre works can be done almost throughout the whole year. The idols, which are exporting to different parts of the world, are at present made up of fibre only. Nowadays, it is not limited to the idols of gods and goddesses only; it has expanded to other sculptures also.

### The manufactured idols: some intensive observations

In this section, we narrate the case studies of some of the idol makers. We were in front of the idol making room of Mr. Bishwajit Pal. The Vishwakarma idols were arranged in lines. The idols looked beautiful. Upon enquiry, he explained how the idols are prepared. He, after making all the arrangements, ordered his employees to start work for making Vishwakarma idols. He also instructed his brother to look after the workers; else, they will not work properly. First, they made the wooden frames for Vishwakarma idols. They then tied the straw on the frame with the help of jute-thread and made preliminary models of god Vishwakarma. On it, they put clay mixed with husk to bring the structure into a shape of god Vishwakarma. These images were made to dry up in sun or in free air. The well processed sandy soil was applied on those images. The faces of the images were made separately from the dies permanently made and these faces were fitted to the body. This time the complete forms of the images with bald heads come into shape. The artists applied sandy soil paste for polishing. In the meantime, they prepared different ornaments like armlets, ornament for head etc. for the idols. These were all made in sandy soil and with the help of permanent dices. Then they decorated the images accordingly and the second-time application of soil-paste was made for finishing of final mud-work. After the drying up of the images, they put colors. The powders of different colors were brought from Barabazar market. Among these there were chalk (Khari) for white color, red color, golden color etc. First, they applied white color on the entire body of the images. Thereafter the images were painted with different colors for different parts such as golden color for the ornaments, red for saree, black for eyebrows etc. Then they decorated the idols with arms in their hands like Hammer etc. In this way, the Vishwakarma idols were prepared.

According to Mr. Bishwajit Pal, the process is more or less same for other idols also. At the time of making Durga idols there are some little differences, otherwise the major procedures are same. During the construction of the straw models the arrangement was made in such a way that the goddess Durga should touch the lion either by sitting on it or by touching its back by her one foot. Devi Durga possesses ten hands instead of only two. There are other images like Lakshmi (Goddess of fortune), Saraswati (Goddess of learning), Kartick (the chief of the soldiers of gods), Ganesh (he is the master of Knowledges) and Mahisasur (the demon-the fighter-against goddess Durga) along with goddess Durga. Another image, the image of a buffalo, appears lying dead in a pool of blood with a deep wound of cutting on the neck. There is a belief that the demon, Mahisasur, can change his body in any form or kind of animal. There are other images of animals and birds as the carriers of gods and goddesses such as Owl for Lakshmi, Goose for Saraswati, peacock for Kartik and mouse for Ganesh.

The images are colored and are dressed in silk cloths, which are often decorated with jaris (lace) etc. The colorings of the bodies are made as per the necessity. For example, the buffalo is black, the demon is dark brown, the gods and goddess are in light brown. Dresses also have different colors. For example, white silk cloth is for Kartik and Ganesh, and Saraswati and often for Durga and Lakshmi idols. Durga and Lakshmi may appear with red or pink Sarees, but for Saraswati the color is white or yellow. Since Durga has ten hands, each hand possesses a weapon, like spear (barsa), trident (trisul), disc (charka), club (gada), conch, etc. Lakshmi possesses a pot of grains or bundle of ears of paddy plant; Saraswati has a Veena (a kind of plucked string musical instrument) with her; Ganesh has a book, club, conch, Hoop (chakra) or a bell (ghanta); and Mahisasur has a sword.

The procedure of making the image of goddess Kali is same. But the specialty of the image is that she is standing on the chest of the god Shiva, who is lying on the floor. The image of the Kali idol has four hands. She is wearing the hands (made of mud) round her waist and necklace of heads. These parts of the body are said to be of Asuras (demons). This is the image of Kali at the time of the destruction of the demons. She shows her tongue as symbol of shame as she set

her foot on the chest of her husband. The colors of Goddess Kali and Lord Shiva are black and white respectively. She is holding a saw and a head; the other two hands are free. This is the way the narrator describes the idols manufactured in his shop. As there have been many changes in the styles and themes due to new demands, the above descriptions are however maintained as far as possible.

### Role of information communication technologies and media:

Technological development helps them in marketing the idols through mobile phones and websites. Before that, they used telegrams to communicate. The consumer market however is concentrated chiefly in Kolkata and other parts of Bengal. Other than this, idol making firms have been set up in different places in India where there is a significant number of Bengali households. In fact, there are many Bengali clusters all over India who are living in those places for many years. The countries where the idols are chiefly exported are UK, France, Germany and Denmark. The idols are exported even in Switzerland and Finland. In North America, the chief destinations are New Jersey, Washington, Boston, New York, California, Chicago etc. The images also go to Ontario, Toronto etc. in Canada.

From the narratives it is found that around 800 Durga idols are exported from Kumortuli to foreign countries. The idols, that are exported, are from the renowned artisans only and not from any other artisans.

**Table 1. Distribution of households by revenue group and use of websites among the idol makers in Kumortuli, Kolkata**

Use of website	No	Yes	Total
Up to 10 lacs	52	1	53
More than 10 lacs	41	7	48
Total	93	8	101

From the table it is found that the people, who are earning high revenue are, more likely to use website. Others still now have not.

Photographers and media play important roles behind the popularization of the traditional folk art of Bengal. Kounteya Sinha a journalist & photographer first launched a fellowship program called 'Sarba Mangala Fellowship of Arts' to protect the tradition of pottery and idol making. Under this innovative initiative, five youngsters, aged below 20 years, would be paid Rs. 5,000 each per month between May 1 and October 1, so that they can learn and master the art of idol making from their parents who are associated with the trade for decades. Five big Durga Puja committees across Kolkata would be approached to purchase the idols sculpted by these children, which will motivate them to continue learning when they see their work being appreciated and sold at an acceptable price.

### Popularization of women idol makers

The one of the most emerging issues in Kumortuli is the start of the women idol makers as business holders. Traditionally, idol making is a male dominated occupation which is encultured from one generation to another. The traditional workshops in Kumortuli did not have a place for the women artisans to work as an independent idol maker. Even, there were only a few women who helped in their family business. But now, some women have broken the tradition through



their hard work and strong will power. Women are involved in the idol making business, but they do not get proper recognition among the members in the community. But, Mala Paul, China Paul, Kakoli Paul, Kanchi Paul etc. are the examples of some women, who have the iron wills of pursuing the profession despite the society's disapproving attitudes towards female idol makers. Media plays important role to promote or uplift the women idol makers in Kumortuli.

### *Case I*

Mala Pal (Female, age-45) popular artist in Kumortuli said that she started making idols at the age of 14. She has learnt this craft from her father. She was told in her childhood that this work is for male members only and being a female, the work is very hard to manage. In fact, when she told her father about her dream to work as an artist his father did not allow her to come to the shop. But after her father's death she is carrying out the business and her work is hugely appreciated in several platforms. She now works as an artist and as a teacher of her craft. She was sent to National Handicrafts and Handloom Museum in Delhi to learn more about the art and share it to others and become a female artisan in Kumortuli. Her mastery is in making small idols with the height of one and two feet, which costs 15,000-20,000 rupees. Except this she can also make fiber model, clay model, Plaster of Paris<sup>3</sup> and terracotta Jewelry. She received several prizes from the District Government and State Government. She said that she can make a clay idol within 5 minutes which she believes that no other female idol maker can do. Her studio is the place of worship for her, where she spends most of the time. She wakes up early in the morning and after completing the whole household work, she comes to studio to work. In the time of delivery, she works whole night to finish the products. She has some regular customers, who order their idols all the time to her and they are very much satisfied by her work. She considers herself as a true artist as because she has received several awards and certificates which she said other female idol makers in Kumortuli have not. She also said that to write about her husband name as an artist before her. Even she did not work or taking name with the other female idol makers in Kumortuli because for her they are not true artists like her which shows lack of unity among them.

### *Case II*

China Pal (Female, age 50) another female artist in Kumortuli said that she is carrying out her father's business after his death in 1994. Since it was during the peak season and all her brothers are not in this profession, she had to take it up. There were no other persons in the family who were free and knew this work. She is the first female who holds her father's business in this area. Other workers in the studio and the vicinity did not like to come to the shop and work. She had the mastery in Single-Frame (Ekchala) Durga idols as well as other idols such as Kali idols, Saraswati idols, Jagodhatri idols, Annapurna idols, Bishwakarma idols etc, which are produced in her shop. She now possesses two studios- one is Kumortuli and the other in Baghbazar. With the support of the government she visited China for making Single-Frame (Ekchala) Durga idols in the year of 2011. She fights a lot to establish her name in the male dominated occupation. In fact, at a time no workers want to work in her shop that time she hires labor outside Kumortuli. She neglected from her family as well as the community by calling bad woman which hurts are lot.

### *Case III*

Kakoli Pal (Female, age-43), another woman in Kumortuli, who turned herself from a home maker to business proprietor cum artist. Her husband's sudden death by brain stroke in 2003 forced her to choose the only available traditional profession. She suffers from severe money crisis at that time but now she overcome from that and living a stable life. All idols were booked by then. She

had to carry out and finish the unfinished work of her husband. At that time, she had two young daughters. She has now become a connoisseur in this line of art and still trying to achieve perfection. Still now, she has no future initiative about her business.

#### **Case IV**

Kanchi Pal (Female, age-42) another women business holder in Kumortuli who has also turned a businessperson from homemaker. She holds her father's business after her father's death. She is not only a businessperson in Kumortuli but also a local political member in that area. She came later in the business when the a few female idol makers establish their position. She has already been empowered politically as she engaged in local politics and used to play a leading role in idol making which makes her journey was not so hard. She is yet to get popularity as a female artist in Kumortuli like others.

#### **Political influence among the idol makers in Kumortuli**

As in other professions in West Bengal, this traditional folk art is not devoid of Political influence. There are workers' union as well as unions of Idol making businesspersons in Kumortuli. The unions are backed by specific parties. The club-based pujas are often politically influenced. This also raises the budget of the puja. For smooth marketing of the idols, the potters cum idol makers must be backed by the political groups. Political support plays important role in exporting the idols outside India and flourishment of the traditional folk art.

#### **Impacts of globalization**

##### **Expansion of market**

Expansion of the national and international market in the idol making business gained attention of other occupational group to involve in the business. At first, the idol making was limited only within the potter caste people but market expansion has broken the caste based occupational boundary and many upper and lower caste people are continuously trying to learn the art form. Involvement of various other communities are also seen in various stages of idol making from the mud to cloth to the ornament.

##### **Improving sustainable pattern of livelihood**

With the change in the economy the idol makers are also trying to improve their sustainable pattern of livelihood by educating their next generation and make changes in their way of living. Due to this, the next generation does not want to be involved in the idol making business. Mr. Gopal Paul a popular artist in Kumortuli says that both of his sons are doing jobs in IT sector and they do not show any interest in the craft of Idol making. So, he has become very worried about the fate of the business, because he does not have any member in the family to pursue the business. He says that he will continue this craft as long as he can. This is one of the reasons why the traditional knowledge of idol making is not being encultured within the family and is being spread to the outside communities.

##### **High demand of wage labour**

Still now idol making is a laborious work and to maintain the overload of production a huge number of manpower is needed. Lack of involvement of the family members compel the artisans to hire workers from outside without making any distinction about their caste and religion. This



makes the demand of the wage of laborers higher, which creates problem to the idol makers to maintain the profit.

### **Transformation of the pattern of idols**

A major change is seen in the pattern of Durga idol i.e., with the growing of urban culture the traditional one framed Durga idols are in the wane. Like the present-day families, each idol is being made in separate frames as demanded. However, the idol makers readily agree to it, because it brings more profit to them.

### **Influence of theme based pujas**

The idols are made according to the customers' need. Customer gives the picture or photo of the idol along with the description of the surroundings and the idol makers must make a copy the image and try to incorporate the feelings of the surroundings. The decorations of the idols must match with the surroundings as described by the customer. This is a difficult task and very much challenging also. Only experienced idol makers can create it. These types of idols are lucrative. Theme based Durga idols are becoming very popular and attracts the students of the art colleges involved in this profession. This is one of the reasons why non-Kumbhakars are gradually entering into this profession. They enrich this art through innovation.

### **Conclusion**

Due to globalization the production of idols increases, and the economy also increases along with it. Increased production needs more infrastructure which is lacking among the idol makers of Kumortuli. The new trend of the idol making business, i.e., the theme-based Puja and new entries to the business, are pushing the Kumbhakars of Kumortuli into tough competition. The Devine cult of Puja is moving towards art exhibition due to innovation and popularization of theme-based idols.

Idol making is a very laborious work. Due to lack of economic profit and uncertainty of work the older generation is failing to influence the younger generation to take it up as a profession. Sometimes the older generation encourages their children to move to other professions or take up Government jobs. This art is the opportunity for the women to earn money and make popularity towards the global market because of globalization. They sold their idols in several foreign countries and they are successfully breaking the traditional gender stereotype towards idol making business. The age-old observation says the people believe that the craft does not bring due respects from others. That is why they do not encourage enculturating the tradition to the new generation. Opening of Global market make several changes in the economy and technology of idol makers in Kumortuli but the traditional knowledge behind making the idols is still unchanged. To preserve such a rich culture government should take some initiatives for them as well as for the nation. As long as the demand is there, there will be idol makers, but they may not be from the same caste, Kumbhakar.

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