Chapter 4
Economy and Social Mobility of Idol-Makers

We have already established by now, that idol-making as a hereditary caste occupation is being practiced by a significant population among the idol-making community. At this point however, I want to highlight that here, by ‘idol-making community’ I am referring to a group that is larger than the traditional caste-based idol-makers. This is because idol-making as an economic activity today supports the livelihood of a far greater section than only the traditional idol-makers. While all the idol-making families in Kumartuli do not strictly belong to the traditional idol-making/potter’s caste, similarly all traditional idol-makers/potters families do not practice idol-making as a full time occupation or only occupation. Hence, it is necessary to see when, how and why the other caste individuals are joining this occupation and also how and why not all traditional idol-makers are continuing in pursuing the same occupation. Thus, to understand the economy of idol-making one should not only look at the production relations but also the dynamics and inter-relationships between the various groups, traditional and non-traditional, who are engaged in the craft of idol-making.

Thus, the present population of idol-makers includes not only the hereditary groups but also artists who have passed out from Art College with formal trainings and individuals from other castes who have been apprentices and had informal training from the traditional idol-makers. It is therefore, no more a homogenous population and can be divided into three main groups

1. The master artists of Kumartuli and Kalighat areas – who are traditional potters, a section of them have migrated from the erstwhile Bangladesh and are known as Rudrapals. This group has mainly learnt through informal means and through practicing the work.

2. The educated, Art College graduate artists, who are not necessarily from potter caste. This group mainly deals with the art of idol-making, may not be particularly skilled in actual idol-making but provides artistic inspirations and experiments with designs.
3. The numerous small artisans, mostly belonging to the potters’ caste but also from other lower caste groups, there are even Muslim potters among them. This group contains the semi-skilled and skilled craftsmen who have a small scale of business and who may or may not have been apprentices with the master craftsmen at one point of time or other.

The small artisans of sub-urban and rural areas belong to the third group of artisans in the above schema. The majority of the artisans that we find today belong to this group. They constitute a variety of caste groups and individuals who have learnt the art from their own interest and might never have belonged to any artisan caste. They may belong to both higher and lower ranking caste of the region, men who belong to the other artisan castes of patuas, malakars, and have taken up idol-making for more income, individuals from other communities and region like some Muslim artisans, artisans who are from Bihar. The last group was found to be full time idol-makers in Delhi, some of them having learned the craft from Bengali idol-makers.

Apart from these three distinct categories, the entire industry is supported through the labour of innumerable wageworkers or karigars as they say who are engaged in the various stages of production. These labourers are, unskilled, semi-skilled or skilled and derive their livelihood from this work. They might have formerly belonged only to the traditional potters’ caste but now are a heterogeneous mixture of many castes – higher and lower in the hierarchy.

There also exists another category of artisan group whom we might term as support groups for the craft. These are the groups of jewellery designers who form an intrinsic part of the craft of idol-making, because without their contribution the making of an idol will be incomplete. They provide the different varieties of decorative items to adorn the clay image.
As opined by many of the respondents, the twin concepts of 'caste' and 'closed group' do not strictly exist among the artisans, and hence despite being a hereditary calling, the entry to this occupation is relatively open. Quite contradictorily in the same breath they pointed out that many of the other caste individuals, mainly belonging to the lower castes, uses the title of 'Pal' when they set up the business. This denotes that the traditional title of 'Pal' still serves an important function of identification and authenticity of the craftsman for the ordinary consumers. This, in another way also means that the association of a definite caste group to a particular hereditary occupation still plays a strong role in the minds of the general population. Thus, though it seems that both, the consumers and the idol-makers (producers) are not much bothered by the ideas of purity and pollution, the reality might be quite different.

**System of Production**

The economy of the idol-makers is sustained by the inter-relation and inter-dependence of the various groups that have been described above. As already said, all craft goods were made by hand and there is no technology involved as such. The 'industry' is characterized by distinct production relations, different variety of produce and network of expansion. There is no formal institutional integration of the craft producers into anything like a system of guilds by means of which craft workers could control the supply of raw materials, the recruitment of craft labour and the prices at which finished goods are sold (Pokrant 1982:89).

What exists is a highly differentiated category of producers. They differ in kinds and levels of skills attained, the types of product they make, the markets they serve, the scale and types of production units within which they work, and the degree of control

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1 Castes have been seen as 'enclosed classes' which did not allow for mobility and dynamic social interaction (Iliah 1996). The essential component for caste groups to maintain their exclusivity and ranking in the hierarchy it was important to close the entry points for other caste members. Weber too defined castes as "closed status groups" where obligations creates barriers to mobility (1967: 405).

2 See Dumont (1970). For me, the phenomenon that most of the current idol-makers have adopted the surname of 'Pal' reiterates the association of caste and hereditary occupation. While there is no strict observance of purity and pollution among castes in Bengal, the psyche of the average Bengali is still influenced by the linkages of caste and occupation – may be with the belief that hereditary occupational groups will be the best in the execution of the particular craft.
they have over the means of production and the production process (Pokrant 1982: 97). Hence the

*use of the term 'craft' or 'trade' is misleading [here to the extent that] it implies the existence of a homogeneous body of autonomous or self-employed producers who possess a high degree of skill based upon years of specialized training under some formally organized and highly structured system of apprenticeship*.

*Pokrant 1982: 97*

The type of production that we see today in the small by-lanes of Kumartuli is more like what Goody described, as the horizontal mode of production,

*based on the increasing degree of skill of the individual worker as he becomes more experienced, and on the management of the production process in conjunction with training of the new workers.*

*Goody 1982: 3*

Among the idol-makers one can identify such division of labour whereby an individual artisan would proceed through the learning of different skills along with successive levels of age, and one day reach the position of master and teacher himself. The lack of formalized system of apprenticeship however eliminates the identification of 'master' craftsmen though for our purpose we will identify the established and well-known artisans as 'master' craftsmen. The horizontal mode of production also exists widely because it is based on the utilization of children who gradually learn all the necessary skills and may later establish independent units of production. Hence, there occurs a cyclical reproduction of the production unit (Goody 1982: 27). In an idol-makers family, all the children learn the craft through assisting the father (unless undergoing any other formal training) and later either the male children stay together and jointly look after the business or else may set up a different unit through cash provided by the parents or kinsmen or through the sale and distribution of the proceeds of the parental workshop.

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3 In analysing the organisation of production of the tailors of the Kano city, Pokrant (1982) described how the craft of tailoring that included multiple groups in the city is different from the usual understanding of a 'craft'. I found this to be very similar to the type of production processes that exists in Kumartuli in 2002-2006.
Though not a cottage ‘industry’ as such, idol-making constitutes a craft-based occupation which is gradually taking the shape of an industry\(^4\), can be identified as having a ‘cottage craftsman mode’ of production, wherein the members of the family and kin group, i.e., domestic group control the manufacture and sale of the product (Goody 1982:12). However, the kin groups, who may be involved in the production process, share the ownership of work only if he is an artist and not an apprentice. Till the time that the kin member is working as an apprentice, he is employed as a wage labour. These kin members would sometime leave to establish a separate unit. This practice can be called the domestic mode of production, quite similar to what was found in the early history of the textile industry in Yorkshire\(^5\) (Goody 1982:12). Thus, the idol-makers can be classified as cottage craftsmen, an independent producer who buys his raw material, has a workshop of his own/rents a space and sells his product directly to the buyers, either by securing orders beforehand, or in the open market to the highest bidder. Though most of the time the division of labour is contained within the household, the bigger producers may employ additional workers throughout the year. Since the work is labour intensive it requires proper pooling of labourers, with different stages of production being simultaneously carried on by different labourers, both paid hired labour and unpaid household labour. Extra labour, generally appointed during the peak season is laid off when business is slack. Hence most of the independent idol-makers would say,

*When I am required to give more supply I sometimes keep one or two additional semi skilled labourers to speed up the production process. However, these are very temporary arrangements.*

The possibilities that some of the idol-makers in the future may turn out to be merchant producers appear when we hear comments like,

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\(^4\) In a larger sense, idol-making is a part of the industry of Durga Puja which includes the pandal makers, the light-makers, the drummers etc., all of whose work goes in celebrating the grandeur of the Durga Puja.

\(^5\) Distinct mode of production among the independent weavers in the Yorkshire district of Halifax, wherein they used wool from their own sheep, spun by the wives and daughters, which were woven in their own looms and were sold individually to the merchant clothiers. Thus all had direct access to market. In contrast there was the Anglian textile industry, where the merchant clothier bought, placed it out for picking and then sent it to weavers...while the clothier was also the owner, all the rest of the people engaged at various levels were merely wage labourers (Defoe 1727, Heard 1970 cited in Goody 1982: 12-13).
I have faith in my son and know that he will employ trusted labourers/workers to continue the work. I have employed three labourers other than me. During peak season I sometimes employ an additional one or two labourer on a temporary basis.

‘Putting out’ is another very common feature in the production process because it requires fewer overhead costs. Most of the putting out work is performed by the women of the household, especially in case of making decorative and jewellery items. They are paid in piece rate basis. This also ensures that the payment is low, and being non-formal rates are not fixed. In case of idol-making, both the women and the children of the household provide free labour by assisting in the work. Thus, all the working hands of the family remain busy in the long and intricate process of idol-making. Thus, the “family economy is responding to …internal balance of production…to ensure customary family subsistence and economic self-sufficiency” (Goody 1982: 20).

The smaller artisans either work alone or with a single labourer or apprentice. First, if the artisan is skilled, he exploits his full personal labour power, then that of his wife and children and lastly either takes up an apprentice or an extra labour. The apprentice though does not pay to be taught, the point at which he starts to receive payment for the work done is decided upon by his ability to work and how the business is prospering (Pokrant 1982). They also practice putting out system since many do not know the entire process of idol-making and lack some of the skills. Once they procure order, they put out the order to other labourers, mainly women who work from the household.

The innumerable labourers or karigars on the other hand are cottage labourers, performing only one stage of the production process, and at no point of time do they have the capacity to exert any amount of control in the production process. They are involved at different stages of the production process as wage labourers, paid on daily basis. The

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6 ‘Putting out’ is a system of production whereby the work is executed in a piecemeal fashion as and when the orders are placed. The labourer is not engaged throughout the year and hence the employer/producer is not obliged to pay when there is no work. Historically, ‘putting-out’ system was a means of subcontracting work. It was also known as the ‘workshop system’. In putting-out, work was contracted by a central agent to subcontractors who completed the work in their own facility, usually their own home. The development of this trend, since 1400, is often considered to be a form of proto-industrialization and remained prominent until the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century. (URL: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cottage_industry#Cottage_industry).
wage varies according to the nature of the work done – one that requires more skill is better paid and vice versa. The labourer however is relatively independent since he can seek work with any producer. In reality, he is often in debt to a particular idol-maker by taking an advance payment and is required to come back to work for him. The labourers are appointed on either permanent or temporary basis. The permanent are very few in number and it is the temporary labourer, which provides the support in production process. These temporary labourers are appointed either on the basis of weekly, or bi-weekly or three months or six months basis. The three to six months employment is termed as seasonal contract and the labourer in this case receives a monthly payment and some time-off.

Though idol-making primarily involves horizontal division of labour, some amount of functional division of labour is also incorporated in the process. This is because many of the components are made by specialized craftsmen. The jute hairs are made by one group of craftsmen; the jewellery designers constitute other specialized groups of craftsmen. As we see, idol-making involves the labour of a particular group of designers from Katwa who will make *shola* decorations from sholapith, of *jari* decorations from makers in Surat, of garland makers, of hair-makers etc., all of whom constitutes

\[ \text{specialist sub-caste occupations [that] are not ends in themselves in terms of commodity production... [but the] products are essential to the makers of other commodities.} \]
\[ \text{Goody 1982:5-6} \]

Hence, idol-making involves both horizontal division of labour among the clay modellers, based on age and developing skills of the apprentice and functional division of labour, that is dependence on the makers of specialized commodities to make the product, i.e., idol-making complete. Hence in some ways idol-making is also similar to cottage

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7 The functional division of labour according to Goody constitutes of “production of commodities which are themselves components for the production of other commodities” (Goody 1982:5). He explained this with the example of *zari* makers who produce the silver and gold thread used by the makers of certain sarees, wood block carvers who make blocks used to print designs on cloth, all constituting a part of the cottage industry of textile making (Goody 1982:5).
outwork of watch-making in 19th century, “social product of a large number of detail workers” (Goody 1982: 1).

Specialization and Types of Idols

The idol-makers produce a wide range of stylistic idols of which they identify two types of idols as of main stylistic forms. All others are a variation of these two styles. They are commonly called Bangla Thakur (traditional form of clay idol) and Art-er Thakur (Innovative clay idols belonging to the genre of realistic art). Both of these can be either ‘ekchala’ i.e., made within a backdrop of a single frame or as side putul i.e. each idol (Lakshmi, Ganesh, Kartik, Saraswati, and Durga) erected on separate frames. Decoration is also of two types Art Bangla Saaj and Art Saaj. Art Bangla is the decoration where the headpiece is made of two parts (dui thak), the first part in the front is called the ‘peti’ and the part above that is called ‘monda’. Art Saaj consists of only one part of headpiece and the choker is arranged as a necklace. The decoration can be of Golden zari or sola or Bullion (Bullion is commonly called as daker saaj since it previously used to come by post or ‘dak’). While almost every idol-maker is adept at making the traditional Bangla Thakur, the realistic Art-er- Thakur requires a higher level of craftsmanship and learning and hence the practitioners are few. The jewellery or decorative pieces are made by a different set of craftsmen and there are certain regional demarcations. The golden and silver zari jewellery is made mostly by the artisans in Kumartuli by procuring the raw materials from Kolkata Barabazar, the artisans in Krishnanagar are famous for making jewellery from Bullion and the artisans from the rural areas of Katwa district are known to be the major suppliers of jewellery made from sola or pith. These artisans are mostly invisible workers since it is the women of the households who do the work and their work is collected by the male agents, who may or may not be craftsmen themselves, who in turn sell them to the idol-makers in Kumartuli and elsewhere.

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8 Goody (1982) identifies three different forms of division of labour in commodity production of various crafts that later transformed to an industry, for example, the system of division of labour in the making of Swiss watches is a cottage outwork and not a factory based production.
Inter-relationship and Dynamics between the different groups

The idol-makers who constitute the caste-based group are of the opinion that an outsider, i.e. one who is not from the potter sub-caste of idol-makers would never be able to make a Bangla Thakur because this is an art which is transferred through generations. To further explain their reasoning they say that it has to be in one’s blood (“amader rakte ache”) to make a traditional idol. The caste-based idol-makers in many ways consider themselves to be superior to the newer entries in the field of idol-making, especially of the formally trained, art college graduated artists. They also reflect the conservatism of the potter caste as artisan (Behura 1978, Foster 1965) because they are wary of innovations and innovators. For them the innovative clay models are made by those who have ideas but not the necessary skills to execute the idea, hence many people among the older generation consider that the makers of innovative idols are lesser artisans. This has occurred to a great extent because of the dependence of the latter group on the traditional idol-makers in actually making the clay idol. Almost all the formally trained artists only make the sketch of the idol and then it is up to the smaller karigar (here this means both smaller artisans and skilled labourers) to make the idol as per the drawing. It is the sense of proportion or sense of aesthetics that makes these works more valuable. Many of the artists might have a theoretical idea about making the skeletal structure of hay and then giving it a shape with clay, but they have never actually made a complete idol in their own hands. It is their experimentation with colours and forms that are valued and hence they are looked down upon by the traditional idol-makers, as ‘lesser sculptors’. However, it is the social and educational capital of many of these new artists and designers, which sets them apart from the master artisans of Kumartuli and from the small artisans from rural areas whom they employ. The resentment against the Art College artists also grows from the belief that these artists do not need to earn money – either they have money or they have another occupation which is their main occupation and idol-making for them is to fulfil their artistic passions. They reduce the market price since they can afford to survive at a lower return. Such a statement however did not appear to hold much truth except in case of newer artists who want to make a recognition in the market, since most of the established artists charge a high amount of honorarium, as high as one lakh just for
developing a thematic puja, after they succeed in their first attempt to showcase their talents.

While the master craftsmen perceive a threat from the Art College passed artists, the smaller craftsmen perceive the skilled labourer to be their competitors. In all the years the production was strictly based on direct orders from the customers and only with the advent of the new group of artists that the processes of contracting and sub-contracting are becoming popular. This also means that the craft labourers are no longer dependent on the producer craftsmen of Kumartuli only, but can secure work independently. While the producer idol-makers have organized themselves into two associations, the labourers have also organized themselves. But then as we see, the exploitation of labourers (karigars) continues because they stand at the lowest rank in the industry of idol-making.

A rough estimate of total number of labourers (karigars) in Kumartuli itself would be about 5000. These karigars, as already mentioned, have formed among them two associations, Kumartuli Mritshilpo Karigar Samiti and Shantipriyo Mritshilpi Karigar Samiti. The interaction with the one-time president of Kumartuli Mritshilpo Karigar Samiti revealed the relationships between the employer and employees and the position of the labourer in the production process. This association was formed in 1988 (Bengali 1380) but as he regretfully says, "neither the Samiti nor we (labourers) have any future here". The association/union was formed to regulate the working hours and payment patterns of the labourers. At that time a 12 point agenda/ rules was formed with the intention that it will uplift the conditions of the labourers. These were:

- The working hours should be eight hours a day. Lunch/dinner will not be provided. However, the owner should make the sleeping arrangements for the labourers who will be working at that time.
- Overtime payment will be one and a half times more for labourers with a minimum of three-months or seasonal contracts. Labourers having contract period less than that will not be entitled for overtime. Overtime period is fixed as five days for
Biswakarma, 30 days for Durga, three days for Lakshmi, 15 days each for Kali and Saraswati. However, the owner can increase the time as per his requirements.

- If the contract period is for either six months/180 days/seasonal then the labourer will be entitled for two days of leave per month.
- The contract papers should have an identification card with number, the terms and conditions of work like time period, nature of payment (daily/weekly/monthly etc) and all other details. Four copies of the signed contract will have to be made and one copy each will be given to the owner’s association (Samiti) and to the labourers’ association. The remaining two will be with the labourer and the owner. Everyone is required to follow this rule. However, these rules are not applicable in the case of apprentices.
- The owner shall bear the primary medical expenses of the labourer if he faces any accident while working for him.
- The owner will also be responsible to ensure the safety of working conditions.
- The labourers who are members of the association should be paid in cash at the end of every month. The association will however not interfere if there has been any separate understanding between an owner and a labourer.
- The rules will be effective from November 19, 1988.
- The rules will be valid for the next three years
- Any/all problems that may be encountered will be reviewed and sorted
- The timings of work will be 9 am to 1 pm and 2 pm to 6 pm.
- The above rules will be applicable for all members of the labourer association working anywhere within West Bengal.

The association has also tried to regulate the rules of working hours and payments in other areas of Kolkata where these labourers go for work and the rules regarding the working hours are being followed in places like Dakhshindhi in East Kolkata and in the Patuapara of Kalighat.

9 Translated from a copy of the pamphlet circulated among the members of the labourers’ association. However, since most of them were minimally literate and did not have a comprehensive grasp over language or written document, they could hardly argue for their rights with the owners. Only those who attended the meetings of the association knew about the existence of some of the rules.
Sadly, though many of these rules are not being followed. The sleeping arrangements are miserable. They have to sleep in the space available beside the idol, where an adult person cannot even stretch his legs fully or shift sides. The payments are still not regularized; most often than not the weekly payments remain due, except for a handful of labourers. The situation is similar to that of daily wagers, and the policy is no work and no pay, even for a seasonal contractual worker. The paid leave that was asked for is not maintained. The interesting point in this story is that it is only through the inspiration of some producer-owners that this association was formed. The story of the inception of the association was detailed by a group of labourers including the members of the working committee, the current President and few other ordinary members. I will put forth their responses as told to me. As the group said,

_They (some owners) felt that the labourers are ill-treated and made us understand that we should demand some of our entitlements from the owners. Some renowned artist/idol-makers of that time who supported our cause and encouraged us are Lakshmi Pal, Sri Krishna Pal etc. Sri Krishna Pal used to say that we need to come forward in the society. We should educate ourselves and improve our conditions. Previously many would employ their young sons in the workshop in lieu of just the meal and they never had a chance to go to school. But with the formation of our association and the encouragement of these people we have certainly progressed to some extent. Our average educational qualification has increased; where almost everyone was non-literate, now many have at least gone to school till seventh standard. For example, the son of our previous treasurer today works in Bangalore, he is the pride of our caste and our association. We think that with more support from the government we can achieve more successes. However, after few years of the inception of this association another set of owners who were not happy with the arrangements has started to create a rift._

The Kumartuli Mritshilpo Karigari Samiti has about 984 members at present and the membership fee is Rs 2 per month. The office holders are replaced after every three years through voting. Two compulsory annual meetings are held by the association, one on 1<sup>st</sup> April and the other around 16-17<sup>th</sup> May (1<sup>st</sup> day of the second month in Bengali calendar). There are 13 board members and a working committee. The president is elected/selected from among them. Other than protecting/fighting for the rights of the labourers they are also involved in certain community works like blood donation camps, free health check up camp etc. The association at one point of time also tried to run a cheap cooperative store for the benefit of the labourers but its workings are irregular because of constraints of manpower. Since all of them are busy earning their livelihood,
there is no one who can look after the store and keep a daily tab of supplies, requirements and sales. It is disheartening to note a sense of dejection and acceptance of their conditions in the face of strong competition and exploitation of the producer-owners. The unanimous feeling was,

_We know that we cannot create more pressure to secure our demands because we are ultimately outsiders in this area. We do not have any choice but to come here for work. Moreover, there is no unity among us, since each is busy to survive on his own._

The organisation underwent a split when some of the producer-owners lured a section of the labourers by offering meals and better sleeping arrangements. Many of the labourers fell for the bait and in 2001-02 they formed a separate association in the name of _Shantipriyo Mritshilpo Karigar Samiti_. These are mainly the ones who come from interiors of rural Bengal and have to stay in the city for almost nine months.

The conditions under which the labourers are compelled to work are inhuman, unhealthy and sordid. There are no facilities available, not even proper sanitary arrangements, let alone bathing area or living space or drinking water provisions. For them, the river has been a blessing since,

_Without the presence of the river we could not have lived here, it provides a bath in the summers and the public taps ensure some amount of drinking water, as we are outsiders we are generally the last to get a share of that water._

In their quest to fight for their rights they see the government as the saviour since their collective strength is too weak to negotiate with the producer-owners. In order to uplift their working conditions they have put their representations to the government functionaries.

_We have appealed to the Chief Minister through a memorandum, we have also written a letter to the local councillor regarding our problems when we heard that Kumartuli will be developed. However, it is extremely difficult for us to gain a foothold through the association, because we are outsiders who do not have any existence. We were never informed about the various meetings that have taken place about the area development. Our association does not have the economic power to build a five-storied building for the labourers, nor is there any space available under the present situation. Perhaps only the government can do something about it. It is to them that we have requested for a community living space and proper sanitary and drinking water facilities._
It has become extremely difficult to sustain this organisational effort. The monthly rent for the office room which is six feet by four feet approximately is Rs 150, with the defaulters who do not pay the yearly fee it becomes difficult to continue the renting of the place. The nature of interaction between the owners and the labourers has also changed in the last 20 years of the formation of the association. Earlier there was a kind of shared intimacy between both the groups; today they act as opposite parties\textsuperscript{10}. Each is concerned about his own affairs. Previously the labourers were either relatives or more like relatives of the owners, now it has become a very impersonal relation of work and wages. Hence, as many of the labourers complain, “today the owners don’t even react or sympathize if a worker is ill, let alone help him to recover”.

My interaction with the other labourer association “Shantipriyo Mritsilpi Karigar Samiti” confirmed what the Kumartuli Mritshilpo Karigari Samiti had to say. In the discussion where about 15 of the members along with the president were present, they agreed that they formed a different association in 2004 (Bengali year 1411) to secure their food and living arrangements. This association has 300 members at present and the membership fee is Rs 2 per month. The main reason behind the formation of a second association was to secure the bare minimum requirements to continue working. The office holders of the other association were either from the local area or stayed at a distance from where they could commute daily to the workplace. They did not need either a space to stay, or to cook or, buy food from the market which was costlier. This arrangement was not suitable for those who come from outside, from far-flung villages and needed to stay in Kumartuli for the entire duration of work. It is a group of these karigars/labourers who formed the Shantipriyo Mritshilpi Karigar Samiti at the instigation of some of the producer-owners. These producer-owners promised to provide

\textsuperscript{10} Notwithstanding the same caste based occupational affiliation these rifts are common in many of the hereditary occupational group. Similar to the relationship between the workers and master weavers in the textile industry, in idol-making too we find that

\begin{quote}
Even when the employers and employees belong to the same caste, terms and conditions can be imposed on labour, and attempts ...to unionise...can be resisted by upholding caste solidarity...[and] disempower workers...decisions are taken to lengthen working days, flout other aspects o labour laws and ignore safety provisions.
\end{quote}

\textit{Harriss-White 2003: 32}

Hence we find that the attempts of the clay labourers to organise themselves are constantly thwarted by the master craftsmen.
them with free home-cooked meals and proper staying arrangements if they would work for 10 hours instead of the regulatory demand of 8 hours. However, it was not very long when they faced disillusionment. The employers very soon broke their promise by giving them money to go outside and have food, which was insufficient to have a proper meal; not providing them proper arrangements of sleeping; not paying overtime over and above the 10 hours, etc. Some of the labourers also complained that they were not receiving regular payments even for normal work. By 2007, they were thinking of reuniting with their former association, so that there can be more bargaining power and negotiations were taking place between the two associations.11

The labourers seems to undergo a constant threat and opposition from the producer-owners because of their organisational effort and collective resolutions and hence they feel that

*The owners are trying to break down our association. They have fitted people among us who convey all the discussions of our meetings to them. They are secretly arranging meetings to pressurize us. These days the labourers do not even talk among themselves during duty hours in case the owners get suspicious.*

My experiences in the field also made me aware of certain apprehensions among the labourers. Their initial reluctance to speak to me also revealed their unsure existence as an interest group in this whole business of idol-making.

Under the prevailing conditions of work and payments, the labourers do not wish to continue the work but are stuck with it because of lack of social capital12 and

11 Forming of associations in this context can been seen as a form of collective action for mobilisation of workers’ demands. As an organised labour force these workers have formed formal collectives like association more in the nature of a welfare mechanism rather than the trade unionism that demand political orientation. I say this because in my interaction with the workers’ association I did not find any strong political orientation among the member. Moreover, as Shah (1990) pointed out, struggles for change need not always be directed towards governance, but involves people at various levels, against dominant caste, class and ideology (1990:19). For more on working class and in trade unionism see Sharma (1963), Mathur (1964), Sen (1977).

12 The concept of social capital as an asset to economic development of not only individuals but also nations has been development both in economics and sociology. In the present context, social capital is more in the nature of what Shultz and Becker (1962-63) termed as ‘human capital’ i.e., society’s endowment of educated, trained and health workers that determine the productivity (Woolcock 1998: 154). Details on the definition of social capital as discussed by Coleman (1988, 1990), Portes (1998), Loury (1977, 1992) has been given in Chapter 1. Woolcock (1998) have tried to “develop a coherent framework
opportunities. For most of them this is a binding that they are unable to break free of in this lifetime but hope that their sons and daughters will not undergo the same hardships and want to ensure that they are engaged in other kinds of work.

_We don’t want our future generations to continue this work because there is no future and no security in this work. These days the Pal are not coming to do clay work, people from other caste, lower castes come in greater numbers. The wages have not increased in comparison to the inflation of prices. When we earned Rs 500 we were in much better condition when compared to the Rs 3000 that we earn now. We can never be at par with the market inflation because the government’s budget is announced after we sign our contracts under fixed rates (“amader chukti age hoi, sarkar er budget tar pore”)._

They estimated that during the peak season there are about 1500-1600 labourer who come from outside and their number is reduced to about 1000 during the slack season. Some of them, about 30%, are going outside Kumartuli and even outside West Bengal to do work on their own, trying to secure orders as an idol-maker with the hope that it will increase their income. They also conceded that securing one or two orders and, independently executing them might be more profitable, since the artisan need not employ any extra labour to complete the work. However, the hardships during the slack season are increasing. Firstly, the work on potters’ wheel is decreasing, since there is shortage of fuel and space. Secondly, some had meagre amounts of land on which they cultivated but today that does not even provide enough food for the family members. At the same time, about 25% of new labourers are joining this occupation every year, mainly because this does not require any specialized skills. The added incentive is the free food and lodging, a minimum entitlement of any labourer; plus some amount of money as wages, which is more than they can get from any other job as unskilled labourer.

For incorporating social capital into development theory...the conditions under which social capital both helps and hinders economic advancement” (Woolcock 1998: 154) (emphasis author’s). Though there appears to be critique and ambiguity regarding the properties and problem of social capital (Portes and Landolt 1999), it has been an important component in the works of economists like Smith (1776), Marshall (1890), Hicks (1942), Becker (1962), Schultz (1963), Putnam (1993) and others, in economic sociology of Durkheim (1893), Simmel (1974, reprinted 2004), Weber (1922), Parsons (1956) and later Portes (1998), Granovetter (1974 -1992). It is a recurring theme in both economics and economic sociology. Saberwal (1976) also states that social mobility requires certain social capital, lacking which one would find that the new stratum to be unwelcome to his advantage. The inhospitable new setting can act as a ‘push-back’ factor (Bose 1973 in Saberwal 1976: 233), whereby the “mobile man is pushed back into the area of his origin” (Saberwal 1976: 233).
A detailed understanding of who are the people who are joining the trade and who are those that want to leave or have left the traditional work in search of new territories is interlinked with the questions of opportunities, skills, alternative options available and the capacity to access those. A close scrutiny on the patterns of migration and mobility among the traditional idol-makers and the labourers will help us in how the system operates to sustain the livelihood of these artisans. The craft of idol-making as we will see still presents itself to be a sustainable economic venture despite the various problems that the practitioners might be undergoing. As we already know by now that historically the occupation of idol-making has been greatly dependent on the rising popularity of the community pujas, and it has continuously provided an impetus for many individuals to pursue the occupation and also venture out of their native places. This is not only true for members of the caste group but also for other individuals. On the other hand, there has also been a gradual shifting away from the occupation of idol-making among many.

Migration Patterns

We will now focus on the mobility patterns of idol-makers, in terms of both occupational mobility and spatial mobility, i.e., migration, the factors that promote or inhibit migration and mobility, both towards and away from idol-making. Once we establish the migration pattern and its characteristics we will shift our attention to the occupational mobility. By migration, I mean the movement of people in space, or more particularly people who move and settle down in another area, either temporarily or permanently (Joshi 2004: 11). In Kumartuli, there exists visible patterns of occupational mobility and migration, but the migratory patterns were more prominent in a metropolitan like Delhi where the culture of idol-making is comparatively new.

13 The terms migration and mobility are inter-related, while migration involves geographical mobility only, the term mobility encompasses both geographical and social mobility. Migration can be directly correlated to upward social mobility, since it is assumed that individuals migrate from their native places in search of better livelihood opportunities followed by higher wages (Rao 1986, Laxmi Narayan 1986, Todaro 1970). It can be either internal or international migration. Similar examples can be found of the Patidar community in Gujarat who went to East Africa and later re-migrated to India, in the process they also achieved upward social mobility and claimed a higher caste status (Pocock 1972, Puri Chandra 1997)

14 I have deliberately chosen this definition above others because in a way it captures the basic essence of migration. As we progress, we will delve into the complexities of migration.

15 The characteristic of migration in Calcutta and Bombay has been somewhat similar but not Delhi. For example in Bombay the population is chiefly of immigrants or descendents of immigrants, the early
In the decades of '60s and '70s theories of migration were predominantly influenced by the modernization theory\(^{16}\) whereby migration is seen as a gradual progress towards urbanization and development and migrants as positive types who would have a positive impact on development by bringing back to their home communities innovations and knowledge. While sociological and anthropological thought have undergone changes and no longer seek for a direct co-relation between migration, urbanization and development\(^{17}\), classical economics still regard migration as a response to spatial unevenness in labour markets, moving where they could obtain higher wages\(^{18}\). However, with the changing scenario of the global world and the differences between a developed and a developing country, migration can no longer be seen as a linear progression of development both at the individual level and at the societal level. It is interspersed with complex realities of social structure and social networks. Thus in the context of a developing country migration as a phenomenon should be analyzed in terms of the diversity of the local situations that are encountered and influence the process of migration\(^{19}\). Migration mechanisms in developing countries is characterized by the overlapping nature of different social units of individual, family, community etc., and the dynamics of the networks (Guilmoto and Sandron 2001: 136). Here I am interested in the administration encouraging the population from the countryside to settle and supply the labour force in the city (Masselos 1995). Compared to this Delhi has a much longer history of being a city with its indigenous population.

\(^{16}\) Modernization theory emerged as a dominant paradigm of economic and cultural change in the late '50s by adopting both an evolutionary perspective and a functionalist perspective. It treats modernization as a phased process whereby societies move from simple, undifferentiated stage to advance complex, differentiated modern stage; and towards a convergence of societies through homogenization process. It is also treated as a lengthy, progressive and irreversible process where a transformation of values from traditional to rational modern values takes place. In essence, this theory promotes Europeanization or Americanization as the ultimate goal of all Third World societies undergoing industrialization (So 1990: 33-35).

\(^{17}\) These are all inter-related concepts which influence and in turn is influenced by others. Modernization theory sought to define euro-centric development as urbanisation and migration as progressive behaviour of individuals so as to positively impact development (Kearney 1986: 333). This explains the push – pull theory of migration whereby people migrate from countryside to the cities and from the less developed to the more developed countries.

\(^{18}\) The rational choice theory (Smith treats that migrants are predominantly workers moving from areas where they were born and raised to places where they find a higher return of their labour (Kearney 1986). However, by the '80s it was noted that urbanization was occurring without development, and is more part of the problem of underdevelopment (Lipton 1980 in Kearney 1986).

\(^{19}\) Stark and Taylor (1991) in their study of rural Mexico also found that rural to urban migration is primarily made to improve the individual’s or a household’s comparative income with respect to his reference group in the village and is not absolute as understood by the economic studies of labour migration in less developed countries. Moreover, choice is influenced by differential returns to human capital in the different labour markets.
micro scale of migration, i.e., its establishment and functioning with relation to individuals and families since the purpose is not to draw any generalizations but to indicate how different factors have influenced the migration of idol-makers.

At the outset we will divide migration into the various types\(^{20}\) and then relate how some of the features are observable in our field. Migration was observed mainly in relation to the Bengali idol-makers who have business interest in Delhi and have come from Bengal. Some of the early idol-makers who came to Delhi are Gaur Pal who came around 1960-61 and made idols for the Durga Puja in Kashmiri Gate (ISBT) and, Keshab Pal who used to make the idol for Minto Road Durga Puja. Both of them were from Krishnanagar. They were followed by others, who gradually proliferated the market in Delhi. Prior to 1959-60, the idol of Durga for worshipping during the Durga Puja were made by the potters from UP, commonly known as the Ayodhya potters, who, though adept in making *Murtis* for Ramlila would make a very different pattern of idol unlike the traditional Durga *murti*. This was made by smearing red clay over a paper pulp structure and then covering it with cloth dipped in clay slip, so that it doesn't crack and was painted. It lacked the life like look of the images of a traditional Durga *Murti*\(^{21}\). Therefore, when Mr. Sudhangshu Roy (an officer in the Handicrafts Board, married to a Pal) asked Shambhu Pal to make a Durga idol for the puja at Binoy Nagar, it was an instant success. That very year (1961) he was commissioned in advance, about 15 orders for the next year's puja. From 1962 onwards Shambhu Pal came back with his kins, uncle and wife's brother and settled in Arjun Nagar in Delhi\(^{22}\). Two years later, Nani Pal, of Kalighat and his brother-in-law joined him as an apprentice and junior artist. After learning and acquiring the skills of the master, Nani Pal set up his own separate unit in

\(^{20}\) For a detailed typology of migration and towards a general theory of migration see Peterson (1958). He classified it into innovative and conservative migration, primitive migration -- divided into forced and impelled migration, free-migration which is small in character and mass migration. Such migration takes place because of a combination of ecological and economic push and migration policies at the macro level and higher aspiration and social momentum at the micro-level. Others like Ravenstein (1885) forwarded the push-pull theory to explain the choices of migrants. However, when cities experience growth and engulfs the peripheral areas as part of the suburban, it also draws out people from traditional occupations by providing them to opportunities that does not necessitate physical migration. In the long run though, there can be significant out-migration from the suburban to other urban locations (Norr and Norr 1982).

\(^{21}\) As told in a personal interview by a Delhi based potter.

\(^{22}\) Personal interview with the son of Shambhu Pal and another student of Nani Pal.
Chittaranjan Park within a gap of two years. Nani was followed by Ganesh Pal, also an apprentice in Shambhu Pal’s workshop, who shifted his independent unit to Geeta Colony near Yamuna Par. Later, Shambhu Pal also brought in his cousin brother to work with him.

As the history of idol-making shows, almost all the present idol-makers of Delhi have, at some point or other, been apprentices of Shambhu Pal, the master artist. This apprenticeship is primarily from the members of his kin group, both natal and conjugal. Some idol-makers who have given a helping hand in times of crises (when quite a number of models were to be delivered within a small span of time) were his friends who already had an established unit in Kolkata, mainly in Kalighat. Of these only Shambu, Nani, Kalipada, became permanent residents in Delhi, while the others have continued periodic visits. These few permanent migrants and known idol-makers of Delhi have been living in the city for the last 30-35 years. Of them only one is a Brahmin and local and is not a traditional idol-maker. Migration can be classified into forced i.e. involuntary and voluntary, i.e. based on choice (Joshi 2004: 11). The idol-makers who have migrated to Delhi in the past and also continuing in the present have voluntarily come into the city with certain information about differential employment and earning opportunities and made a rational decision based on their perceptions of these opportunities. The migration pattern therefore reflects a strong tendency to migrate to localities which had previously attracted natives of their region (Greenwood 1973 in Joshi 2004:14). In other words we can also say that this represents what Harris and Todaro (1970) termed as a model of rational migration. They have migrated because of stiff competition in their region as against the relatively open market in cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, etc. that presented better return of their labour. These idol-makers

23 The most prominent and well-known idol-maker of Delhi today is a Brahmin idol-maker who started his career as an art college passed artist and was teaching as a art teacher. He had a knack in both clay-modelling and idol-making and was an apprentice to one of the oldest settlers Shambhu Pal. Later he established an independent business of idol-making. He however, is alleged to give only the theme/concept and not actually make the idol by hand, since he lacks the necessarily skills.

24 The migration pattern is more like a Chain Migration (Upreti 1981 in Joshi 2004:14)) wherein old migrants serve as links to new migrants and forms a chain like network.

25 Harris and Todaro (1970) developed a typology of migration based on the differential employment and earning opportunities in different regions. They pointed out that individuals and families makes rational decisions for migrating based on their conceptions of these opportunities (1970: 126-42).
can also be classified as conservative migrants\textsuperscript{26} not because they do not want to change their way of life but because their nature of work has gained popularity and has given them opportunities to continue their specialized craft.

The other distinctiveness of migrant Bengali idol-makers in Delhi is that they are predominantly seasonal migrants rather than permanent settlers. Of the 20-25 chief/prominent artisans listed in different parts of Delhi and New Delhi, only about four lives permanently in the city. The rest go back to their villages each year after the peak season of idol-making. More elaborately, the Bengali idol-makers visit the city twice in each calendar year. One is a longer stay and the other a short visit. Every year these idol-makers come to stay for about six months, from around May-June till October-November, the peak season when the idols for Durga Puja and Kali Puja are made. They come with one or two orders, and then once in the city they try to procure more.

The second, relatively shorter stay, of 15 days to 1½ months takes place between the months of December and February, depending on the occasion of Saraswati Puja. The market of Saraswati Puja however is not very big and not all of the migrant idol-makers who come during the peak season comes back for idol-making during Saraswati Puja. It is only those who have managed to secure some orders who come in that period. Since the scale is much smaller, the idols less costly and smaller, it does not make a good business proposition if one does not have at least four to five orders. It is only about eight to ten idol-makers who come to Delhi during the Saraswati Puja season.

These seasonal or periodic migrants mostly practice idol-making even in their native places. However, since most of them live in either villages or in the outskirts of small towns, they do not have many customers to cater to. Generally it is only one Puja that is celebrated in the village, or at the maximum some four to five Pujas in case of small towns. Therefore, the usual practice for these idol-makers is to make the idols for local market much before the season time and then travel for places outside. Thus, the

\textsuperscript{26} Paterson (1958) classified migrants into two types- innovating migrants who move in order to achieve the new, and conservative migrants who move in response to a change in their circumstances, hoping by migrating to retain their way of life in another locus.
idol-makers who come to Delhi every year combine the work in both the places. Some even travelling at the last minute to give a finishing touch to the idols back home or to instruct someone there to make it ready for delivery. Many of them are owners of small pieces of land on which they cultivate during the agricultural season. The yield from the land however, is very meagre, not sufficient to even support a subsistence standard of living.

While it is primarily the above conditions that serve as push factors in encouraging migration to cities, it is equally true that

*Economic factors provide only the necessary conditions of migration ... the non-economic factors such as the information flow, resource networks, brokers and personality provide the sufficient conditions for people's decision to migrate*

*Rao 1986: 1*

Moreover, in the case of the idol-makers this is not only true but it dictates the place of migration, i.e., the destination. To the questions ‘how have you come to know about Delhi?’ or ‘who told you about the place?’ the universal response of the respondents were that either a cousin, or a friend or a distant relative have, at some point of time been to Delhi.

There exists a chain-like link of information that brings an idol-maker from a village in West Bengal to the city of New Delhi and elsewhere. However, at the same time in the 40 years of the known history of the Bengali idol-makers, who have had contact with Delhi, what is surprising is that not many of them had made the city their permanent home. Moreover, if we compare the residence arrangements of the idol-makers with the rate of growth of Durga pujas in the city, the seasonal visits of the idol-makers have not increased in the same rate. What I mean to say is that despite the probable demands for idol not large numbers of the traditional idol-makers have come to the city either from Kumartuli or from other rural areas in Bengal. This denotes another important aspect of migration in developing countries. Since “the developing world is characterized by incomplete, deficient ... and high costs of information [and the] prevention against risks, rather than maximization of their income, is the central principle that directs the strategy” (Guilmoto and Sandron 2001) of the idol-makers.
That the information flows primarily through kinship network is evident in the pattern of how the earlier migrants have come to work in the city. There also existed the chance of non-voluntary passing of information because of the nature of the work which requires assistance and cannot be done alone. Thus, when the first of the idol-makers came to Delhi he had to bring along other men for assisting in his work. And since it was a newer territory to travel, he requested his kins and friends who knew the art of idol-making. That there existed some efforts to make the information scarce and localized among particular families is noticeable if we look at how the helping hands were recruited. The first idol-maker who came to live belonged to Kolkata and had a studio in Kalighat but he did not recruit labourers from either Kumartuli or Kalighat, he rather "requested" his uncle and his brother-in-law to "help" him out in the new order from Delhi. While the uncle used to work in the natal village, the brother-in-law was an unskilled labour "who would help in preparing the clay". He later brought in a trusted friend – a Brahmin idol-maker from Kalighat who already had an established business. The very act of going back to these trusted individuals denote that one did not want the information of a possible market in Delhi to be passed among all those who might pose a competition. Hence, he looked for assistance from the sources where the threats were comparatively low, the uncle did not have the resources to come and work independently in Delhi, the brother-in-law lacked the necessary skills, and the friend having a secure business would not be interested in taking a risk in the unknown market. Moreover, the friend was not from the traditional idol-making caste and hence the chances that he would pass information to others were perhaps minimal.

27 We evidence a different kind of mobility experience by idol-makers coming to Delhi. There is no change in occupational mobility in relation to spatial mobility. In fact what we see is that "traditional occupation provides the necessary security ...[and they] pursue a traditional calling in the modern urban setting" (Rao 1970: 225). This is yet another set of adaptation.

28 A close scrutiny of the process would find parallel to what Vatuk (1972) observed in delineating the Kinship ties of urbanite's who sometimes maintains "close ties with other members of a three or four generation agnostic extended family...though the degree of closeness in terms economic and social varies" (Vatuk 1972: 128). Moreover, the primary purpose of forming these ties is to use the "consanguinal and affinal links...to built up a satisfactory circle of associates" (Vatuk 1972: 135). The effective use of this kinship ties in gaining commercial interest is what we will observe among the early potters of Delhi. In our case the new setting however, have not always resulted in "novel, informal alignments of men" or of inter-caste relations but only some amount of "segmental mobility" (Saberwal 1976: 230-231).
This initial pattern of migration might have also set the trend in the later years, where we see that the flow of workforce is primarily from rural areas of West Bengal rather than from Kumartuli. This is clearly visible if one looks at the original places from where the master craftsmen in Delhi come from. Another possible reason behind the absence of master craftsmen from Kumartuli was forwarded by one of the theme artists in Delhi. According to him, the master artists of Kumartuli are much more skilled in the craft than the ones who usually visit the city from other rural areas, and hence their creations are much costlier which the puja organizers may not be ready to pay for. Moreover, they have enough business in Kumartuli and need not migrate to Delhi. This may be partially true since the idol-makers in Kumartuli were of the opinion that it is too much trouble to work outside for long but they prefer to go to far off places only when there are orders.

Diagram 1: Migration (seasonal/permanent) of Master Craftsmen

All the labourers (karigars) who work under these master craftsmen also come from different parts of West Bengal, but what is distinguishable is that among the ordinary labourers a substantial section comes from Kumartuli and Kalighat, apart from the villages in the Nadia district and the South 24 Parganas. They come with a contract for the season, i.e., the peak season of about four to five months (June-July to October-November). The master craftsmen provide only the boarding; the cost of food is either borne by them or a certain amount is deducted from their weekly payment if the food is provided by the master. The master craftsmen/artisan visits Kumartuli each year to recruit the labourers (Karigars). When they fail to recruit the numbers of labourers required or
are on the lookout for unskilled/semi-skilled labourers, they recruit them from villages back home or ask their relatives to join them as labourers (karigar). They admit that the labourers from Kumartuli are more skilled and hence costlier, so they recruit labourers from villages directly through contacts. Thus every year the labourers move seasonally to Delhi, mostly in groups. By groups I do not mean members of the same clan, these are individuals who have been gathered by the agent/master craftsmen to travel to Delhi for work. They are sometimes either related or are friends or known faces because of economic reasons. The main aim is to earn through the known skills of idol-making, rather than seeking new avenues. The level of education is primary and the main reason behind migration is availability of work and perhaps better wages. In reality however, the wages do not vary much from those paid in Kumartuli. It is the stiff competition which drives them out and compels them to seek another location.

The migration of these labourers is purely seasonal. Most of them travel to Kumartuli in Kolkata just before the season starts and once there, they are either recruited by the producer artisans in Kumartuli or are hired by artisans who have been commissioned with work from places like Delhi or are from the places outside Bengal. Sometimes contacts are established overtime, whereby the labourer regularly goes to work with a particular artisan in each season.

29 This is similar to the patterns of migration observed in other industries like construction work, brick kiln, etc where intensive labour is employed by the contractor who recruits workers through agents.

30 This migration from rural to urban economy is very differently absorbed in the workforce of the city, For, as Tataji (1986) describes “low level jobs are only apparently open to all. But in reality they are not. There are not only preferences based on caste and kin links but the work organisation is governed by norms relation to entry, exit and mode of payment which are agreed upon by the employers.... The work organisation in the so called informal sector is highly diversified with regard to recruitment, scale of operation, level of skills and their collective action (union) to bargain with the employers for job security and benefits...and disaggregate analysis is necessary for a proper understanding of the nature of employment of the rural migrants in the urban economy” (Tataji in Rao 1986: 7).

31 Here we can see modifications of Gunder Frank’s (1967) dependency model of metropolis-satellite development, which ensures that the national capital extracts economic surplus from the villages and nearby cities leaving little no opportunities for development. This leads the surplus labour from the villages to migrate to cities. Rural- urban migration is seasonal because of the strong ties left behind and the desire or habit to periodically visit the native place, economic employment opportunities provide a ‘push’ from the rural areas and the urban areas lures through the ‘pull’ factors of employment and better living conditions, though in reality it leads to urban poverty (Rao 1986, Goldscheider 1987).
While the migration pattern of both skilled and unskilled labourers reflects that most of them chiefly come from Kumartuli, especially the skilled ones, the migration pattern of master craftsmen shows a different trend. Apart from the few earlier settlers who came from Kalighat – the other idol-making hub of Kolkata, none of the master craftsman who either stay or come to Delhi each year are from Kumartuli. Over the years there has developed an established pattern, whereby each year a particular group of labourer comes to seek employment from the same master craftsman. In a sense, we see that there occurs, as Lewis (1952) argues “urbanization without breakdown” meaning that migrants maintain extensive functioning kin and social ties with earlier migrants and with people in their natal communities. This seasonal migration is different from large scale migration, and is “relative to economic and social conditions of migrants at the place of origin and of destination” (Rao 1986: 28).

*Migrants who...intend to stay only for the duration of the task [as in the cases of migrant potters in Delhi] ... tend to stay on if the economic conditions are favourable. But by and large seasonal migrants have a place of origin where they might have some land and a hut and they might move out for two different seasons in a year after spending some time, in between, in their village.*


This is a prevalent practice that was found among the master craftsmen of Delhi who migrate from the rural areas before the puja season begins and goes back to do subsistence farming during the agricultural season.
There is also another distinctive feature that is found among the migrants in Delhi, which speaks of a similar economic, social and cultural background. The similarity is reflected in their style of work, which is mostly restricted in the modelling of traditional idols with much less experimentation, and hence different from the Kumartuli idol-makers. Kumartuli idol-makers say that this is because most of the Delhi idol-makers are mainly the Chitrakara Pals, sub-caste of potters who at one time only painted, though they did not work on *patas* like the Patua Pals. Hence, their deftness with clay is lesser than the Kumor Pals, i.e., traditional clay idol-makers. Such a migratory pattern also emphasizes the presence of networks of reciprocal relationships that link rural and urban areas, providing social security for migrants who live a precarious existence (Lomintz 1978 cited in Kearney 1986: 337). There exists young and mature network, structures that organize the interstate movements of people. Hence the simplistic assumptions of modernization theories, that splits migration into push and pull factors, no longer proves to be the only determinants of migration, what becomes important is to situate circumstances of migration in broad historical and structural contexts.32

Thus, there is a presence of strong social networks, acute for idol-makers who migrate from the rural areas/villages of the different districts of West Bengal. Not having much social capital in terms of education and technical skills their only way to earn is to stick to traditional occupations but by adapting the styles of the region. The networks though may not be the most efficient arrangements for the migrating individuals it nevertheless create a niche for them in terms of a professional sector for a sustaining livelihood. For example, all potters colonies and puja organizers in Delhi today are aware of the presence of Bengali idol-makers living in different parts of the city. Once in the

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32 Work of Sassen-Koob (1978 - 84) have looked into world system theory that provided a better framework for anthropologists in situating circumstances of migration as dependent on broad historic and structural contexts. She linked the immigration pattern with technological innovations that facilitated the substitution of skilled labour with unskilled labour at a much lower price and termed this as “peripheralization of the core” (Sassen-Koob 1982).

33 Kinship, migration and occupational mobility are interlinked and most migrants join their kinfolk or other primary group members in the city. Through such social network of kinship the migrant gets mainly three kinds of help, material assistance, intermediary help and help in making new social connections. On the other hand the recipients in the city get a chance to re-establish the social ties with people ‘back home’ (Choldin 1973: 167). The migrant Bengali idol-making in Delhi are however yet to form any strong cohesive migrant group.
city, the aspirations either change to be in some better, fixed paid job or, set up independent business ventures. Of the most wanted choice of jobs, being a motor mechanic in a company is the first in the list, and then being a signboard painter.

The seasonal migrants return to their natal villages usually with savings and other less tangible effects\(^{34}\). However, while conventional theories holds that these returnees should bring with them capital and savings which they can re-invest we found that in most of the cases the earnings are primarily used up in the housing and consumption during their stay in the city, the rest of the money then goes into meeting the immediate needs of the family and there have hardly been any large scale investments that has led to an upward mobility in life style.

Another reason for limited change in their life style is because of the high transaction costs that they have to incur at the time of migrating to the new destination. In order to begin work in a new destination, one is required to invest money to finance his journey, housing costs and raw materials of production and this obliges one to even borrow money at very high interest rates. This also poses risks for rural residents to undertake inter-state migration, which may be the possible cause for the limited number of migrants that we see here.

The individual migrants make their decisions depending on the household and the community. Since the women of the household take part in production activity it becomes easier for them to leave the household for some months, without losing business interest in the native place. For example, Manik Pal of Delhi explained that before leaving for Delhi, he makes some rough structures and half finished idols which can be completed by the women of his household since all are familiar with the work. This also leaves a person relatively free of any time constraints, because production and sale will not be

\(^{34}\) By using the expression 'less tangible' I refer to the components of skills, changes in world-view, changes in status which are immeasurable. It is important to note that seasonal migration has not disturbed the occupational structure, and consequently no changes in their status and mobility, except may be in economic terms. This is unlike the experiences of other lower caste groups like the Ramgharias, Ad Dharmis (Saberwal 1976) or, or the Camars (Cohn 1955), or, the Kaikoolars (Mines 1984), or, the Nadars, where there has been a conscious struggle around caste and caste identity through social movements, political negotiations and formation of caste associations (Hardgrave 1968).
affected even if the individual migrant may not be able to return to his home within the stipulated time. Hence the migrant is also assured about some amount of income from the household activity, which can supplement the income from the city. Thus greater participation of women means more income for the migrant units, as opposed to other type of migration where men leave their womenfolk for work in the city and the households entirely depend on the remittances sent or brought back by the individual migrant. This principle of family organisation also helps in diversifying the sources of income in case when the migrating member is engaged in any other job in the city other than idol-making. The rest of the family members can still carry on the organisation of production with efficiency.

What is lacking in this system of migration that characterizes many rural migration patterns is an institutionalized system – meaning an “apparently quasi-autonomous system, with rules and norms, allowing specific individuals and organisations to attain their objectives” (Guilmoto and Sandron 2001: 144). This is because migration is increasingly marked by competition and an over population of idol-makers might ruin the market for all. There is not much intermingling among the different idol-makers since they consciously avoid making a micro-society of Bengali idol-makers and prefer to live with the local pottery making groups. Thus the population of the Bengali idol-makers is dispersed throughout the city among different potters locality.

Change of Occupation: Inter & Intra-Generational Mobility

While on the one hand idol-makers from the countryside are migrating to different cities outside West Bengal and retaining their craft, the trend in Kumartuli speaks of a different way of thinking. Here the idol-makers are in a transition stage. They do not wish to continue to work on the present occupation nor do they have sufficient avenues to

35 Studies have been done on the effect of migration in relation to social capital, social relations and environment. Coastal ecosystems were shown to be experiencing extreme population pressure because of migration which is influenced not only by social networks but also remittances that effects the environmental outcomes both in places of origin and destination (Curran 2002: 115 - 117).

36 In the smaller cities we see that there are distinct ‘mohallas’ or neighbourhoods which is not merely a geographical space but also a shared social space (Vatuk 1972), and migrants from the same areas prefer to stay in close proximity thereby maintaining the institutions of social organization, ties of family and kinship.
change the occupation. Since change of occupation will require another specific set of skills the changes often does not take place, because they lack the opportunities to learn new skills.

Occupational mobility is also linked to social mobility. This is because change in occupation also leads to change in income and life style, which can cause a shift in the social status\(^{37}\) of the individual/s. This kind of social mobility can be intergenerational, i.e., from one generation to the next or intra-generational, meaning within the same generation. Among the idol-makers of Kumartuli we find that there exists different sources of income from a combination of varied occupation for the traditional idol-makers: (a) idol-makers who have given up the work completely and have chosen other occupations; (b) idol-makers who continue the making of idols as their main occupation; (c) idol-makers who have chosen another occupation but still practice idol-making as their secondary occupation; and, (d) idol-makers who primarily practice idol-making but have taken up other subsidiary occupations to augment the income.

On the other hand, there are a growing number of unskilled labourers from other castes who are joining this occupation. Of them, the influx is more from lower caste groups like Uttam Das, Achintya Basak etc. In cases where the person belongs to an upper caste it is mostly because of dire economic conditions and lack of skills or education or opportunity to secure any other kind of work. For example, both Achintya and Uttam have undergone upward mobility. Achintya because his father was engaged in the making of small amulets (maduli banano) and Uttam because his father died without leaving any savings and he had to struggle to make a livelihood for himself and his family. The life stories of idol-makers like Asit Mukherjee or Narugopal De speak of another situation where they were forced to undergo downward social mobility, due to the neglect of the parents who abandoned them or the family who left them, in order to fend for themselves. The fact that inter-generational social mobility is linked with the family unit is also glaringly evident when we see the differentials in occupational pattern

\(^{37}\) Social status is over and above the occupational status. It signifies a "specific style of life" and is determined by a "specific, positive or negative, social estimation of honor" (Weber 1967: 187).
in terms of birth order. If the business is successful, the eldest son is expected to succeed the father. The other off-springs are expected to receive better education since by that time the father is fully established and these offspring tend to change their occupation towards a work that has higher status.

Anyone who has a stable income has an aim to educate his children, sufficient to secure them a white collar job or wants them to acquire vocational training skills that can secure them either a paid job or better business opportunities. Though whether or not the income of a driver/electrician/carpenter is more than that of an idol-maker, is a perception that requires further investigation. The change from an entire social setting of an independent, self-employed craftsman to an ordinary worker defies easy evaluation in terms of upward/downward mobility. For it is evident that,

*There can be series of distinct clusters or positions which differ in their relationship to the market, life chances, etc., and yet which are roughly equivalent in power, wealth or prestige.*

_Hatt 1965: 252_

However, though it is necessary to evaluate the change in social position in terms of the entire social milieu the individual belonged to and to the social milieu that he enters, what also matters is the perception of the individuals themselves about their social ranking in terms of material wealth. Moreover, what is also important to note is that of the total number of idol-makers interviewed, almost everyone was of the opinion that the work is providing them only with a subsistence income and has no further opportunities. More than that, it is a lowly job – they used the term "nongra kaaj" meaning dirty job, which they do not want their offspring to continue. One can see that the general ranking of occupational categories also influence their aspirations. For an idol-maker, the job of an electrician or a painter seems to be more prestigious. In other cases, it is the security of the particular job that holds more appeal to the idol-maker. A handful also deem this to be a prestigious occupation with the upsurge of recognition in media and public eye,

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38 Saburo Yasuda (1964) has explained at length how birth order becomes important in analyzing the social mobility patterns in Japanese society. There the institution of primogeniture influences mobility whereby in self-employed families the eldest son is expected to succeed his father (Yasuda 1964: 22). Similar parallels can be drawn in Indian situation where inheritance flows to the eldest son, even though others may have coparcenary rights.
travelling overseas or to other states within the country and hence believe that a proper encouragement of the craft in terms of better and regularized payment can lure the traditional idol-makers in continuing the craft.

Family background plays a very important role, both in continuing the traditional occupation and in pursuing a new work. The support system is more in a joint family where one or more of the members are engaged in other occupations. While one or the other siblings are engaged in salaried job, one or two are still engaged in the family occupation. More specifically when the family is large it is only the less educated ones who stick to the idol-making business, while others shift to a different occupation. One of the idol-maker says,

We are seven brothers of which only three are engaged in idol-making. Of the others one is Peshkar, other is a car dealer, one paints glow sign etc., one is a labourer in Kumartuli (karigar).

Almost similar thoughts are echoed by another

In my father’s generation only my father is involved in idol-making, my uncle has Central Government job.

For him it was evident that the regular earning from the established business of idol-making was more desirable than irregular earning in a new job but at the same time he tried to diversify

I am also involved in other types of work like interior designing, Mural work, clay modelling, portraits, life study etc. However, most of the work is as a sub-contractor of a bigger contractor who has procured the order from a corporate house or government body.

If we make the following table on a rough estimate so as to see the patterns of occupational mobility it appears that while the sons of the erstwhile idol-makers are trying to shift to better-paid and professional jobs, a sufficient number is still engaged in the family occupation. On the other hand, it is the erstwhile agriculturalists, potters and

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39 Peshkar is the Bengali word for someone who writes and keeps records of the courtroom proceedings.

40 As we will see, the shift is towards other occupations which are new and associated with urban growth. The occupational mobility is not towards traditional occupation of other castes. While one can say that this is because of the depressed status of potters as found in other parts (Sivaram 1990), I feel this is because scope in traditional occupation is declining. However authors like Sivaram (1990) stated that mobility is greater among castes who have been involved in the jajmani system. This study shows that both traditional
other unskilled labourers who are joining the work of idol-making, mostly as labourers and not as master-craftsmen.

Table 1: Charting the proportion of Inter-generational Mobility Pattern among Idol-Makers

| Father's Occupation   | Son's Present Occupation
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Potter</td>
<td>Potter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Idol-maker</strong></td>
<td>1-2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculturist</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self employed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical/skilled worker</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unskilled labourer</td>
<td>30-40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Social mobility is accelerated in two ways; it “is high if the opportunity structure is open – that is, if the barriers and advantages associated with a persons background are few” or “if growth is strong and widespread enough to make everyone better off” (Beller and Hout 2006). In case of the idol-makers it is only the former which has been a factor behind mobility since economic growth has not been strong under the communist rule in West Bengal41.

Intra-generational mobility pattern is evident in situations where the idol-makers have undergone changes from being an idol-maker to primarily a businessman, or by

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41 The economy of West Bengal has seen only moderate developments in its 25 years of political stability and based on some crucial indices of industrialization or rank of per capita state domestic product, the economic performance was on the decline till 2000-01 (Sarkar 2006: 341). There is also an increasing informalisation of the economy which has led to economic stagnation. This has been a deliberate ploy of the government to maintain the dependency on the organised left party rule, because people engaged in the informal sector for livelihood do not always live by formal laws and rules and therefore require political protection which is best provided by the local dadas of the ruling left parties (Sarkar 2006: 342).
combining the traditional work along with the regular salaried job, or by switching over
to another craft when the traditional work failed to yield enough income, or by changing
the nature of operation that is from being a producer-owner to a putting out worker. The
effort among these idol-makers is to generate enough income to earn a livelihood in the
city. Hence, a 64 year old idol-maker and presently modeller says,

I turned towards selling miniature idols from moulds (chacherputul) when I saw that the
big idols are not much profitable and there is too much competition. For the last 12
years I am selling small models by procuring them from clay modellers in Krishnanagar,
Kalighat, Ultandanga. I mainly make big models on different medium, clay, fibre, paper
pulp etc. However, I am more of a trader than an artist; I buy goods from other smaller
craftsmen and sell them in my shop.

Other craftsmen, like sola or pith worker Karnadhar Das, would say

I underwent a huge loss and later had to close down my shop. But then since I had a
customer base I took up work on piece rate basis. I secure an order and all my family
members work from home to complete that. I work like a procurement and supply agent
of sola decorations.

Hence it is difficult to assess occupational mobility because one may leave the work
of idol-making and later come back to do the same. Such is the case of young Nabakumar
Pal

After finishing my formal training I worked for about 2 years in Tollygunje Studio, in the
art direction of movies but the income there was very irregular since I was just a junior
assistant. There were also many other problems, the environment was not okay for me (he
used the word 'nongrami' meaning dirty/unhealthy interactions), there was a lot of
internal politics. So I came back to work in my father's studio (karkhana) at Kumartuli in
1997-98.

Bhanu, however, may not have returned to the traditional family occupation, but is
linked to the art of idol-making in a different capacity,

I have worked for one year in idol-making after I left school but did not like the work.
Then I learnt some electrical work and worked with a small electrical goods repairing
shop till 1978-89. There was not much independence in this work and I always aspired to
do something on my own. In 1990 I set up a small idol jewellery shop along with my
brother. By 1991 I started to design and make the jewellery because the readymade
jewellery that I used to sell was not catering to what the customers were demanding.
Since I had a good hand at drawing and painting, I thought of designing on my own so as
to meet the customers demand.
Many combine the work of idol-making with a regular and fixed salaried job. They continue the traditional occupation either to fulfil their passion as artist, or to augment the family income. Thus, Bijoy Ghosh still continues to work on decorative items.

I have two sons but both are doing other kinds of work. Of the two, the elder one sometimes looks after the sale while the other knows the work and helps me during peak time. I am trying to reduce the volume of my business, since the sons are not interested in this.

Some were forced to change traditional occupation, because they incurred huge losses and had to find new avenues to earn income. Hence for the successful entrepreneur, Pradyut Pal the journey has been towards an upward social mobility.

I continued the work for 3 years after my grandfather’s death but stopped because of different reasons. At that time, this is around 1998-99, I noticed that with the rising popularity of Theme Pujas in Kolkata and also in various parts of India, the demand for traditional idols were decreasing, so was traditional jewellery of sola and zari. In one of the years I had to incur loss in the business. It was during that time that I stopped jewellery making and focused entirely on marketing of the traditional goods, so as to increase the demand and thereby prices of idols.

However, not all have lost faith in their traditional occupation. Some of them think that it is better than other occupations. As Sunil Pal says

I definitely want my grandson and the generations after that to continue this work. Though it requires more time, effort and thinking when compared to other work, it definitely pays and gives much more satisfaction. Why do you think that all the craftsmen in this area are still continuing and why are new people coming every year?

Some among them had better fortune either because they were good craftsmen or they stayed together, combining each of their skills in doing good business. As Kartik Pal says

We shifted to our own house in Dumdum for the last 25 years. We are still a joint family and we are three brothers, all of us are engaged in this business, which is jointly owned. I am the middle brother; the other two have passed only the 10th standard, while I am a graduate and look after the monetary side.

But at the same time, he fears that

The way things have been developing (dinkaler ja obostha) we are not even sure whether the next generation, our sons will continue the work or not. It saddens me to note that our government has promoted a lot of craft but done nothing for this particular art/craft. There is no path ahead, no development in this area.
Some are attached to the occupation of idol-making as a way of life, as reflected in the words of a 73 year old idol-maker, whose son is not directly involved in idol-making but is a screen painter.

*I also believe that my workshop and business will not be closed down; I have faith in my son and know that he will employ trusted labourers/workers to continue the work.*

The income from idol-making is also supplemented in cases by the wives who might be engaged in other occupations like putting-out labour in jewellery designing, working in the small factories in the locality etc., but the percentages of such families are minuscule and the income just enough to meet everyday small necessities. One or two strident examples of successful women idol-makers speak of a rapid upward mobility through sheer hard work and perseverance along with some amount of media attention. The cases of Mala Pal, and China Pal who took up idol-making as a main occupation have allowed them to provide more than subsistence earning for the family, but such incidents still remains to be inspirational stories and not the regular practice.

The labourers belonging to the traditional caste of idol-makers/potters are no longer satisfied with the daily meagre income that barely supports the family; they envisage a better future for their offspring, even if they had to struggle for that, and hence talk of long term goals and aspirations. They have inspirational examples among their group that provides an incentive to strive for a better future and also think that with more support from the government there are scopes of improvement. Time and again, they reiterated that,

*We don’t want our future generations to continue this work because there is no future and no security in this work. These days the Pal are not coming to do clay work, people from other caste, lower castes come greater in numbers. The wages have not increased in comparison to the inflation of prices.*

Social mobility in terms of changing lifestyles\(^\text{42}\) has been experienced by a majority of the producers-owners of Kumartuli. The conditions of living have improved over the

\(^{42}\) ‘Life style’ as a relatively empirical and stable pattern of work, employment, consumption, living patterns and future plan that supplements the social stratification theory by means of distinction of one life style from another. Life style is primarily determined by the consumption pattern of leisure goods (Bögenhold 2001). Thus changes in lifestyle would empirically reflect the upward economic mobility.
years. This improvement is both a result of change and advancement in infrastructural facilities, which is a part of being in an urban area and comparative rise in income levels. The fact of owning a television, a refrigerator or a mobile set does not necessary mean affluence for the household. This is because as one of them remarked, “mobile is with everyone, it is a part of the contemporary culture of which we are also a part”. Some of these have been included in their lifestyle at the cost of indebtedness but nevertheless have been acquired in order to ensure social prestige. The top-rank of the master craftsmen have also shifted their home to better localities, have built their own residences and educated their sons but the number of such artisans when compared to the total strength of the population involved in idol-making is only a mere 10% to 15%.

Better educational opportunities and equal opportunity legislation and its enforcement are potential for developing opportunity structures and hence social mobility. Patterns of occupational mobility in terms of change in occupation are also visible among the second generation of migrants in Delhi. But they have not undergone many changes because there might be still some scope of practicing the work in a relatively less competitive market. Hence, we find that Subir Pal, son of the famous artist Shambhu Pal, took up idol-making as the main occupation by leaving his job as an accountant in a shop, because he felt that this work is more independent and earns fame and recognition, and if managed suitably can yield more income than his petty accountant’s job. Similarly, his maternal uncle still works with clay whenever he finds time from his schedule as a watchman in a factory, since he feels that it gives him a feeling of rootedness.

An important observation that can be made in relation to the mobility pattern of this craftsmen community as a whole is that while few skilled/semi-skilled workmen in the community may have suffered downward mobility, most of them have retained their social positioning in terms of income. Furthermore, the sons of skilled craftsmen/artisans rarely dropped down into the ranks of unskilled or semi-skilled, almost half of them at

Hence, the proliferation of the use of refrigerator, television and mobile phones, even when they have to be bought in credit.
least attain a middle class status, or move towards non-manual occupations. The occupation of idol-making as an economic activity can only thrive in the presence of a strong market for the product that will generate demand and hence prices for the idols. Idol-making as a craft to be practiced by the traditional castes and the newcomers should have a corresponding income, social recognition and scope to expand. In the following chapter we will see the inter-linkages of the different factors that in many ways either promotes or inhibits the burgeoning of a ‘market’ and a ‘market place’ for the idol-makers.