Chapter 1
Introduction

As a resident of Kolkata, Durga Puja has been an all too familiar event for me, celebrated each year in the various neighbourhoods of the city, with great aplomb. Almost every year just before the Durga Puja, there are columns in the local newspaper about the works of art being executed in the narrow lanes of the city. This would reflect the pace at which the work of idol-making is progressing, the trends and patterns of the models (idols) that are being executed that would be reflecting the popular culture of the day. Yet, at the same time the makers/creators who are crafting this art are absent from the public gaze except for some interviews with famous artists\(^1\). It is this invisibility of the crafts people who are otherwise an intrinsic part of the culture of Durga Puja, that kindled my interest in the idol-makers and it was not until much later when I became sociologically interested in them. My curiosity was directed towards not the social event of Durga puja only but the makers behind the scene – the ‘Murtikaras’/idol-makers, who relentlessly create the clay idols every year, only to see their creation being eventually demolished in the ritual of immersion of the goddess. This is a very specialized occupational group whose livelihood is dependent on the making of clay images of deities. What is also important to remember at this juncture is that this particular occupation is a result of the culture of idol-worship among the Hindus in India and more particularly among the Bengali community. The idol-makers represent specific distinctiveness since their work can be both, an urban based or a rural based occupation.

Though idol making can be considered today as one of the principle forms of ‘urban folk art’ (Guha-Thakurta 2004)\(^2\), in recent years with an art resurrection of sorts, Durga Puja in Kolkata has given a new space for popular artistic productions and consumption

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\(^1\) The time frame that has been discussed in this paragraph is before 2002-2003. Till the time the book by Anita Agnihotri (2001) was published, the idol-makers were at the same time visible and invisible to the general population. All knew of their existence but not how they exist.

\(^2\) A genre of art that has mass spectatorship, Guha-Thakurta (2004a) has used this term in context with the changing identity of Durga puja from a generalized public kitsch to one of cities most popular and unique art events.
of idol making through the emergence of ‘theme’ pujas. New kinds of artists, designers and set producers, ranging from successful art college trained professionals to the local intellectuals, the amateurs all have entered in this new field of Durga Puja. They are sometimes in collaboration, but more often in competition, with the hereditary idol makers of Kumartuli. This has also created a perceived threat to the trade of Kumartuli idol makers for there are many who are clearly losing out in this rising wave of the ‘theme’ pujas. These traditional idol-makers of Kumartuli have been associated historically with the culture of Durga puja celebration in Bengal and in Kolkata for over the last 250 years or so, and have marked a niche for themselves as a specialized group of craftsmen among the ordinary potters. It is this community of people who are undergoing adaptations and innovations in their life and work in order to fulfil the ever changing demands of the Durga puja, trying to maintain that fine balance between ritual authenticity and innovative ‘art’, which form the canvas of our enquiry.

Today idol making is gaining in popularity as an art form. It involves a variety of professionals other than the traditional idol-makers. A close inspection of this community, who primarily thrive on this occupation, will help us to understand the various realities of these artisans. We will also examine the different fates of the famous art college graduates who are involved in this craft for the sake of experimentation and glory, and of the numerous small unknown artists whose lives depend on the sale of one or two idols during the peak season. My primary objective is to look closely at the artisans. This would involve an analysis of their past and future, image making as part of a growing market and its link with the art and culture of Bengal. This has formed the main idea behind the thesis encompassing a range of questions like: Who are these murtikaras/ idol makers? What is their way of life? How do they perceive their art? How

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3 A term referred to by creative personnel involved in the puja. ‘Theme’ puja as a typology has grown with the awards and rewards ceremonies of Durga puja festivities since the late ’80s where the Puja in its entirety – the pandal, the image, the lights, the colours, the ornamentation and even the music – is conceived of and laid out as an integrated theme by an art designer and his team. The tableau takes on here the form of a tightly-designed set, often no less than hybrid mélange of histories, styles and objects but presented nonetheless as a single concept (Guha-Thakurta 2004).

4 Murtikara is a commonly used Hindi word for idol-makers, the word can be split to mean ‘murti’ - idol or image, ‘kara’ is one who does, i.e. ‘one who makes idol’. The word in Bengali is ‘protima shilpi’ which literally means ‘image artisan’. The word Shilpokala, in Bengali encompasses both, art and craft, shilpo
has idol-making as an occupation become the biggest folk art of the metropolis and it's nearby areas? How is this particular occupation adopting and displaying the patterns of occupational mobility?

The focus of this specific study on the potter community therefore has referred not only to patterns of social stratification vis-à-vis potter communities in other regions of India as against the 'varna' scheme; but it also draws attention to the distinctiveness of an occupational caste as a vocational category; and discuss the impact of modern social and economic institutions on artisan groups. The aim has been to understand the various elements of both the material and socio-religious life of communities and to try to reconstruct the cultural history of a particular area.

**The Problem**

My research questions were formed in relation to those idol-makers who have traditionally been associated with this craft for generations. The question was embedded in the historical emergence of this group as a distinct occupational category and how over time they have been associated with the culture of Durga Puja. To take it further from here, I wanted to understand their current social position and occupational existence in the changing scenario of Durga puja culture that has involved various categories of artists- well known and less known, art designers, set producers, in some cases event management groups in the making of the Puja. It was felt that with the involvement of these various agencies, the erstwhile traditional idol-makers are losing their ground, being reduced to either supplying the idol and in many cases are not even commissioned to do that. The questions for me, therefore, were varied in terms of how these people perceive their work, how have they been coping with the changing trends, how has this affected their work in terms of innovation, or has it resulted in altogether deserting the work in search of new livelihood and is there still a market for their kind of work. These led me to look at one of the most prominent and famous localities of idol-making, i.e., Kumartuli.
Hence, the study has looked at the broad themes of,

i) Local history of the community - myths of origin and the relationship to the wider framework of Indian castes - religious symbolism and rituals of this community in particular.

ii) Potters as an occupational group - history of pottery, techniques of work and modern developments in the technique, the image-makers and their status as 'artisans' vis-à-vis the 'artist', their perception about their 'art' etc.

iii) Market for this occupation, changing economic conditions, recognition/plight of artists etc.

Thus, the rest of the thesis will try to evolve a comprehensive picture of the particular artisan group of clay-modellers/idol-makers of Bengal, in the context of the major festival of Bengali Hindus, the Durga Puja – the changes they have experienced as an occupational caste group, in terms of social, cultural, occupational and spatial mobility. However, these phenomena were studied within a defined geographical boundary, both in the native setting and in a region where they have a strong diasporic existence.

**Review of Literature**

The study is based on the dense theoretical traditions of the sociology of caste, sociology of migration, occupational mobility, sociology of market and concepts in urban sociology. A re-reading of the sociology of caste was important to understand the positioning of the idol-makers in the local caste structure, since idol making in itself is a traditional occupation and has invariable linkages in the social stratification pattern based on occupation. Moreover, for me, no understanding of traditional occupational categories can be complete without realizing the caste underpinnings that has further implications on the occupational pattern and changes. Once the position of idol-makers as an occupational caste group was identified, it also became important to analyse the question of their existence and the patterns of occupational movements within them.
While pottery as an oldest craft has interested different streams of scholars over the years, from the standpoints of ethnology (Coomaraswamy 1909, Gupta 1988), archaeology (Sengupta & Panja 2002, Pal & Haq 2000), contemporary aestheticism (Dhamija 1970, Chattopadhyay 1975, 1978, Fischer & Shah 1970), ethnoarchaeology (Saraswati 1978, Pal 1978, Mirmira 1987) and varying types of social significance, yet as Foster has pointed out there is lack of studies on sociological aspects of pottery and potters. In case of India, the pioneering work of Baidyanath Saraswati on the pottery traditions of India (1978), including research on pottery of different Indian states (Behura 1964, 1978; Bose 1982; Foster 1956; Gupta 1969; Miller 1985; Saraswati and Behura 1966; Sharma 1964), may not be classified as strictly sociological. Descriptions of technologies of potters of different parts of the country were undertaken by colonial officers (Dobbs 1895; Gait 1897), technical aspects have also been widely studied and documented in the works of Gurcharan Singh (1979), Fischer and Shah (1970). Veena Monga (1967) discussed about the social mobility among the potters and wrote about the issues of class, status and power among the potter’s as a caste in Western UP and Delhi. Another work by Gupta (1988) is mostly an account of the pottery centres of UP like Khurja, Chunnar, Chinhat and Phoolpur in UP. The important aspects of the growth and development of pottery industry, the organizational structure and administrative set up and marketing of finished products were discussed by him. Shantha Krishnan’s (1989) work on the traditional potters of Delhi, their craft, enablement and entitlements is a more thorough socio-economic survey of the traditional potters. In other sociological writings of Srinivas (1987), Ghurye (1961), Wiser (1978), Mayer (1970) and Dumont (1972), potters find mention as a part of the localized ‘jati’ system.

However, there has been no comprehensive work on potters or their craft products in Bengal. Research work on Bengal pottery and potters has been limited to a monograph

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5Foster (1956) stated that except some of the Indian caste studies, very little of research studies reveal about the status of potters in their society, their understanding of their art and economy and about the processes that contributes towards the stability of a tradition. Brouwer (1995) also stated that most anthropological and sociological studies have focused on Brahmans (Miller 1934, Gough 1935, 1956, 1960, Harper 1964, Beteille 1965, Mencher and Goldberg 1967, Appadurai 1987), or on dominant agriculturalists (Epstein 1962, Beck 1972). Few anthropologists have paid attention to other castes (Mayer 1960, Pocock 1962 and David 1974). However, in none of these studies do artisans play a central role either ethnographically or theoretically (Brouwer 1995: 3).
on potters of Krishnanagar (Chakravarti 1985). It is a detailed exposition of the history of 200 years of the city, who were the patrons of this art and the origin of these potters, their social status and economic foundation and the changes therein. These potters are in many ways linked to the idol-making community in Kumartuli. The recent work by Anita Agnihotri (2001) can be described at best as a descriptive long essay about popular idol-makers/artists in the city of Kolkata. It fails to give an in-depth understanding of the idol-makers as an occupational group and the survival of idol-making as an art form. This general lack of in-depth fieldwork on contemporary idol making has prompted me to initiate a sociological understanding of the potters as an occupational category. The focus will be on the pottery in Bengal, a region that is historically renowned for its clay wares and terracotta items. There will be an attempt to understand, how among the well known pottery making region/clusters of Bengal like, Bankura, Krishnanagar and Kumartuli, where pottery have survived over the years, do the present potter families/communities negotiate with the changing economic and social conditions. Renewed interest in pottery items in recent years among the general urban population have expanded the market but has this necessarily led to a renewed interest in pursuing traditional occupation among the traditional potter castes? This will lead us in understanding their issues of survival and revival, the idol-makers’ motivation in continuing his/her work, the factors influencing his decisions about the item he makes and the design he puts on them, what makes him specialize on one form, rather than making general earthenware etc. All these questions will come under the purview of our research. The study therefore will focus on the distinctiveness of the potter caste in Bengal, the specific techniques of art and the changes that have happened in the practice of pottery making as an art and the gradual emergence of idol-making as distinct from other styles of pottery. Such an understanding will also necessitate a reflection on the diasporic existence of Bengali idol-makers in several parts of northern India, especially the city of Delhi, where pottery and ritual art have gained much recognition over the years.

For the purpose of research, while I will be limiting myself to some specific geographical locations, it is also necessary to remember that we are talking of a region, which has had a much wider cultural identity than that presently denoted by its
geographical boundaries. This has greatly influenced the occupational and mobility pattern of the potter caste in Bengal. Bengal, as a historical entity, refers to the land bounded on the north by Himalaya and the lands of Nepal, Sikkim, and Bhutan; on the north east by the Brahmaputra river and its highlands; extending to the northwest along the northern plains of Bhagirathi upto Dvarbhanga; bounded on the east by the Garo, Khasi, Jaintia, Tripura, and Chattagrama ranges; and on the west by mountainous forests of Rajmahal, Santal Parganas, Chotanagpur, Manbhum, Dhalbhum, Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj (http://search.com.bd/banglapedia/HT/P_0238.htm). It thus extends beyond the combined region comprising the present state of West Bengal in India and the country of Bangladesh. It is demographically composed by people united by a common language, Bengali, a common social structure, a religious mixture of Hindus and Muslims, and a largely shared history.

Sociological discussion on caste in India has its beginnings in the middle of the 19th century in the writings of travellers, missionaries and, above all, civil servants. Though discussions of caste are also found in ancient literary tradition or in Indological texts they are from a different viewpoint than the contemporary social theory (Beteille 1992:14).

The ‘Sociology for India’ has long ago established the futility of understanding caste and caste system in India only through the textual version of the ‘Purusashukta’ origin, or only by relying on empirical ethnographic studies, and has come up with varying explanations of contextualising caste. The debates became ever stronger after the publication of Louis Dumont’s “Homo Hierarchichus” (1970). Dumont tried to “reduce observed diversities of thought and behaviour to certain basic structural patterns, of which the actors may not be aware, but which lie behind manifest diversities” (Das 1982:3). Such an idealist explanation of caste group refused to explain the various

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6 This is different from the actual geographical entity of West Bengal, as it is found in the map of India in 2007. I have purposefully taken these wider dimensions of wikipedia to discuss the presence of Bengali culture in the eastern region of the country because I feel that this has influenced the occupation of idol-making to a great extent.

7 This is one of the later hymns of Rig-Veda where a reference has been made about the origin of the four orders of society as emanating from the sacrifice of the Primeval Being. The names of those four orders are Brahmana, Rjanya, Vaishya and Sudra, who have come respectively from the mouth, the arms, the thighs and the feet of the Creator (Ghurye 1961: 43).
incongruities that are found in the caste system in different regions, subjecting them to occasional discrepancies.

Though Srinivas, while writing about ‘Varna and Caste’ (1962) tried to distinguish how the concept of ‘varna’ had deeply and wrongly influenced the interpretation of the ‘ethnographic reality’ of ‘caste’ – Dumontian explanation gave rise to an all-encompassing cultural construct to the exclusion of material or political consideration. Therefore, ‘varna’ remained the model to which the observed facts were subsequently fitted.

Hence, Dumont remained the most systematic exponent of the dominant view on caste system as a “hierarchical relation...between larger and smaller, or more precisely between that which encompasses and that which is encompassed” (1970:24). He undermined other conceptual views in terms of details, or in terms of conception and methodology. In later years, Declan Quigley (1993) pointed out that the opposition between ‘purity and impurity’ is not just unique to Indian society but characterizes all human societies and argued that any adequate explanation of caste must go beyond its unconditional, ideological, Brahmanical validation. Others, like Mckim Marriott (1967) stressed the importance of ‘little tradition’ in influencing as well as being influenced by ‘great tradition’, or, occupational categories as more indicative in understanding complexities of caste group (Singer 1972).

Therefore, the case of caste hierarchy is not a “true hierarchy... an unambiguous linear ranking on a single variable”, since there are “discrete categories of caste and not a single continuous hierarchy or ranking” (Gupta 2000:59). Accordingly, “if one were to look at the customs and traditions followed by different castes one would be hard put to force them into any grading system on the basis of purity and pollution” (Gupta 2000:59). Earlier too, Srinivas (1962) and Ghurye (1972) pointed out that the varna scheme can at best refer only to broad categories of society and not its real and effective units. Moreover, caste groups are mobile, that is they can move up in the varna scheme through
sanskritization'\(^8\) of the way of life of the ‘dominant’\(^9\) caste in the region, and very often claim a status equal to the other two higher ‘varnas’ (Kshatriya and Vaishya) rather than the Brahmins.

For Dumont (1970) though, ranking of caste is not a result of material conditions but is found in the religious texts as binary oppositions – in the ancient theory of ‘varna’. In all practical instances what is observed though (even in our study) is that caste hierarchy is local where there is a considerable amount of disparity between ritual, and economic and political position of a caste. This is pronounced in the way when none of the so called lower castes are ready to accept their given status and each producing its own tale of origin, claiming to be a ‘fallen’ higher caste who has become so because of the cheating and cunning of other groups belonging to the same hierarchical level, or after having committed some ‘unknown’ fault (Srinivas 1962)\(^10\). Kjaerholm (1991) states that though the position of the highest and lowest ranking castes are clear, it is the caste in between which has interesting deviations (1991: 179). He therefore, reinforces Gupta (2000) by stating that “all castes apply different criteria of ranking the various castes groups of the local rural society...there is no homogeneous and universally acknowledged hierarchy with regard to the placing of various groups (1991: 181).

In ‘Structure and Cognition’ (1982), Veena Das argues that the very ambiguity and flexibility of the caste categories makes them important – both as categories of thought and tools of action. Kolenda (1967), on the other hand argued for the importance of ‘jajmani’ system as a primary indicator of caste system and its functions in village India. Redfield and Singer (1967), Mandelbaum (1974), Dube (1955), Mayer (1970), Gough

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\(^8\) The term ‘sanskritization’ was coined by M.N.Srinivas (1962). It is a process whereby the lower castes of the area adapts the rituals and way of life of the upper castes, thereby moving higher up in the stratification system, a twin process of ‘westernization’ also occurs whereby the upper castes emulate western lifestyle.

\(^9\) The ‘dominant’ caste may or may not be the highest caste in the varna category, i.e., the Brahmins. A particular caste may be dominant in the regional hierarchy in terms of demographic, economic, political and social wealth, and therefore has a higher status as compared to other castes in the area, and becomes the reference point of ‘sanskritization’ for the lower caste groups in the area (Srinivas 1987).

\(^10\) In his study of the Karkattar caste in Rajavallipuram in the Tirunelveli district of Tamilnadu, Kjaerholm highlighted considerable discrepancies in the traditional ranking of certain castes like velar (potter), marava, idaiyar and karkatta and their present hierarchical division. The ritual ranking is generally based on certain criteria like vegetarianism, type of work in terms of pollution effect, whether divorce is permitted or not (Kjaerholm 1995: 177) etc.
(1960) etc have all voiced the social anthropologists’ commitment in understanding the caste system in India and its changing nature.

Irravati Karve emphasized the diversity of Indian culture, a diversity resulting from the variety of cultural patterns held by a multitude of castes. The interdependence and inter relations between these castes is ‘tangential and peripheral’ (Karve 1953). However, while Karve agree with Dumont that the pattern of caste system has been fixed before the Christian period and religion and politics are divorced from each other, Karve is more concerned with the culture of castes and especially the difference between castes. She also identified that within a region there are often several jatis with the same traditional occupation and the same general name, but they differ widely in behaviour, culture, historical tradition and in physical traits. These jatis together form a kind of ‘caste cluster’. It is such ambiguities in the observance of status hierarchy that make the social arrangements of caste and occupation more nuanced than the theoretical definitions.

The nuances have been more effectively highlighted by K.L. Sharma (2001) in his analysis of caste & class nexus in modern India as opposed to understanding of caste & class as dichotomous category. For him, caste group is both an actual status group at the micro level and an identity group at the macro level. Thus, while at the micro level caste is more a representation of the Indian class structure, at the macro level it acts as an interest group. However, the utilization of caste membership as a resource group/interest group “varies from caste to caste depending upon the status of a given caste in a given area” (Sharma 2001: 18-19). His arguments are somewhat similar to that of Dirks (2002), wherein he identified caste and class as aspects of the same structural reality and that there is a “caste basis of class and also a class basis of caste” (Sharma 2001: 42). He also agrees that structural aspects of caste, i.e., economic and political dimensions have remained underestimated in Indian sociology, because, for example, “a given caste association...is not simply an organization of the members of that caste group, but it is also an organization of unskilled workers or potters or traders” (Sharma 2001: 42). The inter-relationship between caste and class therefore has become obscured and often one is either imposed on the other or reduced to the other.
Nicholas Dirks (2002), in his understanding have shown caste to be a relatively modern phenomenon, a legacy of the British colonial rulers who ‘invented’ the phenomenon as we are familiar today, “as a single term capable of expressing, organizing, and above all ‘systematizing’ India’s diverse forms of social identity, community, and organization” (Dirks 2002: 5). However, it is this phenomenon around which the political movements of Ambedkar and Periyar took form when they worked towards transforming “both the cultural meanings and the political uses of caste in ways that went well beyond the political mandate” (Ibid: 8). So, in Dirks, we find yet another proponent of the localized understanding of caste which decries the “congeries of beliefs, customs, practices and convictions that have been [falsely] designated as traditional” (Ibid: 9).

That caste or caste system is not an unchanging traditional concept is significantly explained by Satish Saberwal (2001) by historically analysing structures and institutionalization. His engagement with the significance of diachrony in shaping the Indian society during and after the colonial period reviews the “ordering devices” like jati and kingship and how these influenced social relationships. He analysed the ‘limits to social change’ by proposing that,

if social structure is defined as the totality of the patterns of enduring social relations in a society [then] men change the links in their patterns of social relations one at a time, and when ‘enough’ men have changed ‘enough’ links, we are likely to say that ‘the structure has changed (emphasis author’s)

Saberwal 1976: 235

Studies of occupational cultures have loomed large in the anthropological accounts of India. The traditional relationship between caste and occupation is a phenomenon observed and analysed closely by social anthropologists like Srinivas (1962-89), Dube (1955), Lewis (1958), Bailey (1957) etc., some even trying to propound an occupational theory of the origin of caste.

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11 He dealt with the question of how within a changing framework of power, of opportunities, of constraints, the Indians employed a variety of strategies, jati and caste affiliations in accessing resources. For more, see Saberwal (2001).
In the later years, accounts by Stella Kramrisch (1975), Milton Singer (1973-75), A.M. Shah and R.G. Shroff (1975) etc., reflect occupational cultures both as an association of a particular caste with a particular occupation and how it refers in different ways to the phenomenon of social stratification, often leading to a construction of a hierarchy of occupations paralleling caste rank. However, while most of these studies were concerned with the occupational mobility and modernization of caste structures as found in North, and North-West India, the Eastern regions of the country, particularly the occupational castes of Bengal and their mobility remains to be thoroughly accounted for. While Pocock’s (1972) exploration on Patidars Gujarat\(^{12}\) focuses on the occupational and spatial mobility of an entrepreneur caste in Gujarat, accounts of ‘Jats and Gujars’ (Bingley 1978) – a prominent agricultural race of the western U.P and Haryana reveals their history and culture as a distinct caste group. A.M. Shah and R.G. Shroff (1975) dealt with the specific occupation of ‘Vahivanca Barots of Gujarat’ as genealogists and mythographers and the ranking as a group in the regional caste hierarchy in relation to similar occupational castes of Bhat and Carans.

Other accounts like that of Singer (1973-75), Y.B. Damle (1963), Panini (1978), McKim Marriott (1967) were looking at indigenous socio-cultural profile of contemporary complex organizations, the foci being on how complex units of production are increasingly characterized by caste-free open occupation rather than traditional caste occupations. Moreover, they also tried to understand the role played by institutions like castes in the social behaviour and attitudes of people participating in comparatively complex organizations and communities. And, almost all these researchers suggesting of ongoing primordial loyalties to caste status to maintain social and cultural exclusiveness, not in any way creating incompatibility with the logic of modern enterprises.

However, all hitherto studies of occupational cultures or occupational caste groups have either been community studies of multi-caste villages in the different cultural regions of the country, or, on the emerging social stratification and changing social

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12 David Pocock (1972) in his book *Kanbi and Patidars* examined the leading cause of migration of the poor members of the Patidars caste of Gujarat to East Africa. Later, in the 1920s these migrants sent large remittances back home, and simultaneously through tobacco cultivation accumulated wealth. Thereafter they claimed a higher caste status by adopting the customs of the dominant group.
values, attitudes, relationships in the growing urban communities. Moreover, these anthropological accounts about “multi-caste villages with substantial population has ignored – comparatively speaking – the ‘few-caste’ villages so much more common in the Indian countryside” (Klass 1972: 603), which may not be the self-sufficient ‘little communities’ of Redfield (1955), and involves a different pattern of social interaction and interdependence with other few-caste villages in the neighbourhood, both in terms of services and maintenance of caste culture.

This seeming preoccupation with understanding of caste also lies in the fact that, caste relations and their corresponding status categories also greatly influence India’s political economy. The historian Susan Bayly (1999) perhaps has provided us with the logic of the existence of caste society, when she writes, “its the man of prowess, the service provider and the settled man of worth [who] formed the ideals around which ‘caste’ norms were forged” (1999: 371). Though existing as a “fluid idea”, caste as a phenomenon has had

*Effects in shaping of ...political and social institutions...[and] caste society expanded in periods of rapid change and upheaval because its elements of both exclusion and open-ended fluidity could help so many people to advantage themselves in situations of either opportunity or uncertainty (or a combination of both).*

Bayly 1999: 367

The further implication of such state of affairs was that,

*Both under the British and in independent India, the Indian state has had a remarkable capacity to reinforce crucial elements of caste. This has occurred both through specific policies of social reform or caste based ‘uplift’, and, ... in the many other areas of state action which have either intentionally or unintentionally contributed to the growth and perpetuation of so-called ‘casteism’ in its numerous modern forms.*

Bayly 1999: 367-68

On the other hand, though caste system may not appear as the erstwhile hierarchically graded, locally integrated, occupationally and ritually specialized endogamous social strata, it exists even in urban areas as occupation based complex network of interest groups preserved through endogamy and legitimized by religion. These groups may no longer close their ranks to individuals from other caste groups to practice the particular traditional occupation; in reality they do not identify others as members of the occupational caste group. In such a situation one tends to forget that
social mobility as a socio-psychological process has persisted over the years, within the caste system without challenging the stratification system itself and that it was possible for the rank of either an individual or a group to change in this way (Rowe 1961:38-40).

"The varna scheme is a hierarchy in the literal sense of the term because ritual considerations form the basis of the differentiation" (Srinivas 1962:67) while caste hierarchy is not only local to some extent but are mobile over a period of time. Moreover, there is a considerable amount of disparity between the ritual and economic or political position of caste. Thus, to quote K.L.Sharma “caste is ... a matter of interpretation rather than substantiation” (Sharma 2001). For Srinivas (1962), the varna scheme while may have distorted caste, provides a sense of familiarity since it is interesting to note that the mobility of a caste is stated in ‘varna’ terms rather than in terms of the local caste situation. For example, the Bedas of Mysore do not call themselves Okkaligas or Kurubas, but identify as ‘Valmiki Brahmins’.

Similarly, many contradictions appear in the social status as ascribed to the potter caste in India. ‘Kumbhar’ is a term of denigration reflecting the low caste status of potter because of the polluted/unclean material he uses for his trade, like mud, clay and ashes (Perryman 2000:17). The symbiotic relationship between the potter making low-fired unglazed pottery and the rules of ritual pollution result in continuous cycles of earthenware being discarded and replaced. This regular replacement of all household pottery at festivals and at occasions of birth, marriage and death, on the other hand keeps the potter in business (Perryman 2000:16).

Alternatively, another word ‘Prajapati” meaning the ‘Lord of the People’\textsuperscript{13} refers to the very first potter God created to make the vessels required for containing food. The wheel, the stick for turning the wheel, are all symbols of creation and are believed to have been given to the potter by the gods as the tools of his trade. A prajapati is someone who works with the basic elements of earth, water and fire which are considered sacred. He creates vessels used in many religious ceremonies and as such is a revered and respected

\textsuperscript{13} Jayaram (1994) noted that the potters of UP called themselves ‘prajapati’.
member of the village. In many communities he even acts as an intermediary priest and is sometimes known as Bhagat (Perryman 2000:17). Moreover, "anthropological thought faces difficulties when it comes to artisans. Their position in society is marked by ‘conflicting claims’ and is said to be an anomaly” (Brouwer 1995:13). For Dumont, the artisans also occupy a deviant position when he argues, “a study is required of the singular, not to say aberrant situation of the five important specialized crafts, comprising of goldsmiths, braziers, carpenters…Among other things, they are ‘caste of the left hand’, call themselves the equals of the Brahmins and intermarry between themselves” (Dumont 1980 quoted in Brouwer 1995:13).

The focus of the present study is on contemporary functions of caste groups and the nature of their presence in determining an individual artisan’s course of life. Historically, the potter caste may not have a stronghold since it falls in the middle range of the caste hierarchy and is not a scheduled category for whom gaining of political power and higher status is a priority; though paradoxically they have been politically recognised as a backward class in the OBC list of West Bengal\(^\text{14}\). At the same time, since caste derives its strength not merely from the power structure of the society but also from its occupational involvement and religious beliefs and practices – wherein the artisan castes are ranked much higher, the mobility pattern may be different from other castes who have strived to become sanskritized. However, it should be noted that the ‘pollution’ complex was never very strong in Bengal, as there have been always ways for a discerning person to cleanse oneself ritually for any ritual violation. Moreover, the ‘potters’ as a caste belongs to one group among the ‘nabashakas’ of Bengal, artisan castes whose ritual ranking is just beneath the Brahmins according to traditional beliefs, as “one of the sixty-four kalas (arts) prescribed for the learned” (Saraswati 1978:4).

\(^{14}\) There is a lot of ambiguity regarding the status of certain castes in the OBC category because West Bengal and Orissa had not prepared any list of OBCs as decreed by the Government of India to the States in August 1961 to prepare their own list of ‘socially and educationally backward classes’ (Srinivas 1996: xxviii). Moreover, till date no political party in West Bengal has tapped the potential. Also many of the OBC (Other Backward Castes) have undergone the “process of sanskritisation by claiming notional ritual superiority” and their economic and political dominance is manifested in their practicing of untouchability or other heinous forms of violence and atrocities on the Dalits (Nandu Ram 2008).
Sociological studies on caste/social mobility in Bengal reveal that upward mobility has been expressed in the form of (a) emergence of new castes (b) rise of a particular caste in popular estimation and the consequent addition of a new stratum to the hierarchy (c) deviation of a section of a particular caste from the traditional occupation of the caste and subsequent formation of a new \textit{sreni} or \textit{samaj}^{15} (sub caste) within the parent caste and (d) movement organized by a particular sub caste for recognition as a separate caste and achievement of a status higher than that of the parent body in the caste hierarchy (Sanyal 1971:320)^{16}.

In a rural area, the potters would most likely live in a Middle stratum \textit{para}^{17} – occupied by artisans, or those who provide other special services (Klass 1972: 606). Among the potters of Bengal, groups of them are highly skilled in the art of manufacturing clay figurines, images and large variety of toys. On the various religious occasions during the year Hindus invoke many of their deities through the medium of clay images – all of which are supplied by the potter artists. Very strangely they call themselves \textit{Karigar} and not artists. However, many of the artisan castes of Kumor (potter) have drifted away from traditional occupation because of low returns. Nevertheless, the caste has remained endogamous despite occupational mobility – with rules of marriage remaining practically unaltered (Karve 1953).

However, most researchers have studied the mobility pattern and changes among the castes of Sadgopas, Tilis, Bhumij-Kshatriya, Dule-bagdis^{18} etc., mainly because they

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^{15} Though "occupational jati was the most characteristic social unit in medieval Bengal... [they] were also sometimes divided into endogamous sub-castes, known by different names, such as \textit{sreni}, \textit{samaj}, \textit{ashram} or \textit{thak}. The lines of demarcation were sometimes marked out by professional specialization, sometimes by cultural difference and sometimes by geographical locations (Sanyal 1981 in Bandopadhyay 1990: 4).

^{16} Hitesranjan Sanyal (1971) arrived at the present understanding of caste mobility in Bengal through a careful historical study of the texts of Mukundaram Chakraborty’s \textit{Chandimangal} (1589), Sukumar Sen’s \textit{History of Bengali Literature} (1960), Risley’s \textit{The Tribes and Castes of Bengal} (1891), B. Bandopadhyaya & S, Das, edited \textit{Bharatchandra Granthabali} (1950), Census Reports (1872-1931), James Wise \textit{Notes on the Races, Castes and Trades of Eastern Bengal}.

^{17} ‘\textit{Para}’ is the Bengali word for neighbourhood. Here it is meant that each locality or neighbourhood is occupied by distinct social groups, and accordingly that area or neighbourhood receives recognition or respect. There is, as we may say, the hierarchisation of the ‘\textit{para}’ depending upon the occupants.

^{18} For details see the ethnographies by Hiteshranjan Sanyal ‘Continuities of Social Mobility in Traditional and Modern Society in India: Two case studies of Caste Mobility in Bengal’ (1971), Surajit Sinha ‘Bhumij-Kshatriya Social Movement in South Manbhum’ (1959), K.C. Shasmal \textit{The Bauris of West Bengal} (1972), P.K. Bhowmik \textit{The Lodhas of West Bengal} (1963), George W Briggs \textit{The Chamars} (1920)
are from the category of Adham Sankaras and have a history of caste based social movement. Within many of these castes there have been sanskritization of culture, changes in occupation and movement of sub-castes with the formation of new strataums in the local hierarchy. For example, within the Gopas there are Sadgopas and Banik gopas—the former has achieved a much higher status, in the rank of nabashakas; a result of change in occupation from milkmen to agriculturalists and traders, along with a leadership based movement that claimed a higher status. The Banik gopas, who still practice the traditional occupation, are ranked much lower in the stratification system (Sanyal 1971, 1981). In contrast to the above castes, the case of the clean sudras or jalachariyana, i.e., those farming and artisan castes from whom water is acceptable to Brahmins, the change from traditional occupation have been less marked in character since they are not involved in unclean occupations. Incidentally, they have not emerged as sociologically problematic enough to gain the attention of researchers.

In such a situation the changes within the artisan castes becomes difficult to analyse, both in terms of inter-generational and intra-generational mobility pattern. As we already know by now, artisans include both handicraft castes (potters) and service castes (washer men, barbers etc). They may be itinerant artisans (for few-caste village) who travel from village to village, remaining as long as there is a demand for their services, and permanent artisans who serve one or more village in the area in which they reside. A distinctive feature is no members of non-artisan castes perform for a livelihood any of the artisan tasks; no member of any one artisan caste perform the duties of the other, though most members tend to derive part or all of their income from their caste occupation, some can supplement by joining other occupations like farming paddy or working for wages (Harper 1959:768). The Bengal potters as a particular artisan caste share all the above characteristics, but over the last few years have experienced a more scattered existence. Other than in places like Bankura, Bishnupur, Krishnanagar and Kumartuli (Kolkata) where clusters of artisans reside permanently, because of the commercial recognition of pottery items, both decorative and religious pieces, the potter families of other villages in the same districts of Chakdah, Nodia, etc., may have become either itinerant artisans for

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19 For a variety of different caste based movements see Ghanashyam Shah (1990), Sachidanand (1977), Gail Omvedt (1994), and Nandu Ram (2008).
the neighbourhood or have migrated to others parts of the country. The fact that such migration serves to be an important dimension in measuring/understanding the mobility of a caste group, is observed in the sanskritization process among the lower caste groups in Bengal (Shasmal 1972: 244).²⁰

In analysing the relationship of caste, occupational structure and mobility, the sociology of idol-making should also involve the aspects of both status and dynamics.²¹ We have already given a schema of caste groups or jatis to understand the first part of the ‘status’ aspect, i.e., the position of the potter in his society vis-à-vis other groups. Foster pointed out that “wherever pottery is made, potters appear to deprecate themselves, and they are looked down upon by non-potters” (1965: 46). This is more because of the materials used and the nature of the work, for though not ritually impure, clay, ash, hay etc., are messy to work with and hence their work is regarded as dirty. This is also evident in the similar negative self-image of the potters, when they say, “we might not be untouchables...our work is with clay and cow-dung and therefore dirty” (Gupta 1969: 21). The other part, called ‘status dimension’ that consists of the personality traits of the potters that differentiate them from other groups is also observed by Foster (1965) in his study of Tzintzuntzan potters in Mexico, or in the homology drawn by Lévi-Strauss (1988) between the two systems of professional occupation and temperaments. In his account of the myths on potters and the association of certain professions with distinct physical, moral and psychological traits, potters are regarded as ‘jealous potters’.²²

²⁰ An ethno-monograph on the Bauris, a lower caste, scheduled in the caste hierarchy by Shasmal (1972) observes how migration brings in changes among groups (sub castes) – for example, the Bauris of Hooghly consider the occupation of palanquin bearer as a “low occupation and degrading to their status in the context of the caste structure of this locality where they have migrated”. On the other hand, the Bauris of Purulia (the original habitat) admit that their traditional occupation is of palanquin bearer. The migrated Bauries of Hooghly have also undergone interesting changes in their religious observances, caste/social structure and recreational life. Their adoption of ‘Kashyap’ gotra from the erstwhile ‘Kukur’ (dog) gotra depicts their demand for a higher status than the other lower castes of the area. Use of the surname ‘Das’ instead of ‘Bauri’ which is prevalent among Vaidya, Kayastha, Mahisya, Namasudra etc may be an effort towards concealing their original status (Shasmal 1972: 244). The same was observed in the changes in marriage ritual, adoption of new religious observances, so as to bring themselves at par with the higher castes in the locality (sanskritization).

²¹ Foster (1965) proposed that sociology of pottery must consist of the analysis of ‘status’ and ‘dynamics’, which I found to be useful in understanding potters and pottery.

²² Lévi-Strauss writes of a Peruvian myth about the story of “a princess who reigned over potters and was adamant in the defense of her art. One of her neighbors...asked for her hand...sent her an ill-looking jar containing water that could give birth to the springs lacking in her country. Offended by the poor quality of
closely guarding the precious clay and the fire, the essential elements in pottery making. Lévi-Strauss proposed to resolve three problems of which one pertains to the problem of ethnography\(^{23}\) and places the potters as having distinct history and governed by specific characteristics, rules and prohibitions that is particularly regional, though the underlying structure of logic is similar. For him, it is the struggle over the possession of the elements that makes them a close community. The conservatism can also arise from the fact that historically the interaction is minimum, in

\begin{quote}
*Traditional European societies*...they did not embody a typical, personalized function within that community. One went to the blacksmith’s, the shoemaker’s, the saddler’s to have an article mended or to order a new one; not so to the potter’s. The potter took his products to the market or the fair or left them with a retailer. In their day-to-day activities, people did not come into close contact with him
\end{quote}

Lévi-Strauss 1998: 9-10

Foster’s understanding definitely finds expression on the conservative personality traits of the peasant potters when he elaborates that this might be because of the

\begin{quote}
*Nature of the productive process itself, which places a premium on strict adherence to tried and proven ways as a means of avoiding economic catastrophe*...a slight variation in materials or process will adversely affect the result...likely to lead to failure.
\end{quote}

Foster 1965: 50

A similar version can be found in Behura’s (1978) work on the peasant potters of Orissa. He observed,

\begin{quote}
a potter strictly adheres to tried and proven ways...Any new experiment firstly retards the output due to lack of proficiency and secondly, it entails a risk...When a potter is thoroughly skilled, and uses only tried methods, he has relatively a good chance of predicting the outcome.
\end{quote}

Behura 1978: 289

In our study we will also notice the presence of similar trends that may reconfirm the personality traits linked with this occupation. We will further look at the aspect of ‘dynamics’, that is more related to the questions of stability and change in the styles, techniques and forms more in relation to the occupational growth and mobility pattern of the craft, that in turn is linked with the market demand for the particular style of work. Thus, the artistic motivations play a secondary role when compared to market conditions.

\begin{quote}
the container, she threw it away..., demonstrates their narrow-mindedness and inability to consider anything beyond what is related to their trade” (Lévi-Strauss 1988: 24).
\end{quote}

\(^{23}\) Claude Lévi-Strauss in his analysis of the myths on potters in various societies ranging from South America to China and Japan highlights the analogies of structure and content of the myths and the association of the same beliefs and representations (Lévi-Strauss 1988: 10-12).
Foster (1956) pointed out when the market is stable the styles and techniques are universally known and practiced, the secretive tendencies only occur in face of rapid changes in tastes. We will notice in our study how market trends have influenced style and given rise to rivalries and secereties. A number of other studies have confirmed how market influences the potters in terms of style and design. Since any craft product must have a market to sell, the variety is dictated by the taste of the customers. Hence, Saraswati & Behura (1966) commented, “it always does not depend upon the potters to choose painting, but more often it is the customer who presses the need of painted pottery” (Saraswati & Behura 1966: 155). Thus, potters of Jalandhar do not paint because it does not fetch them more price while potters in Kutch paint even the bottom of pots from the fear that the customer may reject them otherwise (Ibid: 156). Potters of Kathmandu make a wide variety of pot shapes so as to sell in competitive situations, thereby proving that “minor variations ... in basic pottery repertoire were consciously designed to attract the widest range of customers” (Birmingham 1975: 382). This study explores the consequences of change, where and under what conditions the changes occur and how it affects the traditional caste group structure of the artisans who are living in a constantly evolving social and economic scenario of the city.

In the schema of such patterns of mobility, of geographical and occupational specialization (of craft), caste category can be said to be in the process of becoming more and more explicitly an adaptive structure whose functions include the provision of security, solidarity and preferential treatment to groupings of people who seek to avoid logical implications of detailed universalistic discriminations with respect to the competition for jobs and other scarce resources of society. This feature of caste among the potters is much more evident both in the cities and in the villages as well, even though its traditional features might still enjoy a heavy predominance in the rural areas.

As Gould pointed out

*Mobility in modern societies, realistically speaking, depends upon a combination of education and training qualifications, material resources, personal influence, and various*  

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24 Harold Gould (1963) in discerning the role of caste in social mobility has analysed the adaptive function of caste to provide a sense of security to its members. Such an understanding seems to be more appropriately applicable for the changes that are being experienced by the potters in Bengal.
Alternatively, I would also suggest that among the potter caste, the normative bases of caste have been undermined to a great extent, where caste exists more as a social fact than as a social institution. This is similar to what Beteille (1992) emphasized in general about the role of caste in Indian society today. According to Beteille, caste ceases to be a social institution because, an institution is not only a particular social arrangement but one whose members acknowledge its moral claims over them, and are prepared to submit to its demands, at least some of the time, even when they find those demands unreasonable (Beteille 1992:18). Caste in this sense is no longer strong in contemporary India, even among the artisan castes who may have retained some form of guild organization; caste assemblies/village communities no longer regulate the economic life of its members. Individuals have to a large extent withdrawn from their caste commitment - the only strong presence is felt in the matrimonial alliances but not occupation or in any other respect.

A conceptual framework to understand the patterns of occupational mobility was based on the multidimensional theories on occupational mobility, as against the traditional one-dimensional approach of the functional theory. Sorokin (1959) argued for a sociological analysis of an individual in terms of his occupying a position in a multidimensional social space. Hence, he suggested that,

...it is possible...to reduce the plurality of the dimensions into two principal classes, provided that each is to be subdivided into several sub-classes. These two principal classes may be styled the vertical and the horizontal dimensions of the social universe...Shifting from group to group sometimes does not involve any social rise or descent; at other times it is thought of as inseparable from the vertical dimensions...

Sorokin 1959 cited in Horan 1974: 34

This is one of the first attempts to interpret occupational mobility as having dimensionality rather than equating occupational position with occupational status as the functional theory of stratification of Parsons (1949) and Davis and Moore (1945). Another scholar who suggested a conceptualization in dealing with dimensionality of occupational mobility is Carlsson (1958) who stated that, "[t]here is also a possibility
that the unidimensional model is altogether inadequate to represent the mobility order" (Carlsson 1958 cited in Horan 1974: 37). He employed the word “situs” in understanding mobility. Situs\textsuperscript{25} refers to discrete occupational groupings, i.e., certain occupations which are comparable and whereby a simple rank order can be established. This comparability however is not necessarily between one situs and another (Carlsson 1958 cited in Horan 1974: 36). This breakdown of the unidimensional pattern of mobility corresponds to the different avenues of mobility. In a caste based occupational structure, the patterns of mobility may be more appropriately measured by the ‘situs’ than the ‘status’ category.

For, the individual social position in the stratification system is a combination of both personal reputation and positional prestige, and occupations in this sense are not always comparable. Certain caste based occupations may not provide financial income but has high honorific value, for example, priesthood. This underlies the subsequent analysis on the multidimensional structures of occupational mobility.

Occupational categories in India, with their caste heritage provides a multidimensional model in terms of intergenerational occupational mobility, since this is where issue of dimensionality relates to the interplay of an ascription-based stratification system to achievement-based urban industrial stratification system. In a society with different social groups, with different life chances and life style, any movement can be regarded as social mobility but we also need to understand the boundaries of a stratification system of that particular society (Thernstrom 1968). Occupational mobility is linked with social mobility since a change in occupation brings about consequent changes in the life style and world-view of the individual or group in relation to other groups in the society. Thus, occupational mobility as integrally related to social mobility and “the concept of social mobility...is an exceptionally rich and complex one, and simple one-dimensional indices which facilitate immediate comparisons of social mobility in radically different social orders may not yield the most rewarding comparisons” (Thernstrom 1968: 171).

\textsuperscript{25} Paul K. Hatt (1961, reproduced 1965) in his study of occupation and social stratification suggested that though occupations cannot be scaled into a continuous series, “there are subgroupings which do scale. That is, these are subgroupings within which individuals are consistent, not only in their gross prestige judgements, but also in maintaining constant and precise differences of prestige ratings. Such occupational categories can be called ‘situs’, as distinct from status” (Hatt 1965: 251).
However, the significance of occupational or social mobility is highlighted by contemporary focus on the market. This is because it is the market, which is the wider economic milieu that determines the position of certain occupations. In a modern industrialized and capitalist world, it is market and market forces that acts as a determining force, with reference to the value attributed to particular occupations. It is the deciding factor on which occupation is of importance and hence creates a demand for it, thereby enhancing its income generating power. If the market fails to develop a demand for the goods generated by any occupational group then the chances of survival of that group is diminished to the extent of extinction.

It is here that the concepts of social networks and social capital come into play—though the origins of the role and definition of social capital is traced in the writings of Pierre Bourdieu (1985, 1992), James Coleman (1988, 1990), Glen Loury (1977, 1992) and other authors of twentieth century, the idea that involvement and participation in groups can have a positive effect on individuals dates back to Durkheimian sociology while he was discussing the concept of anomie and the importance of group life and community. However, Portes (1998) pointed out that the first systematic analysis of the term was made by Bourdieu in his writings on the sociology of education (Bourdieu 1985) when he defined social capital as, “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Bourdieu 1985 cited in Portes 1998: 3). Bourdieu further elucidated by adding, “the profits which accrue from membership in a group are the basis of the solidarity which makes them possible” (Bourdieu 1985 cited in Portes 1998: 3).

26 Alejandro Portes (1998) has discussed in detail the origin and development of the concept of social capital in modern sociology and has also shown that it is not really a new idea, given the history of sociology. For more discussions on how the Durkheimian, Weberian and Marxist traditions within classical sociology was heavily influenced by ‘social capital’ see Swedberg, (1987).

27 The development of the theories of social capital and its importance in the process of economic development has been discussed by Woolcock (1998) as he observed that the apparent absence of ‘social capital’—“generally defined as the information, trust and norms of reciprocity in one’s social networks” (Woolcock 1998: 153), the opportunities of mutually beneficial collective action are easily squandered in the countries of Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and other parts of the developing world.
Portes (1998) pointed out that Bourdieu’s definition of social capital is characterized with two elements, first the “social relationships itself that allows individuals to claim access to resources possessed by their associates, and second, the amount and quality of those resources” (Portes 1998: 3-4). This also means that social networks are not always given; one has to invest in the institutionalization of group relations so as to use it as a reliable source for other benefits. Thus, it is through social capital that individuals can have access to all other resources like economic capital, cultural capital and institutionalized capital. Another proponent of social capital is the economist, Glen Loury (1977, 1992), who refuted the individualistic economic theories that focused on equality of opportunity and individual achievements by pointing out that “absolute equality of opportunity...is an ideal that cannot be achieved” (Loury 1977 cited in Portes 1998: 4) and defined social capital as “naturally occurring social relationships among persons which promote or assist the acquisition of skills and traits valued in the market place...an asset which may be as significant as financial bequests in accounting for the maintenance of inequality in our society” (1992:100). His analysis was based on the critiques of neoclassical economic theories on racial income inequality, where he pointed out that legal prohibitions on employers and equal opportunity programs are not sufficient to reduce racial inequality because the inherited poverty of black parents is transmitted to the children in the form of low material resources and hence educational opportunities. Further, the poorer connections of the young black workers in the labour market and their lack of information on various opportunities also hinder their social mobility (Loury 1977 in Portes 1998:4). One can find a similarity in the Indian caste based stratification system that denies material resources and access to information to certain caste groups in the lower social ranks. Sociological literature on intergenerational social mobility illustrates this argument of social capital further. Later Coleman defined social capital as, “a variety of entities with two elements in common: They all consist of some aspects of social structures, and they facilitate certain action of actors – whether persons or corporate actors – within the structure” (Coleman 1988, 1990 cited in Portes

28 Bourdieu (1979) discussed in great details on what constitutes cultural capital and institutionalized capital and how individuals can have benefit through them. For our purpose, it would just suffice to say that social capital is an instrument that plays crucial role in individual achievements.
1998: 5). Coleman had an undeniable effect in introducing the concept in American sociology and setting up the stage for the scope of usage of the term. Both Coleman (1988, 1990) and Loury (1977, 1992) emphasize the importance of dense networks as a necessary condition for the emergence of social capital and ensures the existence of sufficient ties between a certain number of people to guarantee the observation of norms. Burt sees it as, “friends, colleagues, and more general contacts through whom you receive opportunities to use or financial and human capital” (Burt 1992 cited in Portes 1998: 6). Thus, social capital “stands for the ability of actors to secure benefits by virtue of membership in social networks or other social structures” (Portes 1998: 6). In a society characterized by caste based networks, social ties therefore can play an important role in accessing economic capital in terms of loans, investment tips or protected market; cultural capital with contacts of powerful and influential people among the caste group; institutionalized cultural capital by membership to associations and organizations and ultimately lead to the development of human capital.

Social capital therefore can be said to be inherent in the structure of social relationships – an accumulation of obligations from each other according to the norm of reciprocity (Portes 1998: 7). Portes (1998) further observed that the sources of social capital could be consummatory or instrumental. The first is realized when individuals are thrown in a common situation and hence are forced to learn and support each other’s initiatives. The term, bounded solidarity is used to refer to this kind of solidarity. The instrumental source of social capital is found in the theory of social integration of Durkheim and in the role of sanctions played by group rituals (1893, reprinted 1984). This is also the case where trust is enforceable through social norms and sanctions. The other kind of instrumental social capital is embedded in the reciprocity of exchanges whereby both the donor and the recipient share the same social structure and while the

29 Coleman (1988) illustrated his argument by giving the example of Jewish diamond traders in New York city and how close knit ties facilitates transaction without recourse to legal contracts (Portes 1998: 6). In case of caste groups too one can find that word of mouth in many cases is honoured and forms the basis of many economic and social transactions.

30 Portes (1998) gave examples of such solidarity being reflected when “wealthy members of a church anonymously endow church schools and hospitals; members of a suppressed nationality voluntarily join life threatening military activities in its defence; and industrial proletarians take part in protest marches...” (1998: 8).
donor donates with the expectation of receiving status, honour or approval from the collectivity even if not the actual return from the recipient. In these cases however, the collectivity acts as the guarantor for the repayment of debts (Portes: 1998: 9). However, as Portes (1998) also indicated social capital can have both positive and negative influences. Sociological literature on migration and mobility relies heavily on the idea of social capital, in terms of educational attainment, sources of employment or occupation (Ibid: 9), but it may also have negative consequences of exerting too much of social control, exclusion of outsiders and downward levelling norms (Ibid: 15). Nevertheless, the concept of social capital as a source of network can be linked to stratification. The possession of certain social capital which in turn are also translated as human capital can act as an explanation of access/denial to employment, mobility through occupational ladders or entrepreneurial success, in a caste-based situation where social capital is bequested only within the particular caste group, and remain inaccessible for the members of other groups thereby limiting the individual’s capacity. The work of Mark Granovetter refers in this connection to the power of “weak ties...indirect influences outside the immediate circle of family, close friends to serve as an informal employment referral system” (Granovetter 1974 cited in Portes 1998: 12). Studies of immigrant and ethnic entrepreneurship also draw upon the strength of social capital in terms of social networks, as evident from the presence of Rotating Credit Associations (RCAs) for the capitalization of Asian immigrant firms in the United States (Light 1984 cited in Portes 1998: 13).

This brief orientation to an understanding of social capital and social networks is imperative for my study in order to form a background of how these concepts play crucial role in the mobility pattern of a traditional occupational caste group of idol-makers.

Studies on Indian artisans especially pottery in general have tended to be seen as revival which denies any dynamics within the occupation. For pottery as a craft, markets have become larger and more accessible and implied heightened intra-artisan

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31 Light (1984) defined RCAs as being “informal groups that meet periodically, with every member contributing a set amount to a contributing pool that is received by each in turn. Social capital in this case comes from the trust that each participant has in the continuing contribution of others even after they receive the pooled funds. Without such trust no one will be able to contribute and each will be deprived of this effective means to gain access to finance” (Light 1984, 1988 cited in Portes 1998: 13).
competition, between regional complexes, between groups of artisans more or less equipped at mass production and quality control\textsuperscript{32}. While markets did create opportunities for accumulation, their utilization depend on a host of variables influencing the facility with which the craftsmen could meet the new competition. How the effect of these variables are mediated by the specific features of the product, by the social relations bearing on production, and by the significance of the product carried for its consumers, will form the entire range of questions in this study. How idol-makers, among the potters caste have coped with the commercialization of decorative clay items vis-à-vis the economic scarcity experienced through practicing only a single specialized art (idol-making), is something that will be unravelled through the rest of the thesis.

Interestingly enough, experiences from the field have revealed that the economic scarcity that the ordinary idol/image makers are experiencing have not deterred them from practicing the art of idol-making. Their pride in being an artist (silpi) or Karigar, as opposed to ordinary clay artisans has been a strengthening factor in the culmination of newer patterns of iconography, adaptability in the usage of raw materials and a vast range of artistry. Hence, while the impact of modern social and economic institutions on caste organization of this artisan groups have resulted in the changing of occupations on one hand, on the other there have been considerable demographic movements among them. The trends of such changes within the practice of idol making is happening with the rising popularity of pujas, evolution of the theme pujas over the past two decades, and the more recent ‘concept\textsuperscript{33}’ pujas, in the culture of Bengal.

The involvement of the clay-modellers/idol-makers in these Pujas has been reduced to a minimum. Though this is one of the few craft cultures that has experienced an influx of new artisans, the medium of craft does not follow the traditional practices but is constantly evolving. The traditional artisans who have failed to adapt to the demands of

\textsuperscript{32} I think that with the establishment of Handicrafts Council, Cottage Emporiums and the various crafts bazaar in the metros of India, like the Dilli Haat in New Delhi, Shilparammam in Hyderabad, Swabhumi in Kolkata, the market accessibility of all artisan groups have increased and regenerated the consumers interest in the crafts in general.

\textsuperscript{33} Similar to theme puja, concept puja is a loose term that is being popularly used to define the artistic transformation of the public place, more refined form of theme puja where the element of creation is more and not restricted to the creation of mere replicas as is often done in theme puja. Moreover, the effort for a congruity is also much higher.
the changing popular culture of the puja, are experiencing a threat to their art of idol-making. These changes have also led to the breakdown of division of labour among the caste, the erstwhile limitation of women not being involved in idol making has gradually changed with the rise of female artists among the clay-modellers who may or may not belong to the potter caste. Individuals having a ritually low status like widows and artisan from other religion like Islam have also made their presence felt, though these are more of a one-off incident than a regular practice34.

Thus, this changing economy and industry of today's Durga Puja raises questions of survival and revival of people from different layers of society who depend either directly or indirectly on the extra income that is assured through the innumerable jobs required for the successful completion of the puja. This is because idol making involves thousands of artisans. While there are the chief artisans along with numerous small image-makers, there are others like the suppliers of raw materials, dressmakers and jewellery designers all of whom form a part of the larger community of the idol makers. With an estimated cost of around Rs. 50 crores on the different community pujas throughout Kolkata, (the amount is no less in the pujas organized in other cities like Delhi and Mumbai) the question arises as to what ways are the artisans involved and how do they benefit from this annual extravaganza.

Methodology

The objective of this research is to bring to the forefront of sociological analysis the lives and conditions of a particular occupational group, which is more like a community, with certain unique characteristics. Though it is part of the urban social life there exists some kind of exclusivity about this community. Since, idol-making is both an art form and a trade/business for these people, there exists a definite way of life of these people. The aim here is to study meaning and seek understanding of this community35. This is further reinforced through the fact that the community of idol-makers also represented

34 My field experiences and several news paper reports have pointed these shifts.
35 The analysis of the culture of idol-makers will therefore be similar to Geertz's interpretative theory of culture which looks for "explication...construing social expressions on their surface enigmatical" and where analysis involves "sorting out of structures of signification...and determining their social ground or import" (Geertz 1973:5 & 9).
residence in a kind of self-contained physical space, and a framework of activities which are not entirely independent of the rest of the society that they are living in. This represented for me an ideal scenario for an ethnographic study, a situation where the actors craft and re-craft their identities as artists and traders. Further, the work of an idol-maker in this case does not end in completing the clay image but also finding appropriate avenues for its exhibition and sale.

The approach therefore has been ethnographic, an attitude adopted to inquire into the worldview of the subjects of this study. But then we must remind ourselves that ethnography is a practice where the risks, purposes, meanings and hopes of one’s own and others are intrinsically embedded in the knowledge generated. In such cases the researcher is not always morally and politically removed from the subjects of his/her study. Ethnographic work has become important given the intricate organization of work, the divisive structure of the urban setting of which they are a part. But at the same time it ran risks since the doing of ethnography rely a lot on the subjectivity and interpretations; the very act of writing it down is an interpretative act.

My position as researcher might have been influenced by my familiarity with the existence of this group in the culture of the city of Kolkata. I was working in a familiar social setting, culturally I share the same domain as that of my subjects but at the same time they were represented in an unfamiliar locale and under particular situations. The challenge was to bring out the existential reality of these people without brushing aside what either appeared to be too familiar as a part of the Bengali culture and identity, or falling into the pitfalls of describing an ‘exotic’ culture whenever I happened to encounter anything too unfamiliar and new.

The technique of “thick description” as proposed by Geertz (1973) is a highly stylized form that has become the standard in ethnographic writing and is interpretative of the field setting. I have undergone the problem of differentiating the “imagined with the imaginary, the fictional with the false, making things out - people, situations, patterns, understandings – with making them up” (Bishop 1992: 150) while writing down the
ethnographic data with hope that I have done justice in describing the people that I was studying.

Although an ethnographer who is working within a familiar culture is less likely to impose an internal but ultimately irrational symbolic or functionalist coherence on that culture than if he or she is faced with the exotic otherness of a far-off culture, there is a temptation to confer truth values that are in line with preconceived categories [and] temptation for the ethnographer who works within a familiar culture is to assume that he or she is somehow able to improve on an actor’s account of what is going on – even to expose what is really going on.

Thompson 2005: 16

My sense while doing the ethnographic field work is that the people are “intimately connected with, critical of, and informed” about the urban setting they are part of and “are active participants in the generation of accounts of what is ‘really going on’ (Thompson 2005: 16). The ethnography therefore is not only about the lives of idol-makers but has a larger connectivity with the rest of the society. It is both a microcosm and part of the complete picture of the larger site where they operate which in many ways acts as a mirror of their lives.

The Interview Process

The ethnographic gaze facilitated some questions while it hindered others. I employed a range of methods, participant observation, unstructured, semi structured and formal interviews. Ethnographic work was supplemented with primary and secondary literature on the issues of urban occupational groups, discussion about the work of idol-making and about idol-makers in popular magazines, newspaper articles in Bengali. An internet search about Durga Puja and idol-making also reflected how widely discussed the subject is and how Durga puja is intrinsically linked with Bengali identity as evident in the numerous sites, blogspots and advertisements dedicated to Durga Puja and idol-makers.

Given the nature of the study, a statistical sampling method was not considered desirable. The method was purposive sampling since the interviewees were chosen on different criteria, covering the entire range of category of the idol-makers present in Kumartuli - famous artists or master craftsmen, medium sized artisans, small artisans,
members of each group in proportion to the total numbers involved in the work. They were also sought on the basis of their residential arrangement in the map of Kumartuli. The entrance to Kumartuli is the Banamali Sarkar Street and the entire area is divided into smaller parts like Majherpatti (literally meaning middle settlement), Bangalpatti (settlement of East Bengal population), Dhakeswari Mandir and Kumartuli Lane. I interacted with the idol-makers in each of these parts so as to understand how visibility and display affects the trade since it is one of the primary ways of selling the goods. Hence, a workshop which is easily visible from the roadside is likely to have better business than the ones which are situated at the not so visible backlanes. If we look in the Map 2 of Kumartuli we will see that most of the workshops of the well known artisans are situated in the better part of the locality. Those who have a larger scale of business might have a bigger warehouse and a second workshop in a different place but they have still kept a small shop cum workshop in the main lane i.e., either in the Kumartuli Lane or in the Banamali Sarkar Street.

Different interview schedules were used depending on the nature of different groups who were interacted with. Structured interviews were used for interacting with the puja organizers and government officials, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the idol-makers and the jewellery designers and an art college graduate and professional sculptor who are also engaged in idol-making\(^36\), and unstructured interviews were used to speak with the women of the household. In a few cases, genealogies were collected since it was both essential to the study as well as an important aid in establishing rapport with the participants. It was necessary to interact with the associated craftsmen involved in jewellery designing because they share the same social reality and as a similar traditional caste group is actually a part of the world of idol-making. It was also necessary to explore the women of the household to understand the gendered aspects of the community, the production and re-production relations and women’s status in the community, without which no understanding is complete. Other than this core group, interactions with puja

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36 The one I interviewed is a renowned sculptor who dabbles in idol-making and has won many acclamations for his work. I wanted to interview some of the other famous professional names in idol-making today but did not have the right connections. Moreover, since the focus was on the traditional idol-makers, I thought it to be more useful to look at their understanding of the new professional artists cum idol-makers.
organizers were deemed necessary to understand how the dynamics of the larger society influences and are influenced by this community. How and what role do the organization of a puja play in the deconstruction, construction and reconstruction of this art form and the lives of the artisans. The interviews with the government officials were spurred with a felt need on my part as a researcher once I was in the field and came to know about the proposed development schemes for these artisans. Thus, it was to have a comprehensive idea of the State government’s action plan in regard to Kumartuli that I interacted with the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) officials, in charge of the Kumartuli project. I also interacted with the Branch Managers of the banks that provide loans to the idol-makers through the associations, Kumortuli Mritsilpi Sanskriti Samiti (hereafter to be referred as KMSS) and Kumortuli Mritshilpi Samiti (hereafter to be referred as KMS)\(^\text{37}\). This was to know the official estimates of the running capital of the business and gauge the total financial strength of the entire business. It also helped to supplement the official processes of documentation and processing of the loans, as found from the participants.

The Durga puja organizers of both Kolkata and Delhi were interviewed. They were chosen on the following criteria of

i. old big budget puja in three main zones in Kolkata, South Kolkata, Central Kolkata and North Kolkata

ii. small neighbourhood pujas in the same areas

iii. famous theme pujas in the immediate localities

iv. older, big budget Puja in Delhi and smaller new housing society pujas in the growing Bengali community in the NCR region.

Since the puja committee comprises of a group of members of the working committee – the interviews were not strictly speaking one-to-one interviews. It was mostly conducted in a group of four to five members of the working committee, though it is the secretary who was directly questioned and he answered the queries, in most of the

\(^{37}\) These are the two associations formed by the master craftsmen, i.e., the chief idol-maker who is also the owner. A detailed understanding of the formation of the respective associations, the dynamics and role of the associations in the economic social and cultural life of the idol makers will be given in the subsequent chapters.
cases it was in the nature of group discussions. All the other members either supported him or corrected his answers from time to time. This is also to ensure that it is a group effort and not dependent on personal decisions of the individual. A total number of 15 puja committees were interacted with and the profile of the committee members were mixed and wide ranging, consisting of local shopkeepers association, big businessmen, white collar professionals, artists, writers, documentary film directors, unemployed local youths and women in the locality. The age group generally varied from 20 – 50/55 years, though veterans of 70-80 years old were also found who took an active interest in organizing pujas. These interviews were conducted mainly before the arrival of the Durga puja when such committees become more visible because they actively work at this time towards the organizing of a puja and were easier to contact. A few were also interviewed at other times but then it imposed problems in terms of finding out the actual people involved, contacting the local club etc.

The interviews with the idol-makers were conducted intermittently through a period of three years, both in Delhi and in Kolkata. Since the nature of the work of idol-making necessitated that the artisans were far too busy at certain times of the year, this did not encourage a continuous interaction. The fieldwork was carried on in different phases. Because of the seasonal nature of the work my first two visits were spent in familiarizing with the field and the neighbourhood. The idol-makers were too busy in idol-making, some of them flatly refusing to speak with me. Some said categorically that they did not have time to waste and if I was interested enough I might come back later during the off-season that is after January (Saraswati Puja), when they would be comparatively free. Their work would start full-fledged only around April- May and they would not entertain me during that time. The initial problems of gaining entry in the field were overcome when I contacted one of the key officials of the Kumartuli Mritsilpi Sanskriti Samiti, the formal association of the idol-makers. It is the joint secretary of this association who helped me in building a rapport in the field. He also was the key respondent and helped me familiarize with the field.
The total number of interviews taken among the idol-makers is 80 including both the big artisans and the smaller artisans. Apart from them 15 jewellery makers were interviewed so as to understand their linkages in this work. The age range of the idol-makers varied between 25-75 years, with a concentration in the age group of 35-55 years. These are people whom I identified as being at the prime of their career in the idol-making and also successful in the trade of idol-making. The average educational qualification is eighth standard, with a handful of about five to six persons who have at some point of time entered in college or have passed graduation. Thus, we can fairly say that the formal educational level is substantially low among the idol-makers, though the literacy rate is full\textsuperscript{38}. It was however difficult to gauge the income level, because of lack of concrete data about annual income or household goods. The entire problem around the issue of income and economy are inter-related with various factors which will be dealt with later in the thesis. The interviews were mostly conducted in the workshops while the idol-maker was at his work. It was not always taken under ideal conditions of one-to-one interaction since either the labourer working would provide inputs on the making of an idol, or general living conditions, or another idol maker would join the conversation to further explain things to me. Moreover, since the key respondent who was a comparatively known and powerful person among them accompanied me at certain times, I was apprehensive of the responses of the participants, since they might brush over or cover many facts, especially the more sensitive ones on the role of association, financial problems etc. In order to avoid this problem, by the time I became a familiar face in the locality, I tried to fix up different time schedules or sometimes arrived on my own, at different points of time each day.

Group discussions were conducted with the labourers, since no one was particularly eager to give interviews for fear of being a cynosure in the eyes of the idol-maker/manufacturer. So the best way in which I could interact with them is by joining

\textsuperscript{38} I would say that literacy is 100%. Though the study did not have a scope for household survey, I have seen women of almost all household have basic reading skills if not of writing and arithmetic. However, whether the reading skill can be directly translated into their comprehending capabilities of any written matter is doubtful.
them in their chatting / 'adda' after they completed the days work by about 8 p.m. in the night.

The women were ready to talk once they completed the household work and these sessions were mostly conducted in the late afternoons often interrupted by the demands of the children or household chores or the coming of a neighbour for some work, but then it also provided a better understanding of their interactions and negotiations. Some of the women idol-makers also said, “I do not have any free time, you can speak to me in the workshop or in the home while I am doing work, it doesn’t matter”. This was in contrast to the men who often said, “Come in the evening after 8 when the work is over and I am free”, or “Come on the day when there is some festival and there is not much work”.

Since the field work was carried over some years, it also helped me to do follow up exercises. I went back to some of my earliest participants to cross check some of the findings that I came to know about much later, or whenever I felt that the interview was either incomplete or not very comprehensible for me. What also happened in these lengthy interactions is that those who were reluctant to provide certain information earlier since they thought me to be just another person who wants to reap benefit and not actually interested in their lives, came back later with more information saying things like “You have been here so long, you really are interested, please write about us and our plight”, or, “You must write the things clearly so that the government will do something about us”. It could have been because they felt that this might be different from the numerous one-time contact that they have had with others who have visited Kumartuli.

In Delhi, the process of interviewing was a little different since the Bengali idol-makers do not stay in a particular locality but are dispersed among the potter/artisan habitats in different parts of the city like Sarojini Nagar, Yamuna Par, Chittaranjan Park, Govindpuri, Dakshinpuri, Najafgarh, and Patparganj. Also, they were not available throughout the year and had to be contacted only in the few months before the puja. Hence, these were mostly single interactions, taken while the idol-maker was busy working in a rented space for limited period of time. Long term interaction could be
Figure 1 Humus clay collected from the River Hooghly

Figure 2 Boats that bring in the raw materials like clay, wood, hay etc.
Figure 3 The Lanes of Kumartuli

Figure 4 Work being executed on the by lanes because of lack of space
carried on only with three households of permanent idol-makers. The educational level of the long term residents is higher than the visiting idol-makers. All the idol-makers belonging to the age group of 25-40 have been to College, with one of them being professionally trained. The young women of the households also had formal schooling and have been to college, in contrast to the women in Kumartuli.

**The Profile of the Field**

With a brief description of the localities in Delhi I will move on to detail the environment in Kumartuli. In Delhi, each of the three permanent idol-making households was located in the different neighbourhoods of Sarojini Nagar, Yamuna Par and Govindpuri. The living conditions were however the same. These are small residences located in a low income neighbourhood. The living areas are combined with the workspace except in one where the workshop is located in a community ground because of paucity of space. All the residences are rented accommodations. In contrast none of the visiting idol-makers had a residential arrangement in Delhi, all stayed either in an ante-room in the working area or by sharing with friends.

The main study area, namely Kumartuli falls under Ward No 8 & 9 of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation. The area is located in Northern part of Kolkata near the Hooghly River. It is marked by Rabindra Sarani in the East, river Hooghly in the West, Durgacharan Banerjee Street in the North and Banamali Sarkar Street in the South (See Map 3 and 4). The actual area occupies about 11 acres of land within the city. Idol-makers or clay modellers comprises the major percentage of the present population, but other than them there is a mixture of varied population starting from government employees to people engaged in small scale industrial work, household manufacturing, petty traders, housemaids etc. On the outset the area is distinctly marked as a place inhabited by people belonging to the lower income group, in a slum like locality/environment.

The first thing I noticed while entering the Kumartuli area was rows of small dingy houses with each having an open front yard that serves as both the shop and workspace of
the artisan. The main house has a side entrance, quite inconspicuous. The workspaces are generally 15ft (length) by four to five ft (width), a very small area to work in, and display that work for the purpose of sale. In cases where about five to six craftsmen have to work, it is difficult to keep the idols within the workshop. Many a time one would see either half done or fully completed idols being placed outside on the road, running the risk of damage either because of rain, or hit over by passers-by. The low lanes and by lanes of the area also faces the problem of blocked drains and overflowing sewerage, an impending and ever present danger for the mixing of clay etc., that requires some amount of dry space as it is mostly done in the area outside the workshop because of shortage of space. Because of such working conditions almost all the workshops are dark, dingy and dilapidated. There are practically no storage spaces for the completed murtis/idols. The artists were observed working on the lanes beside piles of garbage, slushy drains and mud puddles.

Historically known as the habitation of the clay artisans, the inception of the locality dates back to the end of the 18th Century. Kumartuli is part of the neighbourhood of ‘Haatkhola’, a busy trading area. “Haatkhola”, literally meaning an open bazaar, is a place that was historically frequented by traders. This has also led to the presence of a variety of small household manufacturing units in its immediate neighbourhood. Thus, in Kumartuli itself there are households, other than jewellery designers and idol-makers, which are engaged in different small manufacturing activities like manufacturing of cotton vests, cheap plastic goods, and a few households engaged in the painting of ordinary clay ritual items like Mangalghats etc.

Most of the inhabitants stay at rental basis under the Kolkata Thika Tenancy Acquisition and Regulation Act of 1981. The area was previously owned by zamindars of Shovabazar, who either rented the premises or offered housing to the many artisans, some of whom have settled in these parts as early as in the nineteenth century. The place

39 The details of the act will be discussed in the next chapter, in the context of urbanization. This area is popularly to belong to the Mitra family of Darjipara and the Rajas of Sovabazaar.
is now fragmented and owned by the heirs to whom all the rents and taxes are paid by the community through the tenancy act.

At present there are 528 families of artisans in Kumartuli, including idol-makers, jewellery designers and makers, i.e., the mritshilpi, saajshilpi, solashilpi. There are 300 shops and workshops, of which 165 are of idol-makers/clay-modellers (mritshilpi), 51 are owned/occupied by jewellery designers, 41 are godowns/warehouses and 43 are other establishments (DPR ‘Kumartuli Urban Renewal Project’ January 2007). The unofficial estimates made by the artisans living in the area denotes that about 3000 people in Kumartuli alone are engaged in this trade in one way or the other, besides a few thousand more who reside outside this location, of these approximately 30 households are originally from Bangladesh. In every household almost everyone would be engaged in the making of the idol. The children and young people would spend their days in watching the images taking shape, the slightly older ones would be seen either assisting in mixing clay or helping by bringing in paints etc., and the women of the household, especially girls, would be seen making jewellery or small figures for the ‘chalchitra’

When the work pressure is high they are also engaged in image-making, modelling the fingers, hands etc., applying the last coating of clay, attaching hairs and dressing the idol with clothes and jewellery. Thus both the formal and the unorganized structures and relationship of work contribute significantly in the making of the idol.

The potters have organized themselves into two associations of craftsmen, the Kumartuli Mritshilpi Sanskriti Samiti (KMSS) established some 60 years before, and a new one some 20 years old named the Kumartuli Mritshilpi Samity (KMS). The former has some 260-270 members who are the descendents of the original settlers, while the latter is a group formed by the artisans who have come from Bangladesh after independence. They also have a distinctive identity within the Kumartuli area in the lane called ‘Bangalpatti’ (where people from Bangladesh live).

40 A halo-like backdrop of the individual clay idol. This is made of clay and painted and decorated with small clay figurines or paintings of the various Hindu deities.
What was noticeable during the field interactions was the quiet rivalry reflected in a kind of aloofness between the two associations, of one not being aware, or not forthcoming in providing any information about the other. Moreover, while the *Kumartuli Mritshilpi Sanskriti Samiti* (KMSS) was observed to be having very active involvements, the other *Kumartuli Mritshilpi Samity* (KMS) is a fledgling artisans’ association. There was also some resentment amongst KMS as despite the presence of famous and highly acclaimed artists from the Bangalpatti, who are also part of KMS and enjoy greater status among the art appreciators of the city, the association lack institutional presence. Apart from the potters there also reside the *malakars* or garland makers, who make ornaments as well as images from *sola* (thermocol) or pith. They also form an intrinsic and crucial part in idol-making and have recently organized themselves into *Kumartuli Saajshilo Samiti* (established Bengalee 1408, i.e., 2001). The ordinary clay labourers or *karigars* have also organized themselves into two associations of *Kumartuli Mritshilpo Karigar Samiti* (1988) and *Shantipriyo Mritshilpo Karigar Samiti* (2001). The KMSS runs a charitable dispensary and clinic where a general physician sits for four days a week. They also organize an eye check up camp twice a year.

During the time spent in interaction with these clay modellers I came to observe certain things that struck me both as an individual and as a researcher. The first of them is while watching the labourers (*karigars*) who work on wages cooking food in the workshop itself. It is noticeable because generally in Hindu households (especially Bengali households) a demarcation exists in the partaking of cooked food especially rice except in the kitchen/dining area. Since it is considered to be a polluting item, (*etho*) thus taking of food in the place of worship should be considered heathenism, but here when the idol is in the making, apparently it makes no difference. This struck me as strange because, being familiar with the underlying culture of the Bengali society, I know that cooked food is restricted within the kitchen or dining area, even in non-Brahmin households, and transgressions to this rule are not encouraged. This practice also made me re-think about the inter linkages of work and culture, but I have not really found any satisfactory answer other than the reason of paucity of physical space.
When I looked back at my field notes, each quote opened up possibilities of various interpretations. The interaction with the community has been rich. Long hours were spent in a sort of ‘adda’\textsuperscript{41}, in the sharing of information and life styles, in the common understanding of what ‘idol-makers’ stand for. The most heated discussions began whenever we came upon the idea of economic sustainability or development of the residential arrangements in Kumartuli. Another unique experience occurred when I went back to the field after the occurrence of the massacre in Nandigram in March 14, 2007. Everyone was aware of the events that have happened there and was wary of their future and what it will unfold in the light of the ‘development’ of Kumartuli. Hence, the discussion veered around the massacre in Singur, the necessity of industrialization, politics of the Left Front Government in West Bengal, rising food prices, how successful communist movement in China has been to bring about its development, the cheap prices of Chinese goods which is capturing the market share, the debate between agricultural and industrial economy, the ineffectivity of the KMC and the mayors of Kolkata etc. This and other prior discussions on the current issues also made me aware of the political consciousness of the average artisan. Almost all knew the names of the local, regional and national leaders, reigning political parties, and a little of the history about the political scenario in West Bengal.

Another striking feature of the field was the consciousness and intense involvement of the participants. In the last few years there has been quite an amount of media focus on the Kumartuli idol-makers as a group of reputed clay artists. Television channels and magazines have made specific programmes or special articles on the women artists or the artists from other religious backgrounds. This has perhaps made them confident in their identity and made them aware of their collective presence. Thus, when I asked whether I should keep their names confidential or could I use them, most of them readily agreed that I could use their names. Some categorically preferred to give their names, which made me think of ‘why’? Is it because by making themselves visible enough they can

\textsuperscript{41} A typical Bengali expression of informal gathering, a common feature in the evenings when friends meet after the days work. It has become an identity or essence of the Bengali culture where the discussion and debates on various subjects staring from world affairs to neighbourhood news can continue for hours over cups of tea and smokes of cigarette.
represent the demands of an interest group? Or is it simply because they have become too blasé about it with the continuous flow of visitors in the area? In the entire period of my field work I saw on an average, about two-three visitor in a week, roaming about in the lanes of Kumartuli, some Indians and mostly people of foreign origin who are either interviewing or capturing the area through the lenses of the camera. Another important affect of this over-exposure is also reflected in the nonchalant way they interacted with me and indifference to me as an outsider. The first thing that they said to me is that they did not have anything new to say for me. They had been interviewed several times by several groups with promises about a better future but no one had ever done anything for them. Thus, for them I was just another of the many individuals who have come to fulfil her own agendas. This kind of thinking had both a humbling effect and guilt in my part as a researcher, unsure of how to intervene or whether at all to intervene in the processes that were being unfolded for me.

Another commonly used terminology among the community living in Kumartuli is the differential terms used for people who are involved in the making of jewellery for the idols vis-à-vis the idol-makers. The jewellery designers and traders are commonly called Saaj Byabshayi as against the idol-makers who are known as Protima Shilpi. Though these days the jewellery designers are officially called saaj shilpi (jewellery maker), this draws the attention towards some kind of stratification between the idol-makers and the jewellery maker. Since in popular Bengali culture the work of an artist or ‘shilpi’ is seen as more prestigious work, related to art and higher forms of expression, as against the mundane affairs of a businessman/trader or a ‘byabshayi’, the use of these terms differentially for the jewellery maker and the idol maker indicate towards an informal recognition of the idol-makers as having a higher status than the jewellery maker. Such connotations therefore downplay the combined role of idol-makers as traders or of jewellery maker as an artist.

**Issues at Hand**

While writing, the data on the idol-makers in Kumartuli and Delhi has intermingled since in many ways they represent the same community. The specific importance of idol
makers of Delhi has come in only with reference to the issue of migration and occupational mobility and market, so as to generate a more nuanced understanding of the situation. Conscious efforts were made to create spaces for "voices from the field". In many instances the responses of the participants were written ad verbatim so as to bring about the insights, experiences and observations of the actors who are busy negotiating their everyday reality. Thus, a more feminist methodological standpoint was adopted in writing the ethnographic data, whereby one is aware of the "positionality" and "how we inflect and shape our topics, our data and particular form of representation" (Lewin 2006: 26). In doing so I have strived to bring about the intricacies of the multi-layered narratives and how the issues of caste, traditional occupation, class and mobility are contextualized by the people and how they differ from the theoretical understanding of such concepts.

The method of what Van Velson (1978) calls 'situational analysis' has been adopted in the analysis of empirical material. In this method, some of the material itself is presented apart from inferences and abstractions made from it, and constitute a part of the analysis. The method is useful where there appears a "discrepancy between people's beliefs and professed acceptance of certain norms on the one hand and their actual behaviour on the other" (Velson 1978: 143). Moreover, it provides wider scope wherein no views are considered right or wrong, as "...there are only differing views representing different interest groups, status, personality and so forth" (Velson 1978: 147). As a participant observer, however, I was conscious of the feminist anthropologists questions of insider and outsider and have been pre-occupied "with the power of the observers stance and had long understood the moments of creativity as grounded in the history of the creator" (Ginsburg 2006: 236). It made me realize "the benefits of in-depth participant observation" and how it must be "balanced against the debits of a small sample bound by the conditions of a particular time and setting" (Ginsburg 2006: 236).

The dilemmas in participant observation in contrast to survey studies veer around the need to explain the validity and accuracy of the procedures and ethical justifications regarding the direct contact with the research subjects. The participant observer's role
varies from that of a 'total researcher' to that of a 'total participant'\textsuperscript{42}. This rests on the belief that the researcher is exempt from the human affliction of subjectivity but then at the same time admits that the background of the researcher might keep him/her from accessing all the different sources of information in a particular field setting. Thus while involvement in the field setting allows the observer to understand the people and look at the world through their eyes...it can also blind him/her to some of their behaviour patterns, and thus distort the study. As has also been pointed out by some,

\begin{quote}
the identification is probably more intense if the people studied are suffering from deprivation, and if they are a low status group...a situation [where] the researcher feels a need to do something about the deprivation
\end{quote}

\textit{Gans 1962 cited in Bodemann 1978: 395}

However, the identification decreased in its intensity as the research progressed and by the time I was analysing the data and writing the report I was much more detached and critical about the narratives that were encountered in the course of the fieldwork.

But then the fact that I was using their relationship with me for the collection of data brought another problem of 'using' the field without actually directly benefiting the field. The feelings were more acute when prompted by such questions from the field like, “I will answer your queries and you will get degree but what will I get?” The role of stranger in participant observation seems to be more suitable to understand the field setting and the problem. It is here that the

\begin{quote}
Attributes of alienness is taken into account ...and absorbed by the setting much in the way in which attributes of the "priest," "pupil," "poet," "deviant" or "shoemaker" are dealt with in a framework of interaction. Unlike the artificial 'outsider' the researcher as a "stranger participates and intervenes in the joys and sufferings of the group and takes account of members interest\textsuperscript{43}.
\end{quote}

\textit{Simmel in Bodemann 1978: 400}

The participant observer in such cases is not satisfied with the facticity of the setting with which he is faced but by participating and intervening, breaks through the

\textsuperscript{42} In the works of Herbert Gans (1962, 1967) distinguished three types of observers, total researcher who “is physically present at the event which he observes, but does not really participate in it”, researcher participant and total participant where the researcher participates as a real participant, thereby oscillating in the dogma of value neutrality and ‘pure’ laboratory and that of the presence of the participant observer who has an effect upon the setting.

\textsuperscript{43} Simmel’s understanding of a stranger as different from the Barbarian in Bodeman (1978).
cognitive barrier of being taken for granted, and at the same time, the awareness that he is a stranger to the setting, also allows for the fact that his knowledge too is “always knowledge from a particular point of view” (Bodoman 1978: 400).

Getting caught in the web of social interaction was disturbing for me as an observer because there was a constant apprehension that my class background may inhibit my interactions in the field. Thus, the irreconcilable dilemma between ‘objectivity’ and ‘empathy’ is what

*The participant observer is an integral part of the situation he is observing...together, the observer and the observed constitute a context which would be different if either participant were different or were eliminated...Continued observed-observer transactions influence in many ways both the kinds of data that emerge...and the registering, interpreting and recording of them.*

_Schwartz & Schwartz 1955 cited in Bodoman 1978: 403_

The writing down of this ethnography has therefore involved many such negotiations with myself in order to bring about the lives and times of the idol-makers of Kumartuli.

The interviews were conducted in Bengali and hence the problems of transliteration and transcription were unavoidable. I have translated to the best of my ability so as to hold on to the essence of the narratives. While transcribing in English, some of the grammatical & syntactical structures posed great difficulty. In all such cases I have carried out approximate translation to correspond with the broader meaning being conveyed, while in other cases I have retained the original Bengali quotes for the benefit of readers who might understand the colloquial meaning of the language used by the participants.

Let me provide some clarifications of the different words used at various points of this writing, many of which have contextual meanings and many which are related to the typical Bengali lingua but adapted here to continue the spirit involved in such expressions. First, whenever I say ‘Durga idol’ I mean the tableau of Durga with her four children Kartik, Ganesh, Saraswati, and Lakshmi. This is the usual form of Durga worshipping, representing respectively the Protector, the Initiator of the Puja, Knowledge
and the Provider – signifying the complete manifestation of the Goddess (Chaliha & Gupta 1990). In some households alternate images are also worshipped, but those are aberrations and not regular practice. Many words have been used interchangeably like artist or shilpi has been equated with artisan or traditional craftsman, this was also prompted by the fact that the idol-makers when speaking denote themselves as ‘artist’. Moreover, all such ‘artist’ also means that they are manufacturer and trader, i.e., they have their own unit of production (even though he may go for contractual work with another artist). They differentiate themselves from the ordinary clay labourers whom they call ‘Karigars’. Therefore, in all places in the text, the word ‘Karigar’ would mean ordinary labourer. There has always been a clear demarcation between the ‘silpi/shilpi’ and the ‘karigar’ and there is marked stratification between the two groups though they work together – the relation is more in the nature of employer-employee. In the entire text I have oscillated between the words ‘art’ and ‘craft’, using them interchangeably. This is because the dimensions of the work encompass the characteristics of both art and craft. It is primarily a craft because it involves a skill learnt through practice over generations but at the same time it is a form of ‘artistic’ expression because the individual idol-maker thrives to leave a mark of his distinct style in his creation. Moreover, the Bengali term for both ‘art’ and ‘craft’ is shilpokala and hence the usage of the word ‘shilpi’ denotes both an artist and a craftsman. My usage of the words art and craft is more linked to the meaning of ‘shilpo’ than in the debate between what constitutes an art or a craft. As it is, in this new genre, idol-making is seen to be a form of installation art since it is no longer limited to the moulding of a clay figurine but is conceptualized in style and form as a thematic continuation of the pandal, lights and decorations with which it should be perfectly blended. It is this challenge that inspires the professional artists who are

44 The word ‘shilpi’ means artist in Bengali.
45 Installation art involves the artists’ articulation of the spatiality of a particular site through a conceptualised process of placement and inscription. The artist's actions integrate the art work, conceptually and physically, into the site and its context, and the unmediated physical, sensory qualities of installation art - real space, real time, sound, materiality, the haptic and olfactory, invite the 'viewer' to engage in a performative relationship to the work's keen aesthetic immediacy. That is, all the senses of the artist's and viewer's bodies are connected as receptors for meaning (Bonita Fly in http://home.iprimus.com.au/painless/space/bonita.html).
increasingly associating themselves with Durga Puja\textsuperscript{46}, a scope to experiment with design and form.

**Scheme of Chapters**

The entire thesis is thematically divided in terms of chapters. In the present chapter, I have introduced the central problem and its possible analysis in the light of relevant sociological literature on crafts and craftsmen. The rationality behind the methodology adopted for studying the problem has also been dealt with. Clarifications on terminology used have also been given to the extent required so that the general reader is acclimatized with the field setting.

The second chapter will explore the interconnectivities between urban space and traditional community and how the spectacles of urban life present newer opportunities in the flourishing of certain occupations. It also provides the larger backdrop of the history of pottery in India and in Bengal, with particular reference to the rise of idol-making as a craft, and of the idol-makers as a community.

In the third chapter the focus is more towards establishing the particularities of the community as an occupational caste group. Here it is situated in terms of the pan-Indian and local caste hierarchies of Bengal as a regional entity.

The fourth chapter is an analysis of the practice of idol-making as an economic endeavour, the process of idol making and the techniques of work, and the relations of production and dynamics between the traditional versus the modern practitioners of the art. It also explores the patterns of occupational mobility and migration among the traditional practitioners in the face of fierce competition.

The fifth chapter is about the market dynamics and the general problems of the trade, the reasons that hinder the growth of the market outreach for the traditional idol-

\textsuperscript{46} In my interactions with a famous sculptor and artist, the discussion around installation art in the 1990s and the challenge to make Durga puja as an installation art was said to be the inspiration for his work on idol-making.
makers. The focus is more on the capacity of the idol-makers as traders and businessmen and how and why they seem to be losing out in the otherwise increasing market of Durga puja, in the transactions of crores of rupees that is on the rise by the passing of each year.

In the concluding chapter I will try to tie up all the issues discussed and present a summary of the propositions that have been examined in my study.