Chapter 2
Pottery and Idol-Making in West Bengal

The main purpose of this chapter is to look at the emergence of idol-makers as an occupational group in Bengal, and how they have formed a defined identity in course of time. To provide a complete picture of this artisan group, it is necessary to have a glimpse of the wider pottery making cultures that prevail in the country. Moreover, it is also important to situate them in the particular socio-historical background of the region and the rise of the city of Kolkata, and how it had shaped and is shaping their lives. Hence we will start with a general background of pottery making traditions of India and of Bengal in particular, and then try to link them to how the rise of festivals and formation of city as a space for festivities has initiated and sustained the art of idol-making as a livelihood.

Traditions of Pottery in India

Every village, of almost every state of India, has a potter (Khumbar or Kumhar) who 'wheels' out an amazing variety of household utensils and other objects of utility. The rich traditions of pottery are found both in the Northern and in the Southern States. Each area has different styles of pottery. Local traditions and the type of clay available influence the shapes, forms and the decorative designs (Saraswati 1978). The potter, Kumbhar, as we will see is an integral part of the life of the people. Apart from the ordinary clay utensils that are produced perhaps in all places, some of the potters’ groups have developed a specialized genre of pottery, be it in the realm of religious or votive objects or decorative pieces or ordinary vessels. Some of the pottery traditions have gained immense popularity because of the special treatment of the clay, distinctiveness either in style or in form, or both. A range of these well known centres of clay art is found across the country. Kangra and Andreta in Himachal Pradesh are famous for black pottery. A variety of items in black pottery are created in these places for domestic use. They are reminiscent of the early northern black clay ware of the old Harappan pottery in their form and decoration (http://www.4to40.com/art). Delhi’s ‘Blue’ pottery is famous for its glazed surfaces and intricate designs on the surface (http://www.indianmirror.com/crafts/cra5.html). This particular art form again is the
influence of the Arab tradition and is linked with the coming of the Persians in India. The name is derived from the eye-catching Persian blue dye that is used to colour the clay (http://www.indiaprofile.com/art-crafts/ceramics.htm).

Uttar Pradesh also has a rich tradition of producing some of the finest and most decorative pottery items. Chunar is symbolized by its fine black clay pottery. This is inlaid with silver paint in intricate designs. Khurja is also well known for its cheap but tough tableware. The specialty of Khurja pottery is white clay pottery, a specialized craft of the traditional Muslim potters. Meerut, Hapur, Chinhat and Mansalia are important centres where ordinary domestic articles and glazed items, mostly tableware are made. Produced on a mass scale, fired at high temperatures, these pottery items retain their mud colour and are in popular demand. In Kanpur, the clay ware is thin textured, with stamped and incised designs. Another common form is the large jars prepared by beating the wheel-thrown rough forms of clay and shaping them into large containers. In Jhajjar one will find slim-necked water-containers known as surahis, which are half turned and half moulded and have a variety of patterns of rosettes and flowing designs, with artistic gargoyle heads for spouts (Dhamija 1970: 44-45).

Rajasthan pottery has certain distinct characteristics. Jaipur pottery, made out of Egyptian paste, is thrown on the wheel and fired in wood-kilns, usually at very low temperatures. This naturally makes it fragile though few can resist the charm of the delicate white and blue floral motif, which is painted onto the body after firing. The range of items is primarily decorative such as ashtrays, vases, coasters, small bowls and boxes for trinkets (http://indiantourguide.blogspot.com/2007/10/indian-blue-pottery.html). In the Pokhran pottery, pieces in different shapes are made for varied uses. Alwar is noted for its paper-thin pottery, known as kagzi (paper like) pottery. The village Molela specializes in producing reliefs of gods and goddesses, mainly Ganesh, the elephant god. These reliefs are painted in vibrant reds, yellows and pinks and the figure is fired

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1 For more information on Khurja pottery styles see Jayaram (1994). Her thesis traces the social aspects of the Khurja pottery and the transformation of a craft based occupation primarily associated with Muslim artisans to a much practiced work even among the caste Hindus of Uttar Pradesh.
In Gujarat, a mixture of white and black clay is used in pottery making. After they are sun-dried, the clay articles are painted. Only earth pigments, ground and mixed with water are used. The object is first coated with a uniform base colour and the patterns are then painted in various colours. A vast repertoire of motifs is spontaneously rendered by craftswomen. Designs are made of dots, zigzag stripes and diagonals. Floral and animal patterns are only occasionally used. Kutch and Saurashtra in Gujarat are noted for their beautiful earthenware. South Gujarat also has very fine potters, who create a range of pots and also ritual objects such as terracotta horse, elephants and dome-like resting places for their ancestral spirit. The animal forms are created by combining a series of pots; long cylindrical pots form the legs, a larger pot makes up the body, and the neck and head are separate pots. These are put together and a coiled tail, shaped ears and other elements are attached to form the whole. The effect is of a strong sculpturesque animal form.

The potters of Kutch are known for creating a range of pots for varied occasions. There are special pots for worship during the ceremony of initiation, marriage and death, prepared by the potter for all communities, irrespective of caste or creed. The other variety of Kutch pottery, presently found only in Nizamabad of Uttar Pradesh is the silvered black pottery. It has a highly polished lustrous black surface, which is incised and filled in with silver colour. The glazed effect is done by dipping the clay item into a “slip made of clay, mixed with vegetable matter. After this the dried pottery is polished with a vegetable matter, when fired, creates a black oxide, which gives the glowing black polished surface. It is then incised and mercury is rubbed into the incised sections, creating silvery patterns. The effect is very similar to the Bider work of Andhra Pradesh, where oxidized gunmetal is inlaid with silver wire” (Dhamija 1970: 46-47).

The South has several centres of noted glazed pottery. Vellore has black and red wares. Usilampatti in Madurai district has black pottery. Karigari pottery in South Arcot of Tamilnadu is most famous for the intricate items. Here the items are made in parts and
then joined (Dhamija 1970:46). The chillum (clay pipe) is made into a noteworthy item both through its elegant shape and deep blue or green glaze. Khanapur in Belgaum district of Karnataka is known for its large sized containers and jars for storage and preservation. Going further south, the region famous for its pottery is Pondicherry. Most of the products here are moulded out of china clay and mature at very high temperatures. Tamilnadu is famous for the terracotta figures of the Aiyanaar Deity. The figures are huge and they are found standing guard at the entrances of villages protecting the insiders from evil spirits (Dhamija 1970:45).

These broad regional variations reflect how pottery as a craft is influenced by the culture of the region, of the geographic conditions and of the type of clay available. Every village potter inculcates into his art the regional characteristics and variations. For example, in the water pitchers produced by the potters of Rajasthan the shape is dictated by the function. The mouths of these water pots are small, probably to prevent spilling when water is being carried, a natural precaution in a place where water is so precious. Thus what is established in these variations is that “pottery at any site may vary over time, in terms of how they were made, for what they were made and probably where they were made” (Orton 1993 cited in Basu 2002:33).

Baidyanath Saraswati (1966, 1978) and others have traced the pottery making traditions that exists in different parts of the country in detail. While pottery has received scholarly attention, the potters not so much. No doubt that the existence of pottery making culture speaks the importance of a particular group of artisans as a service caste. There also exists certain commonalities in the art of pottery across the country – most of the traditional potters use the potter’s wheel turned by men only and women produce handcrafted clay items (Saraswati 1978; Behura and Saraswati 1966). But apart from the commonalities that may exist across the cultures, what makes the pottery of one region different from the other is its evolution, which is heavily influenced by the socio-cultural, religious and political history of that particular region. A marked example of such an influence may be observed when we look at the pottery making traditions and cultures of

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2 In the writings of Brouwer (1995), Kolenda (1981), Mayer (1970) the potters are denoted as an important caste that formed a part of the jajmani relationship in traditional villages.
Bengal. The most important point of differentiation occurred with the use of fired clay in temple architecture. In the absence of stone or hard rocks in this deltaic region not only were the palaces being made of hardened clay, but a whole range of art grew around its use, as evident from the wide range of terracotta temples in the Murshidabad, Bishnupur and Bankura area.

**Pottery making Culture in Bengal**

In Bengal, the pottery traditions also have a distinctive history and style and these originate in the ancient history of the region (www.http://banglapedia.com). The recent excavations at Mangalkot, Pandu Rajar Dhibi, and other archaeological evidence from different sites trace the history of the region from its proto-historic days in the first millennium BC. The deposits divided into seven successive periods range from Chalcolithic to the Mughal period. The antiquities unearthed comprise seals and sealings, silver and copper coins, terracotta figurines and objects, household objects of utilitarian use, beads of semi-precious stones, and ceramics including Black and Red ware and northern Black Polished ware (Panja *et al* 2002). Traces of medieval culture have been found in Hooghly, a district town in West Bengal, with the excavations of hoards of gold coins that dates back to the Gupta period (Fourth to Sixth Century). Among the sculptures executed during the Ninth to Twelfth centuries, mention may be made of the monumental Sudharshana Chakra, a massive Sambhara form of Shiva, a highly sensitive Lokeshvara, and a voluptuous Ganga. All of these indicate the existence of a rich tradition of craftsmanship of this region.

This established archaeological history of the potter’s craft also reveals that there existed a high quality of workmanship\(^3\). The pottery craft of Bengal holds a unique position of having inscribed potsherds from the post-Mauryan to the Kuṣāṇā culture phase (Basu 2002:35). The figurative imagery styles however flourished much later between the 16\(^{th}\) and 19\(^{th}\) centuries in the area near Vishnupur – the capital of the then

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\(^3\) Archaeological excavations in various sites, like Chandraketugarh and Tamluk in lower Bengal have revealed high quality Northern Black Pottery ware. Moreover, during the Maurya-Sunga Phase there existed extraordinarily varied types of deluxe as well as ordinary ware in different shapes, colours and fabrics (Basu 2002:32).
Malla Kings who were great patrons of art (Perryman 2000:171). One important reason behind this particular style of architecture can be the lack of stone, which is why the important buildings and temples were made from brick and covered with ornate terracotta tiles depicting scenes from the Ramayana and Mahabharata as well as everyday life (Perryman 2000:171). For centuries here the potters collaborated with the Sutradharas (members of the architect/carver caste). The plaques and tiles were carved by the Sutradhars with small thin chisels in semi-hard blocks of plastic clay, especially prepared by the potters and later returned to them for drying and firing. Press moulds were made for the reproduction of repetitive borders and other repeated elements (Perryman 2000:171). Thus, there were two distinct types of pottery items that flourished from this period: (a) ordinary vessel making and (b) decorative and votive clay items, primarily of terracotta.

Bengal pottery is well known as having perhaps the best tradition of terracotta, most of which also carries religious connotation. Many of the objects prepared are used for religious purposes such as votive offerings to the numerous gods and goddesses. Bengal also has the largest array of the finest specimens of temple terracotta panels. Another well-known pottery item is the Bankura horse, heavily decorated; this horse is made of rich red clay and is offered to the gods and goddesses at religious ceremonies (http://www.ethnicindiacrafts.com/Pottery_Crafts). The Bankura horse, also known as Panchmura horse after the name of the place where it is made, has gained popularity as a distinct decorative item in upper middle class family drawing rooms. The terracotta art however is primarily an expression of the folk culture of the different regions. These highly expressive designs are the ceremonial forms of the indigenous gods and goddesses and linked to their religious beliefs (Ghose 1981).

Thus, despite the paramount role played by domestic earthenware, it is its religious association that gives the pottery of Bengal a far wider dimension (Chattopadhyay 1976: 172). Hindu mythology boasts a rich pantheon of gods and goddesses whose worship is an important element of everyday Hindu life. Clay images of these gods and goddesses are therefore in much demand in all the places where the Hindu faith is practised. Each region, each village has a galaxy of deities to be worshiped on special occasions
The vast amount of religious earthenware or votive clay items can again be classified under two categories: (a) figurines of divinities and (b) ceremonial pottery (Chattopadhyay 1976:172).

In the first category, Durga is undoubtedly the most popular figure. Saraswati, the Goddess of Learning, is perhaps the next who is heavily worshipped. Images of the goddess Saraswati are produced in the largest number because Saraswati Puja is a domestic observance, and many Bengali households install images of the goddess. Festivals related to these deities give the potter a motivation to work on the fine art, as his creation is in high demand during those days. Other important festivals are Kali Puja, Lakshmi Puja and Jagatdhatri Puja. Other than these clay images of Annapurna, Viswakarma, Sitala, Ganesh Kartik are also produced in large numbers.

Other than the figurines, ceremonial pottery is another category which involves the making of pots and vessels to be used for ritualistic offerings. These are lamps, incense burners, and other objects of household and temple worship. The mass production of such items is noticeable during the different ceremonial occasions that happen at several points of time during the whole year. Some of the ceremonial potteries are in themselves the object of worship. Of these one popularly practiced is the Manasa pottery of Birbhum. It represents the snake goddess and is a quaint, double curved pot with a face painted on it. Similarly, the Dakshinirai pots, found in the Sunderban area, are round pots with an edge running along the mouth signifying a crown and worshipped as the god who protects people against tigers (Chattopadhyay 1975).

Apart from the utilitarian and the ritualistic pottery, there also exists a unique style of pottery in Bengal. This is the realistic pottery of Krishnanagar. A place called Ghurni in Krishnanagar produces the finest of realistic clay sculpting. Clay models of human figures, animals, fruits and flowers are made from unfired clay and through mixing of definite proportions of fine alluvial clay and sticky clay. These models can be both miniatures and life sized, different scenarios are also made in clay and cloth, jute etc., are
also used to give a realistic touch to the images. These are popularly known as putuls or dolls of Krishnanagar and gained immense popularity with the advent of the British who patronized this art and took them to the various exhibitions in England, making them a distinct art form, though many art critics scoffed them as too realistic to be art (Chakravarti 1985).

Almost all of the research work on Bengal pottery are however, archaeological (Pal and Haque 2000; Basu 2002) in nature, either exploring the chronology or the stylistic pattern of pottery from the archaeological relics. In respect to this, the interest in the potter’s group, and of pottery of a different nature, the thriving art on small figurines, life size model etc., have developed much later, which are more anthropological in nature (Chakravarti 1985).

In this schema of clay artistry, the art of image making or idol-making can be related with votive clay items, but they actually form a different genre of artistry as a handmade unfired clay art. The traditional potter’s wheel is completely absent and the work is mainly done through pressing, moulding and use of a mixture of different varieties of clay. This type of clay modelling is relatively new, owing to the rise and popularity of worshipping gods and goddesses in the form of annual puja celebrations. According to some the worshipping of Puranic Idols is not older than 1000 years and the rise of idol-making as an occupation is traced only with the popular celebrations of post-Vedic deities like Durga and Kali (Beane 2001). The story of Durga mainly appears in the Skanda Purana, and in Chandi, a part of Markandya Purana. But similar stories with minor differences appear in the Brahmananda Purana and the Mahabharata (Bhattacharya 1977). The present form of Durga Puja, also known as Akalbodhon is considered to be conceived by Lord Ram. The legend runs that Ram wanted to invoke the blessings of the Goddess before his mission to kill Ravana, the Lord of Demons. It is called Akalbodhon (untimely commemoration) because before this the Puja was

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4 For greater detail on the Krishnanagar pottery see Chakravarti (1985).
5 I used the word ‘art’ here to make it distinct from ordinary pottery. Idol-making reflects a very specialized form of clay modelling where it is the individuals’ artistic imagination that plays a very important role in making the idol beautiful and an object of reverence. Moreover, there are distinguishable styles in the work of each idol-maker and the work of one can be easily differentiated from that of another.
scheduled to take place in the spring and Ram performed the puja in autumn. To appease the goddess, he worshipped her with 108 lotuses. The celestial time of the worship begins on the day of the *Mahalaya* (the first day of autumn after the new moon). The goddess is actually worshipped for four days beginning on the sixth day of the celestial time (*Devipaksha*) before immersing it in water on the day of *Bijoyadashami* (the tenth day). Immersion in water in a way completes/signifies the ever-present cycle of creation and destruction, a precursor and metaphor of the belief in reincarnation. In the composite pantheon of the Hindu religion it is difficult to assign a specific position to any particular divinity since one and the same god and goddess is often worshipped under different names and forms associated with particular appearances or actions (Campbell 1973). Durga among the Bengalis is worshipped as one of the many forms of the Goddess, a special manifestation in the form of Chandi, as the slayer of the dreadful demon Mahishashura.

Idol worshipping is very common among the Hindus and in Bengal, in individual households one can easily notice the presence of an altar for the family deity that is worshipped for everyday puja and also as part of the annual festival when a particular deity is worshipped and its legends evoked. What entails the scope of discussion on idol worshipping and Durga Puja is to trace how the culture around Durga puja has acted as a stimulus to the occupation of idol-making and its associated trade; how the rise of the idol-makers is intrinsically related to the popularity and spread of Durga puja.

The origin of the worship of Durga in the form of a clay idol is somewhat obscure. Several contesting episodes appear in the cultural history of the region. One of the earliest accounts of Durga Worship in Bengal is found in Vishnupur. According to popular legends, the king Jagat Malla of Malla Dynasty, who flourished around the 10th

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6 The story of Durga is found in Campbell (1973), Berkson (1995) and Bhattacharji (1995). The story was often repeated by the respondents during the course of my fieldwork, and is something that almost every child in a Bengali household grows up with. However, what is of significance is that there is a curious mixture of the folk and the classical myth in the popularly circulated story in Bengal, i.e., of the Goddess Uma’s annual homecoming with her children to enjoy a few days of rest at her mother Menaka’s place in Bengal. This Uma is the daughter of Himalaya and the wife of Shiva. This twin identity is perhaps what is reflected in the idol that is venerated during Durga Puja – a fierce looking demon slayer accompanied by her children who seems to be somewhat unconcerned (Deb Sen 2007: 108-111).
century AD “was hunting in the jungle” and “catching sight of a heron on a treetop he dispatched his hunting hawk to kill the bird, but the heron killed the hawk. There upon the Goddess Durga commanded him to establish a place of worship” (Őstor 1984:18-19). In another account, Durga puja in the present form of an annual festival was initiated in 1580 by Raja Kansanarayan of Taherpur (now in Bangladesh) and later emulated by Raja Jagatnarayan of Bhaduria in Rajshahi district (also in Bangladesh) (Banerjee 2006: 31). However, the first recorded Durga Puja seems to have been celebrated by Bhabananda, the ancestor of Maharaja Krishnachandra of Nadia in about 1606 (Chaliha and Gupta 1990; Banerjee 2006).

On the other hand, the history of this particular type of clay modelling is only about 350 years old. The Maharaja of Nadia District, Raja Krishnachandra (1710-1782) introduced the image worship of Jagatdhatri and Kali in lower Bengal and brought a few families of expert potters from Dacca in East Bengal and Natore in North Bengal and settled them in Ghumi near Krishnanagar in the early eighteen century (Sen 1982). Sudhir Chakravarti (1985) in his monograph on the clay modellers of Krishnanagar has however contested this claim stating that no documents have been found to support the story. Many documents exist about the Raja providing lands for the settlement of different groups but none such exist on the particular potter community. Moreover, barring a single family in Ghumi no other stated their ancestral link to Natore in the course of Chakravarti’s fieldwork.

The significant part of this history is that along with the celebration of the puja (worship) with clay images, Krishnachandra also introduced the tradition of ‘bisharjan’ (immersion) of the image after each puja, so that a new image was required for worship in each year. Thus what was traditionally a one time affair, whereby the thakur or the deity was installed permanently in the defined spaces of the temple or the household, changed into an annual occasion of making a clay image which was the pratima and not the thakur or deity.

The word ‘pratima’ in modern written Bengali indicates a man-made statue of any deity in clay, stone, wood or metal. A ‘pratima’ is not sacred by itself, but becomes sacred only when it is worshipped.

Sarma 1969: 581
Such a notion of the deity or the goddess might have had great implications for the art of clay image making. Because the clay image is not considered as an object of reverence till the time it is properly worshipped, anyone with an urge and a capacity to give a vent to his creative talents could be engaged in the art of idol-making. Moreover, the ritual of bisharjan dictated that the work is not a single, lifetime affair, but a regularized work which has a rhythmic pattern like any other occupation. Hence, the questions of continuity and sustenance provided an impetus to the groups of clay workers who increasingly shifted their attention to the making of idols. It is during this time that the art of image-making thrived as a full-fledged occupation apart from making articles of ritual worship, the different ceremonial pots, namely Raserhadi, Sakerhadi, Dharmaghat, Mangalghat, Manasaghat, Nagghat etc., which was also done by Bankura potters. From then onwards Krishnachandra started celebrating it every year and popularised the puja in other areas too. The grandeur of the Durga Puja, Jagatdhatri Puja etc., as celebrated by the Raja can said to be not only an expression of his religiosity but can also be noted as a political expression of identity. At that point of time, Bengal was ruled by the Muslim Nawabs of Murshidabad and as a contemporary of Siraj-ud-aulah Krishnachandra may have sought to popularize the celebration of pujas to uphold the Bengali Hindu identity of him and his people and the region as a whole.

In the recorded history of Kolkata, the first Durga Puja was celebrated in the house of the then Zamindars of Kolkata, Barisha’s Shaborno Choudhurys in 1610 by their first ancestor Lakshmikanta Ray Mazumdar (Bharati 2005: 47). However, it is not till the next century that Durga Puja gained popularity in Kolkata, by which time the city was taking shape into the present form accompanied by certain social dislocations and the rise of new classes of urban rich.

7 A water pot filled with water, has from time immemorial been a symbol of good omen and is indispensable in any Hindu ritual. In cases where the image or deity is available for worship, a water pitcher serves the purpose and is therefore often called ‘mangalghat’, i.e., good omen (Chattopadhyay 1975: 3). Manasaghat, Nagghat are also pots which are shaped or mounted in the form of a serpent, representing the deity Manasa – the goddess of the serpents. She is worshipped in the monsoons so as to save oneself from the wrath of the snakes.

8 Such connotations have been implicit in the writings of Ghosh (2000) and Sarma (1969).
City, Space and Rise of Spectacles

The phenomenon of the city is of interest for this study since it acts as the basis of various social consequences and influences the life of its inhabitants as a social fact. In this regard therefore it is important to trace the growth and development of the city of Kolkata and establish the linkages between its history and that of the idol-makers who came to be a part of the social life of the city.

Certain social dislocations accompanied the growth of Calcutta, which was a direct result of the continuing dominance of the British East India Company in Bengal. The social groups that figured pre-dominantly in Calcutta’s economic life in the pre-colonial period were the Setts and the Basaks, the traditional merchant families who had some amount of autonomy in the pre-Plassey days. They were involved in the cloth and yarn trade concentrated in the Sutanuti village (one of the three villages of Govindopur, Sutanuti and Kalikata that formed Job Charnocks Calcutta). The old records also show that the original population of Calcutta consisted of the agricultural and fishing communities and some other working groups. They belonged mainly to the castes of Bagdis as well as some Muslims belonging to the lower status like Jola (weavers). From the middle of the 18th century they were gradually squeezed out to the fringes, mainly in the eastern part of the locality. The decline of the Seths, who are known as the “jungle clearing pioneers” (Dasgupta and Chakraborty 1992) of Calcutta, began after 1757 when the East India Company switched over to direct agency system but sought to retain extensive landed properties in Burrabazar, which later became the Indian part of the city. The Basaks also left property similar to the Seths and this were later given out as rented property. This however, could not revive the social status of these traditional mercantile families and were gradually replaced by the emerging intermediaries or Banias appointed...

9 Durkheim's notion of social fact may also be applicable to the notion of city because it has a distinct identity, and has distinct social characteristics, and is external to individual and are also endowed with coercive power by which they impose on individual (Durkheim 1970). It shapes the life of the residents in the city. However, Rene Maunier (1910) has defined that the city as not “an isolated phenomenon, sui generis but a community which must be identified, because of its certain characteristics, with a certain social type…” (Maunier 1910: 537).

10 A profile of the social dislocations in the early colonial period was discussed by Dasgupta and Chakraborty (1992) and Mukherjee (1977). This paragraph follows the same history. My justification in particularly sticking to this is that it sketches the rise of the rich intermediaries and their subsequent ranking in the socio-cultural hierarchy of the city, which I will be discussing in this chapter.
by the British East India Company. One of the eminent names of this time is that of Nabakrishna Deb, who obtained the right of holding a property in Sovabazar and was later awarded the taluk of Sutanuti by the Company. This amounted to an exclusive right to collect the ground rent and grand *pattas* or leases in the greater part of Northern Calcutta (Dasgupta and Chakraborty 1992: 39). He later got the title of Raja.

At the same time the Shaborno Choudhuries, as the original Zamindars of Calcutta patronized the priestly family of the Kali temple and other Brahmins who got rent-free lands in what was to develop as Calcutta proper in the early 18th century and it is from them that the British later purchased land in Calcutta, though still liable to pay rent to the superior landlord, that is the Nawab of Bengal. From 1727 Ramlochan Ghosh of Pathuriaghata Street started celebrating Durga puja; he was the Diwan of Lord Hastings-the Governor of Bengal. It is only after the battle of Plassey that the English became the formal landowner and the class of new Banias emerged. The new Banias were the traders and businessmen whose roles were vital to the British Indian economy, for it was important to have interpreters, brokers and other native agencies to conduct business with the Indian producers. These sections flourished under the British rule and later became the leaders of modernization (Mukherjee 1977:13). Thereafter, there was also a sudden influx of population to Calcutta because of the Maratha raid in the south-western districts of Bengal. By 1772 the city was achieving its distinct characters with the segregation of English dominated ‘white town’, the cosmopolitan ‘intermediate town’ and the Indian ‘black town’.

It is this differentiation that led to the derelict conditions of the native ‘black town’ especially in the low lying areas near the river banks in the northern part of Calcutta, the poor drainage system, narrow roads and the garbage dumps – a place squatted amidst the underdeveloped part of the growing city. In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Calcutta, in the words of a colonial observer,

*was divided into two worlds, southern or European and northern or native. The European town was, large, airy and commodious; the houses were in general well built and some of them equal to palaces. The black town in contrast was overcrowded with men living in badly built, unimpressive houses*

*Mukherjee 1977:4*
Early histories of Calcutta also indicate that there were some areas which became
associated with the predominance of certain castes, and later became identified by their
distinct names. Some of the well-known areas that still exist are Muchi-para, Caloo-tola,
Kumortuli, Kansari-para, Ahiri-tola etc. An interesting history on the origin of such
different ‘tolas’ or ‘paras’ (localities) in the city of Calcutta can be traced back to the
community-wise settlement plan of the East India Company in 1757. “The East India
Company drew up a plan in the order of an Indian village community for the settlement
of the Calcutta population. The Company had plans to allocate different sections of the
town to different castes. It was resolved that all ‘Weavers, Carpenters, Bricklayers,
Smiths, Taylors, Braziers and Handicrafts shall be incorporated into their respective
Bodies one in each district of…Town” (Ghose 1975:146). These can be said to be town
based castes, and the fact of living in towns did not severe the caste affiliations of its
residents. The settlement of the different paras or localities also suggests of the
“concentration of population…the wider markets, the division of labour, the
concentration of individual or groups on special tasks …” (Park 1915: 577) that
ultimately changed the material conditions of the growing city of Calcutta11. Such
distinctions along with the differential living quarters of the Europeans and the natives or
indigenous population gave rise to drastically varied living conditions among the
different classes and occupational groups living in the city.

It is during this period of the colonial rule that the new-zamindars or baniyas of the
British started celebrating Durga puja as a novelty for the Britisher’s sake12. This annual
celebration characterized by gay festivities and display of religious sentiments can also be
the influence of Western Christian culture that involved a public display and celebration
during Christmas. Taking a cue from the Christian annual public festivities there might
have risen the proclamation of the presence of an equally engaging and long festivity

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11 Calcutta is a parvenu city without a past or lineage; it grew with the establishment and development of
British economic and political power, a ‘chance’ creation. It is much later that attempts were made to
differentiate the localities (Mukherjee 2006: 14).
12 During the British rule, “a system of ‘farming out’ which was first used in Calcutta for collecting rents
and duties,…allowed a large-scale circulation of money and have new groups, banyans and gomasthas, the
opportunity to control land and land rent, thus replacing the ancient families” (Mukherjee 1977: 14). They
tried to establish themselves as the important members of the new society and the familiarity with the rulers
by celebrating pujas and inviting the British.
through the celebrations of Durga puja. The distinctiveness lay in how each zamindar would conceive the celebrations. This was an occasion which is more social than religious, a way to display the socio-economic status of a particular family. The neo-rich among this rising business class initiated puja celebrations to upgrade his social status\(^{13}\). The worshipping of the mother goddess formed only a part of the celebration, the emphasis was more on who could display wealth in terms of introducing different functions like jatra shows, nauche girl shows, giving community feast, etc., during the entire period of four days when the Durga Puja is celebrated.

Hence the sudden popularity of celebrating Durga Puja as ‘barir’ (household) puja was witnessed during the later half of the 18\(^{th}\) century (Banerjee 2006). This trend is reflected in almost all of the traditional pujas in Kolkata, like the Chatubabu-Latubabu Puja that started around 1770-80 in the house of Ishwar Ram Dulal Deb (Sarkar). Raja Nabakrishna Deb initiated a Puja in 1757, which is known as the Shovabazar Rajbari Puja. The Hathkhola Duttabari Puja was initiated by Manmohan Dutta in 1795. Others followed like Mitras of Darjipara (1760), Mitras of Chakraberia (1757), Sreemanis (1779), Debs of Entally (1790), Rani Rashmoni (1793), all indicating the rising importance of celebrating Durga Puja as a means of social recognition (Mitra 2003:51). Hence by the middle of 18\(^{th}\) century, idol-makers from Nabadwip, Meturi, Shantipur, Krishnanagar were brought in the city annually by these families in order to create the clay images for worshipping.

This occupation gained further impetus with the introduction of ‘Baroari’ or community pujas. The ‘Baroari’ pujas can again be seen as a form of protest by the ordinary public. Since most of the household pujas were family affairs and only invited guests could actively take part in the festival, some felt that what was required is a public

\(^{13}\) Identity is shaped in Indian context through expenditures in public celebrations, that provides the double function of, (a) providing a space for maintaining social reputations and webs of obligations, and (b) they serve as spaces for status enhancing competitions (Rao 2001: 85). The second is an “opportunity for individuals to demonstrate, to signal, to the world that an important time has arrived, an important transition is completed” (Rao 2001: 86). The culturally determined preferences for status and rank in Indian society create powerful incentive for public expenditure in festivals.
celebration where all could be involved\textsuperscript{14}. However, some of the Baroari pujas also elicited conflicts over the participation of certain castes and sects\textsuperscript{15} and the Baroari puja celebrations were waning by the end of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century and very few survived till the 20\textsuperscript{th} century (Ghosh 2000).

The Baroari puja underwent a reincarnation by the beginning of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century as Sarbojanin puja. The first of these Pujas of Kolkata was organized in 1910 as the ‘Sikdar Bagan Sarbojanin Durgotsav’ (Nandy 2003). Some argue the community puja of Bagbazar that was organized in 1918 to be the first of the sarbojanin puja (Ghosh 2000). The word ‘sarbojanin’ comes from the Bengali root word “sarbo-jon” meaning everybody/all, so the puja which is meant for all, and not merely confined within households, among known relatives and friends, was recognized as “Sarbojanin Durgotsav” (literally meaning Puja for all and sundry). The community Pujas received greater acceptance and popularity when a revolutionary Atindranath Basu conceived the Sarbojanin Durgotsav in 1926 as a platform for communal and class harmony, as a festival where all can participate irrespective of caste, class and communal affiliation. By this time it also came to reflect the cohesion and locality of the neighbourhood or para. Some of the sarbojanin puja were associated with the nationalist movement, the extremists who worshipped Durga as the embodiment of Shakti (Sarma 1969, Ghosh 2000). Thus the puja organizers would organize for swadeshi mela or fairs, competitions for lathi khela (an indigenous martial art form which uses wooden sticks (lathi), wrestling

\textsuperscript{14} This again has contesting dates. While Ghosh (2000) dates the initiation of Baroari pujas to have taken place in the last decade of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century in 1790, Sarma (1969) dates the event to have taken place in 1760, while a missionary newspaper published of such an event in 1820 (Sarma 1969); Chaliha & Gupta (1990) dates the event in 1761. In the absence of definite records, we may say that the ‘Baroari’ puja started only in the second half of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century. The story remains similar for all; a group of Kayasthas/Vaidyas families got together in Guptipara, in the village near Shantipur in Nadia district and held the first community puja. This was held in protest when these people were barred from taking part in the household puja. The puja was financed by collecting subscriptions from the neighbouring villages and this group performed a glittering ceremony. This came to be known as the ‘baro-yari’ (baro-12, yar-friends) or Baroari puja or the puja of 12 friends and this gained popularity in other parts of Bengal in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century.

\textsuperscript{15} In 1821, a caste dispute broke out during the celebration of Baroari puja at Joynagar in South 24 Parganas, over an invitation extended to a member from the lower weaver caste (tanti), when the upper caste members of the locality attacked the organizer for defiling the puja. Similarly, sectarian disputes rose in Chinsurah in 1837 between the Vaishnavites and the Saivaites over animal sacrifice (Ghosh 2000:296).
etc., to promote the culture of nationality. The well-known pujas of this genre are that of Bagbazar Sarbojanin and Simla Byam Samiti\(^\text{16}\).

Gradually, the practice of image making or idol-making came to be heavily dependent on these annual celebrations, and by the twentieth century, Kolkata became the chief market for these idols. Many of the idol-makers who used to annually visit the city started to settle down since business increased. The two main hubs where the idol-makers established their workshop were Kumartuli in the Northern part of the city and Kalighat in the south, both near the river Hooghly because of the easy availability of clay. Earlier, each year groups of craftsmen would come to Kolkata through the river from the suburbs and rural areas. They would come before the Rathayatra and go back after the Kalipuja\(^\text{17}\). This seasonal migration gradually changed into their settling down in the present Kumartuli area when the patrons like Raja Rajballav and Radhakanta Deb Bahadur granted them some land in the Sutanuti area. The settlement was formed in terms of a 'pattani'\(^\text{18}\).

In the words of Niranjan Pal, Deben Pal, Neelkanto Pal and Madhusudan Pal, the veteran idol-makers, the population of idol-makers in Kolkata settled down as part of the legacy of the new landlords or banias of the English rulers. Most of the aged population is aware of this popular history and take a pride in that. Another interesting characteristic is that most of them are conscious of their heritage and links and their early history of the

\(^{16}\) In my field interactions with the Puja organizers of Bagbazar Sarbojanin and the Puja souvenir of 2006, the puja was recognised to be 87 years old, with the first puja organized in 1919. By the 1930s, eminent nationalist of the day Subhash Chandra Bose, Durgacharan Bandopadhyay, Acharya Pratul Chandra Roy and others came to be associated with this puja. The organizers still continues to keep the tradition and spirit of the earlier swadeshi mela by organising a mela/fair where exhibitions, lathi kela, and other martial arts like karate are promoted through friendly competitions. The same character can be observed in the puja organized by the Simla Byam Samiti. Authors like Bhattacharya (2007) however, argue that Hinduism assumed a 'secular' identity, a revivalist rhetoric of a wronged community much earlier than this period. Particularly in Bengal by the late nineteenth century some selective discourses and rites were used to strengthen the language of anti-colonial nationalism (Bhattacharya 2007: 920). For her, “the nineteenth century saw the successful construction of an urban identity for Calcutta around Durga Puja” (Bhattacharya 2007: 958).

\(^{17}\) This is taken from my field notes. Unless otherwise mentioned, all narration on the life and times of the idol-makers in the Kumartuli area has been gathered from my field notes.

\(^{18}\) A type of land settlement agreements of taxes and facilities by the landlord and the tenants whereby the tenure of settlement is long and permanent, though ownership can never be transferred.
city. The artists who are older, 60 years or above are therefore very vocal when they say that

Earlier Job Charnock came to Bengal and when he displaced the Seths, Basaks and Malliks (the big zamindars, traders and landlords) from Fort William, many of their heirs settled in Rajabazar and Sovabazar area. After the battle of Plassey, Raja NabaKrishna Deb settled in Kumartuli and made the place his family home (bhodrashon). He later requested Raja Krishnachandra of Krishnanagar to send an idol-maker in his place to prepare the Durga idol for his family. This is the time when we started coming to Kolkata. Later orders grew and many of our ancestors made the place their permanent homes (prothome gola chilo pore basha kore chole eshechen).

However, it must be noted that another version on the inception of ‘Kumartuli’ or the ‘locality of potters’ dates back to the end of the 18th century. The area got its name Kumartuli, as the dwellings of the Kumbhakaras or Kumars, when a few Kumbhakar families who mainly produced clay utensils began to settle in this area. These are the original settlers of the land which was then in the possession of Babu Govinda Chandra Mitra19.

The history of Durga Puja, therefore, can be linked with the development of the city. At the same time, the puja also came to be a marker or identity of the Bengali culture. What was primarily a rural institution, celebrated by the rural gentry or landlords became a space of festivity of the masses. The involvement of the masses is acutely found when we look at the puja associations. The formations of Puja associations arose as a necessity because the celebration involved huge costs, perhaps it is the costliest of all

19 The Zamindari Abolition Act (Estate Acquisition Act) which was enacted and enforced in early fifties in the whole of the state of West Bengal, was not extended to the bustee areas of Calcutta. As the city grew, the landlords of Calcutta moved to the less crowded areas and gave the erstwhile garden houses and lands to the people in need of accommodation on a monthly or yearly rent. As the demand for shelters grew, the hut-owners living in these lands let out a part to others and there developed a three-tier system of landlords, hut-owners and ordinary tenants. (Siddiqui & Hossain 2002: 6). The land tenure system in the bustee was governed by the Thika Tenancy rule which gave the landlord enormous power to evict the hut-owning tenant. The hut-owner could not construct durable brick-built structure and any attempt by the hut owner to do so would make him liable to eviction. The subsequent amendments of 1949 and 1968 accorded security from eviction and permission to build two storey pucca brick – built buildings and powers to bring civic amenities but these amendments were hardly being acted upon, when the Thika Tenancy Acquisition and Regulation Act 1981 replaced the earlier tenancy regulations in bustees and vested the ownership of bustee land in the state. As Siddiqui noted, this created a stumbling block in the development of bustees, the hut owners did not have a right for modernising the structure and the state did not have the sufficient resources to build housing estates (2002:7-8). It is an authorised slum, which existed from the British period and have a high proportion of floating and seasonally migrating tenants. It is covered under the Thika Tenancy Act (1981) of the Government of West Bengal, whereby rent is deposited to the Controller of Thika Tenancy (Kundu 2003).
annual ceremonies. Historically these associations have also undergone certain distinct characteristic changes. With independence of the country the celebrations became more resplendent. The idols became more decorative and richly adorned.

_Durga puja now represented the cohesion and distinctiveness of the para (locality or neighbourhood). The greater the fanfare, decoration and designer lighting for the pandals became, the higher the esteem of the neighbourhood...innovations are carried out in the making of the image, decoration and lighting of the pandals._

_Ghosh 2000: 297-298_

The extravaganza around the puja rose to a huge level involving a lot of finance. In place of the modest arrangements of the nationalist leaders and their fervours the puja associations also underwent a change. By this time several of the puja associations were formed for the purpose of organizing and performing puja in a particular neighbourhood. In the 50s and 60s, generally a group of young men would come together for the purpose and only after discussions with the elders and families living in the area when they were assured of the required financial help did they form a puja association or committee. The members of this committee are entrusted with different responsibilities for organizing the puja (Sarma 1969: 585). Before the '80s it was necessary that the president of such puja committees be influential and rich persons from the locality that will ensure sufficient funding for the celebration. The subscriptions were collected from the families residing in the immediate vicinity and it sometimes happened that many families were found to be forced to subscribe to two or more community pujas since the demarcation of the neighbourhoods or paras were not well defined. It is during this time that the political leadership came to be actively involved in these affairs. Several of the pujas in the city came to be associated with the names of the party leaders of different groups. All of them heavily subscribed to the puja and brought in advertisements and souvenirs for financing the pujas. There arose puja in the names of Congress leaders, important party cadres and important political parties like that of the Hindu Mahasabha. For the political power to

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20 In 1969, the cost of a major community (sarbojanin) puja was estimated to be Rs 37,000 (Ghosh 2000), some were spending in lakhs. With the rivalry between neighbourhoods about who can arrange for a more opulent puja can also be considered as a drive to form collectives or association for the specific purpose of celebrating the four day long festivities.

21 Even after the nationalist movement, the puja pandals were still seen to be used for political purposes. While the Hindu Mahasabha held puja is the same venue every year (Sarma 1969), I came to know from my field interactions that some of the well known pujas of both North and South Kolkata receives full fledged support and lavish contributions from the local MLA, or MP or the respective party funds. They
organize and actively patronize certain particular pujas speaks of the powerful imagery of Durga puja as a public celebration and a platform to garner public support, irrespective of its religious background. Along with the ever-growing demand of idols within the city and its neighbourhoods, by the middle of the 20th century, especially during the 1940s and after, the demand for idols also grew outside Bengal, in places where the Bengali population travelled and began to settle down. By the late '60s, images were also flown outside the country and puja was celebrated by the overseas Bengali communities.

The public celebration of Durga puja, in many ways, can be linked with the proclamation of the Bengali cultural identity throughout its changing nature of celebration. What started as a political statement by Raja Krishnachandra was continued in the community pujas that carried the fervour of nationalism in the early 20th century. The nationalist leaders sought recourse to the popular festivity because it attracted popular participation and mass mobilization. Thus,

*It was in the realm of the symbolic and performative that the will of the public was increasingly articulated under colonialism. Along with the land question, public disputations ranged widely over religious observances and cultural performances. Controversies ranged from hook-swinging during festivals to the observance of Ganapati festival started by Balgangadhar Tilak in Maharashtra to the performance of the Ram-Lila in northern India.*

*Ghosh 2000: 291*

Its popularity remained constant in the '70s and '80s and successfully shifted the attention from the widening social and economic inequalities. At this point in time it might have served as an instrument to distract the attention from the everyday social problems in the city, the rising restlessness of the youth, whereby the energies were shifted to the celebration of the Durga puja, an engagement for the otherwise restless youth. The argument gains a stronghold when we see that it is by this time that

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also take an active part in organizing the puja. Ghosh (2000) also identified that many politicians are known to patronize particular community pujas. The theme of ‘Durga’ as ‘shakti’ or supreme female power is popularly used by the RSS for political mobilization, especially for their female wing or ‘Durga Vahini’ (Kovacs 2004).

22 Sarma (1969) has linked the formation of puja associations as a channel to pour the energies of the otherwise unengaged youth power of the state. The interests in organizing puja seem to indicate that there are no secular social movements in Bengal with sufficient mass appeal to utilize the youth energy. In the absence of a sense of fighting for a cause, only sporadic student unrest happens (Sarma 1969: 593).
community celebrations of other deities like Kali, Sitala, Jagatdhatri, Annapurna and many others began to get popularized, an engagement for the unemployed youths throughout the year, of “young men who seek individual expression through socially approved channels” (Sarma 1969: 594). This is not to say that in this case it is tantamount as an instrument of hegemonic power or public relations ventures to deliberately shift away public attention from everyday reality but at the same time it definitely served to make the general public oblivious to the increasing tensions in everyday social life. The phenomena of Durga puja therefore is not merely a religious expression but also the social, cultural and political expression of the Bengali population in many ways. The celebration of different pujas, especially Durga puja therefore transforms the urban space into a spectacle, a different reality that exhibits the culture of Bengali identity. This

Festive time, insularly delimited, opens the parenthesis of uncommon days: separated from daily rhythms, men relinquish the serious use of their time, and their lives with ordinary moral and social values become undone.

Ozouf 1975: 372 as cited in Gotham 2005: 234

By the late '80s and early '90s the character of Durga puja underwent yet another change with the growing involvement of the capitalist market. From the late '80s corporate sponsors started offering awards for best decoration, best images, best presentations etc. It reinforced the concept of an urban spectacle that involves

However, as history will show very soon Bengal was to experience the Naxalite movement, the current of which might already be brewing.

23 Many scholars of urban sociology are critical and express concerns that the urban spectacles of festivals, parades and carnivals, and so on amount to instruments of hegemonic power (Waitt 1999) or public relations ventures that shift local attention away from everyday social problems in the city (Kearns and Philo 1993, Evans 2003 as cited in Gotham 2005: 225).

24 This is because the leisure is “commodified and rationalized in capitalist societies” (Lefebvre 1991) and one can observe a similar trend in the Durga puja today where it represents to be a source for capital accumulation for the producers and is ‘alienated’ from the workers, i.e., the idol-makers, whose produce it is.

25 Extending on Georg Lukacs theory of ‘reification’ of social relations and products, Debrod (1994) extended it to understand the production and consumption of images, and developed the concept of spectacle as a

new-stage in the development of capitalist urbanization, a shift to an image-saturated society where advertising, entertainment, television, mass media and other culture industries increasing define and shape urban life while obscuring the alienating effects of capitalism.

Debrod 1994 in Gotham 2005: 227

Of the several meanings of spectacle given by Debrod, this thesis adapts the one which means “particular public events, high profile extravaganzas and urban spaces” on the one hand and a kind of “controlled visual production” on the other (Debrod 1994 in Gotham 2005: 227). Durga puja while being a public event
“capitalist markets, different sets of social relations, and flows of commodities, capital, technology, cultural forms and people” (Gotham 2005: 227)\textsuperscript{26}. With the advent of ‘theme puja’ various forms, types and technologies have been introduced. The media images, advertising and the evolution of ‘theme’ and ‘concept’ pujas gradually began to involve not only the idol-maker but a host of other professionals. The puja team today consists of structural engineer, interior decorator and event management group who conceptualize the puja. The idol-maker is therefore reduced only to execute the clay image as only a part of the spectacle and not the soul of it. Durga puja today involves spectacular displays that involve the capitalist market – advertisements and product launching by MNCs\textsuperscript{27}, new sets of social relations – puja committees involved in the organizing of the puja, a flow of commodities – markets for clothes and other consumer items and cultural forms – in the nature of theme pujas.

For the purpose of the study therefore we need to locate the rise and importance of the idol-makers in the social life of the city of Kolkata and their stake in this spectacle as both a craft community and also their space in the larger socio-cultural and political picture of the city.

**Idol-makers as a distinct Occupational Group and their space in the City**

In the occupational history of Bengal, it is mostly the potters who were engaged in the making of ordinary clay items, who then shifted to idol-making. But, at the same time not all potters are idol-makers, because it requires a certain level of artistic talent regarding the ability to create human forms and life like models. Also, it requires the patronage of the aristocrats, since they were the willing consumers of the art, and these

\textsuperscript{26} Changes within the set up of Durga puja, has been several, in case of social relations, the puja has given rise to two distinct groups of the producer and the owners, thereby reinforcing the domination of the producer, i.e., the capitalist economy of production relations which in turn influences social relations.

\textsuperscript{27} Multinational Companies have found the spectacle of Durga Puja as a space for influencing consumerist activities. As symbolic production is important for contemporary commodification, the advertising imagery, marketing and promotion have become important for these kinds of producers who encroaches the spaces of mass culture. For similar analysis see Gotham (2005). Very recently, the Bengal Chamber of Commerce and Industry has planned to showcase this grand carnival to the world. As corporate houses will offer pandal hopping as part of the package, the entire scenario speaks of the changing world view of Durga Puja (Ghosal 2006).
classes are not found in all localities. On the other hand, traditionally in Bengal, it is not only the potters who were engaged in idol-making. In different localities, individuals or groups from other castes were also skilled in idol-making. In the area called Rarh (parts of West Medinipur, Purulia, Burdwan and Birbhum) it was the architectural castes of Sutradhars who were involved in idol-making. In Maimansingh and Tripura it was the family priest who used to make idols, since idol-making required knowledge of the Shastras, skill and concentration which only a Brahmin can have (Chakravarti 1985: 5-6).

Other than these conventional groups, idol-making and clay modelling is done by several other castes in West Bengal. In the Sunderban and South 24 Parganas the clay modellers belong to the caste of Mahishya, who are mainly agriculturalists but also involved in clay modelling. Even the lower castes of Hari, Bagdi, Pod and Namashudras were also found to be involved in clay modelling. In the northern part of Bengal like West Dinajpur, Coochbihar and Jalpaiguri, it is the tribal group of Rajbanshis who are involved in making earthenwares and clay idols. In Kolkata, Nadia, Murshidabad and North 24 Parganas it is the caste potters or Pals who are engaged in clay modelling and idol-making.

With the rising demands of Durga idols and proliferation of the celebration of the other deities there evolved a specialized group among the potter caste who made the life sized sculpted tableaux of Indian gods and goddesses. These artists, although originally from the potter/ Kumor caste, rarely produced regular pottery items such as vessels and tiles. They create figures from unfired clay, using the technique of pressing and moulds, a specialized skill passed down from one generation to another (Basu 1970, Bunny 1983). They consider this work to be an art form superior to the work of ordinary clay item manufacturing. Idol-making and idol-makers symbolize a creative genre that uses a variety of raw materials and the minimum of technology. There is a merging of utilitarian materials and religious symbols and codes. These goes into the fabrication of the idols: hay, wood, clay, paints on one hand; faith, imagination, technique and vision on the other.

28 See Crafts and Craftsmen of West Bengal (1978)
As part of the city’s socio-cultural and political fabric, an understanding of how the idol-makers worldview underwent transformation and reflected itself in the art of idol-making. It requires an historical understanding of pottery

*as a site where everyday practice provides valuable insights into the linkages of the macroprocesses [of post industrial advanced capitalist moment] within the texture and fabric of human experience.*

Low 1996: 384

Thus, with the changing characteristics\(^29\) of the society, the idol-makers consciously and unconsciously evolved varying patterns and styles. Traditionally, the Durga idol was generally made in a single frame, coloured in an unnatural hue of yellow with a green Mahisasura and was dressed in *sola* or pith jewellery. It was more like a household idol and the lion was not anatomically very correct\(^30\). Very soon with the stability of colonial rule the lion was modelled in great anatomical detail in the manner it was installed in front of the Governor’s House. Some authors suggest that this was a reflection of the defeatist mentality of the general population who understood that British rule was there to stay after the battle of 1857 and accepted it as a fact (Agnihotri 2001: 79).

During the national movement the artistic expression fought its way in the form of the symbolism of Bharatmata – an inspiration for the country fighting for its freedom. By the end of the ‘40s, after the two world wars and the independence, the form underwent further changes when the single frame was divided into five individual frames – a symbol of the breaking of the joint families and popularity of nuclear families\(^31\). The wars and partition also left their mark in the stylization of the idols which became more violent in their expression. The lion was more ferociously carved, the Mahisasura as a painful sufferer and the goddess was represented in a more accurate stance of attack. Thus, the

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\(^29\) Sarma (1969), Ghosh (2000), Agnihotri (2001) have discussed how the representation of the image reflected the current incidents or mood of the society. The organizers also urged the clay artists that the work should conform to the tastes of the consumer.

\(^30\) Anita Agnihotri (2001) has proposed that one reason behind the unusual form of the lion (it had a fish like face with a fox like scowl...) is the absence of lion as a familiar animal in Bengal and hence there has been no direct inspiration, it was entirely based on imagination.

\(^31\) For a detailed discussion on this see Agnihotri 2001.
idol lost a lot of its other worldliness\textsuperscript{32} and became more realistic. Between the '50s and '70s, Parvati Durga was another popular form that was entirely modelled in clay. In the '70s with the rising of the Naxalite movement and the freedom war in Bangladesh, the symbol of the traditional village bride (banglar bodhu) gained popularity. In the late '80s onwards market and capitalist ideology invaded the popular imagination, and yet again there was a change in the form. The idol became more decorative and flashy with magnificent jewellery. The heights of the idols increased to befit the glamour of the pandals and the light decorations and the whole festivity became more a showcase of wealth and splendour (Agnihotri 2001: 77-87)\textsuperscript{33}. Intermittently, in between these major stylistic changes mainstream culture also influenced the shaping of the idol – instances of the face of the goddess being carved in the imitation of popular Bollywood heroines, the Mahisasura taking the form of the infamous personality of the time etc., are common motifs in the history of idol-making. It is again the capitalistic market influences that enriched the light decorations, popular happenings of the time being depicted in the decorations around the pandal\textsuperscript{34}.

The present population of about 528\textsuperscript{35} families in Kumartuli area apart from the numerous other idol-makers, who are dispersed throughout the city, speak of a significant presence of an urban occupational group. The bulk of the population which was earlier a part of rural Bengal, has gradually become city dwellers. Some have retained ancestral ties, while the others have severed all connections\textsuperscript{36}. In the dispersed population of idol-makers in Kolkata, Kumartuli still forms a distinct neighbourhood retaining its fame as

\textsuperscript{32} The deities earlier though represented a human form, retained the super-human aura by being different from the exact reality of humanistic form. This might also be an unconscious effect of untrained artists (erstwhile pot makers) who lacked any formal training in human sculpting and painting.

\textsuperscript{33} Agnihotri (2000) extensively traced the inter-linkages and interdependence of the artist or idol-maker, the society of which he is a part and the influence it has in his art or vision.

\textsuperscript{34} News paper articles and public references to these times are abound with descriptions of such happenings, as a viewer of Durga puja in Kolkata I have seen popular news items like major train accidents or movie scenes like that of titanic being modelled either in the light decorations or in the architectures of the pandals.

\textsuperscript{35} Official estimates of 2002 done for the Kumartuli Urban Renewal project (DPR 2007).

\textsuperscript{36} In my interactions the group which retained ancestral ties mostly belong to West Bengal potters, whose ancestors lived in the suburbs of Kolkata or in the nearby famous clay art centres of Krishnanagar and its fringes, of Bankura or from Medinipore. They also mostly belong to the labour category and not the master craftsmen. Significant portions of the population who have migrated from East Bengal or have come from Northern Bengal do not have any ancestral ties in their mother village.
the oldest and still illustrious locality for idol-making. This considerable settlement of an urban crafts group incites the sociological interest to explore the structure of this group, the formal and informal relationship within the practitioners of this art and how 'city' has either brought in changes or impelled them to retain the parochial ties. As a rural occupation idol-making was never a lucrative income source, but its demand in the urban life opened up possibilities for a somewhat regular income. Along with it came the recognition of these craftsmen as valuable artists. Thus, the city was perceived as providing them a space to be upwardly mobile in terms of income and recognition. While the continuing popularity of the pujas has given an impetus to these artisans to continue with and innovate their art in the long run, the city environment has accomplished the task of assimilation and conversion of these once rural migrants.

The idol-makers of Kumartuli today show significant signs of transformation as rural migrants – the role of the city being an important factor in this change. What becomes therefore important to locate is the inclusiveness of urban life – the larger social systems playing a crucial role in changing their life style. In the families of many of the early settlers one can find that not all the members of each generation are engaged in idol-making. Take for example, the family of the famous idol-maker Jiten Pal. Of his sons only one is engaged in the family business while the other brother is in a central government fixed salaried job. This is not because for his family a change in occupation was necessary for sustenance, but because the city provided the scope to explore new boundaries and not be tied with the traditional family occupation. Till today the entire family stays together, while the elder brother pursues the family occupation, the other provides an assured income of a fixed job. At times when the work pressure is high, one can see the younger brother helping in the family workshop. While retaining the joint family structure such changes definitely provides mobility in terms of material wealth.
At the same time, a Weberian (1922, reprinted 1958) understanding of the city\textsuperscript{37} gives us the scope to locate this group in the kinship and power structure of the urban life. In the urban life of the city the idol-makers are defined by their location in the occupational structure and though are not exclusive or functioning in separate enclaves, they definitely form distinctiveness in the basis of their survival. Patterned substructures of social interaction persists, that has

\begin{quote}
Developed out of people’s efforts to cope with the opportunities, incentives, and rewards, as well as the deprivations, prohibitions, and pressures which the natural environment and society...offer to them.

Gans 1962: 249
\end{quote}

This, in essence, might be applicable for all city-based occupational groups. Within their local neighbourhood they have retained certain forms of social organization\textsuperscript{38}. The geographical boundaries of the locality giving rise to a ‘we’ feeling among the individuals who are linked with the production of this art form in different capacities. Here one can easily distinguish the presence of social organizations among the different social groups that form the entire network of idol-making, that is the master craftsmen,

\textsuperscript{37} Weber’s theoretical point of view has been described by Martindale (1958) as social behaviourism. For Weber, the city that is often theorised as “a densely settled area of crowded dwelling forming a colony” is “inconclusive for cultural factors play a role in the point where impersonality makes it appearance in human affairs” (Weber 1922, reprinted 1958: 50). He forwarded the “theory of urban community” and noted that “urban ‘community’, in the full meaning of the word, appears as a general phenomenon only in the Occident”. The “relative predominance of trade-commercial relations with the settlement as a whole” is present only in rudimentary form in very few of the cities in the Near East (Weber 1922 reprinted 1958: 80-81). For him,

\begin{quote}
The Indian urban dweller remained a member of the caste. As a rule...were also members of local professional associations... [but] citizenship as a specific status quality of the urbanite is missing...The hereditary caste system of Indian society with its ritualistic segregation of the professions, excluded the emergence of a citizenry and urban community... Nor was it possible for the commercial and artisan castes of India to unite in a form corresponding to the medieval urban corporation.

Weber 1922 reprinted 1958: 82-8
\end{quote}

As we will see in our analysis, the idol-makers primarily remained the member of a caste based occupational group with strong primordial ties that is perhaps not so visible in their everyday life, but surfaces only in relation to other city based groups. Urban studies have to a great extent explored the “co-existence of different ‘ways of life’ in urban settings” and uprooted the myth of vanishing primary groups within the city (Smith 1980: 171-175). The persistence of subcultures has been explored by Wirth (1928) \textit{The Ghetto}, though he expected them to decline with increasing urbanization; Herbert J. Gans (1962) in \textit{The Urban Villagers}, Whyte (1955) \textit{The Street Corner Society}, Lewis (1977) in his observations of folk urban continuum in Mexico City, among many others.

\textsuperscript{38} The presence of kinship ties, networks, endogamous marriage rules of only marrying into one’s own caste or higher, and conscious efforts to retain the stronghold within the area in terms of number, so that the area can always have a distinct identity of being ‘dwelling of the potters’ or ‘Kumartuli’, can be seen as markers of social organization.
ordinary clay labourers, the jewellery-makers, the clay and hay suppliers etc., all of whom contribute towards the making of the clay image. This also indicates a different set of associations\textsuperscript{39} that though not primary are definitely important as the basis of powerful secondary relationships. Within the locality there exist five associations of the different categories of artisans. I have already mentioned the two associations of the master craftsmen, named as ‘Kumartuli Mritisilpi Sanskriti Samiti’ (KMSS) and ‘Kumartuli Mritisilpi Samiti’ (KMS). Apart from these, the jewellery designers have also formed the ‘Kumartuli Saajsilpi Samiti’ to maintain their identity as a special category of artisans. The ordinary labourers have also formed their separate associations, the ‘Kumartuli Mritisilpo Karigar Samiti’ and the ‘Shantipriyo Mritisilpo Karigar Samiti’. A close scrutiny at the basis of organization of these associations reveals that there exists a concept of quasi community\textsuperscript{40} behind their formation. Formally it serves the purpose of strengthening the bargaining power of a community but it also serves as a social support system for the members at times of need. The need for better survival prompted the formation of these associations. In the words of a veteran artist Madhusudan Pal,

_The KMSS was formed to help the artisans whose conditions were deteriorating. As individuals they did not have much bargaining power to acquire loans, so they organized themselves under KMSS so that the loan amount can be increased with KMSS as the guarantee. It also helped to initiate dialogue with the State government to provide certain facilities for the idol-makers. One was to increase the ration/permit for withdrawing large amount of Kerosene oil for lighting lamps during peak season when the work has to continue 24 hrs. It also helped in improving the road, water and electricity conditions of the area. Today the government also gives extra electric meters\textsuperscript{41} at a much lower rate during the peak season so that work can progress non-stop._

\textsuperscript{39} Each group of artisan forms secondary associations among themselves, seeking to realize certain similar goals and shared interest, and in this case reflects a means for mainly securing the economic end. Organization of associations is based more on the secular nature of the craft as an economy and is unlike the caste-based associations and cooperative movements as found among other artisan groups like the weavers of South India (Mattison 1984).

\textsuperscript{40} By quasi-community I mean that there exists certain characteristic of community like social bonding, behavioural rootedness, identification with the neighbourhood and a sense of belonging, that facilitates cooperation etc. For relationship between urbanization and community see Gans (1962), Young & Willmott (1960), for different levels of bondedness see Riger and Lavarkas (1981), Campbell and Fiske (1959), McMillan and Chavis (1986), for network of interrelationship see Stacey (1969), social relationship like community spirit and we feeling see Worsley (1987).

\textsuperscript{41} The general lighting within the workshops is very weak as a result of which major part of the work takes place in the area outside workshop. However, the street light is also not enough to continue the work till long hours. The heavy demands in the few months before the puja requires that they work throughout the day and even overnight. They have bargained with the CESC that extra power and lighting may be provided to them on a special emergency basis. The extra cost is shared by all the residents.
For the so-called outsiders, that is, master craftsmen from East Bengal, the formation of an association in this locality was a question of stating their presence. Hence it was seen as an immediate necessity soon after they settled in Kumartuli. In the words of the president,

_The Kumartuli Mritshilpi Samiti was established in 1967. By then there were about 10-12 families of idol-makers who were displaced from East Pakistan/East Bengal/Bangladesh. To survive and gain a foothold in the local market we formed an association that will mark our presence. We collaborated with State Bank of India for loans and today it is a regularized process for each year. The Samiti also used to do other community work but it has always been irregular. Activities include collecting money to help families in need, for treatment, for marriage of daughter etc._

He is supported by the secretary, who said,

_The main reason to form a committee at that time was to secure loan because the locals saw us in a different light, though today we are mixed – (sthaniyora onyo chokhe dekhto jodio akhon shobai mishe gache)._ 

The associations (Samitis) of the Master craftsmen also reflect the presence of a community structure – "the processes of communication through which a working consensus is generated..." (Manheim 1960: 228)\(^{42}\). This is primarily reflected in the arrangement of the processing of loans, or the membership criteria whereby no one who has a business interest outside Kumartuli is eligible to secure loan. Even though one can practice idol-making as an occupation he has to belong to the community in Kumartuli to be a member of these associations.

This can be juxtaposed with the labourers (karigar) associations where one can see the formation of a struggle against exploitation. This can also be the reason why the karigar samitis have tried to include all such labourers who are working in the different sites of idol-making in the city, or form similar associations at these places. For them the association serves the purpose of strengthening their demands and garnering a unity – a culture of trade unionism\(^{43}\), which is very marked in the communist history of the state.

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\(^{42}\) In contrast, Manheim pointed out that cities of America has the distinct ecological characteristic of the "absence of large, closely knit kinship groups which inhibit the economic adaptation and spatial movement of the individual" (Manheim 1960: 229).

\(^{43}\) The political ideology of the State of West Bengal is strongly linked with the rights of the workers and trade unions have been indispensable to safeguard the interests of the workers in relations to the employers. Under the aegis of the CP'\(M\) there is a strong trade union movement CITU (Bose 2005).
For the jewellery designers, formation of an association was geared by the sense of insecurity in staking their claims. In the words of the secretary,

*We are also members of the KMSS or KMS but we recently thought that we should have a space of our own because if there is any disagreement then the opinion of the idol-makers will prevail in KMS or KMSS since it is primarily their association. Hence we have established our own organization in Bengali year 1408 (year 2000 as per International Calendar). It is registered under Society’s Act and is named Kumartuli Saajshilpo Samiti. At present there are about 70 members, both shop owners and home based workers are members. After establishing the association we have done some specific work like written a letter to the finance minister about uplifting the VAT from our trade. We have also given letters on this issue to the Chairman of Left Front Mr. Kamal Bhattacharya and another separate letter to Mr. Biman Bose.*

Such interactions also show how the city’s political culture gives rise to interest groups, each either negotiating with those in power or joining the opposition party vis-à-vis their socio-economic and political status in the city’s profile. In the past they have voted out particular party representatives and brought in others in order to continue to achieve their demands. According to Neelkanto Pal, it is their constant negotiations with the local MLAs that have resulted in the development of certain basic amenities like streetlights and street taps for running water, provision of purified drinking water etc.

The various associations in the locality are also a marker of the social culture and history of the Bengali community as a whole. In the local and regional culture of West Bengal formation of clubs, unions, associations is seen as an effective tool of strengthening one’s position in terms of demanding rights; as spaces where social contacts are renewed and re-established and new contacts are created; as a platform to participate in collective good and enhance collective well-being. Thus, the associations of the Mritshilpis, Shola shilpis and the Karigars reflect the formation of both secondary and primary relationships among city dwellers, a space for increasing the intimacies in the social contacts in the otherwise cut-throat world of competition and survival in the city (Smith, Form and Stone 1954). Thus the theorizing that the city as a place of

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44 Mr. Biman Bose is the Chairman of the Left Front Government in West Bengal and CPI(M) State Secretary.

45 By ‘interest groups’ I mean groups or associations formed to make certain claims and influence public policy towards their interest. Mostly used in relation with electoral politics, interest groups can also form pressure groups when they lobby at the political level (Wootton 1970). However, the extent of influence of interest group is dependent on the stakeholders strength in the existing social structure.
specialization, segmentation and anonymity\textsuperscript{46} denies the opportunities of intimate social relationships is not entirely applicable for the idol-makers community.

In the organization of the idol-makers in the city one can delineate the presence of extended family relations and kinship networks, similar to a rural community\textsuperscript{47} structure. The interconnections and interdependency of family and household relationship is manifested acutely in the everyday life of the idol-makers. We can take the example of Maya Pal whose brother has given his daughter to her after she underwent a miscarriage and was going through a depression\textsuperscript{48}. Similarly, Manik Pal was bequeathed the workshop by his maternal grandfather who did not have a male heir. Others like Madhusudan Pal also acquired the workshop through marriage and kinship ties. Close boundaries of kinship ties and organization of production is also reflected when Uttam Das says

\textit{In the last 20 years no new residents have come in the locality, when a workshop or house is sold off it is mainly the local Pals who buy them.}

They also reflect a closed community structure or an environment when we see that all of the master craftsmen are related in one way or other. All are actually \textit{Atmiya-svajana} or one’s own people. Each is the brother, the uncle, the first cousin, the second cousin or the \textit{kutumb} (related in terms of marriage) or \textit{gyati} (related through bloodline) of another\textsuperscript{49}. Only a handful are not related but have simply achieved a foothold in this occupation. Even the \textit{Karigars} or labourers are distantly related either to each other or to any of the master craftsmen. This is not only a perceived feeling of relatedness but also

\textsuperscript{46} Simmel (1969) noted that with the development of modern industrial society the interrelation between group size, impersonality and individual power varies in terms of personal relation, which is the life principle of small groups to be replaced by distance and coolness of objective and abstract norms of large groups that characterise the city (1969:97).

\textsuperscript{47} The concept of the city “as a series of urban communities based on extended family relations and kinships networks” (Young & Willmott 1957, Marris 1962 as cited in Low 1996) is what is reflected among the community of idol-makers.

\textsuperscript{48} The kin support of the maternal kin is very distinct in this case, which reinforces the fact that total assimilation of women into her affinal household is a myth even in extremely patrilinial societies, very often the woman seeks support from the maternal family in times of crises and are “carriers of property as well as of sentiments, ties and relationships” (Goody 1990: 480).

\textsuperscript{49} In the Bengali kinship structure these terms are used to define the position of one individual in reference to others in the kin relations. A detailed description on what constitutes the ethnographic terms \textit{Atmiya-svajana}, \textit{Kutumb} and the \textit{Gyati} can be found in Fruzetti and Ostor (1984) Inden and Nicholas (1977)
an actual reality. In many of my conversations one or the other of the respondents would exclaim “oh!, you have talked with him. He is my paternal uncle” or “he is actually my uncle’s brother” or “she is from my maternal village” etc.

Along with the rise of idol-making as a city-based craft, Kolkata also provided space to the other groups associated with this work. For example, the labourers (poli mute) who procure the bele mati or fine clay from the riverbed by diving into it are originally people from Sunderban area belonging to its numerous villages. They came into the city over the last 40 years (from the 1960s) in search of a livelihood. In order to survive in this alternative livelihood they had fought with the Bihari labourers who were the poli mute then (Ananda Bazaar Patrika 24th Sept 2006)

Strangely however, despite the fact that the idol-makers are a part of the city, their stake in the political scenario of the cityscape has not been very strong. One major reason is that they do not form a politically strong nexus or category of scheduled castes, scheduled tribe or any other backward castes. The urban renewal process has excluded the needs and opinions of the residents and has set the stage for possible conflicts between the government experts and the local community in their struggle for adequate housing and land tenure rights.

The disbelief in the formal structures of government and government functionaries is also the result of broken promises. The several office holders of KMSS explained that in the initial years, when the association was being established, the local MP promised that the association could have a five-storey building and a Gallery on the main road to showcase the work of the artisans. However, since there was no written agreement on this in reality it was given to a rich businessman and only a 200 square feet room was marked for them in the promised spot. The businessman has built a building there and rents it out

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50 The primary potter caste of ‘Pal’ is not listed in the SC and ST list of the State government, though they are mentioned in the OBC list. The absence of a strong caste based politics in West Bengal as found in the Southern states along with the relatively less numerical strength may also be the reason why the potters have failed to gain mileage.

51 The shops and workshops of the potters are actually located in the narrow lanes and is not visible from the road and hence to have a visible space on the main road is a lucrative option for the idol-makers since it will enhance the visibility of their art.
for social functions like marriages etc. The mere 200 square feet showroom has not served any purpose for the idol-makers since there is not even enough space to showcase the works properly. This and other similar experiences that have time and again shown the futile promises and talks of development and have made the community sceptical about the government agencies. Therefore, when the KMDA (Kolkata Municipal Development Association) speaks of renewal and development of the area and a project for Urban Renewal under Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) funds for Basic Services to Urban Poor (BSUP)\(^2\), they are not gleeful about the idea.

At present a majority of the artisans stay on rent in spaces which are “*fragmented and owned by the heirs of the erstwhile landowners/zamindars*”. However, all the rents and taxes are paid by the community or the tenants through the Kolkata Thika Tenancy Act. Controller of Land & Land Revenue Department explained that the Kumartuli slum has three-tier system (a) owner of the land is government (b) owner of the structure are Thika tenants (c) ‘*bharatiyas*’ or occupiers as tenants of Thika tenants\(^3\). Question of settlement and land arises in the words of Deben Pal,

*Before the settlement of idol-makers from Nadia district, there were few families of potters who lived here and made earthen ware or clay utensils. I heard that the then Zamindars had given a land settlement (*projasatra*) in lieu of an annual tax (*shara bochore ekta khajna deoa hoto*).*

Kartik Pal added,

*All the houses here are rented, but after the problem of rent increase and payment/rent control\(^4\) from 1982 we have been paying under the Thika Tenancy, we pay directly to the State Government at the Rent Control.*

\(^2\) Each city has been asked by the Central Government to finalise detail plans for urban development and renewal with consultation and participation of the citizens under the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission. The plan will be independently assessed and funds for the projects will be shared by the Centre and the States at 80:20 ratio (Guidelines for Projects on BSUP under JNNURM, GOI, 2005).

\(^3\) Report of the KMDA on the DPR for the proposed project titled “Kumartuli Urban Renewal project” under JNNURM of GOI.

\(^4\) When asked to mark the time around which major changes in the rent structure and payment happened, the respondent pointed out that he cannot remember the year, but it happened during the presidential tenure of Shri Neelam Sanjeeva Reddy. I found such references quite interesting; most of the older people recalled the past incidents in terms of certain political situation of the state or the country, which might be taken as an indication of the political awareness of the commoners in West Bengal. Evans-Pritchard’s (1940) structural analysis of time is indicative of the peculiar ways in which time is thought about. For the Nuer time reckoning is linked to both everyday cycles and generational cycle and the temporal relationship or
Hence the concerns were voiced over and over again when Mantu Pal, Babu Pal, Sadhan Pal and numerous others ask,

*What is the guarantee that they will give us the land? Moreover, what will the new relations of tenancy be? The owners of the structures (workshop cum warehouse) sometimes sublet the space-after redistribution, who will get the rent of those sublet spaces?*

Others remarked,

*Why would the government be suddenly interested in our development? What would they get out of this? There is no profit in this scheme for them so they will not do anything.*

Bijoy Ghosh one of the oldest jewellery maker and trader and the president of KMSS uttered the reasons behind the suspicions and scepticism.

*I think the whole talk around development of Kumartuli is a big hoax. The government from the very beginning started to propose about flat, swimming pool, market complex, parking etc., and we have become apprehensive. They are also not clear about what will be the relation between the tenant and the landlord – we presently pay our rents to the rent control, how will that system be revised? Or if there will be any new system in place? Moreover, if we are shifted to a far off place, (they were initially asking to temporarily shift to Saltlake) we will be losing our customers. We also wanted the renewal to happen in parts so that not all artisans are displaced at once, but the ministry was not ready. We are sceptical about the entire project scheme since we stand every chance of obliteration.*

Most of them are aware that in terms of the valuation the space occupied by them is of immense strategic importance in the developmental process. This is an area with different business centres in the vicinity. There are many important banks and chief post offices, and the area is well connected through different modes of water, rail and road transport. So the inhabitants fear that it will not be their development, but the development of the city, in terms of mall and market places that the government is actually envisaging. In order to counteract this they have also given a 14 point letter at the time when talks about development started during the tenure of Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy as the CM of the state. This has been as early as in the late 70s but has not received any serious attention for the last 20 years. In these processes one can similarly identify the notion of a city as "the focus of cultural and socio-political manifestations of urban

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distance between the ancestor and the living person never changes. Though apparently illogical, for the Nuer this makes perfect sense.  

55 Situated near the Central Business District, the area serves as a manufacturing zone of SMEs and provides peripheral services to many businesses.
lives and everyday practices” (Low 1996: 384). It is a contested place whereby the idol-makers as an occupational group are also staking their claims in the development processes. At various points the idol-makers expressed their undefined position in the entire development process. In their words,

_The government is not clear about the plan of development and the space that will be allotted to us. In the last 40 years I have heard of development only before elections. This time however, it seems that some work might happen. There have been several meetings with the stakeholders; plans have been discussed, though many have not agreed with some of the proposals. No work has been done till now._

The president of the KMS Gopalchandra RudraPal stated that,

_I know about the Kumartuli Renewal Project, but at the same time I also know that it is being reduced to a great extent. When we first heard talks of renewal the budget was around Rs 200 crores, now it has been slashed down to mere Rs 27 crores of which only Rs 5 crores have been received till now. We demanded that we should retain the same space that is being presently occupied by us even after renewal._

The different categories of clay workers are also trying to stake their rightful claims, the labourers or _Karigars_ have made the association a platform for demanding their rights

_We live under miserable conditions; there are no facilities available, not even proper sanitary arrangements, let alone bathing area or living space or drinking water provisions. Without the presence of the river we could not have lived here. We have appealed to the Chief Minister through a memorandum, we have also written a letter to the local councillor regarding our problems when we heard that Kumartuli will be developed. However, it is extremely difficult for us to gain a foothold through the association, because we are outsiders who do not have any existence. We were never informed about the various meetings that have taken place about the area development._

It is important to highlight in this regard that a series of studies was conducted by the Economic and Social Support Programme Cell (ESSP Cell) of the Division of Planning, CMDA in 1977 “to understand the issues and constraints involved in case of selected trade group within the metrocore”. The study that focused on Clay Modelling and Image-making units at Kumartuli among its other recommendations suggested that a vacant plot of over five _kathas_ were available in the area and a three storey structure can be built to provide designed workspace, store space and living space for some of the
impoverished families in dearth of space\textsuperscript{56}. While the recommendations remained concealed in the red files of the government office, the land was usurped by 1978 through the construction of a park and a club under the local development fund of the MP and his aegis towards the local youths. This appropriation of space also speaks about the powerlessness of a community against the contestations of different communities over a public space and how the constant changes in the available open spaces in the city influences the well-being of the inhabitants.

In relation to this, Delhi, the other city of our investigation, represents yet another scenario, where these idol-makers are absent from the city's social and cultural space. This is more so because the community is dispersed over a large geographical area and lacks cohesion to fight for their rights. Their migratory living conditions also accounts for the lack of strong networks and collective behaviour. More so because they come here only to fulfil their economic needs, as an occasional occupational venture and not to fulfil social needs. They have an invisible existence in the city, similar to the thousands of urban poor. Very recently, in March-April 2005 the handful of the 10-15 permanent idol-maker families (not all of them are Bengalis) have come together and gave a petition to the Delhi government for space but there has been no response. In the face of complete disregard from the authorities on the issue, the interest died off.

Interestingly this can be linked with the concepts of votes, numbers, urban space and political power\textsuperscript{57} that interplay in the lives of the city dwellers. While in Kolkata, the political culture of the city admits that they are aware of the conditions of this prestigious


\textsuperscript{57} The utilisation of urban space and the redistribution of spatial structure in terms of social structure has been explained in the essays of Pahl (1975), where,

\textit{The poverty is largely the result of the distribution of power in society and this distribution is preserved by powerful interest groups and finds expression in spatial and physical terms in the city. The elimination of poverty necessitates a voluntary abdication of some power by the affluent majority in favour of the poor minority.}

\textit{Pahl 1975: 188}

Gans (1968) also traced the causes of urban poverty to the social, economic and political structure of the society and that the poor are condemned to live in a ‘culture of poverty’ only because these structures operate to increase the wealth of the affluent thereby deliberately keeping some of the citizens poor.
urban occupational group and definitely would like to bring about a change in their lives (even though in reality they are paying little heed to their problems), the political power can choose to continuously ignore these groups because they are dispersed and few in numbers and hence do not merit any attention.

A tour of the lanes of Kumartuli talk about the almost ghettoized conditions that the inhabitants live in. Reflected mainly in the unequal distribution of material resources and urban services this again can be attributed as a part of the colonial legacy and the unplanned growth of the city of Calcutta. In the estimates of the old idol-makers like Panchanan RudraPal, in the '50s there were not more than 60-70 idol-maker families in Kumartuli. In the official estimates of 1977 there were 150 families and by the end of 2002 it rose to 528 (a large number of them shifted to other places in Kolkata because of shortage of space).

However, the community is very politically aware and is banking on their collective strength as an important urban group to secure their futures. They are not ready to relinquish their rights without any written agreement and so the collective thought is

Let the government officials explain in detail about the plans and proposals, what exactly would be the share of each of us, the facilities that we will be getting and only after we are clear on every issue and the government is ready to sign agreements that we will think of leaving this place and shifting to the temporary arrangements.

Some are also afraid that in the face of state machineries their struggle may not last for long and hence they very dejectedly say,

What would you say about us in your writing? We are living in constant insecurity and dilemma, and with the recent happenings in Singur, we are not very sure that our fate will not be the same (amader kotha aar ki bolben amra to onischiotae bash kori, bhabchi akhon hal abar singur-er moto na hoi).

They shared their opinion on industrialization, political climate of the State, urban development and the ineffectiveness of the KMC and the mayors of Kolkata. What was interesting to note is that the majority of these idol-makers have definite ideas about the political climate of the state, the repercussions of changing economic conditions, and their stake in the city’s landscape that in a way state that this is an informed public but at
the same time not the determinant of the public domain. But it definitely reflects the formation of a public sphere\textsuperscript{58}, where “plebian anger and recrimination is a negotiating strategy of survival for the urban poor”, the “self-expression [which] is bit of both, defiance and complicity” (Ghosh 2000: 292).

At present, Kumartuli caters for almost 80 percent of the idols that are made for the pujas, not only for the ones which are organized in Kolkata but also orders from other states, as well as abroad. Though, as I have stated earlier, this thesis have mainly discussed the art of idol-making in terms of the making of Durga idols the increasingly public celebrations of Kali, Saraswati, Laksmi, Vishwakarma, Ganesh, Karthik and all other deities who are worshipped by the Bengali Hindus throughout the calendar year maintains the continuity of work and livelihood. So the production chain is almost continuous and not limited to a few months before the Durga Puja. The estimated costs involved for the different community pujas throughout Kolkata is around Rs 50 crore according to a newspaper article in 2004 (Ananda Bazar Patrika Oct 2004) but in this game the idol-makers are the smallest and most insignificant party.

\textsuperscript{58} Habermas’ notion of public sphere where ‘private people come together as a public’ and mediates between the state and the civil to form ‘a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed’ (Habermas 1974: 29-38).