



Heritage and the *Mritshilpis* and *Pratimashilpis* of Kumartuli

Report on a consultative meeting held
in Kolkata, West Bengal,
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with proposals for research

*Samir Kumar Das, Bishnupriya Basak,
John Reuben Davies, and Meghna Guhathakurta*

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Participants

(Alphabetical order)

Anita Agnihotri, author of *Kalakātāra pratimāśilpīrā* (formerly Secretary of Government of India Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, and Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation)

Dr Bishnupriya Basak, University of Calcutta

Professor Pradip Bose, formerly with Centre for Studies in Social Sciences Calcutta

Dr Arnab Das, University of Calcutta

Dr Debashish Das, Jadavpur University, Kolkata

Professor Samir Kumar Das, University of Calcutta

Dr Soujit Das, Government College of Art and Craft, Kolkata

Dr John Reuben Davies, University of Glasgow

Dr Debductta Gupta, St Xavier's College, Kolkata

Professor Meghna Guhathakurta, Research Initiatives, Bangladesh, Dhaka

Somen Pal (Pratimashilpi from Kumartuli)

FOREWORD

Kumartuli is a neighbourhood of Kolkata that sits on the east bank of the Hooghly, four kilometres upstream of BBD Bag (Dalhousie Square). The locality is home and workplace to around five hundred artists and artisans, specialists and masters in the art of devotional sculpture in unbaked clay, who fashion the *pratimas* (deity-icons) for Durga Puja and other Bengali religious festivals.

Kumartuli is the heart and focus in West Bengal for *pratimashilpa* (the metier of making deity-icons). It was founded after the mass migration of *Kumbhakars* (earthen-pot makers) from Krishnanagar, now in the district of Nadia (sixty-five miles north of Kolkata), to the metropolis and their subsequent colonisation of a vicinity they called the *tuli* (locality) of the *kumar* (potters). Kumartuli is now the last of Kolkata's larger caste-based neighbourhoods, and its densely populated maze of narrow streets and lanes is packed with *mritshilpis* and *pratimashilpis* employing traditional techniques based on craft-lore passed down from one generation to another to create the devotional images integral to the celebration of the city's principal religious celebrations. Despite their role as bearers of a tradition fundamental to the culture of Kolkata in the modern era, and the popular triumph of Durga Puja combined with the commercial success of pandals (the temporary structures which house the *pratimās*), the *mritshilpis* and *pratimashilpis* of Kumartuli are nevertheless enduring the struggles and traumas of critical decline.

This report summarises the discussions of a symposium held in Kolkata in November 2018, when eleven interested resource persons, including members of the *mritshilpi* community and those who work closely with them, met to discuss the issues facing Kumartuli and its people. The document also outlines a research design for a pilot study, aimed at identifying the crucial questions that need to be asked in order not only to address the crisis currently facing this traditional community in an effective and inclusive way, but also to go beyond the problem of 'heritage in crisis', and learn how heritage-facing cultures might be given a voice and thrive.

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Introduction

John Reuben Davies

The University of Glasgow is one of the leading universities in the United Kingdom, and the foremost in Scotland, in the field of Global Challenges Research. In fact, 70% of the Global Challenges Research funding that comes to Scotland from the UK government is for projects led by the University of Glasgow. We therefore hope that the University of Glasgow is well placed to provide the institutional support for the kind of project outlined in this report, which is directly concerned with the fundamental Global Challenge of sustainable development.

The two main areas that our meeting in Kolkata was concerned with can be encompassed under the headings of Sustainable Economies and Societies, and secondly, Human Rights, Good Governance, and Social Justice.

At the centre of UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goals is Sustainable Economies and Societies, under which comes the challenge of sustainable cities and communities. UNESCO's World Day for Cultural Diversity emphasises that Sustainable Development Goals can 'best be achieved by drawing upon the creative potential of the world's diverse cultures'. This surely applies as much to cities – especially a cosmopolis such as Kolkata – as to anywhere.

One of our overall aims in seeking ways to further sustainable economies and societies is to help build sustainable livelihoods and neighbourhoods that can be supported by strong foundations for inclusive economic growth. We can work towards this aim by understanding the challenges faced by communities living in the context of rapid urban development, studying the impacts of demographic change and economic growth.

Another important aspect of sustainable development relevant to our discussions is social justice. We hope this can be advanced by identifying strategies to provide bulwarks against poverty and the marginalisation of minority groups.

First, however, there are the cultural issues themselves: the changing nature of art and aesthetics, the learning and dissemination of heritage in everyday life, the management of space between studio, household and neighbourhood, and the nature of heritage as material culture as well as tradition.

What follows is a summary of the individual contributions and general discussions held on 25 November 2018 that focused on these issues, together with ideas for the design of a pilot research project that will form the basis for further work and the establishment of a sustainable network.

Samir Kumar Das

As we learn from the discussions in this symposium and develop a research design, it will be essential to go beyond 'heritage in crisis', and towards learning how to work with and alongside heritage-facing cultures.

One of the central themes is the relation of heritage and art. Whereas heritage is part of art, it is not part of art appreciation. It is only recently that professionally trained artists have increasingly been introduced to lend to the *pratimas* their artistic and aesthetic claim. While the celebration of Durga Puja, by all accounts, marks the popular occupation of the public sphere, it is still not clear why the increasingly artistic and aesthetic transformation of the *pratima* is being consumed by everyday working folk *en masse*. The growing marketisation that exists side by side with what continues to be a subsistence economy is another factor that also contributes to the present scenario.

Finally, the migration of the kumars, whether from outside or from Kumartuli to other areas in Kolkata, makes it imperative on our part to study how heritage copes with challenges in diverse contexts and locales.

Bishnupriya Basak

In addition to the aspects mentioned by Dr Davies and Professor Das, the study will also need to be concerned with the organisation of space and the continuum of studio and household; and it will have to investigate the materiality of cultures, since neither heritage nor art can be divorced from materiality.

Learning and dissemination of heritage in everyday life: the social transmission of *shilpa*

Pradip Bose

The evolution of the Durga Puja is from the family puja to the *barowari* puja (that is, puja in public spaces). The range of expression is consequently increased because of the requirement of the production sphere.

The characteristic of the production system is an extension of the *Jajmani* system or the functional and occupational division that lies at the heart of the Hindu caste system: an annual contract transmitted generation-wise, typified by repetition, without change and innovation.

The city space was occupationally divided with various enclaves of production identified by toponyms the city developed: Kumartuli (the neighbourhood of the potters), Colootola (the neighbourhood of the oil crushers).

There was in the history of this *shilpa*, which follows a very conservative tradition, the idea of keeping the studio separate from the household. The artist's studio is a western concept, symbolising a space for retreat and reflection. Yet there is little upon which to reflect. The craft is learned and the product is produced. Even today very few serious artists have a studio.

Kumartuli developed because the new wealthy Bengalis of the mid-nineteenth century had disposable cash to celebrate Durga Puja lavishly. Partly for this reason Kumartuli actually represents a break with heritage. There was a gradual change of design coming out of Kumartuli, all determined by the clients. For example, the lion in the Durga *pratima* originally looked more like a fox, but during the nineteenth century became more like the lion that is depicted in the coat of arms of the British Crown. The colour of Durga has also changed. *Pratimashilpa* in Kumartuli has to a certain extent therefore become more of a response to the market than a tradition. That is why it does not have a heritage of its own. The form now changes according to demand. For example, there were requests to include Osama bin Laden as the embodiment of evil in the image of the *asura* or the demon. The face of Durga has been crafted in the form of famous film actresses too.

All this is connected with the desire to attract crowds to the pandals, so that the puja has become a spectacle to draw in lucrative sponsorship.

The *pratimas* from the Kumartuli workshops are nevertheless the best in Bengal, the quality is maintained and it has spread to other families. But artists have taken over the new themed pujas where décor and ambience have become more important than the physicality of the *pratima* (image). The *pratima* is now often customised to address the theme.

Arnab Das

Durga is a changing heritage, but still a heritage nevertheless. *Pratimashilpa* (by contrast with the view of Pradip Bose) is indeed an art, a changing art form involving the interpretation of changing sensibilities and perceptions around Durga. The individual is always culturalised and the historical context of Durga Puja is oriented more towards folk sentiment.

Kumartuli's output is centred on Durga, other productions are secondary. The faces of the idols change and indicate the dynamic nature of the heritage. The heritage is always put into practice and therefore the theory derives from practice.

Discussion

At the heart of the discussion was the question of skill versus heritage, art versus craft.

The importance of assistants was noted, with seasonal labour (a result of under-employment in agriculture) leading to the unpredictability of costs.

On the whole, *pratimashilpis* are not a group accorded honour among the general populace (which suggests that they are not perceived as artists).

Isn't there something that comes as Kumartuli 'branding' notwithstanding the diversities and varieties of forms of idols? Can we define the Kumartuli heritage?

It was argued that the 'branding' is in the basic quality maintained in forms. Artistic reflection may be seen in the creativity, the vision and visualisation of the idol.

An old *Pratimashilpi* had explained their profession as an integrated one of the five senses: perhaps 'traditional heritage' may be seen to inhere in this.

The importance of compliance with Shastric requirements was also stressed in an attempt to define 'traditional heritage'.

The changing nature of art and aesthetics in the *pratimas* of Kumartuli

Pradip Bose

Heritage and tradition are retrospective constructions. What then is the Kumartuli tradition? With the changing nature of *pratimas*, and the rise of themed *pandals* and pujas, Durga Puja has in many instances become a spectacle, with the *pandal* – the structure which houses the *pratima* – becoming just as important as the devotional image inside it. 2018 in particular saw *pandals* that resembled a studio set with, to take an example, a realistic recreation of an historic house of old Calcutta. Can this type of studio-set *pandal*, however, be considered art? In addition, secular artists are gaining an increasing share of the *pratima* market, and the design of the *pratima* is becoming less and less religious.

Anita Agnihotri

Anita Agnihotri takes a different approach from Pradip Bose. She highlights the devotion with which the *kumars* conceptualise the *pratimas*.

We need to be specific about time and place when we are considering *pratimashilpa*. Small pujas are very important in the overall picture.

(In the 1980s, under the Left Front government, a cobbler's son was commissioned to make a *pratima*. It was discovered that there was animal skin in the structure. When it was then also ascertained that the *pratima* had been constructed by a member of a subaltern caste, a new *pratima* had to be made and re-worshipped in order to mitigate the sin.)

Agnihotri recalls having seen the mind at work in the conceptualisation of the *pratima*. Exceptionalism is observable in the *formaishi* (demand-oriented) puja, not in the traditional puja.

The lion was originally white-bodied with the mouth pointed like that of the hilsa fish. This changed after 1857, she argued, with British imperialism receiving its seal following the Queen's proclamation. The new lion was more aggressive, similar to the lion in the British Royal Arms.

Bhanga ek chala or the disintegration of the *ekchala* or singular frame for Durga in the 1940's symbolised the breakup of the joint family and the emergence of the nuclear family.

In the 1970s Gorachand Pal created a domesticated Durga, with flowing hair and a family, who resembled a Bengali housewife. Rakhal Pal remains the pioneer of an artistic journey.

Alok Sen, initiated another tradition of realism. He was bold enough to bring in political issues in the *mandap*.

Occupational groups and their role

The nature of the construction of the images creates an infrastructure. The process of image making is complicated, with various allied and dependent small-scale industries. These allied industries are spread all over Bengal and in some cases, even outside the state.

The hay which is used to make the basic framework of the images is sourced from the Sundarban region. There was a time when boats with huge loads of hay purchased from the farmers of the Sundarbans used to serve the Kumartuli potters, but their numbers have greatly reduced in the recent past since the eviction of the *khatahs* (stables where people sleep, eat and live next to and above cattle), indirectly affecting the image-making industries. As the number of boats has greatly reduced, the *ghats* remain idle most of the time and many of the small hotels and shops catering to the sailors and traders have closed and the *ghats* have become shabby and dirty.

Various types of clay are required for the modelling of the images and are sourced from different regions.

Assortments of dresses and ornaments are required for the dressing of the images. Each of the specific accessories is produced by different groups of crafts-people located in other parts of Kolkata or Bengal.

Knowing the artist's mind is very important to this project. The artist has to carry the whole team with him. The main cost is not that of materials but of labour. A profitability calculation is almost never done by the . artist who is immersed in his own creation. Bank loans are taken out by the artist against payment by the client. But there is then a problem if the artist falls ill or faces any other emergency in the family before the pujas.

The cost of raw materials has increased sharply but the prices of the images have not been increased proportionately. Workshops are small and cramped and do not have sufficient space to store unsold stock. Therefore the crafts-people are forced to sell their products at whatever prices they can command, even if it entails a loss of investment.

The marginal profits the image makers are able to earn during the festival seasons is hardly enough to support them during an annual five-month slump period. They are therefore driven to search for irregular odd jobs or attempt to earn some income by extending their skills to areas such as terracotta work, ceramic pottery and paper-pulp work.

During the festival season when image making is a highly demanded skill, crafts-people with different types and levels of skill come to Kumartuli to work under the artisans who are permanent residents of the cluster. A drastic change has been taking place in the status of these seasonal workers. Earlier, treated as family members of the resident craftsman, they are now treated as wage earners. These workers have their own trade union, work strictly for eight hours a day, demand overtime for additional work, thus making a significant shift towards a more industrial mode of operation. The stiff market competition has also manifested in disputes between the various master artisans as well as the various studios. Such changes have led to the demise of the sense of community and shared identity that was once widespread in Kumartuli.

Debdutta Gupta

Details of the form and style of idol-making were highlighted. Two kinds of style go back to antiquity – the *Kansanarayani chal* and the *Bishnupuri chal*. In the first Lakshmi and Saraswati are placed at a higher tier than Ganesh-Kartik while in the second the opposite is seen. The *Bishnupuri chal* was created by the potters or *faujders*, the style originating from Bishnupur. The potters were previously occupied in making clay vessels. Debdutta further discussed three other styles: the *Khashbangla chal*, the *Dobhashi chal*, and the *Cchhabiyana chal*. The *Cchhabiyana chal* depicted the idol in the mould of Bollywood actresses. For the Rudrapals the singular condition of making Durga was casting her in a earthly form of the mother or the bride.

The Birbhum *sutradhar* does not use moulds, but sculpts the idol, hence blending the two styles of earth and clay.

The Devi is no longer made in mould excepting in the ancestral house of Rani Rasmoni. Here the goddess is ten-armed; eight arms are of wood while only two are moulded in clay.

Idol-making of Kumartuli has been impacted by certain external influences like the doll-making tradition of Joynagar as well the *patachitra* of Kalighat, still lingering in the communities of Das and Chitrakar.

Soujit Das

Bishorjon (the ritual immersion of the deity-image in the River Ganga) from Baghbazar ghat makes for a necessarily perishable material culture. The art of the *mritshilpi* therefore has an ephemeral existence.

The migration of Kumbhakars from Krishnanagar to Kumartuli took place in the mid-eighteenth century, but *pratimashilpa* was happening 100 years earlier. Yet there is very little, if any, serious literature on the development of the forms of the Durga *pratima*, and Kumars, as a caste, have no access to the religious formularies that prescribe the form

of the deity images, since they are restricted to Brahmins. They therefore have a certain liberty to play with the form.

The earliest examples of Durga *pratimas* are from the Pala-Sena period and are carved in stone. Prior to the 1840s British officers actively patronised Durga Puja. Production of friezes and ivory *pratimas* probably came about to supply the European market where, for example, early nineteenth-century London had a 'Little Bengal' of returned expatriates who celebrated their own form of Durga Puja. They may also be the development of the clay images in a different medium.

The breaking of the *ek-chala* (one-platform) tradition, with Durga and her four children (Kartikaya, Ganesha, Saraswati, Lakshmi) all under one structure, happened long before the current trends of Kumartuli, sixty to seventy years ago. In boxes.

There have been androgynous and transgender interpretations of Durga, and even representations of Mamata Banerjee (the Chief Minister of West Bengal) as Durga. *Mritshilpi*s also engage in commercial commissions, one of the most notable being the dinosaur at Science City. The future may even include a hologram *thakur*.

Somen Pal

The form of the *pratima* is dependent on some reference. Form is an evolving aspect of the *pratima* and is influenced by family members who inherit the artistic craft of the *mritshilpi*. Changes to the form of the *pratima* can come from within, from experience. But influences from outside also have their impact, through the market, technology, or the consumer. An important intention of the *mritshilpi* is often to project folk art. The commercial success of Durga Puja has meant that images of Durga have gradually become more prominent than other images.

Durga Puja had been a predominantly family-oriented event until the 1930s, when it broke away to become a much more public phenomenon. Around this time Gopeshwar Pal became influential, making the first free-standing images. Units of measurement also changed from the Bengali *poa* to the imperial foot. Changes to the form of the sculptures began during the Swarasati puja on an experimental basis.

Histories of Migration and Caste-based Occupation

Debdatta Gupta

More light was thrown on the changing art and iconography rather than migration. For instance, the Jaya-Bijoya idol of Kumartuli emanates from the tradition of duality of forms preserved within a single idol, as seen in the case of Surya and Visnu. He also mentions those antique forms in which Kartik wears nagra shoes and the lion sports pump shoes.

Arnab Das

Caste is occupational in origin and symbolic within the culture. Caste is also fluid, since occupations are never fixed: the *Kumar* was at first the creator of earthenware vessels.

The *kumars* are placed next to the Brahmins, the first in the caste hierarchy.

Caste is significant for politics, and this must be borne in mind when taking this project forward.

Managing spaces: the studio–household–neighbourhood continuum

Debasish Das

A primary survey of Kumartuli's built environment was undertaken about a decade ago. The studio and the residential structures – mostly huts with tiled roofs – stand huddled together. A considerable part of the studio area also consists of *kuchcha* (temporary structures made of bamboo, straw, mud, tiles) huts. Accessibility remains poor and circulation within the area is by narrow streets and lanes that are impeded by encroachment of unauthorised structures.

An average studio is a fenced off space with an earthen floor. The area is generally 100 to 150 square feet with a water tank (to keep the clay moist) occupying part of it. The structures have wooden walls held together with rope, and roofs made of tin and matting. There is minimal electric lighting with low wattage bulbs. The narrow lanes of the cluster are also used for the drying of images, storing of raw materials and dumping solid wastes.

The West Bengal government has taken up the task of developing Kumartuli as part of the slum development project under the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM).

What emerged from the open discussion was that there persists a studio-household continuum in Kumartuli whose heritage is shaped by these overlapping domains. Such an organization of space makes it impossible for the business of idol making to completely professionalise itself. The terms that continue to be used to refer to the frame/structure of the goddess (*Katham* or *Tacture* as the Pratimashilpis call them) and the space of her making allude to their ritual sanctity and social continuity. A segregation of space as seen in the highly professionalized 'studio' is certainly a modern invention and lacking in Kumartuli.

Any study of the built environment of Kumartuli would need to keep the following aspects in mind. (a) The structure that has more to do with the balancing of the idols; (b) the management of space among the idols and the members of the household and neighbours within the workshop/shop floor.

The objective of developing Kumartuli as a heritage site would need to engage in a dialogue with the different stakeholders and explore how any reconstruction of the existing space is attuned to the ideas of space prevailing in the community.

Heritage as material culture

Pradip Bose

Material culture is no longer a dominant trend in anthropology. Physical material is only the smallest part of 'material culture'. Material culture encompasses the whole way of life. (Professor Bose refers to James Clifford, *Writing Culture*; anthropology can never be objective; one is always 'writing culture'.)

There are no studies on how the *pratimashilpis* live their lives. There needs to be a study of material culture. There has been no study of Kumartuli by the Anthropological Survey of India.

The image-makers do not do the work of the traditional *kumars* (potters). They do not (and cannot) use the potter's wheel. There are still many traditional potters within, or on the outskirts of, Kolkata. There is a lot of demand for their work, and there is no obvious problem of unemployment in this caste.

Concluding thoughts

Meghna Guhathakurta

A number of themes can be identified from the discussions of the symposium.

Skill versus heritage

Pratimashilpa has been variously interpreted as folk art, classical art, creative art, and artisanal craft. There remains a tension between its conception as a product of the artist's skill and creative imagination within a tradition, and the craftsman's ability to reproduce a relatively static and formal design within a context that is his by heritage. This tension holds together the aesthetics of folk art and the more avant-garde productions of the studio artist, encompassing a range of styles along with unchanging core elements.

Transformations

Transformations in *pratimashilpa* have come about at the interface of *shilpa* with insider and outsider; at the interface of *shilpa* and technology, consumer, and market.

Materiality

The material culture of Kumartuli lies not simply in the physical materials and products of the locality, its residents and its buildings, but also in its lived heritage, and in its methods of production. The producers in this respect are just as important as the product and the environment in which it is produced.

Differences

Kumartuli is a place where the urban meets the rural in many aspects of its life, history, and artistic and artisanal productions. Kumartuli is also a neighbourhood which exposes the differences between rural and urban life and culture, and acts as a kind of barometer of change in Kolkata. It provides a story within the life of a mega-city: a mega-city with a mega life. Many aspects of the life of the city and its wider environs can be encapsulated in the life of this particular neighbourhood.

Urban renewal

Kumartuli is therefore also a microcosm of the process and effects of urban development and renewal, where questions of the voice of the resident people, debates, consensus, and power relationships need to be asked repeatedly. Dignity and ownership are surely the core issues.

Primary approach to the study

Gonogobeshona or 'people's research'.

The principle of *gonogobeshona* is egalitarian, treating no group, class or community as more advanced. There is no concept of a 'knowledgeable' class on which another group must depend. The central idea is that people will understand the reality of a society not through formal knowledge but through collective self-analysis and, in the process, will realise that they can change their reality themselves.

Main questions for academic study

1. To see how migration patterns across the two Bengals influenced image-making of the Durga in Kumartuli.
2. Compare how migrant potter families and their art survive in the place of origin.
3. What are the prospects for the trend to carry on into the next generation?

Further questions for sustainable development

- What are the statistics for younger generations abandoning the traditional vocations?
- What are the reasons? Deprivation in their living and livelihood conditions? Seasonal nature of business?
- How are commercial pressures forcing *pratimashilpis* out of business?
- To what extent is *pratimashilpa* falling into decline because the artists and artisans are not appropriately honoured or paid by buyers?
- What infrastructural support from the government or civil society organisations is currently being provided?
- What infrastructural support is being looked for from the government or civil society organisations? If not from government and civil society, how else can such infrastructure be secured?
- How can proper financial planning be encouraged and supported?
- Are there alternatives to bank loans to aid cash flow?
- Why does heritage not qualify as art? Is heritage then a matter of skill?

