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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

## CONDITION OF THE WORKERS OF THE IDOL MAKING INDUSTRY: A CASE STUDY OF KOLKATA WORD NO.9.

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### Abstract

Kumartuli, a neighborhood in Kolkata, India holds an important place in history which has a long tradition of clay idol-making along with a strong association with the cardinal festival of Bengal – Durga Puja. Kumartuli is in North Kolkata alongside the river of Hooghly. With the rapid expansion of the city Kolkata, this area has undergone a huge transformation – mainly due to urbanization. The study followed both deductive and inductive methods using historical and empirical approaches. As a part of empirical approaches field survey, interview method, observation, case study also the use of secondary sources of data has been done.

Idol making industry is mostly male dominated, only 16 percent of the total workers are found to be female. The businesses are running through many generations, more than 40 percent of the shops are older than 60 years and 34 percent of shops' annual turnover is in between 21 lacs to 40 lacs. During Durga puja 88 percent intra state labor migration can be seen, among them 58 percent are temporary. 40 percent of the shops export less than 5 unit and 54 percent of shop owners sell more than 110 idols during puja. 22 percent of ancillary shops of this industry make more than 60 lacs as an annual turnover. Based on the survey and analysis it can be concluded that there is a lack of supportive infrastructures, government policies and development/renewal projects. Preservation and maintenance of the heritage and cultural aesthetics of the place need to be established. It requires research towards enhancing the lifestyle of workers and creating employment opportunities.

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### Introduction:-

The history of Kumartuli dates back to the 17th century when potters in search of better livelihood came from Krishnanagar to Gobindapore, a prosperous village on the banks of the Bhagirathi ( now river Hooghly) to make a living by making pots, clay toys and cooking utensils for household use. Later, when the land at Gobindopore was required by the British East India Company to build Fort William, the inhabitants migrated further up the river to Sutanuti. The potters moved on to the new destination, colonized a vast area and named it Kumartuli. The artists or *Karigars* who are involved so passionately in crafting idols from raw clay to an idol of a god and goddess, work in

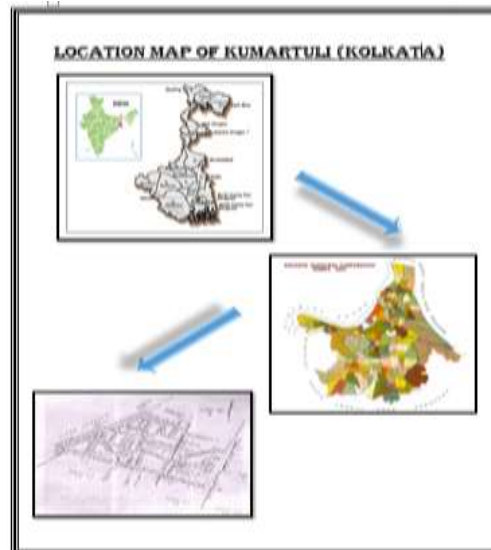
their 'workshops'. These workshops as they are called actually comprises of working space, storage space for idols, storage space of raw materials, eating, cooking and sleeping space of *karigars*. It is a place where *Karigars* or labours work and live in the same space. The built environment of this place is majorly the workshops linearly planned along the narrow lanes as well as the shops where accessories for idols are sold and residences of artists.



A typical workshop of the *karigars* at Kumartuli is a linear rectangular room with an entrance facing the road or the lane. As you enter the workshop, there are rows of idols stored on either side. The walls are of bricks and slopping roof of tin shades supported on bamboo truss system and has mezzanine floors. The height of these workshop ranges from 18 feet to 20 feet. Very few units have conventional staircases while the rest have wooden or steel ladders. These structures have temporary roof because the artist and *karigars* usually come to these workshops only before Durga Puja to complete their work. This practice was followed till the British shifted their capital to Delhi. Thereafter, the urbanization resulted in the place of work being transformed into permanent residences and workshops. The art of idol making is a unique and requires creative imagination skills with a long process. It is an important part of cultural practices for any culture and cannot exist without the tangible component. The art exists only when people involved have the passion to continue their art as a tradition along with the changing demand of time, as examined in the case of Kumartuli in Kolkata. The essence of built heritage lies in the interrelationship of its people, place and their activities.

#### Study Area:-

The study area Kumartuli is located in the North of Kolkata in West Bengal, India. It comes under Ward No. 9 of Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC). This neighbourhood is located in between Rabindra Sarani (formerly known as Chitpur Road) and the eastern bank of Hooghly River, between Ahiritola and Shobhabazar. In this craft region mainly craft community and the heritage structures juxtaposed Abhay Mitra Street, Bonomali Sarkar Street, Durga Charan Banerjee Street, Rabindra Sarani. Furthermore, starting from collection of raw materials for the artifact (Durga Idol) to the transportation of artifact is carried out through the ghats present along the zone such as Chapatola ghat, Raj Ghat, and specially Kumartuli Ghat along eastern bank of River Hooghly as well as road transportation.



**Fig (1):-** Location map of Kumartuli

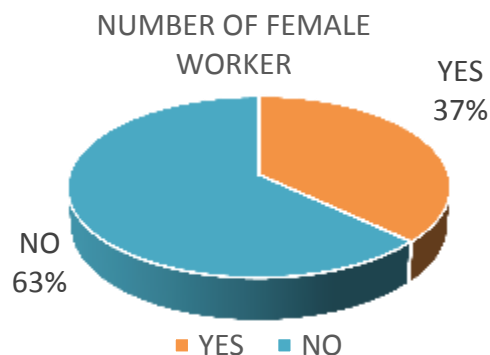
### Methods:-

The study followed both deductive and inductive methods using historical and empirical approaches. As a part of empirical approaches field survey, interview method, observation, case study also the use of secondary sources of data has been done. The study was conducted in January 2017 among 100 workshops of Kumartuli and 50 ancillary shops.

### Observation and result:-

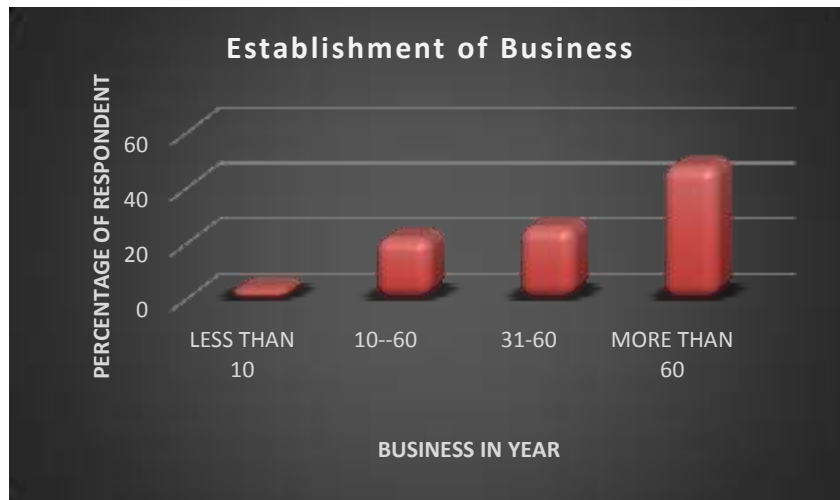
To sum up the methodical and deduced statistics of this survey which all converge to following datasets consisting of tenure and influence of the business, resources, gender ratio of workers and their migration statistics, economical aspects in terms of turnover. Few significant peaks to mention likewise we see how shops are the pivotal role of this entire industry having a steady demand over the span of till date, heterogeneous economic module of large, medium, small sized (based on number of idol production) shop. With regards to the resources and supporting industry we find a balanced gender ratio and their affordable migration for the sake of industry, and growth of ancillary shops.

**Fig (2):-** Pie chart showing the number of female worker

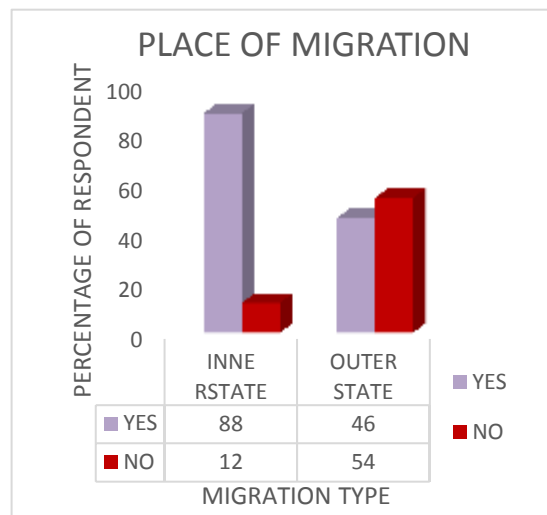


Idol making industry is mostly male dominated, only 37 percent of the total workers are found to be female while being a strenuous job, yet gradually the female workers' percentage is increasing which is a positive impact.

The artisans are mostly Hindu (88%) but 8% Muslims were also found along with remaining 4% other religion.

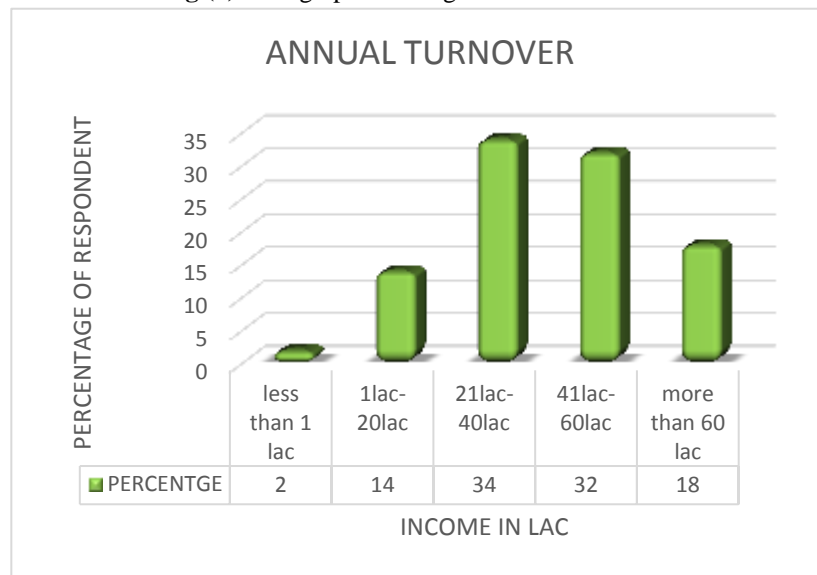
**Fig (3):-**Bar graph showing establishment of business

Most of the people in this area running their businesses generation after generation, so there are businesses found to be older than 200 years as well as newly formed 5 years also. The figure is showing a graphical representation of the establishment of businesses and tenure.

**Fig (4):-**Bar graph showing place of migration

There are two types of migrants can be found amongst artists one who come from outer district other than Kolkata such as Nadia, Birbhum, Bankura, N-24 Pargona, Midnapore, Hooghly etc. another type are one who come from outer states like Bihar, Orissa, and U.P. and these outer place migration happens occasionally only in peak seasons like during Durga puja and Kali puja.

58 percentage of the workers nature of job is temporary due to lack of work, so they are forced to do other jobs like laboring in building construction, cultivation work or some other pottery works.

**Fig (5):-**Bar graph showing annual turnover

Annual income varies a lot in this businesses some studio (shop) owners those who export a good number of idols to foreign countries they earn better profit than others. But the income of the idol makers are not very satisfactory, whatever the owner earn they get  $\frac{1}{4}$  percentage of that or more or less among those 18 percentage those who earn more than 60 lac annually they export durga idol to foreign countries like United Kingdom, America, Bangladesh, Srilanka, Nepal, various countries of Europe etc.

Like other industries an ancillary industry formed based on this idol making industry too, mostly their products are decorative artifacts, jewellerys, pottery works, garlands, floor drawings etc. Profitability of this ancillary shops highly dependent on idol making industries, 26 percentage of these shop owners annual turnover is 1-20 lacs, 20 percentage of those earn less than 1 lac and 22 percentage of them earn make more than 60 lacs.

#### An ancillary shop



#### Discussion:-

Idol makers at Kumartuli are working 10 hours in a day to meet the September-end deadline. While their studios and their work continue to draw people, they are plagued with problems. Shortcomings are discussed below.

This business needs quite a lot of initial investment. The major part of the capital is obtained from banks and the majority of their income goes to repay their debts. Labourers and suppliers of raw materials also demand instant cash payment, which leaves them with very little profit.

The festival comes on the tail end of the monsoon and working with clay becomes doubly taxing. Since many of the idols absorb moisture, artists are forced to work on them again. It became very difficult to dry the idols due to rain, for drying the idols electric & gas expenses rose for that people don't pay more. Repairing process of rain damaged idol increases the cost of labour price. This requires more raw materials and labourers and the cost of this is not accounted for when the Puja committees pay them. The additional cost is their loss. About 10 to 12 idols go to waste annually.



Traditionally, artisans derive their roots from Nadia district. Even now, labourers and helpers to the artists mostly come from Nadia. However, the steady flow of labourers is declining.

People get easier work near their homes under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. So they do not want to come all the way to Kolkata to work, until 2013 the daily wages of semi-skilled workers was Rs. 200. From 2014 it has been doubled.

The artists' studios are excessively cramped, making it impossible for two persons to walk side by side between the two rows of idols on both sides of the room. The studios are damp and dark even in day time. Many of the studios have a small upper floor where junior artists work on smaller idols. Workers do not have proper housing facility and there is no government initiative in this matter. The congested lanes within Kumartuli pose a threat to the finished idols at the time of delivery to the Puja committees as the elaborate idols often bang into the narrow lanes and get damaged. A lot of effort and craftsmanship goes behind every idol.



Due to pollution it has almost become impossible for artists to gather mud, sometimes the artists have to travel far and sometimes have to take the help of brokers, this is resulting in the wastage of both money and labour and the effects are visible when the artists try to sell the idols in the market.

Unavailability of mud, straw, and the rise in the price of bamboo. Idol makers don't get the materials even after paying the price. Very little Ganga mud is left, in consequence artists don't get more than 3 sacks in a vehicle.



Artists work in a very low voltage bulb, which illuminates less than sufficient, electric lighting is minimal.

There is no enthusiasm among idol makers because their profit never increases. They do not even have a chance of recognition. They neither get any help from the financial institutions nor from West Bengal government, entire thing is self-financed.

**Conclusion:-**

Hence it can be concluded on the basis of the survey and analysis done that there is a lack of supportive infrastructures, government policies and development/renewal projects. When it comes to government policies, no policies are taken for improving this community, but previous government had promised to resettle these artists in a new building (multiple studio under one roof) but due to some monetary, administrative, and political issues most of the projects collapsed, a little that was done is all that remains and few people those who were shifted they became the sufferer of the leftover project. Preservation and maintenance of the heritage and cultural aesthetics of the place need to be developed. It requires research towards enhancing the lifestyle of workers and creating employment opportunities.

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