



Journey of the Goddess into The Domain of Demons and Back: An Integrated Ethno-Social and Psychological Analysis of Artisan Life, Social Organization, Gender Dynamics, And Sustainability in Kolkata's Kumartuli

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Abstract

This paper presents an integrated ethno-sociological and psychosocial analysis of the clay idol artisan community, settled in localities such as Kumartuli and Kalighat Patua Para in Kolkata, West Bengal. It examines two central themes through Psychological, Social and Philosophical lenses. First, it analyses into the socio-economic, ethical and psychological dimensions related with the practice of reuse of the wooden frameworks (used to make idols called Kathamo) observed in this community. Second, it investigates the experiences and the position of the female artisans in the community and how they navigate through a male dominated tradition. Using ethnographic fieldworks, semi-structured interviews, psychological and philosophical theoretical frameworks, this paper explores into themes of evolution of tradition, ethical negotiation, sustainability, socio-economic reorganisation, gender struggle and identifies areas for possible future researches.

Keywords: Kumartuli, Social Psychology, Sustainability, Women Artisans, Cultural Anthropology, Ethnography

Introduction:

Human engagement with art, particularly the creation of sacred imagery from materials like clay, terracotta, stone, and paint, has been present from the very inception of human culture. This paper focuses specifically on the art of the clay within the unique context of Kolkata's renowned idol-making centers: Kumartuli and the smaller Kalighat Patua Para. Kumartuli, the "potter's settlement" ('Kumar' means potter in Bengali and 'Tuli' stands for settlement). It is home to at least 50 households experienced in crafting idols for diverse festivities, specializing in clay artistry passed down through generations. The Kumhars (potters) of Kumartuli engage themselves in making different types of idols as per the requirement and festivities. Kalighat Patua Para, located in the surrounding areas of the famous Kalighat Temple, represents a related but much smaller community.

This paper focuses on two main key aspects related with this community which demand deeper psychosocial and ethical examination:



References to Dākinīs and Yoginīs also appear not only in Brahmanical sources but also in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, as well as Japanese, and Chinese sources. In early dates, Dākinī was associated with the Mother Goddess, often symbolizing formidable female deities representing energy, wisdom, and transformation. However, a significant shift in perception occurred, and this concept gradually changed. The LaṅkāvatāraSūtra, a prominent Mahayana Buddhist scripture, introduced a transformed portrayal, mentioning that those who are excessively attached to meat-eating would give birth to dākas and dākinīs. They were also described as terrible eaters of human flesh. From formidable female deity figures, she becomes the flesh eater, an ugly ghost-like feature.

Yoginī, on the other hand, is the feminine of the Sanskrit 'yogin' or 'yogi'. In the early medieval period, the word Yoginī designates a variety of Tantric goddesses. These historical Yoginīs were complex figures associated with esoteric power, tantric practices, and often depicted in groups as wise figures.

1.2 The market demand for shock element: A case for shock aesthetic economy.

Crucially, it is very important to note that the dākinīs or yoginīs in the present context of Kumartuli and Kalighat are not the same as the ones discussed above from ancient texts. Today, their drapery and form depend on the patrons and market demand. The Kumartuli Samiti informs that some clients demand dākinīs draped in Banarasi sarees, while others want distorted faces, sometimes changed into alien forms, or even skeletons in wedding attire. The focus is frequently on creating terrifying, "demonic" figures, often emphasizing a "shock element" or "ugly" features to evoke the terrifying nature of such figures. This contemporary commodification into market-driven "demonic" figures stand in stark contrast to their multifaceted historical origins, providing a complex symbolic backdrop to the ethical unease surrounding their creation from recycled divine structures. One of the artists interviewed, Samir Pal, revealed that, "more the idols are hideous, the more they are in demand". These aspects birth questions such as "how mainstream consumes spectacle giving rise to "shock aesthetic economy" in Kolkata's idol market?"

Looking into this journey of the God and Goddesses into the world of so-called demons reflects the malleable nature of norms and ethics. As per the human collective need, ethics seems to be a subject of variable interpretation.

This leads to a question about; how much ethics and norms are just tools to conduct and maintain social organisation?

How is this ethical tightrope walked, and at what psychological, social and moral cost?

Is this cost shared by every member of the society, including women?

1.3 The Recycling Chain: Ethnographic Description, Sustainability Claims, and Emerging Social Categories.

In 1990s, in Kumartuli, women and children of artists engaged themselves in the making of the figures of Dakini-Yogini which are sold during Kali puja as subsidiary demonic entities but, gradually, due to the emergence of the new economic chain and the process of recycling involved in it, participation by women,

depleted. This is mainly because the division of labour in this new emerged cycle mitigated the requirement of the family members of artists to be involved in the process of making, even the, subsidiary idols.

Samir Pal, an experienced artist and a prominent member of "KumartuliMritshilpi Samiti" (which is one of the important associations of artists from Kumartuli) informed in one of the interviews, that "after the 'Visarjan' of the idol of Durga with her family, people, especially those residing in the slums by the railway tracks near ganges, engage to collect the straw entwined structures of immersed idols of deities." They sell these at very cheap rates to a second layer of informal artisans, many of whom reside in neighbouring settlements. These self-taught artisans, work with limited resources and guidance, sculpting the fierce forms of Dakini-Yogini, which are considered grotesque by mainstream aesthetic standards as demanded by the market. They sell these to established idol makers and art vendors in the city. These figures are then sold in a packaged form along with the central deity of Goddess Kali in the market, for Kali Puja.

The whole process is described as profitable for everyone involving: people collecting the structures receive their profit; the "sparsely trained" artists who make the associate idols, also benefit by selling them to mainstream artists, approximately for Rs 2000-3000 each and the main artists also get their share, by selling them in the market with a margin of profit, as they acquire the finished product at a low cost. As similar pattern is observed with minor variations in Kalighat market where alongside Kali idol production, ghost models are sold with starting rates such as, Rs 300 a pair as well as higher-end options priced at Rs 2,500, Rs 3,000, and even Rs 5,000. Artisans skilfully layer clay over structures to create terrifying representations with unique features like light-bulb eyes, coloured untamed hair, ghostly teeth, and claws, ensuring no two figures are alike.

This practice not only promote sustainability but also provide livelihoods but a critical assessment regarding the net ecological impact and the fairness of labour practices within this multi-tiered chain is much needed and it makes for an amazing future arena of research. This economic adaptation has clear implications for social organization within Kumartuli. It explicitly creates and reinforces distinct social categories based on perceived skill level, economic role, and the nature of the artistic product handled:

1. Impoverished Collectors.
2. The "semi-trained" Artisans.
3. The Established Mainstream Artists.

This stratification raises questions. Does this division of labour, represent the emergence of a new, stable social category? How permeable are the boundaries between these groups? Although everyone is able to earn their living but will the marginalized section ever get credits for their artistic work?

1.4 The Psychological Burden and Ethical Conflict: Moral Dissonance, Guilt, Fear, and Philosophical Dimensions.

A strange pattern of admission avoidance among some artisans was observed, pointing towards a significant underlying psychological conflict among the artists of this community as moral or ethical dissonance. It can be understood via philosophical frameworks:

- The Core Conflict (Moral/Ethical Dissonance): The dissonance arises from the conflict between the reverence for sacred forms (the kathamo from Durga Puja idols) and the act of transforming them into



'demonic' figures for commercial purposes. This pits religious/moral values against economic/market pressures.

• **Philosophical Dimensions:**

A) Deontology vs. Consequentialism: This conflict reflects a tension between a deontological view (the act of transforming the sacred is inherently wrong, violating a duty of respect) and a consequentialist justification (the practice is acceptable due to positive outcomes like economic benefit for several groups and resource reuse). The reported guilt suggests consequentialist reasoning doesn't fully resolve the deontological unease for some.

B) Sacred vs. Profane: The practice involves a direct, potentially unsettling, negotiation of the boundary between the sacred (the ritually significant kathamo) and the profane (economic necessity, market demands, the 'demonic' figures). The unease likely stems from managing this transgression and the potential symbolic contamination involved.

• **Manifestations:**

a) Reported Guilt: The explicit statements by artists like Mintu Pal and Mala Pal that this practice was "beyond their religious ethics" directly signal towards their moral dissonance and resulting guilt. This guilt appears rooted in the violation of internalized values.

b) Avoidance/Reluctance: The observation that "Numerous artists admit that most of them are part of this recycling process but very few wants to admit about it," especially regarding demonic figures, presents the attempts to reduce the psychological discomfort. This avoidance might also stem from shame and the fear of social judgment, discussed later.

• The Interplay of Guilt and Fear/Terror: While guilt arises from the value transgression, fear is also intertwined.

1) Fear of Consequences: Artisans might fear social disapproval, loss of reputation, or supernatural retribution, amplifying guilt.

2) Existential Fear (Terror Management Theory): TMT suggests violating sacred boundaries can provoke underlying existential terror related to mortality. Transforming sacred symbols potentially threatens cultural worldviews. The reported guilt can thus be seen partly as a resultant of this deeper fear, a signal of the threat posed to the cultural worldview that buffers mortality awareness. However, the guilt is not reducible only to fear; the violation of moral standards itself remains a primary driver

1.4 Managing the Conflict: Justifications and Behavioral Adaptations

Despite the moral dissonance and associated guilt/fear, the practice persists, indicating effective psychological management:

• Moral Disengagement Theory (Bandura): Mechanisms like moral justification (sustainability, economically beneficial for all), euphemistic labelling ("a form of moral disengagement where harmful actions are softened

or sanitized by using different language to reduce the perceived moral intensity of the behavior. For example, stating that untrained artists transforms the kathamo into demonic idols"), advantageous comparison (vs. pollution), diffusion of responsibility across the chain allow participation despite ethical concerns.

- System Justification Theory (Jost & Banaji): Participants may defend the system, despite flaws, because it provides economic function and predictability.
- Adaptation via Routinization: Repetitive engagement normalizes the ethically charged act, reducing conflict through habituation. Reuse of DākiniYoginī structures themselves further embeds recycling.

Part 2: Women in a Man's World: Psychosocial Dynamics of Gender, Artistic Expression, and Resilience in Kumartuli.

1.1 History, Gender roles, Artistic expression and Women Artist.

The reference to women as sculptors or artisans is quite rare, historically but it doesn't mean they lacked skill as we can see in exceptional cases of brilliant female artists such as: Halahala, a rich potter woman (6th century BCE); Suna Pathuriani, a highly distinguished female stone sculptor/architect receiving payments equal to male sculptors; the 'Vadhu' (daughter-in-law) of chitrakara Sri Satana who made the Mahoba Tara statue; and evidence of women engaged in temple-building. However, women workers were often involved in small-scale work for petty payment (bharanas/gaunis), like pounding stones/filling floor holes.

1.2 Female artists of Kumartuli and their stories.

Our surveys brought to light, mainly three women artists engaged in the mainstream idol making in Kumartuli – Mala Pal, Chaina Pal and Kakoli Pal. They shared about their individual journey navigating through a majorly male dominated sphere, in the interviews conducted.

Let's look into their stories through a Psychosocial-frameworks-

Case 1: Mala Pal

- Dialogue & Reported Experiences: Mala Pal shared her tough journey. She recalled being "fond of making idols" as a child, but her father, also an artist, "did not allow her in his workshop, as she was a woman". Her journey as 'Silpi Mala Pal' began at age 14 after her father's death in 1985. With the crucial support of her elder brother, Gobindo Pal, she got an opportunity to learn colour theory in Delhi. Since then, she has been engaged in making various idols like Durga, Kali, and Tantric gods as per order, specializing in miniature idols. Her art reached beyond the local market, with exports throughout the globe. She manages both her household and workshop, and though lacking a large, well-furnished workshop compared to some male sculptors, her awards signify her success. Concerned about the future of the craft, noting that "future generations of Kumartuli artists are not taking that much interest in this profession" (with only 20% following family tradition according to Sinha), she established a school ("Pathshala") teaching sculpting to around 150 students with no age limit. She observed that although male students initially dominated, "the number of female students is gradually increasing". She is now a prominent member of the KumartuliMrit Silpi Samiti.

- **Psychosocial Interpretation:** Mala Pal's trajectory exemplifies a blend of intrinsic motivation (her early fondness for the craft) and necessity (father's death driving her entry). Her success suggests high achievement motivation, facilitated significantly by crucial social support (her brother). Her perception appears integrative, encompassing artistic craft, business acumen (exports), and generativity (commitment to teaching the next generation). Her artistic expression shows clear agency, specializing in miniatures while also creating traditional forms, thus blending tradition and innovation. Her story highlights how passion, opportunity (even if delayed and requiring external support), and developed self-efficacy (built through mastery experiences like awards, exports, running a school) can enable individuals to overcome significant gender-based barriers. Her membership in the artists' committee signifies achieved status and potential minority influence.

Case 2: Chaina Pal

- **Dialogue & Reported Experiences:** Chaina Pal's story shares similarities. Her father, Hemanta Pal, was also "against of her passion of making idols". After his death, she quit school and took over management of his studio. Now in her mid-forties, she leads a team of about 12 people and has received the 'RajyapalPuraskar' for her work. She reported generally managing her dual responsibilities (workshop and household) smoothly. However, she described intense pressure "at the time of heavy orders and deadlines before Durga Puja". During these periods, dedicating the majority of her time to the workshop meant "The role of being an artist, a mother and housewife has to face tensions to meet the expectations of the family". She recounted how family members "have to cook for their own and do all the household work without Chaina, and this leads to day-to-day conflicts and increasing tensions". Initially, these conflicts "affect her emotionally," but gradually, she "understood how to work like a 'Machine'".

- **Psychological Interpretation:** Chaina Pal's motivation seems strongly driven by necessity (taking over the family studio after her father's death) and role fulfillment. Her perception appears dominated by the demands of the business and the significant work-life conflict, particularly during peak season. Her competence is evident (awards, managing a team). However, her reported coping strategy - learning to work "like a 'Machine'" - is psychologically significant. This likely represents a form of emotional regulation or even dissociation, adopted to manage the overwhelming stress and emotional labor involved in navigating intense professional demands alongside family conflicts and expectations. While potentially effective for productivity under pressure, this strategy raises concerns about its long-term psychological cost, potentially leading to burnout, diminished intrinsic artistic satisfaction, and emotional detachment. Her experience vividly illustrates Hochschild's concept of emotional labour in managing both client/work demands and family tensions. Arlie Hochschild coined the term "emotional labor" to describe the work of managing one's own emotions, particularly those that are required to be displayed in the workplace. It refers to the effort needed to regulate feelings in order to present a specific emotional display to customers, colleagues, or clients, often as part of a job requirement. This can involve deep acting (changing one's inner feelings) or surface acting (controlling outward emotional expressions). We can thereby understand to some extent, what she meant by, working as a 'machine'.

Case 3: Arati Pal

- **Dialogue & Reported Experiences:** Arati Pal shared a story marked by explicit bias and struggle for legitimacy. Circumstances pushed her into the profession after widowhood. Initially, despite being trained, she recalled how first her father, and then her husband, "distanced her from clients and sent her to do the less important 'clay structuration work'," while they handled clients themselves. This reflects the preconceived

notion "that women couldn't handle big orders or communicate with the clients". After her husband's death, she took over the workshop. Due to the lack of male members, she faced "a lot of issues related to handling the clients". She specifically had to face "difficulties in communicating with customers with sceptical temperaments and bargaining". She also endured "socially awkward situations and humiliation at the initial phase of her work".

- **Psychological Interpretation:** Arati Pal's entry was driven by necessity following widowhood. Her experience starkly highlights the impact of gender stereotyping and gatekeeping within the family itself, limiting her initial exposure and role. Her subsequent struggle upon taking over the workshop exemplifies the challenges faced when confronting explicit bias and societal skepticism directly. The "humiliation" she endured points to the powerful role of shame used as a social control mechanism to enforce gender roles, likely inducing significant fear and anxiety (terror). Her perception was initially shaped by these social challenges. Her professional identity had to be forged through a difficult struggle for legitimacy. Her case underscores the immense psychological effort and resilience required when denied initial opportunity and forced to prove competence against entrenched prejudice. Her experiences are a clear example of navigating negative attributions and potential stereotype threat, and the heavy emotional labor involved in managing difficult client interactions under conditions of scrutiny and skepticism.

These individual stories, while unique, collectively illustrate how pervasive gendered structures within Kumartuli shape motivations, filter perceptions of artistic practice, and necessitate distinct psychological adaptations and coping strategies for women artisans.

1.3 Gender roles and Social control mechanisms exerted by society.

Women entering the mainstream violates societal expectations, triggering social control mechanisms:

- **Gatekeeping:** Active discouragement by male family members. Mala Pal's father didn't allow her in his workshop; Chaina Pal's father Hemanta Pal was against her passion. Experienced male artists today still resist female members learning in workshops. Women often allowed only in emergencies (workload, death of male member).
- **Stereotyping:** Preconceived notions about women's capabilities (handling business/demanding work). Arati Pal faced notions that women couldn't handle big orders or clients.
- **Resource Inequality and Devaluation:** Struggles for recognition, financial support (Kakoli failed to get government help). Work framed as domestic extension, not 'professional'. Women often work in peripheral spaces, less visible and valued.

1.4 Emotional costs of navigating bias: Countering social control mechanisms.

Operating within this biased environment imposes emotional burdens, including those related to shame and fear.

- Attribution Theory (Weiner) and Bias: Gender bias likely shapes performance attributions. Women's failures risk internal attribution by others, successes risk externalization, undermining perceived competence. How women counter these biases needs study. Arati Pal's struggle exemplifies establishing competence against bias.
- Stereotype Threat (Steele & Aronson): Documented scepticism creates conditions for stereotype threat, where awareness of negative stereotypes induces anxiety, potentially impairing performance. Arati Pal's initial "socially awkward situations and humiliation" could be partly understood this way.
- Internalized Limitations: Persistent exposure carries risk of internalizing limitations, affecting aspirations, although success stories like these actively counter such aspects resilience. Irrespective, further assessment needed.

1.5 Emotional Labor, Coping Strategies, and Psychological Well-being.

Dual demands, impose burdens:

- Work-Life Conflict & Chronic Stress: Puja season intensifies conflict and stress. Although Long-term impacts need further study. Chaina Pal conveys that she directs her major focus on her art during puja season due to the hefty market demands, dedicating majority time to workshop but this leads to tension with family expectations (members have to do chores themselves), causing day-to-day conflicts.
- Emotional Labor theory (Hochschild): Women continuously manage emotions navigating bias, client demands (artistic expectations), family needs (caregiving and household duties). Such multi-tasking, risks burnout. Chakraborty & Mridha (scholarly works) see it both as empowerment (opportunity to first hand deal with customers) and exploitation (extra stress and burden).
- Coping Mechanisms and Their Costs: "Machine" strategy (as told by Chaina Pal) signifies adaptation and we can infer that they use their work as a measure of escapism from their day to day conflicts. But escaping isn't resolving their issues and hence we can also see it as a coping mechanism used by the female artist in order to deal with their stress.

Although understanding the full range of impact and evaluating long-term effectiveness or costs is essential.

Operating against significant adversity, Kumartuli's successful women artisans demonstrate remarkable resilience, adapting positively and building crucial self-efficacy through their achievements. This success offers potential for minority influence to gradually shift community norms, although progress confronts the underlying Patriarchal Irony and Cultural Dissonance inherent in venerating female deities while restricting female creators – a contradiction demanding further exploration.

Conclusion: Reconciling Paradox in Kumartuli's Future

Kumartuli presents a study in paradox: a place where divine forms emerge from clay, while the remnants of past gods fuel an economy fraught with moral dissonance. This analysis, integrating Sreemanti Laha's ethnographic survey with psychosocial insights from Priyanka Roy, reveals artisans navigating conflicts



between sacred values and survival, evidenced by guilt, fear, and complex social stratification arising from the Kathamo recycling chain. Simultaneously, it exposes the struggle of women artisans against a patriarchal structure that restricts them through bias and shame, even as they demonstrate remarkable resilience and agency. The future sustainability of this vital tradition demands more than economic or ecological focus; it requires confronting these deep-seated psychological and ethical tensions—the internal conflicts, coping mechanisms, and impacts of gender inequality. Only by addressing the human dimensions of guilt, fear, and shame, and fostering genuine social equity and psychological well-being, can Kumartuli hope to reconcile its paradoxes and ensure the integrity of both its art and its community. Ultimately, the goddess's journey reflects the complex human journeys of her creators.

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Interviews: Personal interviews (with Samir Pal, Mala Pal, Chaina Pal, Arati Pal, Kakoli Pal, Chakraborty & Mridha) are primary data.

PLATES



PIC 1: ARTIST SAMIR PAL AT HIS WORKSHOP



PIC 2: COLLECTED IMMERSED SARASWATI IDOL STRUCTURE



PIC 3: SARASWATI IMMERSSED STRAW STRUCTURE



PIC 4 : OLD STRAW STRUCTURE RECYCLED TO SHIVA-DURGA

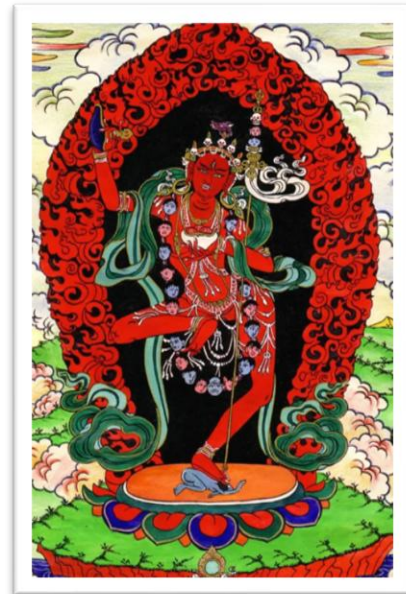


PIC 5: LEARNING ABOUT RECYCLING PROCESS OF STRUCTURES



PIC 6 : GANGADHAR STONE INSCRIPTION OF VISVAVARMA

Fleet, J.F. *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, Vol.3



Pic 7 & 8: Different forms of Dākinī from ancient texts

Courtesy: [s-11600.jpg \(700x1040\)](#) & [01-679x1024.jpg \(629x949\)](#)



PIC 9: YOGINĪ FROM
 CHAUSATHYOGINĪ TEMPLE,
 ORISSA

Courtesy: warrrior-Yogini-at-chausanti-64-Yogini-temple-hirapur-orissa-india-circa-800ad-david-wells.jpg
 (612x900)



PIC 10: YAMUNA YOGINĪ STATUE

Courtesy: Yogini_Yamuna.JPG (1782x2672)



PIC 11: MAHOBA TARA STATUE MADE BY A
 WOMAN ARTIST, THE DAUGHTER-IN-LAW OF
 CHITRAKARA SATANA

Courtesy: [Fig_166_KhadiravaniTara_\(Mahoba\)_The_Indian_Buddhist_Iconography.pdf](http://Fig_166_KhadiravaniTara_(Mahoba)_The_Indian_Buddhist_Iconography.pdf)



PIC12: ARTIST MALA PAL MAKING HER FAMOUS MINIATURE
 DURGA



PIC 13: TANTRIC GODS MADE BY MALA PAL



PIC 14: TERRACOTTA JEWELLERY TO EXPORT BY MALA PAL



PIC 15: SCULPTING SCHOOL, RUN BY MALA PAL



PIC 16: GODDESS KALI, PAINTED BY A SCULPTING STUDENT



PIC 17: A SENIOR AND A JUNIOR STUDENT OF MALA PAL'S SCHOOL



PIC 18: ONE OF THE PRESENT AUTHOR AT KUMARTULI