

## **Social Significance of the Kumor Paras of Kolkata– the Hub of the Finest Artists of the world**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

“Kumor Parar gorur gari, bojhai kora kolsi hari, gari chalaе bansi badan, sange je jae bhagne madan...”<sup>1</sup> A very known poem by Kabiguru Rabindranath probably recited by all of us in our childhood days, a poem which reminds us of the picture with a man pulling a cart piled with many clay pots and other utensils, on a village road; a poem which was written century back yet so prevalent and contemporary. This is a poem which brings importance to a traditional occupation which has been surviving for generations as one of the long lasting occupations of the world. Now during this festive season, what comes to our notice so often are these Kumor Paras, a place otherwise we hardly visit in other parts of the year. This article is just a simple attempt to acknowledge the outstanding hidden talents these clay artists have.

India, being the land of so many gods and goddesses, and their images, has a tropical climate with extreme humidity and thus offers an ideal place for traditional clay modellers and potters. An important point which deserves special mention in the present context is that the art of pottery is passed on from generation to generation with the potter’s child learning the art simply by watching their parents and relatives followed by self practice; there is no need to go through a strenuous academic course like that of any other profession. The potters augment their social status and commitment to the work through the training of relatives. This kind of involvement of relatives results in saving time and funds, while the strength of family employment helps in the strengthening of the workgroup.<sup>2</sup>

The potters have always shown how interdependence of family members could remain

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1. <https://archive.org/details/bangla-sahaj-paath1>
  2. K.C.Gupta, *Progress and Prospects of Pottery Industry in India*, Mittal Publications, Delhi, 1988, Chapter 2 – Growth of the Industry, pp 18-22

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strong, especially where there is a high level of female employment/involvement. The physical proximity of the home to the workplace and the mixing of the work routine and domestic activities serve as two basic links between home and work. While the residential pattern of the potteries always ensures a special link between home and work. Home and work routines are well synchronized; and when this becomes obligatory, working hours becomes long and irregular. They live in the same locality as a family unit and shows a significant sign of unity and trust among each other. The place they live are known as kumbharwada, kumor para, kumartuli etc.

Artisans, who have an inclination towards idol making and pottery, are passionate about their art which they use for the purpose of earning their livelihood and they have been doing this as a tradition and heritage. These artisans in the traditional occupation of pottery are known in India and the world as Kumbhars, Kumars, Kumbhakars, potters etc. Apart from being a traditional occupation, pottery is considered as an important part of the subsistence economy<sup>3</sup>.

This occupation involves all the members of the family including the women, inspite of the fact that pottery also could not come out from the gender bias syndrome (the potters' wheel is mainly the property of the male potters etc.), the issue which requires a special attention in a different article altogether.

Even with so much of advancement of science, the essence of these earthen materials have not reduced. Rather, many a times nowadays, they are given more prominence and are preferred due to their sustainable and bio-degradable nature which being made of clay easily decomposes back to nature without polluting the environment. People are becoming more health conscious and have understood the ethos of additional benefits of cooking in earthen pots and utensils. Earthenware products are more renewable and recyclable ones, with a high level of weather and heat resistance, suitable for humid countries like us.

These clay workers are engaged in a number of sub-activities, which are intrinsically related to our day to day lives and chores.

- Without their existence, we could have neither thought to have any image pujas in this country, and without idol-worshipping, Hindu culture remains incomplete.
- Not only idol - making, they have immense contribution in making clay items as utensils, as matkas, tea cups, dahi handis etc etc. It is a well known fact that clay pots or 'matkas' or 'kalsis' are the best containers for the purpose of storing water and keeping it cool, especially among the poorer section of the Indian population who have no capacity for owning a refrigerator. It may be noted that before the advent of the machine age and the refrigerator, it was these pots that served as the only sources for storing water. This heritage is still continuing and matkas can even be found in wealthy families who can easily afford to own the best of the available refrigerators. Water stored in matkas remain cold for long hours and gives a fine taste to drink. Nowadays, the matkas are found in various shapes, sizes, designs, and colours to suit the competitive markets and customer demands. The traditional

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3. [https://www.sahapedia.org/descendants-prajapati-kumhar-community-potters#:~:text=In%20the%20Indian%20subcontinent%2C%20the,of%20kumbha%20\(earthen%20pot\).](https://www.sahapedia.org/descendants-prajapati-kumhar-community-potters#:~:text=In%20the%20Indian%20subcontinent%2C%20the,of%20kumbha%20(earthen%20pot).) accessed on 10.08.2017

use of ‘bhars’ (earthen cups) to serve tea, dahi or lassi in shops offers potters the privilege of carrying on a traditional ancestral heritage.

- During any pujas or festive occasions specially during deepabali, the use of ‘diyas’ (earthen lamps) brings special glamour. The diyas either come in simple mitti colours or with decorative paintings and designs. Their elegant look still gives a tough competition to the widespread use of electric fancy lights.
- With the growing importance of nature, increasing plantation along with the contemporary trend of decorating homes specially balconies with indoor plants, earthen flower plots preferably the decorative ones have widespreadly come to the prominence. On frequent distances on the roads nowadays, we find the potters selling pots which gain prominent places in our luxury homes as thoughtful decorations.
- Last can never be the least, the terracotta artefacts and decor items including wall art are in the limelight.

### **Major Potter Colonies of Kolkata and their profile:**

1. Kumartuli is the hub and a revered hotspot for traditional Indian pottery, clay modelers, doll-makers and image-makers who are popularly known as *mrit shilpis* in the northern part of old Kolkata. It is bounded by Rabindra Sarani in the east, Ganga Prasad Lane in the west, Durga Charan Banerjee Street in the north and Banamali Street in the south. Within this area there are two other streets – Kumartuli Street running parallel to Durga Charan Banerjee Street and Bhaskar G. Paul Lane running parallel to Rabindra Sarani. The area is internationally claimed as a clay modelers’ community; it has approximately 528 resident families. This area deserves special attention not only because of its economic activity, but also because of its heritage value. Image makers of the Kumartuli area are responsible for making images of Gods and Goddesses for social and religious festivals, of which Durga Puja is the most important one<sup>4</sup>.

The tradition of clay modeling as a distinctive feature of Bengali culture dates back to the 17th century when potters in search of better livelihood came from Krishnagar to Gobindapur, 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 Gobindapur was acquired 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, and colonized a vast area and named it Kumartuli. *The Bengal Consultations*, a journal published in 1707 AD, gives an account of the presence of Kumartuli’s artisans who occupied 75 acres of land at Sutanuti, which is a constituent of present day north Kolkata. Presently, the potters’ colony is extended over an area of approximately 5 acres of land, stretched over Ward Number 8 and 9 under the Kolkata Municipal Corporation<sup>5</sup>. There are around 300 studios in Kumartuli, many of which serve as both workplace and home. Each house occupies a nominal area of about 100-150 square feet. Tin and matting make up the roof. Electric lighting is minimal. Most of the artisans sit on the floor to work. During the

4. Information elicited from a women respondent during face to face interview sessions with the researcher in Kumartuli, Kolkata in May 2015

5. <https://www.kmcgov.in/KMCPortal/jsp/UAAMapView.html>

festival seasons, the alleyways are packed with images drying in the sun. Most of the structures are hutments of *kutch*a and semi-*pucca* categories. It may be noted here that this area of Kumartuli where these *shilpis* (craftsmen) live are ironically categorized as authorized slum areas, in spite of the fact that they have been residing since the birth of Kolkata. The poverty of these potters demoted them from the position of original inhabitants to slum dwellers in course of time. This area consists mainly of two kinds of slums — (i) The first kind of slums has been existing since the British period when middlemen took land from the landowners, usually for a long term and built hut type settlements which they let out to migrants. This migration continued till the partition of India when Bengal was divided into East and West Bengal. Migrants from East Bengal needed a place to live and had no alternative but to accept accommodation without basic amenities. Initially, Kumartuli was inhabited by migrants from Krishnanagar; later on, migrants from East Bengal, now Bangladesh also settled here. Therefore, within Kumartuli, we find the existence of two *pattys* (habitations) – ‘*bangal patty*’ where the migrants from East Bengal settled, and ‘*ghoti/e-deshiyo patty*’ where the original inhabitants of Kolkata reside. There is another type of slum called the “*thika* tenant slums” where the slum dwellers have taken possession of land at a fixed rent and have constructed their houses. The land selected for the slums was inferior in quantity, and as such, the *thika* tenants got them at a nominal rent. As the landowners did not have substantive interest in the land and the hut owners were busy with their own business, no one paid any heed to develop the living environment of the area, leading to a congested slum with workshop and living space amalgamated together. The area also has two cooperative societies or *samities* – the *Kumartuli Mritshipi Samiti* with 80 members who are termed as *bangals* and the *Kumartuli Mritshilpi Sanskriti Samitis* with around 340 members, one for the *bangals* and another for the *Ghoti/ ae-deshiyos* respectively. They were formed to look after the interests of the artisans of their respective communities, for instance, providing some business funds, raw materials at a cheaper rate, providing free polythene sheets in rainy seasons etc.<sup>6</sup>

#### **Harish Neogy Road, Ultadanga<sup>7</sup>:**

Harish Neogy Road, Ultadanga is another potters’ colony which is very different from the other two localities discussed so far, in terms of social composition and nature of production. The earlier two were mainly populated by Bengalis, whereas this one is occupied by ‘*Prajapatis*’, a *Kumbhakar* sect from UP and Bihar. They migrated from those areas generations back and gradually settled in Ultadanga Muchi Bazar area. Their numbers gradually increased and finally they became a potters’ community and the area came to be known as a potters’ colony. They are proficient in making *bhars* (small cups), pots and *matkas* (water pots), *diyas* (lamps) and other decorative items. They generally do not make idols. The women again here are ancillary workers and are used for preparation of clay, carrying products, drying them, weighting and arranging them according to size and shape, colouring

6. Data generated from own field survey

7. Information elicited by the researcher from a member of the Kumbhakar society who is a practicing potter and an LIC agent and three senior potters of the area between January 2013 and August 2013 in Ultadanga potters’ colony.

and decorating if needed and also selling them by the Ultadanga Main Road adjacent to their area of residence during *Diwali* season. The women, however, make *diyas* and decorative items, whereas men make *bhars* on the wheels. The wheels previously were hand run, and were very difficult to use because of the extreme exertion of pressure resulting many a time in chest and hand pain. Later from 1985 most of the families have begun using electric wheels; women are denied access to the use of wheels. The women work almost the entire day starting from 4 AM till 10 PM. Not only do they contribute to the business, they have to take care of their families and have cooking and child rearing duties. They are very poor, with no basic amenities of life present in the area, have insufficient income, low educational knowledge. The *Prajapati* community, unlike the Bengali *kumbhakar* communities, is more conservative. This conservative outlook automatically has the greatest impact on the women, who are not only denied access to proper education, but also to the outside world. Their presence is restricted to the private sphere. Their space is limited to the neighbourhood and the houses of people living in the community; chatting with fellow *Prajapatis*<sup>8</sup> in the compound area provides them the only source of entertainment. They move around with *ghunghats* (women covering head with a portion of the sari called *anchal*), and dress typically like conservative women. Their whole lives revolve around supporting their husbands and households. They have no outer knowledge which restricts them from getting employment in any job other than that of an unpaid helper in the family enterprise. They cannot take up jobs that are considered socially derogatory like that of a domestic help because they belong to a high caste and their community will not permit them to do so. Previously they were not even allowed to sell the products by the roadside. Now, however, due to financial constraints, such restrictions have been lifted. The men nowadays are doing jobs in factories for additional income. The area, till date, has not received any benefit or help from political parties, the KMC, or the government or any NGO. No agencies have taken any responsibility to improve their living conditions. There is no self-help group for women, no bank loans are received, no funds are disbursed, no schemes are applicable or implemented, no caste certificates are issued, and no training is imparted. They are very poor kind of people living with the minimum basic necessities of life. Housing structures are in a deplorable condition; they are made of straw, bamboo, tin, and are *kutcha* formations, with thatched roof. They have a common toilet which a cluster of say 10 to 12 houses share. They use their houses as their work place, the burning area, as kitchens and for dining, as bedrooms, store rooms as well as for business dealings. The women are involved totally in the business as helping hands and for all kinds of subsidiary work related to the business. The houses which are very small in size provide space for living, working and storage purposes. The potters face extreme challenges due to competition from other cheap and more polished and decorative ready made factory made goods, which serve the same purpose. They thus cannot increase the price of their products in order to retain customer demands since business profit is decreasing day by day. The artisans hold that the sweet and tea shops now use plastic cups for *dahi* (curd) and tea because they are cheaper. However, they forget the pollution factor that is attached to the use of such plastic goods for food consumption. They can also have a bad impact on health, and also they are non-recycled products. They block drains and litter roads. Clay products

8. [https://joshuaproject.net/people\\_groups/17316/in](https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/17316/in) accessed in 2017

are good for health and are biodegradable. That is why potters say about their products: 'From earth we begin and unto earth we perish'. However, the government and environmental agencies have some objection against these potters in the sense that they create air pollution through *bhattis* (kiln) for baking the clay. The government has pressurized them to quit the place because they create pollution; whereas plastic cups which are major contributors to water logging in the city, are not actively restricted. The problems and hindrances the potters here face are more or less the same as those of the other potters' colonies. In the rainy season, they face the maximum problems like the others. The additional problem that they face over Kumartuli and Dakshindari, is that they prepare *bhars* and *matkas* in *bhattis* where it is difficult to keep the fire going during rainfall. This causes difficulty in supplying finished products in time. As the area is small, they have fewer numbers of *bhattis* and pressure mounts on *bhattis* during the rainy season. The potters use them in shifts.

The potters here have no season; all through the year they make products and store them to capacity.

The place has a strong resemblance to Kumbharwada in Mumbai, where the *Prajapatis* from Gujarat reside and work<sup>9</sup>.

Preparation of the clay is done by separating unwanted particles from the clay by hand, legs and a medium sized wire-like string with a metal base; after that there is loading of water to be used in the preparation of clay, pouring an adequate amount of water to soften the clay, properly mixing the clay and drying it in the sun for the entire day, re-sizing the clay into specific lumps that will be poured over the wheel, again softening and mixing the clay to be finally used by the males for making different items on the wheel. The preparatory work is all done by women. They also sit in front of the wheel to help the men to immediately remove the pots or other items from the wheel instantly after the required shape have been given in the wheel. The women also stack these soft clay items on a long wooden piece. They work constantly till the entire stack is filled with products. The women then carry that wooden piece filled with clay products outside their house under the sun for drying. Generally, they dry the items on the rooftop so that they get the direct sun ray and are quickly dried, and another wooden piece full of products can then be dried. There is a major shortage of space and not to many items can be dried at the same time. Moreover, over piling on the rooftop may create an extra load on the roof; as the roofs are not made of very heavy material, there is a chance of roof collapse. The women keep track of these products and see whether they have dried and prevent them from over drying and any other wastage and loss. After drying, they bring them down from the roof and put all the dried products in the colour mixture which they have made at home by mixing market made colour with saw dust. After the products have acquired the earthen colour, they put the items into the *bhatti* for baking. They wait for a sufficient quantity of products before they arrange for the *bhatti* as using the *bhatti* is a very expensive process for them. They have to arrange for coal, wood, *bichuli* (hay) and saw dust to light the fire. They may prepare the *bhatti* once in a week to save cost of production. Above the *bhatti* there are bamboo racks of around 3 to 4 layers depending on the height of the place. Those who have small *bhattis* inside their houses do not have this facility of stacking items in bamboo racks above the *bhatti*. They, after burning in their small

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9. <https://lbb.in/mumbai/kumbharwada-pottery-colony-dharavi/> accessed on 2017

*bhattis*, put the products under the sun for natural baking; but then they have to depend on the whims of the weather. For them, work becomes difficult during the rainy season when they do not have much space left for storage after arranging for their own living areas. Those who have personal *bhattis* stack their goods above the *bhattis* and use a fan above the bamboo racks to help in further drying. When there is no adequate sunlight for drying they use another technique to dry their products. They burn the wood pieces and cover the products by these burnt wood pieces. All these are again done by the women. Then finally, they sell their products in the market generally in three ways.

First, they supply to the *bhyaparis* (the businessmen) who come to their houses and they get paid by them. These *bhyaparis* either supply the goods to adjacent sates at a higher price or make additional profit or sale them inside the city in places where the *Prajapatis* cannot go due to distance or unavailability of access.

Secondly, the women and the girls of the family sit on the main roads just outside their colony. Popularly, the area is known as Muchibazar. The demand increases during any festive occasions like the Bengali New Year in April or Durga *puja* time and especially during *Diwali* when a supply of *diyas* and other decorative items are needed. Thirdly, the male members of the family mainly carry the products to specified shops and markets in cycle vans. Thus, we find that in the entire process of production, women play a predominant role but their contribution is mostly unacknowledged.

#### **Summing up:**

This article thus tried to throw a light on the extensive use of the clay products — one of the most important bio-degradable products on earth, the importance of the artisans specially the unpaid women workers attached to these clay products, their relentless hard work, their immense ability to survive in the competitive world, by improvising their knowledge and expertise, their perseverance to stay united when the entire world is trending towards nuclearisation. This article is a tribute to the kumor para art and artisans who probably happens to be the finest artists of the world, yet unrecognised, unaccounted, only remains just a part of the informal sector economy.

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