

# Busy time for Kumartuli artisans

By BISWAMOY MUKHERJEE



Kumartuli, the world's biggest idol workshop, is bustling with activity as the countdown for the five-day annual extravaganza Durga Puja - begins.

The monsoon rain is still in form but Bengalis are already getting ready to celebrate the autumn festival of Durga Puja, their biggest festival dedicated to the worship of the incarnation of Shakti. While frenzied shopping, speculation about which puja pandal theme will be a winner this year and holiday plans add to the excitement, the idol makers at Kumartuli also get into a tizzy as the deadline for delivery looms ahead.

Kumartuli in north Kolkata is the hub from where hundreds of Durga idols travel to different corners of the city and suburbs. Artisan units are working round the clock at Kumartuli - the potter's town - to give final touches to the *Maa* Durga idols. Kolkata Kumartuli, a traditionally potters' quarter in northern Kolkata, is more than three centuries old.

The term "Kumar" means potter and "tuli" a locality. By virtue of their artistic productions these potters have moved from obscurity to prominence, emerging virtually as an independent international brand of Durga-image makers.

The smell of wet clay from Ganges and other rivers, the criss-cross patterns of bamboo spread out within the narrow confines of a ramshackle, eight-by-eight studio blend seamlessly to create the traditional homes of the artisans where Goddess Durga takes 'birth'. The place is called Kumartuli. For the average Indian who is a stranger to Calcutta, the name Kumartuli may not ring any bell of nostalgia. At this moment, when you go to the area, chok-a-block with images, half done or just begun, jostling for space on the narrow lanes, it is difficult to imagine that these frames would dazzle with their beauty and decor a few weeks from now.

Numerous makeshift *karkhanas* (workshops) with bamboo scaffolds, heaps of straw, lie cluttered here and there in preparation for shaping the models of the 10-handed Durga, flanked by her sons and daughters, Ganesha, Karthik, Laxmi and Saraswati stand imposingly over the demon Mahishasur whom she has destroyed.

The artisans usually work in eight-hour shifts, but just before the puja, when the whirl reaches a crescendo, they work all-through the night with overtime pay. Steeped in history and traditions Kumartuli came into existence when a group of *Patuas* from the bank of Ganges came to reside in the small hamlet. "Once plague broke out in this area and the superstitious localities started offering puja to the Gods and Goddesses. Gradually a group of *Patuas* came to reside in the area and was known as the *patua para* who earned their living from idol-making," nonagenarian idol maker Ashok Pal said as he journeyed down memory lane. "I have been working here since childhood. My father used to be an idol maker but age doesn't permit him to do so much of hard work these days," he



Pics by: Amitabha Gupta

## Expressions

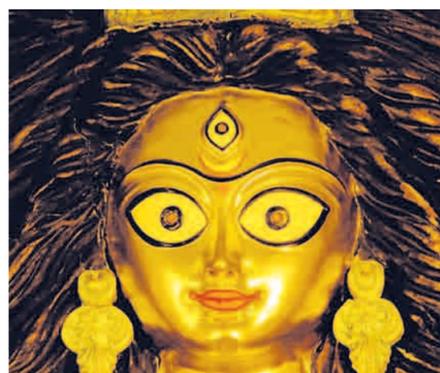
### The window's the thorn



By UNNATI ASHAR

Trees sway side-by-side  
Lush, green, in delight!  
The playful breeze tickles them  
And they give it a high five!  
As the mellow setting sun  
Melts the sky with it  
Making it smooth, rich and soft,  
The sky is painted in mesmerizing hues  
A splash of orange, grey and blues!  
The neon noon lifts its veil...  
And crepuscular rays emerge  
Dividing the sky into contrasting columns  
Of warm-coloured sunlight  
But oh, why am I feeling something's amiss?  
Just then, it strikes  
The window's the thorn in my side,  
It won't let the breeze tousele my hair  
Nor let the hypnotizing fragrance  
Of damp green grass  
Awaken my senses!  
Oh, how I miss the soft silken breeze  
Tickling my soul and refreshing  
Every pore of my being...!  
I start feeling the grey cold inside  
While the zephyr frolics outside...

(Selected by Biraj Dixit) ■



said. "The younger generation is not that keen to pursue idol-making as a profession as there is less social recognition and monetary benefits," he lamented, adding that government subsidies could have bettered the situation. Succumbing to commercialism, the new-generation of idol makers now defy many of the age-old traditions. The most interesting part of visiting Kumartuli is to see the workers toiling away the clay in hands. How their expert hands curving, trimming and chipping away. Even when they pause to look up and answer the interrupter their hands hardly stop, they keep at it, rubbing, shaping, patting the clay and add water bit by bit. Making jewellery and dresses of Devi Durga is another astonishing art of Kumartuli. A large section of artists of this area involve in this work. They make dazzling and shiny accessories with amazing skills and conceptions that makes the idol of goddess Durga more bright and vibrant. The accessories are always compatible with the sculptures, as there are so many types of accessories. In Bengali it has been called *Saaj*, such as *Daaker Saaj*, *Aat-Banglar Saaj*, *Bangla Saaj* and so many and so forth. There are around 400 studios in Kumartuli which serve as both workplace and home. The potters who make



Pics by: Somen Sengupta



these images are called *kumars* and they often have the surname Pal or Paul. It is one of the wonders of Kolkata. These artisans work day and night to create idols of various shapes and sizes, to deliver across the country. Usually one idol takes around 10-15 days to be finished.

These artists come from various parts of the state of West Bengal to earn their livelihood. In recent times idols made of fibreglass are also being produced and exported to various parts of the country and the world. Despite the threat of 'theme artists', where the idols they make are formed of metals or wood rather than the traditional clay, majority of the organisers believe in old school artwork and most of the artisans hold family business, which has been passed on from generation to generations, ahead. Durga idols start getting sculpted almost five to six months before Durga Puja. Not only do the artists create idols for West Bengal and other states, the idols are also sent abroad. This potter's town supplies images to more than 90 countries worldwide with new nations joining the list every year. Many East European countries, where religious ceremonies were previously banned, have started buying images from Kumartuli.

A spokesman of Kumartuli Mritshilpa Sanskriti Samity, an association of the craftsmen, Babu Pal told UNI that the NRIs of countries like Hungary, Bulgaria, Russia, Austria and Poland, come to Kumartuli to buy images. US based NRIs, including the Bengali Association of Southern California, Bengali association of Greater Chicago, Dakshini, Sanskriti, Garden State Puja Committee of New Jersey, East Coast Durga Puja Committee of New York, come to Kumartuli to select deities to ship to their cities. Additionally, hundreds of agents in Kolkata service NRIs seeking idols from Kumartuli, he said. With the internet expanding exponentially, Kolkata's traditional idol makers launched a community website for Kumartuli so that they could reach potential overseas buyers of Durga idols. More than 15 idol makers have already launched their websites till now. They have already secured direct offers from around the world, said Mr Pal.

A number of years ago, there was a fire in Kumartuli and with puja only a few days away, the famous sculptor Gopeswar Pal separated the idols and placed them individually. The style soon caught public fancy. However, in the last few years, with emphasis on tradition, there seems to be a visible preference for *ekchala*. To sustain themselves in the lean season, the potters have turned into producing clay toys, decorative items etc which are in demand at local shops and fairs. There have been plans by the government to convert the traditional Kumartuli *para* into a dedicated space built in concrete, and offer better facilities, but the artisans rue that they have been hearing it for years and "nothing has been done." Meanwhile, for Kolkatans, Kumartuli's image is still that traditional locality in north Kolkata with narrow walkways where potters turn clay into magic idols. It is *Mahalaya* on September 19, the day that formally marks the beginning of the Durga Puja. It is that time of the year again when the Durga Puja fever grips Kolkata for days. A community of more than 400 artisans in Kumartuli has been giving final touches to the idols. Durga puja, the biggest festival of the Bengali community, begins September 26. (UNI) ■