



## **Reconceptualizing Idol Making in the Context of Bangladesh**

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### **ABSTRACT**

**While bringing into attention the creative skills of a local Idol maker, this paper aims at exploring Idol making in the light of the maker's perception and simultaneously placing it within the broader social and cultural context of Bangladesh. It seeks to understand the meaning that idol-making carries to its creator, and the meaning of idol-making felt within the larger social context of Bangladesh. While doing so, this paper investigates the concept of art prevailing in contemporary Bangladeshi society and therefore, examines the creative dimensions of idol making from folkloristic and material culture perspectives. Along with bringing forth the unheard stories of a local Bangladeshi idol maker, this paper aims at dismantling the grand narratives of art that existed within Bengali society and therefore, provides an opportunity to reconceptualize the artistic dimension of local idol making in Bangladesh.**

**Keywords:** Idol making, Art, Colonization, Bangladesh, Durga, Hinduism

Pottery has been an integral part of Bengali folk culture for centuries. The practice of making pottery out of clay by professional porters has been common in both rural and city areas of the country. The Bengali clay porters are usually known as the 'Kumar' or 'Kumbhakar' or 'Mritshilpi'. Among the clay porters, there are a significant number of people involved in religious Idol making. In the context of Bangladesh, the Idol maker is usually a mature man with a special kind of skill and 'Shashtra' (religious) knowledge requires for creating various hand-modeled Gods' figures. These local artists are involved in a stylistic creation of Hindu God and Goddess making a blend of aestheticism and sacredness. The absence of research works on the Idol makers in the context of Bangladesh motivates me to write the paper. This research investigates the context of creative activity like Idol making, the meaning that the artwork carries to the creator, and the meaning of idol making felt within the broader social and cultural context of the country. Although these local artists have been constantly working to be continued with the tradition of idol making, their voices remain unheard in the broader context of the country. This paper is an outcome of an in-depth semi-structured interview with a local Idol maker who makes Idols for various public and domestic 'pujas' (venerations) performed by the Hindu community in the Cumilla region of Bangladesh. This paper is written based on the primary data collected through interviews in February 2021. The theoretical framework heavily relies on folklore and material culture study. The questions asked throughout the paper are-

What are the processes of Idol making? What creative skills are required in Idol making?

How much importance does Idol making carry to its creator?

How does the Idol maker understand his position within the society?

How is the history of art in Bengali society rooted in the history of colonization, and how does it influence defining the work of the Idol makers and their position in Bengali society?

In Bangladesh, Idol making is an urban folk art (Abhijit Das and Jaydeep Mandal, 2018). Idol makers are endowed with great artistic creativity. Idol makers make various kinds of religious idols pertaining to the Hindu religion. These idols are bought by the Hindu community for veneration purposes. One of the notable idols that most of the idol makers make is the Goddess Durga. Apart from that, they also make the idols of various Hindu Gods and Goddesses such as Saraswati, Lakshmi, Ganesh, Kali, etc. However, creating the idol of Durga is the most important work that the religious idol makers perform every year.

Durga is the primary goddess of Hinduism who has got multiple incarnations and possessed the power to appear on earth in the form of different deities. She is mostly known as the Goddess with three eyes and ten hands that symbolize her powerful nature. The followers of Hinduism especially the Bengali community of Bangladesh and India worship the clay image of Durga because of her powerful warlike nature:

“The traditional image of Durgā depicts an ensemble of the goddess and her 2 daughters- Lakshmi and Saraswati and 2 sons- Ganesh and Kartick-with the husband Siva’s face overlooking them atop held in a single background scaffolding... Here the large idol of Durgā, slaying the buffalo- demon Mahiṣāsura, is seated on a lion with her 10 arms holding weapons respectively gifted to her by the gods. All these weapons have symbolic meaning” (Bandyopadhyay 2017, 16).

The appearance of Durga is symbolic, especially within the Bengali Hindu community. Durga is often referred to as the three-eyed goddess. Her left eye symbolizes desire whereas her right and middle eyes represent action and knowledge respectively. Being an embodiment of nature, Durga’s left eye also symbolizes the moon whereas the right and middle eye represent sun and fire. Moreover, she carries a variety of weapons in her ten hands through which she fights against the evil power. Each of her weapons has a symbolic meaning to Hinduism. On one hand, she carries the conch shell symbolizing the mystic word ‘Om’ that indicates the name of the supreme god of Hinduism. On the other hand, she holds the bow and arrows, which represents her energy, potentiality, and dynamic nature. Thunderbolt is another weapon that represents her firmness and confidence in destroying the evils. The half bloom lotus in one of her hands represents her spiritual quest against the greed and lust of the mundane world. The beautiful discus signifies her will to establish righteousness on the earth. The sword that Durga holds in one of her hands represents the sharpness of her knowledge.

The trident symbolizes her power to alleviate physical, mental, and spiritual suffering. In Hindu art and iconography, Durga is often portrayed riding a tiger or a lion that represents her power, will, and determination. Durga’s bold gesture symbolizes her power to confront evils without fear and encourages the followers of Hinduism to fight for righteousness courageously.

As Pocius argues, “Art involves creation. Artists live in a particular period and a particular place. Thus creation never occurs completely in a vacuum; it must involve the choice of techniques, as well as content...(1995, 424). When I was interviewing in February 2021, my interviewee, Shamol Chandra had just started to make the Idol of Durga for the upcoming Durga puja. Durga puja in Bangladesh is usually celebrated every year in October. Shamol Chandra shared the whole process of making the clay image of Durga. From his interpretation, it was apparent that making idols is such a creative activity that involves systemic techniques and contents as depicted by Pocius.

The clay image of Durga is made of straw and clay. At first, a frame structure is made with bamboo and straw. The frame is made considering the height of the idols. Then both white and black clay is used to give the final form. When the clay is collected from the riverside, a religious ritual is performed to make the process auspicious. This ritual is performed to ask for a blessing from God so that the whole process goes well. As Shamol Chandra relates, the idol makers can get a sense of the right clay by touching it. Choosing the right clay is an important part of making idols. If the wrong clay is chosen, the idols can not be made. After creating the frame, hands, fingers, and other parts of the body are given proper shape through coating clay. Then comes the painting part- eyes, ears, nose, lips are drawn, and the appropriate color is used to paint the whole idol. For the bright color idols, a double layer of color is used. Before coloring, the idol needs to be dried. The local idol makers usually keep the idol in the open air for several days so that it can dry well. However, the idols should not be over-dried. If it is burnt, it can not be used for veneration because using burnt idols for veneration is thought to be very inauspicious. The burnt idols are usually used for decorating the house. Once the idol is dried, if there is any crack in the idol, the idol makers fix that with an extra layer of mud. The last part of the work is to decorate the idol with nice clothing and jewelry as per the customers’ demand. As Shamol Chandra relates-

*Once we draw the eyes, it just lightens up the idol. The Goddess is adorned with an appropriate sari and jewelry. Some prefer to adorn the goddess with an expensive sari and jewelry. Sometimes they would order gold jewelry for the Goddess. The more they pay, the more beautiful the idol becomes (interview with Shamol Chandra, February 2021).*

According to him, two types of idols are commonly found in today’s idol markets- traditional (clay made) and modern (fiber made). In comparison to clay-made idols, fiber-made idols are long-lasting. Fiber-made idols are used in temples because of their longevity.

Before the Durga puja (which is the largest festival of the Hindu community of Bangladesh), the idol makers are very busy since it takes several months to make the idol of the goddess Durga-

*Durga does not come alone. She comes with her family. So, you also have to make every member of her family along with Durga. It’s a big job to be accomplished before Durga puja (interview with Shamol Chandra, February 2021).*

Durga Puja is an enormous festival in Bangladesh. Special attention is given during Durga's idol-making. Making Durga idols is a very time-consuming job. Durga puja is usually held in October every year. The preparation of making the Durga idol starts from the month of February and continues until the beginning of the festival-

*We usually make Durga Idols on a pre-order basis. Since making Durga idols is expensive and time-consuming, the devotees need to place an order for the idols by February so that we can start working from February and give enough time to complete the whole process. The idols are made based on the customer's demand and budget. Once the idol is completed, the customers are contacted to take the idol for venerations (interview with Shamol Chandra, February 2021).*

In response to my question, what creative skills do an idol maker require to create an idol, my interviewee relates, an idol maker needs to know how to give life to an inanimate object. He says,

*When you build the shape, it does not look like having any life. However, when you start drawing the body parts and decorating the idols with female dresses and ornaments, it becomes lively as a living being. So, an idol maker should know how to lighten up an idol through their creativity. Once an idol is installed in the 'puja mandap' (veneration stage), God appears in it through the performed rituals. The idols get their position at the beginning of the veneration (interview with Shamol Chandra, February 2021).*

An idol maker should have the ability to choose the right clay, know the proper use of different clays, give a proper shape to the idol, draw the body parts beautifully, choose the right color, and decorate the idol beautifully. The whole process of making idols require much attention and perseverance. Sometimes the idol makers need to appoint helpers to make the people quick if there are many orders. However, helpers are not as efficient as the real idol makers. They learn as they go. Therefore, the main responsibility of making the idols and completing the whole process on time mostly resides in the idol makers.

Many renowned idol makers in Bangladesh make idols in big cities. They earn great money and enjoy a decent status in society. But local idol makers' work is not that much recognized in the broader context of Bangladesh. However, they play an influential within the smaller cities/villages by supplying idols for the Durga puja. Most of them have workshops where they make idols. Idol making is their main source of income. Some idol makers are engaged in other small businesses as they find it hard to live a decent life through idol making. Most of the idol makers take up the profession from their father. However, some are the first generation of idol makers. Shamol Chandra is the first generation of idol makers in his family. He came to this profession to earn some extra money. Now it has become his main source of income. He has been involved in this profession for almost twenty years. As Shamol Chandra relates, people these days are not interested in idol making/pottery because of a lack of income and recognition. In many cases, they don't get a scope to show their talent because of the low budget of the customers. Out of frustration, many idol makers are changing their profession nowadays. However, many idol makers are still working hard to regain the strength of the work and to keep continuing with the idol-making culture-

*This is a traditional occupation. We make idols with great affection and care. The idols that we make are very close to our hearts. Our heart fills with joy when it turns to be a beautiful idol. I think the Bangladeshi government should take the handicraft industry seriously. Only then our fate could be changed. We are working hard to continue with this traditional occupation but there is no recognition and money (interview with Shamol Chandra, February 2021).*

In response to the question of what importance this occupation carries to him, Shamol Chandra says, as a follower of Hinduism, idol making is not only a job for him but also a way to please God. Through this work, he feels closer to God. The love toward God is reflected in the perseverance of an idol maker. He sees beautiful idols as a blessing from God. According to him, perfection is important in this job. The more perfect an idol is, the more it reflects the dedication of the idol maker towards God. For him, making idols are ways to deepen his love for God. He thinks belief in God is important to continue with this profession.

*If you can make a perfect idol, it means God is happy with you because created idols are both sacred and aesthetic. A perfect blend of both is required in making beautiful idols. Respect should come from inside. If you respect God, you will create god with great care. Some people use the machine while creating idols. We the local idol makers use our hands. Making handmade idols is time-consuming. However, the perseverance that an idol maker shows during creating idols represents a spiritual connection of the idol makers with God (interview with Shamol Chandra, February 2021).*

Making idols are also a way to make a good connection with the community members. Devotees come to the idol makers with great hope and aspiration. Shamol Chandra feels very happy seeing the happy face of the customers when they take the idols for veneration-

*People take them with great love and affection. I try to create the idols as lively as possible. However, life is installed in it with the veneration of the devotees (interview with Shamol Chandra, February 2021).*

The concept of 'Karma, Maya, Mukti, and Re-birth (Reincarnation)' (Glassie 1997, 40) is reflected in the whole process; from creating the idol to the end of veneration. The idol makers create idols with great care and love. The devotees also take the idols for veneration with great affection. The veneration ends by sacrificing the goddess into the water. As per Hinduism, human beings learn to overcome 'Maya' (materiality) in the whole process which led them to free their mind from the greed and sin of this mundane world. The followers of Hinduism bid farewell to the Goddess so that she could be reincarnated in the next year. Durga represents married women in Bangladesh. According to the popular myth, Durga visits her parent's place (earth) once a year during the celebration. Likewise, a Bengali Hindu woman needs to leave her parents' home after marriage and is permitted to visit them occasionally. Therefore, bidding farewell to the goddess is an important part of the whole ritual process.

In response to the question of how it feels to create something that will be destroyed at the end, Shamol Chandra relates,

*Nothing is permanent in this world. You will die, I will die. Every object of this world is going to be destroyed one day. But that does not reduce the importance of anything. I try to make the idols as beautiful as I can without thinking that they will be destroyed at the end of the day. Creating beautiful idols gives me heavenly pleasure (interview with Shamol Chandra, February 2021).*

Tim Ingold refers to the reciprocal relationship between the maker and the objects that s/he makes. According to him, the creator builds a reciprocal relationship with the object when making it. Shamol Chandra's comment reminds me of that reciprocal relationship between the creator and the object. He feels a kind of heavenly pleasure by making beautiful idols in return

for the time and energy that he invests in making idols. For him, it's a hope for the future, a means of communicating with the community members and attaining religious satisfaction.

Samol Chandra Das lives in the Cumilla region of Bangladesh. Cumilla is a small city in Bangladesh. Shamol Chandra shares how he came to this profession-

*It was a big transition in my life when I took over this profession. I had an interest in pottery and I was good at drawing. I took the lesson of idol making from an 'ostad' (teacher). I learned it easily as I had interest in idol making. I don't earn a lot but it pleases my mind. People call me 'karigor' (creator), and that makes me happy (interview with Shamol Chandra, February 2021).*

In response to my question, if he would like to call himself an artist, Shamol Chandra smiled and replied-

*That's a very big word for me! We all need certain qualities to survive. Everyone has their distinctive qualities, and I have one which is idol-making. Art is something you do to fulfill aesthetic pleasure. However, idol-making is the means of my livelihood (interview with Shamol Chandra, February 2021).*

Shamol Chandra's simple assertion about art and artists speaks a lot about the concept of art that exists in contemporary Bangladesh. In the social and cultural context of Bangladesh, art has a very elitist connotation. It is still thought to be something divorced from real life. As Pocius argues, the "term art often is subtly associated with class, or money, or a particular historical period, and perhaps with categories of writing, performances, or objects" (Pocius 1995, 413). He also argues cultural attitudes shape the popular stereotypes of art- "First and foremost, art is a universal phenomenon, yet at the same time it is culturally specific (Pocius 1995, 414). The history of art in Bangladesh is rooted in the history of colonization. The subcontinent was under the influence of British colonialism for almost 200 years. Bangladesh was a part of the Indian subcontinent until the country achieved independence in 1971. Therefore, the history of art in the subcontinent can not be separated from the history of colonialism. Ganguli refers to Indian art as the historical discourses of colonialism (1988). The powerfulness of Indian art was ignored in the name of otherness, primitiveness, ambiguity, backwardness, and savage for a long period. As per colonial discourses, anything beyond Western art was considered primitive. Ganguli depicts 'Indian art as colonialist agenda' and 'minority history' (Ganguli 1988, 50). As Bangladesh has been a part of the Indian subcontinent for a long period, traditional art discourses in Bangladesh still imitate colonial ideologies. Therefore, art has always been associated with the idea of class. The categorization of art (High art vs Folk art) refers to a distinction between the elite creation vs ordinary people's creation. What is or is not considered as art is very much culturally specific. As per traditional discourses, art should not be ordinary but exceptional. The popular conception is that art should be coming from genius, not from ordinary people. Although folklorists these days are trying to define any creative activity as art, in Bangladesh, most of the creative activities that people perform in their day-to-day life are not recognized as (high) art. Most of the ordinary objects people make in their day-to-day life are defined as folk art. The popular conception is that high art should be coming from genius, not from ordinary people. As per Banglapedia's definition, "Folk art generally includes those articles that are traditionally made by communities of people to satisfy their religious, social and aesthetic needs" (accessed 7 February 2021). Following this definition, idol making is

categorized as folk art. The categorization of art (High art vs Folk art) refers to a distinction between the elite creation vs ordinary people's creation.

As Pocius argues, "art covered the aesthetic dimension of everyday life' (Pocius 1995, 423). I like the way Pocius indicates the necessity of having a broader notion of art deviating from the westernized conception of art. He shows how the definition of art gradually moves from the 'specialized skills of privileged individuals' (Pocius 1995, 416) to the 'creative dimension of ordinary human activity (Pocius 1995, 419)'. As I mentioned earlier, Shamol Chandra's perception of art is much influenced by the society in which he is living. The social and economic position of the local idol makers is thus determined by the dominant narrative of art that existed in Bengali society. Folklorists have indeed pondered over the concept of art a lot- "Folklorists believe that all peoples can produce exceptional things that can be labeled by analysts as art" (Pocius 1995, 414). Folklorists try to understand art in the process of performance or communication. Therefore, the idea of performing any skillful activity is considered art.

In the context of Bangladesh, to reconsider the creative skills of local idol makers, we need to come out from the narrow definition of art and find a broader definition of art as suggested by Pocius. I believe, a project like this is important to bring forth the artistic dimension of Idol making. This paper will not only help to listen to the unheard stories of the local idol makers but also encourage to dismantle the grand narratives of art that existed within Bengali society and therefore, give ways to rethink art deviating from the Western and colonized ideologies. As Glassie mentions, "[A]ll objects exist in context (1999, 59). Glassie talks about the importance of context behind any creation. He argues any act of creation may have many stories. The lack of studies with these local artists is indicative of their absent voices in the broader social and cultural scenario of the country. In our day-to-day life, we consume many objects without giving a thought to their makers. It's important to bring those people into light who have been constantly contributing to supply the objects that define our life in many ways. The functions that the local Idol makers serve in Bangladeshi society are important and the meaning of idol making could be best understood within the broader social and cultural context of the country.

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