Performance of Idolmaking: Intersection of Caste, Tradition and Space Among Mritshilpis of Kumartuli

Sagnik Chakraborty

Abstract: Kumartuli, an artisanal neighbourhood in North Kolkata, is home to custodians of the intricate idol-making craft, which has been primarily passed down through generations as a form of heritage and knowledge. The craft, practised by the Kumbhars (potter), represents a dynamic interplay of heritage and innovation, mediated by the locality's socio-cultural aesthetics and spatial fabric. Various anthropological studies have attempted to visualise Kumartuli as a locality, situated at the rich intersection of culture, aesthetics, and art, drawing a connection between the ecologies of work and ritual practices prevalent within the community structure. The community lies at the intersection of deep-rooted caste structures and struggles to preserve the sustainability of the craft in the current scenario of iconographic processuals. This paper attempts to analyse the lived experiences of idol makers, drawing on the convergence of caste as a form of social capital and folklore, which embodies oral history and space as a manifestation of social construct. Through qualitative interviews, this paper explores how individual idol makers navigate the complex intersection of cultural and religious symbolisms that shape their process of identity formation in the day-to-day schema of life.

Keywords: Caste, Folklore, Identity Formation, Idol Makers, Lived Experiences, Space, Unstructured Interviews

I. INTRODUCTION

The original location of production of the unbaked clay idols of *Goddess Durga*, including the numerous gods and goddesses of the *Bengali* almanack and other objects of veneration, is *Kumartuli*, which translates to the locality ('*tuli*') where the potters ('*kumars*') were settled. Its history is intertwined with the colonial city of Calcutta, which exists in shards of a social memory preserved during a few discourses, debates, and observations that are becoming increasingly fragmented over time. More than 500 idol makers and artisans behold the hub, which is now a compendium of homes and workshops in wards 8 and 9 of the *Kolkata* municipality, representing a sense of situatedness and collective identity propagated from the conjoint shanties and residences spread over six and a half acres of land. These artisans are specialists involved in the

Sagnik Chakraborty*, Post-Graduate Student, Department of Sociology, Jadavpur University, Kolkata (West Bengal), India. Email ID: sagnikchakraborty3439@gmail.com, ORCID ID: 0009-0004-6440-5338

For generations, idol making has been the traditional occupation of the Kumbhakar caste (referring to the surname Pal), forming the largest caste-based neighbourhood in Kolkata. A substantial section of the population belongs to this caste. In addition to Kumbhakars, the area is home to a sizable population of members of other castes who work as migrant labourers in various industry-related jobs.

This locality, situated in the northern part of Kolkata, offers a rich intersection of socio-cultural aesthetics and art, which is deeply rooted in the caste structures and social realities that the unique spatial organization of the area has historically mediated. The connection between folklore, evolving iconography, and the caste system in Kumartuli is a complex and intricate proposition. Various anthropological studies have attempted to visualise Kumartuli as a community cluster, deriving its essence from the relationship between the ecologies of work and ritual practices prevalent within the community structure. However, it is recently that new avenues of cultural research are being promoted to explore the recursive relation of structure–agency duality (Shove, 2012) [1] amidst the process of identity formation for the inner artisanal communities like that of the '*mritshilpis of Kumartuli*.' Owing to this line of discourse, this paper attempts to narrate the biographies of the Kumbhakar community through unstructured qualitative interviews, which engage participants in the task of idol making and clay modelling as part of their traditional occupation, passed down through generations as a form of heritage. This paper also examines how the intersection of caste-based structures and prevalent folklore, combined with the unique spatiality of the area, influences the lived experiences of individual idol makers belonging to this community. By situating Kumartuli as a heterotopic space, investigating the creation of spatial dynamics and its symbolic meanings using Lefebvre's (1991) [2] concept of spatial construction, and analysing their performative engagements using Goffman's (1959) [3] Dramaturgical framework, this study investigates how the identities of idol makers are constructed, negotiated, and performed within Kumartuli's spatial referendum.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study's empirical data is qualitative, determined by both primary and secondary information. The primary purpose of employing a qualitative methodology was to gain an in-depth understanding of the intersection of caste structures and the prevalent folklore. within the community cluster, which is mediated by the unique spatiality and performative aspects of iconography, resulting in varied experiences in both the

private and professional realms of the idol makers. The primary information mainly consists of data collected through observations in the initial phases and subsequently through unstructured interactions, with the main aim of exploring the process by which socio-cultural forces influence identity formation among idol makers in Kumartuli. To fulfil the demands of this study, 17 idol-making workshops were selected as samples, where more than 60 per cent of the respondents were male idol makers over the age of 35 (as the fieldwork was conducted during the months when younger idol makers migrate to other states for seasonal work). Snowball sampling was primarily considered, which facilitated access to specific, critical spaces where the idol makers navigated their roles as artisans within the spatial context of the area.

The study is conducted in Kumortuli (also known as Kumartuli), specifically in wards 8 and 9 of the Sovabazar Metropolitan Area, the age-old hub of idol makers and potters in Kolkata, West Bengal. This area has gained its popularity worldwide over a long period for making fine clay idols (Chakraborty, 2024) [4]. These idols are made by a distinct occupational caste community known as *Potua*, Poto, or *Kumor* (Chakraborty, 2024). The fieldwork was completed in two stages in the months of May-June, 2024, which initially involved rough mapping of the spatial dynamics of the neighbourhood and observing the day-to-day performances of idol making and iconographic realities by the artisans (for choosing the specific workshops, convenient sampling was used due to limitations in the time frame), followed by unstructured interactions with the artisans and proprietors of the seminars regarding their lived experiences. Field notes were made to record the information procured during the interaction process. The analysis and coding were done using 'thematic analysis,' where primary data were collected from the field. Secondary data procured from previous ethnographic studies on the area, supported by specific theoretical propositions on Heterotopia, Spatial Constructs, and Dramaturgy, led to the realization of varied realities in terms of the individual reality of an idol maker from the lived experiences and day-to-day work dynamics within the neighbourhood, which was projected in the broader spatial context.

III. CASTE FORMATIONS AND REPRESENTATION OF 'CAPITAL' THROUGH INTERPRETATIONS OF FOLKLORES

Heritage is nested not only in the intangibility and work of skill but also in the specific groups that embody it. In the context of Kumartuli's caste genealogy, the references indicating 'original holders of the space' and 'immigrants who settled here by the mid-18th century' are highly speculative, like their discursive proposition. These conceptions were traced in terms of 'colonial functionalities,' re-structuration of habitual areas around the '*Govindapur-Sutanuti juncture*,' and 'prevalence of aristocrat representations in visualizing the religious symbolisms of household *pujos*,' which led to the migration and subsequent settlement of image-makers and idol makers from *Krishnanagar* and adjoining areas to the Govindapur region, in turn creating an infused perspective projecting a caste-occupation continuum, where people from the image-making community, community of oil

refiners, local merchants, and artisans were obliged to linger together in a compartmentalized environment, giving rise to the unique character of the idol-making cluster that we see today.

For historical accuracy, we can say that Kumartuli was home to a concentration of potters, primarily from lower castes, such as the Kumbhakars, who were traditionally responsible for producing idols and earthenware. Caste hierarchies have always influenced the area's socio-economic structure, defining power-authority correlations (Chakrabarty, 2012) [5].

Kumbhakars (known as Kumars in colloquial Bengali) are the occupational caste of idol makers, with the surname Pal being the most common. Vidyanidhi Ray (Chakrabarty, 2012) distinguished this occupational group based on regional and occupational characteristics. In Calcutta and Eastern Bengal, idol makers are known as Kumbhakars. In contrast, in *Mymensingh* (now in *Bangladesh*) and *Tripura*, they belong to the caste of astrologers (*grahacharya*, literally those who make astrological predictions by deciphering planetary movements) (Chakrabarty, 2012).

According to historical records, some *Kumars* were *Sutradhars* (sutars or Chhutars) who worked in wood carving processes as part of their caste. Sudhir Chakrabarty (2012), however, was the first to distinguish between Kumbhakars (potters who use potters' wheels to create earthen pots and utensils) and *Mritsilpis* (literally clay artists) with superior ritual status while commenting on *Krishnanagar* clay modellers. He claims that many Kumbhakars graduated as Mritsilpis, though not all of them were recognized as such. The Kumbhakars may have been segmented as subcastes due to differences in their occupation. Later, these groups are presumed to have assimilated into one, with varying degrees of success. Many Kumbhakars continue to work in the traditional occupation of making clay pots, utensils, and well rings, and they have struggled to gain the patronage of the regional and aristocratic society for making the idols (Chakrabarty, 2012). He also notes that many people from outside the Kumbhakar caste, such as the Sutradhars, had already entered this field and dominated the local market, making it difficult for the Mritsilpis to break in (Chakrabarty, 2012). He uses the example of *Ishwar Chandra Pal*, a *Kayastha* who entered the field of idol making and captured major clients on a global scale with his unique iconography. Another intriguing fact is that the Mritsilpis have various surnames, including *Das, Khan, Pal, Paramanik, Patra, Sannyasi, Khas, Barik, and Kundu* (Chakrabarty, 2012). However, all the famous clay modellers and idol makers were Pals. This implies that the Kumbhakars of Kumartuli are an amalgam of castes with multiple caste origins, suggesting that people are not necessarily born into a caste and assigned to a predefined caste occupation; instead, the pull of occupation binds members drawn from a variety of castes into the Kumbhakar caste (Chakrabarty, 2012).

A. Nirmal Kumar Bose Notes this as a General Phenomenon in Bengal

"New castes arose because of a change of occupation, migration from one place to another, and debasement or purification of customs, but all accepted two fundamental principles. Nobody opposed

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freedom to follow one's customs and the right of a family or caste to its particular occupation". (Bose, 1975) [6].

The binding process is by no means easy. The 'politics of social identification and interests' of the constituent sub-castes frequently refuse to be 'subjugated to' and melt into what, borrowing from Sen, may be called a 'broader collectivity' (Sen, 2018) [7]. A significant part of this process of miscegenation and assimilation is politically contingent.

Despite that, there are some instances of disagreement in analysing the reality of the constituent binding force that constructs the cohesion process among the varied groups within the Kumartuli cluster. An occupation does not always supply the adhesive. Kumartuli has been a longstanding testament to numerous occupational competitions and rivalries. Thus, idol makers of ritually impure castes were not intentionally accommodated into the network of Kumbhakars. Therefore, the migration of *Rudrapals* was initially viewed with dubitation—if not enmity—by the native *Kumbhakars of Kumartuli*. It was never an easy life for them, and due to the same reason, Ramesh Pal and Rakhal Pal had to discard their surname 'Rudrapal' and take up the title 'Pal' since they did not want to be recognizably distinct from other fellow Pals of Kumartuli.

Narayan Pal, another renowned artisan from the Rudrapal guild, recalls the roadblocks and hurdles their ancestors had to overcome to gain recognition as an integral part of the Kumbhakars of Kumartuli. According to Ramesh Pal, he was not allowed to set up his workshop (*Rupabharati*) in Kumartuli. It was partially due to his gracious personality and his fabulous troubleshooting capability, and partly because of the intermarriages and consequent affinal networks across the families of Pals and Rudrapals, that the process of caste formation among the Kumbhakars in present-day Kumartuli was significantly ameliorated.

Mukherjee (1937) [8] highlights the analogy between residential studios and contemporary guilds, coherent among the idol makers, their families, and other artisanal groups lodging the area as the nursery of craft and occupational skill in India, and how this form of artisanal knowledge is passed down the generational lines as a form of collaborative dimensionality of tradition and occupational skills (in this context, about the idol-making community of Kumartuli).

"Occupational castes easily have transformed themselves into guilds in India, guaranteeing social and economic protection to artisans, traders, and merchants. The guild is a temporary or permanent union of caste people practising the same craft and trade and framing general rules of conduct, social morality, and observances. At the same time, sometimes it regulates trade or wages, the conditions of employment of labour and the use of machinery, as well as the education of apprentices and the protection and maintenance of the destitute and the helpless" (Mukherjee, 1937).

The 'acclimations' of the occupational group of Kumbhakars to market forces and changing landscapes of urban modernity were by no means an easy or smooth affair. The skill that lies embodied in the Kumbhakars may—borrowing from Bourdieu (1986) [9]—be called 'embodied capital.' While the inventory and transmission of the skill are uncertain, the skill is believed to be the key to the sustainability of the heritage of idol making. However, at

another echelon, the same capital does not easily convert into other forms of capital, creating a flux in the processes of identity formation and sustainability of the craft.

Bandyopadhyay shows how the caste capital of the 'closely-knit upper caste group of *bhadraloks*' enabled them to exercise their 'hegemonic control over the public space in colonial Bengal' in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Bandyopadhyay, 2020) [10], and this led to the process of imitation of the same 'spatial imperialism' by subordinate castes like that of the idol makers, creating a 'caste-guild culture' based on heterogeneous competitions and homogenous access to knowledge and resources.

Over time, caste dynamics in Kumartuli have significantly impacted both the artisans' social positioning and their relationship with the folklore that informs the iconography of the idols they create. For example, the Kumhars' utilisation of earth and mud as material mediums is ingrained in the region's mythologies and folk narratives (Bose, 1975). Despite being relegated to lower social strata in a larger societal context, these castes have maintained a distinct form of spatial belonging, with Kumartuli becoming a site of cultural, spatial, and occupational relevance. This spatial dimension of belonging is critical for understanding how identity formation and idol-making practices intersect. One of the most essential factors in maintaining the guild structure is that generational identity is passed down through lines of lineage as a form of generational knowledge and heritage.

Kumartuli's synthesis of ritual practices and folklore illustrates that the iconography of idols is inextricably linked to the caste structures that have historically governed the idol production process. In this context, caste is more than a hierarchical system; it is also a repository of collective knowledge, tradition, and folklore that influences the art of idol-making. The stories and mythologies that inform idol symbology are not arbitrary; instead, they are directly related to the artisans' cultural practices and belief systems, as well as the communities to which they belong.

The prevalent folklores play a pivotal role in constructing and perpetuating the cultural identity of the artisans at Kumartuli. Stories of divine inspiration, myths about the origins of clay *(prithvi tattva)*, and anecdotes of artistic prowess contribute to a shared cultural repository that strengthens community bonds. These oral traditions frequently elevate the artisans' status by portraying their work as divinely inspired and spiritually significant. Several accounts from idol makers can be cited as examples of folklore's integration into the ritual practice of idol making. Still, in this case, I would like to focus on two that I found particularly fascinating.

i. *Evolution of Iconography*

The images of gods and goddesses, particularly *Durga, Lakshmi, and Saraswati*, are crafted with specific motifs and symbolic elements that have been passed down through generations. These motifs have profound socio-religious implications firmly embedded in the community's collective consciousness. However, no single set of iconographic motifs is used to create an idol. According to Samir Pal, there were initially two styles of iconography:

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Kangshanarayani and *Bishnupuri*, which were decorated with various background *chalas* such as *Brindavani chala*, *Kailashi chala*, *Indrani chala*, and *Brahmani chala*, with a focus on the *Ekchala* style of idol making.

According to him, it was an otherworldly depiction of the goddess. The idols from this school of iconography had broad eyes, much larger than a normal human, and eight of her ten hands were proportionally smaller. Though she appears human, the figure's features are larger-than-life, overshadowing everything in her presence. *Durga* and *Lakshmi's* skin is deep yellow, whereas Mahishasura's is green. Durga's face is larger than the other idols, and her lion resembles a horse or a half-dragon. She is intended to appear more divine and unique than her devotees. In this form, she resembles a goddess rather than a daughter or mother, which is how she is viewed in Bengal.

Idol makers of this school believed that to elicit devotion and fear among the devotees, the idol needed to have a 'supernatural' appearance. They thought a separation between man and God was unavoidable—otherwise, the tenets of submission and sacrifice would not be realised. However, the tradition of *Ekchala* idols was altered when *Gopeshwar Pal* introduced iconography depicting idols in separate *chalas*. He also mentions that this dimension of iconography was further refined by introducing Bangla-style idols brought in by migrant artisans from Bangladesh's Faridpur and *Mymensingh* districts. They first attempted to bridge the gap between God and man by creating idols resembling human figures, utilising 'realist avant-garde propositional dynamics.' All features, from the nose and eyes to the hands and breasts, were balanced to give the idol a more human appearance. With this, the fearful Devi became a daughter and mother, winning the hearts of Bengal's worshippers.

He concludes by saying, *"Eta shunte sudhu itihaash, mone holeo etai amader sotti."* This may seem like a historical note, but the truth of their community is being preserved as a form of generational knowledge.

The entire narrative made me question the general representation of folklore about a community's lived experiences. I wondered whether folklores are only 'words of mouth' passed down generational lines without focusing on the historical tangibility of the prevalent traditions.

I felt that the way Samir Pal narrated the genealogical evolution of craft in idol making, from the Ekchala tradition to the dala tradition, or separate chala in the iconographic process, is nothing less than an infusion of tangible traditions with prevalent folklore. Folklore has been a driving force behind Kumartuli's artistic output. The representation of deities and their genealogical transformation, particularly that of Goddess Durga, is deeply informed by local mythologies and historiographies, representing a 'human-supernatural composite relation.'

The Kumhars' caste identity, tied to their material interaction with clay, brushes, motifs, colours, etc., lends authenticity to their creations, as these material mediums are not only treated as individual entities of creative practice but are also mythologised in Bengali folklore as sacred possessions. Thus, the historic note by Samir Pal not only deconstructs the general notion of the representation of folklore within a community but also provides a fresh lens to visualise socio-cultural aesthetics shaped by the coherent presence of folklore in tangible forms and fluid symbolisms. These determine the sense of rootedness and identity construct projected within the community cluster and beyond, reinforcing the notion of 'caste as a form of embodied capital' (Bourdieu, 1986).

ii. Prostitutes, Punya-Mati, and Sense of Identity

According to Biswanath Pal, a veteran idol maker, there is a *chalti-kotha*, a folk belief that the first mould of clay used for creating the idol of Goddess Durga must be collected from several locations, such as royal courts, cow sheds, and the houses of courtesans and prostitutes. He mentions how, in his youth, he accompanied his grandfather to the home of the *bhadro-mohila* at *Sonagachi* to collect the first mould of clay for creating the idol. The lady would offer him sweets (*bhadro-mohila* is a Bengali term for 'gentle-lady'; in this context, it signifies the prostitutes, which initiates a stark denaturalisation process in the deliberation of re-establishing the already constructed identity).

According to him, this entire scenario is culturally significant because it requires a great deal of courage and strength for a woman to live independently as a prostitute in a male-dominated society. Women who dare to do so are honoured by being asked to donate clay from their homes to make *murtis* of Durga and Kali, as they are sought as human renderings of the goddesses.

The individual reality and interactional procedures of the prostitute community with the idol-making guild can be identified by the scenario that the cultural-ethnic identity of the prostitutes is not that of simple escorts; instead, they hold a unique array of cultural exchanges with other communities present in the region, including aristocratic identities, idol-makers, and other artisanal sections. They were not just sex workers; instead, they were talented singers, dancers, and businesswomen who were responsible for their households. In the current scenario, their identities have undergone various transformations because of cultural exchange and aristocratic imitation, intersected by the influence of aristocratic families and the norms of business communities on one hand, and the situated behavioural guidelines that determine the secluded nature of their identity on the other.

According to him, the clay used to create *the idols of Devi* carries symbolic and ritual significance. Its diverse collection—from prostitutes' houses, cow sheds, royal courts, and sacred sites—represents a cultural custom deeply rooted in folk tradition. It reflects the inclusive nature of Hindu cosmology, where divinity is created through the amalgamation of all social and artistic elements. This, in turn, recognises the contributions of marginalised groups, such as courtesans, and highlights their role in the broader cultural and spiritual landscape. Through his narratives, he attempts to establish a symbolic connection between the aesthetics of idol making and the perseverance of the courtesan community, thereby departing from the generalised notion of identity formation that prescribes social exclusion.

The idol makers' expertise in sculpting, painting, and understanding the ritualistic requirements of the idols entitles them as custodians of a critical cultural practice.

This cultural capital often transcends economic capital,

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as the artisans' social standing is inextricably linked to their role in preserving religious and cultural heritage. He exclaims, *"Onader sahajjo chara matrimurti banano sombhob i noe,"* meaning that it is impossible to create an idol of the goddess without their help.

Using clay from courtesans' houses represents a symbolic shift away from rigid caste hierarchies. However, the scenario presents a paradox, as idol-makers frequently belong to caste groups associated with artisanal work. This reflects a dual dynamic:

On one hand, the tradition challenges caste exclusivity by recognising the contributions of marginalised groups. On the other hand, the idol-makers' own caste identity ties them to specific social and economic roles, limiting their mobility despite their cultural contributions.

According to Biswanath Pal's narrative representation, folklore serves as a medium of inclusion by legitimizing and sanctifying the participation of marginalized groups in the idol-making process. He claims that these stories help to integrate diverse social groups into a shared cultural identity, even though caste-based stratification persists in other areas of life. This subsequently determines how the collection of clay begins as a custom and ends with integrating folklore and ritual heritage, constructing collective realities for all stakeholders involved, from creating idols to fulfilling festival obligations.

Using Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital (1986) enables us to visualise how caste and folklore intersect in shaping the identity of Kumartuli's idol-makers. While they are essential to the creation of religious and cultural artefacts, their socioeconomic status often reflects the inequalities inherent in caste systems. The narrative about courtesans and clay collection serves as a symbolic act of inclusion, but its effectiveness is limited by caste and modern socioeconomic systems.

In both circumstances, caste is more than just a hierarchical system; it is also a repository of collective knowledge and tradition, intersecting with folklore to influence the idol-making process. The stories and mythologies that inform the iconography of the idols are not arbitrary; instead, they are directly related to the artisans' cultural practices and belief systems, as well as the communities to which they belong. For instance, the creation of a Durga idol is deeply embedded in the local folk narrative, where the goddess is seen as a symbol of power, protection, and divine femininity. The way this goddess is represented in material form—through her posture, weapons, and expressions—is deeply rooted in the traditional iconography that has evolved in Kumartuli over centuries due to the continuum between folk traditions and the socio-cultural aesthetics of the community structure.

However, Kumartuli's idol-making process reflects the evolving nature of iconography, which adapts to the transitory nature of cultural norms as they change in response to modern tastes, religious practices, and societal shifts. This transformation is frequently influenced by rising middle-class demands for idol representations that conform to contemporary aesthetics, which leads to changes in identity dynamics among various communities related to the craft. However, the essence of the folklore remains intact, ensuring the tradition's continuity. In this regard, the caste structure continues to play a crucial role in maintaining the authenticity of the icons as they navigate shifting market demands.

IV. CASTE AND LINEAGE: SUSTENANCE OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

Though idol making is primarily a caste-based occupation, it has expanded beyond that. This profession is practised by various castes in Bengal, including the *Sutradhars, Kumbhakars, Karmakars, Chitrakars, and Patuas*.

'*Pal e der bishal boro Gushthi'*— The Pals are a large clan with a standard connection. Ranjan Pal discusses how connections form due to living close together in small spaces, which can sometimes lead to kinship relations through marriage. Marriages are typically solemnised within the community, according to him; "*we generally get our sons and daughters married to other Pals, unless someone does not want to join our family*." Marriage strengthens family bonds and serves as a network for many idol makers, allowing them to compete in a market economy.

According to an anonymous source, living in Kumartuli's community cluster among one's caste members has certain advantages—it allows for specific material and cultural exchanges, such as the sharing of resources required for idol making, *'amar jokhon matir dorkar hoy ba onno samogri kom pore, amaay shahjyo kore'*. It also allows for the exchange of craft-specific knowledge. 'If we make a mistake at work, someone will point it out and tell us how to do it appropriately. ' Subhash Pal, an emerging idol maker, stated that "sharing of knowledge among the Pals ensures that the quality of production is maintained."

The creation of social capital for those residing in the Kumartuli community entails "transforming contingent relations such as those of neighbourhood, workplace, or even kinship" (Bourdieu, 1986) into relationships that imply "durable obligations" that are experienced, maintained, and guarantee certain rights.

Similarly, lineage is an essential means of passing down knowledge and skills within the Kumbhakar community. Most businesses in Kumortuli are operated under the name of the idol maker's father or grandfather, who is 'known' or has '*porichiti*', a name. Sen (2015) [11]. It describes how families closely guard the spread of the technique within the Mritsilpi community and strictly pass it down from father to son. Sometimes, the idol maker may have learned from a relative, but "the predominant story of the great masters of idol making within the neighbourhood of Kumartuli is a lineage of father and son" (Sen, 2015).

This practice not only allows them to continue their family's living tradition, but it may also emphasise the importance of 'credentials'—collectively owned capital that entitles them to credit in various senses of the word, as well as durable networks and material and symbolic exchanges that sustain them (Bourdieu, 1986). Guha Thakurata (2015) [12] discusses the case of *Pradip Narayan Rudra Pal*, who works from multiple locations and produces both traditional Durgas under his father's name, *Mohan Banshi Rudra Pal*, and more experimental ones under his name.

Lineage is also a source of great pride because it allows the next generation of idol makers to carry on the family

name, carefully crafted over generations of hard work. According to Bourdieu (1986), "the possessors of such an inherited social capital, symbolised by a great name, are then able to transform all circumstantial relationships into lasting connections."

While lineage is recognised as an essential factor in shaping the career choices of young men within the community, allowing them to pursue a career in this field, certain qualities are also required of an independent idol maker. *'Najor jodi bhalo hoy aar shekhar jodi agroho thake'*—that is, if there is an interest and aptitude for learning, as well as an eye for detail, the transition is quick, according to Bhibhas Pal. Another senior artisan, Jatin Das Pal, stated, 'There is a role for family lineage in the way things shape up,' but 'those who have an interest/eagerness and initiative will progress.'

However, specific difficulties arise during the process of establishing caste as a form of capital, leading to the disintegration of the superficial picture of caste homogeneous processes, because the sustainability of heritage is dependent not so much on the possession of skill per se by a generation of idol makers, but on its high transmissibility into future generations. However, various ethnographies (Sen, 2015) suggest a problematic transmission of skills. Magan Pal, a senior idol maker, does not want his sons to succeed him in the profession, which he believes has not only lost respectability but has also become increasingly competitive and unprofitable. Many senior idol makers are, however, concerned about the future of their profession. Intersectionalities, such as caste, gender, and pre-existing village ties, as well as other factors, impede the transmission of skills. Many helping artisans and skilled assistants accuse their mentoring idol makers of discriminating between their family members and outsiders hired to work in their studios. They are also reportedly hesitant to disseminate the skill of idol making in all its stages (particularly the final stage of *chokkhudan* or donating the eyes).

However, with the collapse of caste as a system caused by urbanisation, the erosion of caste monopolies, democratic participation, and political mobilisation, castes play out their logic in different ways in urban India. Assertive caste identities have made ritual dominance obsolete (Gupta, 2004) [13]. Castes have been found to express their competitive spirit toward one another freely. They take pride in their knowledge, skills, and entrepreneurial capabilities and are willing to go beyond the village context to achieve their economic and political aspirations.

Caste is crucial as a form of "ascriptive hierarchy" because it shapes "opportunity structures, status differences, and cultural values in contemporary India" (Jodhka, 2015) [14]. Caste-based knowledge as a form of competency that transforms into skill helps the Kumbhakars maintain their primacy in this profession in Kumartuli (Deshpande, 2013) [15]. The invisible transmission of knowledge since childhood, the prolonged investment of time, labor, and energy needed for the acquisition of such a skill, the recognition and careful nurturing of family name, the experience of being in this profession for a long time, the wide-ranging networks of interdependence and trust forged with a variety of people in the process of putting an ensemble together work as a strategic resource, as an accumulated form of caste capital. (Bandyopadhyay, 2016) [16].

V. INTERSECTION OF SPATIAL DYNAMICS AND DRAMATURGY

The lives shape Kumartuli's spatial and social organisation, lived in the neighbourhood. The Potter community (Kumhars) traditionally lived in the neighbourhood. These artisans, who are primarily from lower castes, have historically held a dual identity: skilled creators of sacred idols and marginalized members of the social hierarchy. The settlement of an idol-making section in Kumartuli in the 18th century, primarily to meet the social and religious needs of Kolkata's wealthy merchant families, exemplifies a fusion of caste-based labour and geospatial belonging. As a result, Kumartuli's identity as an idol-making centre is inextricably linked to its historical and social evolution, rather than just its geographical location.

The spatial reality of the potter community is intrinsically tied to their craft and Kumartuli's geographical location. The studios—small, often cramped spaces that are mostly extensions of their households, the narrow lanes, adjoining market areas, and, finally, the unique spatial feature of concurrent railway tracks beside the river Hooghly—reflect their caste-defined socioeconomic realities, portraying them as centres of immense cultural production. The spatial organization demonstrates the blending of private and public domains, with idol production—an intimate and sacred process—taking place in full view of the community and visitors. This paradoxical identity, in which marginalization coexists with creative reverence, informs the community's spatial and social identity, and it is this identity that navigates the spatiality of the place, which is heavily inscribed with the potters' cultural capital. The narratives, practices, and folklore surrounding idol-making are central to the artisans' sense of individuality. Still, they also give rise to collective identities rooted in place, occupation, and social history, which construct and deconstruct a sense of rootedness within time dynamics. In this context it is essential to understand how the socio-cultural aesthetics and religious symbolisms are created and articulated by individual idol makers through the practice of idol making which is in turn determined by the spatial constructs of the area, besides analysing the projection of these spatial actor-network relations in the broader socio-spatial landscape of metropolitan Kolkata. This circulation of symbolic meanings is reflected in a growing corpus of tourism referring to Kumartuli as an extension of the
The current state government's ambitious tourism project has begun to showcase distinctive aspects of Kumartuli as sites to be visited, explored, and visually consumed as part of a broader cultural experience of the city.

Sharon Zukin(1995) [17], whose work has informed a whole range of critical studies of urban renewal systems, for example, shows how three notions of culture- as 'race', 'aesthetic', and 'marketing tool'- are reshaping civic spaces in the period of globalization by tying these to a new 'emblematic economy' grounded on Tourism, media, and entertainment inform us about how the transition from clay pottery making, or 'mritsilpa',

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to clay image making, or 'pratimasilpa', affected the Kumars. We observed the sensation of occupational and caste fluidity that marked the social life and identity of this community.

Present-day Kumartuli, a dense agglomeration of nearly 500 clay modelling workshops, shanties, and residences, occupies 6.6 acres of a larger 15-acre ward of the same name and is one of Calcutta's oldest settled areas. It is one of the few remaining examples of a traditional caste-based occupational zone, such as those found in various clusters of the old 18th and 19th-century city. The lack of development in this quarter—the makeshift hutments and the deplorable living and working conditions—has forced Kumartuli to be classified as a *bustee* or slum in modern municipal records.

Geir Heierstad's [18]. A recent study, '*Caste Entrepreneurship and the Illusions of Tradition Branding the Potters of Kolkata*' (2017), focuses on the entangled histories of colonial Calcutta and Kumartuli, with a particular emphasis on their location on the banks of the *Hooghly*.

He contends that the history of the unique configuration of a riverine space is critical to understanding not only the significance of Calcutta's development as a leading port city, but also the development of a colony of kumbhakars whose production of both ritual and domestic pottery was reliant on the easy availability of a specific type of riverine clay and easy transportation facilities (Heierstad, 2017). The River Hooghly, a significant geographical feature, serves as both a symbolic and practical component of their craft. Clay collected from the riverbank is considered sacred, strengthening the artisans' spiritual connection to their work. This spatial dynamic underscores a lived duality: Kumartuli is simultaneously a heritage site and a functional production hub, constantly negotiating traditions and modern demands.

According to Heierstad (2017), due to its location on the navigable Hooghly and the safety provided by the British Calcutta, it became what Ulf Hannerz (1992) [19] referred to as an 'urban cultural swirl,' a metropolis of high cultural complexity, and a place of vivacious cultural production. These primary structural conditions enabled the *Kumhars* to transform Kumartuli into what it is today: a global market for the traditional caste-based occupation of clay image making. However, if these were the structural conditions that facilitated Kumartuli to emerge as a distinct commercial space in later years, it required the critical mediation of the city's public Durga Puja and the market orientation of clay image modelling to transform it from a space of traditional artisanal production to one of modern circulation, exchange, and consumption.

This section primarily focuses on analysing Kumartuli's spatiality through certain recorded cases as a social construct that is immanent to the concept of heterotopia and, in turn, intersects with the dynamics of dramaturgy.

i.   Heterotopia and the Ritualization of Space

Foucault (1986) [20] characterizes heterotopia as "other" spaces juxtaposing the real and imagined. Kumartuli is a heterotopic space wherein the mundane (daily crafting) and sacred (idol worship) coexist. This duality contributes to the artisans' distinct identity as creators and custodians of cultural heritage. Foucault's theory of heterotopias, which refers to spaces outside of traditional societal order but serve as reflections or contrasts to norms, can also be applied to Kumartuli. The potter's studio in Kumartuli is a spatial reality that operates outside the traditional spheres of the urban bourgeoisie, yet reflects and upholds societal and cultural norms. This space of idol-making, defined by caste, creativity, and folklore, produces a distinct form of identity that transcends the physical realm and enters the realm of the symbolic.

Foucault's (1986) premise of heterotopia emphasizes Kumartuli's role as a liminal and transformative space. The workshops and their surroundings are economic centres and cultural enclaves where artisans preserve traditional knowledge while adapting to contemporary demands. The dual functionality of space is particularly evident during Durga Puja. For example, Kumartuli's physical transformation into a bustling hub for clients, media, and tourists corresponds to its symbolic transformation into a heterotopia. This space reflects and challenges normative structures of urban life.

A middle-aged artisan, Amal Pal, internalises this duality, forming identities that straddle the sacred and secular. He mentions how they have been taught to maintain the particular style of iconography as a heritage of their '*gharana'* or 'style of idol making', and his father would always comply with the set of behavioural norms related to cultural aesthetics and ritual practices of idol making within the community cluster. He also mentions how he and his brother were taught to adhere to a strict 'shastric' conceptualisation of iconographic processes as part of their preliminary socialisation. However, it has recently been forced to move away from the traditional 'Bishnupuri' iconographic processes to create theme-based idols based on the changing demands of the clients. According to him, this shift comes because of extreme commercialisation processes sweeping through the traditional structure of the community, presenting it as a tourism hub coupled with processes of commercialisation, commodification, and consumption of images, instead of upholding the ideals of practice about 'high art' and 'ritualistic precision' based on sense of heritage and rootedness, which were the ultimate ideals for the community, even a few years back. He said, '*ki korbo….ghar chalanor jonne kortei hbe'*, they must comply with the market's demands, if they are to sustain their household. This creates a duality between '*Gharana* and *Ghar*', where the gharana requires idol makers to conform to ascribed identities and follow strict scriptural interpretations of iconography. In contrast, the sustenance of the household of ghar forces them to take a more flexible stand on idol-making processes. On one hand, he said he was taught to visualise idol makers as creators of deities central to Bengali cultural identity; on the other hand, they now must act as economic agents who must contend with market dynamics. This scenario is well defined in Guhathakurata's (2015) work of '*In the Name of the Goddess',* where she calls idol makers both 'cultural keepers and creative adapters', where she primarily speaks about how the idol makers must maintain equilibrium amidst the duality of heritage preservation processes and implementation of innovation. In idol-making processes.

He, in turn, mentions how the current commercial forces have created radical

differences between 'invocation of the goddess' and 'supply of orders within a particular time frame.' Previously, these two roles were in an infused state, but now the idol makers are forced to choose one, creating a flux in their state of reality and realisation of individuality. This oscillation, or what Foucault might describe as the "mirror effect" of heterotopia, is central to understanding the identity formation process.

ii. Lefebvre's Spatial Triad and Intergenerational Shifts in Identity

Lefebvre's (1991) spatial theory offers a nuanced perspective on the lived experiences of Kumartuli's artisans. He views physical spatial attributes as socially constructed, and he defines three types of spaces: perceived, conceived, and lived, which intersect with each other to determine the lived experiences and accessibility of beholders to spatial realities, thereby creating a scenario in which identities can be negotiated, formed, and practised. In the context of Kumartuli, the perceived space of the workshops is tangible and functional, where clay, bamboo, dried straws, brushes, and paint collaborate with the expertise of the artisans to form idols. However, the conceived space, dominated by cultural narratives and religious symbolism, imbues these physical sites with deeper meaning. The lived space in which artisans negotiate personal histories and communal identities demonstrates the complexities of their identity construction (Paul, 2021) [21].

Kanu Pal highlighted the process of generational differences in spatial engagement. He said, for veteran artisans, Kumartuli's lived space is inseparable from their personal and communal identity, rooted in a traditional understanding of their craft as a sacred duty (*seva*). In contrast, younger artisans, influenced by global aesthetics and digital platforms, often reimagine Kumartuli as a conceived space of creative innovation and entrepreneurship. These shifts demonstrate how spatial dynamics contribute to the evolution of identities, as Lefebvre's triad unfolds in the artisans' daily lives. He says that the setup of the workshops for elder idol makers is different from that of the younger idol makers. Their workshops are characterised by less compartmentalisation of spaces, as they believe that creating an idol is a process of 'unified effort,' where the *shilpis* and *karigars* work together in a collective proposition. Here, the proprietors of the workshop act alongside the seasonal labour to create an idol. There is compartmentalisation only for specific ritualistic acts, such as '*chokkhudan*'. According to him the older workshop owners tries to maintain the 'heritage proposition' besides maintaining client relations, he mentions how the idol makers tries to preserve the human-supernatural composite ties by adhering to traditional methods of image-making, which is not only created for consumption but also for devotion, and according to him the spatiality of workshop characterised by a home-like environment helps to attune themselves to the process of idol making.

When asked as a follow up question to explain the structure of workshop of the younger idol makers, he hesitantly mentioned '*ora shilpi na ora manager'* they are not artisans but managers, he explained how most of the young idol makers have inherited the workshops of their forefathers, and shifted the seminars to the border areas or extensions of the community cluster just for the sake of more space and higher compartmentalisation of the area, where they can manage a group of karigars who would work under him to create the idols of the order received. According to him, "They never thought once before selling their old workshop, that the space itself created the name of their forefathers, it was this space through which the idol makers family identify themselves", following this he puts forward a question, are identities today this flexible that, to stay relevant in the commercial market, an individual is ready to forget his roots. He also mentions how in today's scenario a radical difference is being situated in the spaces of Kumartuli based on the duality between *Pratimashilpi* and *Mritshipli*, where according to him, Pratimashilpis are people from that of the older generations, who focuses more on the essence of idol itself in the whole process of iconography, their workshops are characterised more by simple attributes of solid coloured walls, simple tube lights and a single fan combined with arrays of idols and torsos of unfinished idols besides module of clays and scattered equipment such as brushes, paints, spirits, etc.. In contrast, the Mritshilpis are artisans whose primary focus is on theme-based idol making, where their creations are inspired by the theme of the marquee, according to which they design their idols. He said their workshops are characterised by bright, well-lit spaces, a cabin for the manager with air conditioning, where client meetings may take place, and digital catalogues. He also mentions that they have a separate space for storing idols.

A study on five idol-making studios of Kumartuli (Paul, 2021) reveals a similar proposition to Kanu Pal's narratives, which investigated how spatial hierarchies within the area mirror caste-based occupational divisions. The work focuses on how studios owned by generational Kumhar families hold central positions, reflecting their symbolic and historical significance. In contrast, studios run by migrant artisans, non-Kumhar groups, or younger independent idol makers are located on the outskirts, emphasising spatial marginalisation. The study observes that the central studios, which senior artisans frequently lead with familial ties to the craft, continue to utilise folklore-based iconography. On the other hand, peripheral studios tend to experiment with modern materials and designs, indicating a shift away from traditional narratives and a greater sense of rootedness.

iii. Dramaturgy and the Artisans' Performative Identities

Erving Goffman (1959) characterises social interactions as performances in which individuals present themselves to influence perceptions. In the context of Kumartuli, idol makers navigate both the front stage (interaction with clients and the public) and the backstage (workshops where idols are created), revealing how their identity is continually constructed and reconstructed. However, the context off-stage presents another arena of discourse, where it is primarily evident that there is a trait of tension about a state of constant flux, determined by the conjoint reality of front-stage and back-stage propositions. since the notion of 'leisure time' is less prevalent among idol makers in general.

Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework illustrates the performative nature of identity for individual idol makers. In

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the early stages of public interactions, artists assume roles that align with client expectations and cultural norms. For example, during client consultations or media interviews, they highlight their devotion, heritage, and the sacred nature of their work. These performances are meticulously curated to uphold their reputations as traditional artisans and modern entrepreneurs.

According to Chandan Rurdrapal, they have a set pattern of answers for varied categories of people. For instance, if a journalist approaches them, they know what questions they would ask and the answers. Similarly, if a documentary filmmaker approaches, they see what shots they want and their approach to complete the shoot. For clients, they know how to manage client relations based on the nature of the demands and the dynamics of the client relationship. He says, '*amader kache horek rokhom grahok ashe, sobar mon jugie cholte hoe'*, the clientele base is dynamic and they must try to fulfil the demands of the clients as much as possible. He also mentions that during the interaction process, there is a surge in footfall of photographers and media personnel two weeks before Pujo until Mahalaya, as they try to capture their best shots of the unfinished idols, the clay structures, and the idol makers working on those idols. He says this whole process creates many problems in terms of distraction, since the photographers intrude on their professional space. He mentions one instance where a photographer entered the workshop without asking for permission. According to him, these acts may damage the idols on order, as the spaces are cramped and traffic is usually high at that time of the year. He mentions that due to careless movements of a media personnel, an idol of *Lakshmi* got major cracks on its hands, incurring huge economic losses. He said, '*chobi tulte baron korchi na.....kintu dekha uchit jate karur kono ashubidha na hoe'*, he is not asking the photographers to avoid clicking pictures, the process of capturing visuals should be such that they do not intrude on each other's space of professionalism, ensuring free flow of work and customer satisfaction. The idol makers must navigate all these issues and social realities, while maintaining a balance between heritage preservation processes and innovative aspects of cultural aesthetics related to the process of iconography that determine their lived experiences within the community. They must constantly maintain an 'impression and process of civil inattention' when varied visual artists infiltrate their spaces with cameras or continuously work on their 'facial expressivity' while maintaining client relations. This entire front-stage interaction process determines the intersection of their collective and individual reflexivity based on the duality of rootedness and imposed forces from the broader socio-spatial landscape.

However, their struggles emerge backstage—in the private spaces of workshops. Here, artisans encounter economic pressures, resource constraints, and the demands of mass production. Observations revealed that the backstage is also a community bonding space, where artisans share techniques, stories, and anxieties. This distinction between the public and private spheres exemplifies the fluidity of their identities, which are shaped by both external expectations and internal reflections. Pradip Pal narrates a scenario, how while playing cards at one fine evening his friend *Bishu Pal* explained an idea of creating an idol from waste products of the household, and how listening to that idea the whole group present there started to chalk out a plan to gather materials and create the blue print for the same. However, he said the idol couldn't be made due to internal conflicts, non-cooperation from the larger community and extensive individual competition, 'nijo hingshar jonne banano gelona'.

Following this, he also mentions how the workshops, which were their professional spaces till February, working in the same space becomes more of a 'private affair', from March. Since the footfall of externals in the community space is less. He says, '*Swarasati Pujor por ar oto rush thake na…….tokhon kaj kora tao sohoj, nijeder moto kaj kora jae'*, After Swaraswati Pujo, the rush of people and clients is reduced, thus they can concentrate on their work and work more freely, utilising the whole workshop to its full capacity. According to him, this is when they must start preparing for the upcoming season; there are issues related to a lack of orders, increasing prices of raw materials, changes in client demands, space constraints, and losses incurred, among others. However, even amidst these situational processes they at least get a few days to rejuvenate and reflect on the last year's performance, he says, the most joyful moment during this period, is the time he spends with his family, this according to him gives enthusiasm to tackle all upcoming issues related to the idol making process and further perform his expected behavioural attribute based on norm structure of the community.

The interplay between front and backstage in their daily lives reflects larger tensions between globalisation and localisation, tradition and modernity, individual aspirations, and collective identity. Pradip Kumar Ghosh created an eco-friendly Durga idol made from biodegradable materials, including bamboo and jute, which deviates from the traditional clay-based design. While this innovation was lauded for its environmental consciousness, it also sparked debate within the community about the sanctity of conventional practices.

Pradip's work emphasises the dramatic interplay between front-stage and backstage performances. Onstage, his innovation drew an urban, environmentally conscious audience. Backstage, however, tensions arose within the community, with elder artisans questioning the departure from traditional materials and techniques. This tension highlights the struggle of Kumartuli's artisans to strike a balance between modernity and heritage. This creates a debate on the line of departure from high art, while focusing more on an individualistic notion of cultural representation through visual aesthetics.

The artisans' identities are constantly negotiated within Kumartuli's spatial and performative dimensions, rather than being fixed. The interplay of heterotopia, spatial production, and dramaturgy reveals the construction of identity. as a dynamic process shaped by tradition, modernity, and the daily realities of economic survival. Kumartuli thus serves as a microcosm for investigating how space,

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performance, and power converse to shape individual and collective identities in urban artisanal communities.

VI.   CONCLUSION

Kumartuli idol makers exemplify the sociocultural negotiation of identity in a spatially and socially distinct context. Their craft, which is deeply rooted in caste-based traditions and folklore, serves as both a means of preserving heritage and a platform for creativity. This paper employs case studies to illustrate how these artisans navigate the dual nature of their roles, serving as both traditional custodians and modern innovators. The identity of Kumartuli's artisans emerges as a hybrid construct shaped by space and performance (Lefebvre, 1991; Goffman, 1959). Kumartuli's heterotopic nature allows for the coexistence of traditional and modern practices, whereas Lefebvre's (1991) spatial dialectics emphasise the interplay between space's physical and symbolic dimensions. Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical insights reveal how artisans navigate these dynamics by adapting their performances. For instance, artisans must combine traditional craftsmanship with contemporary design preferences when fulfilling international idol orders. These negotiations highlight the fluidity of their identities, as they alternate between roles as cultural custodians and global artisans. Hybridity is heightened during public festivals, when artisans serve as both creators and performers, displaying their work as part of a larger cultural spectacle.

Kumartuli's spatial organisation reflects broader socioeconomic hierarchies. Artisans frequently lack ownership of their workshops and work under precarious conditions dictated by landlords and market forces. These power dynamics shape their spatial experiences and, consequently, their sense of identity.

Foucault's (1986) concept of power as dispersed and relational helps to explain how artisans navigate these structures. While encountering economic constraints, they also exercise agency by reinventing their craft and asserting their cultural significance. Lefebvre's (1991) emphasis on the production of space as a contested process highlights how artisans actively shape Kumartuli's identity while also being shaped by it.

Identity formation in Kumartuli is thus more than just individual self-conception; it also involves collective self-definition within a specific spatial context. The artisans' caste identities, informed by their social and spatial location, contribute to a shared cultural identity that is inextricably linked to their role as creators of sacred art. While accommodating modern influences, evolving expressions of idol iconography remain tethered to these caste-based traditions, which shape the folklore and religious expressions of the community (Paul, 2021).

Kumartuli thus provides a unique example of how caste structures, folklore, and the evolving iconography of idol-making are woven into the fabric of space and identity formation. The potter community's caste identity is more than just an occupational designation; it is also a crucial component in preserving and transforming the artistic traditions that have shaped the local religious and cultural landscape. The artisans' spatial connection to Kumartuli

reinforces their collective identity, allowing them to continue their work in ways that reflect both tradition and change.

The evolving iconography of Kumartuli idols is thus a dynamic process in which folklores, extensively influenced by caste-based knowledge and practices, intersect with contemporary social realities and role performativity within community structures. This intersection of tradition and modernity, identity and space, ensures that Kumartuli remains a vibrant and relevant centre for sacred art production, where folklore continues to guide the artisan's role-playing process, even as socioeconomic dynamics change.

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I must verify the accuracy of the following information as the article's author.

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AUTHOR'S PROFILE

Sagnik Chakraborty and I graduated from Jadavpur University, Kolkata, with a master's degree in sociology. My areas of interest lie at the intersection of culture, space, and sociology. My main areas of concern are the lived experiences of urban marginalised communities, the sociology of place-making, and the changing dynamics of visual culture. Examining how cultural customs and spatial practices influence community identities and promote a feeling of community in urban environments is something that particularly interests me. By highlighting the tenacity and inventiveness of marginalised groups in constructing their cultural and spatial narratives, my work aims to draw attention to the delicate balance between heritage preservation and innovation. By exploring these topics, I aim to deepen my understanding of the social forces that shape urban areas and cultural heritage. Finding narratives that demonstrate the initiative and ingenuity of communities as they negotiate the challenges of urban environments lies at the heart of my passion.