

Panpatti: The ‘Kumartoli’ of Silchar and its Idol-Making Heritage

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Abstract: Durga Puja is among the most celebrated religious and cultural festivals of the Bengali community, representing a harmonious synthesis of devotion, artistic creativity and collective cultural identity. In northeastern India, the Barak Valley of Assam comprising the districts of Cachar, Karimganj, and Hailakandi has historically served as a vibrant centre of Bengali cultural heritage. Within this region, Silchar occupies a pivotal position in preserving and promoting the enduring tradition of Durga Puja, where the festival has evolved beyond a religious observance into a prominent artistic, cultural, and community-centred celebration.

This article examines the historical and cultural significance of Panpatti, a locality in Silchar widely known as the “Kumartoli of Silchar,” drawing comparison with Kumartuli, the famous idol-making centre of Kolkata. Based on historical sources, local narratives, and interviews with scholars and artisans, the study traces the emergence of Panpatti as the primary hub of idol making in the Barak Valley. It highlights the migration of skilled artisans from present-day Bangladesh during the colonial and post-Partition periods and the development of a hereditary idol-making tradition.

The paper also discusses contemporary challenges such as modernization, rising material costs, spatial constraints, and competition from external artists. Ultimately, the study emphasizes the need to preserve Panpatti’s century-old idol-making heritage as an important component of the cultural identity of Silchar and the Barak Valley.

Keywords: Durgapuja, Panpatti, Idol making, Sculpture, Brothal, Kumartoli, Heritage.

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Introduction:

Durga Puja stands as one of the most resplendent religious festivals of India, celebrated across the subcontinent with profound devotion and collective enthusiasm. For Hindu Bengalis in particular, it is not merely a ritual observance but a civilizational expression, an annual confluence of faith, artistry, memory, and community life. In the northeastern frontier of India, the Barak Valley of Assam forms one of the significant cultural habitats of the Bengali people. Often described as a “third homeland” for Bengalis, alongside Bangladesh and West Bengal, the Valley preserves and nurtures a distinctive yet deeply rooted Bengali ethos.

Geographically situated in the southern part of Assam, Barak Valley presently comprises three districts—Cachar, Karimganj, and Hailakandi, with Silchar serving as its principal urban centre. As in other Bengali-inhabited regions, Durga Puja occupies a preeminent position in the cultural calendar of the Valley. In Silchar especially, the festival unfolds as a grand spectacle of devotion and artistic splendour, transforming the city into a luminous landscape of sacred imagination.

History of Durga Puja in Barak Valley:

The historical roots of Durga Puja in Barak Valley may be traced back to the mid-eighteenth century. It is widely believed that during the reign of the Dimasa ruler Suradarpa Narayan, the festival received active patronage from the royal court of Cachar. Between the decades of 1745 and 1750, Durga Puja began to assume a more formal and celebrated character in the region. In 1736, Maniram Deb Laskar of Barkhola was appointed as a revenue officer under the Dimasa administration, and from the 1790s onward, the Deb Laskar family has continued its household Durga Puja tradition, an enduring testimony to the festival's deep historical continuity in the Valley.

Thus, in Silchar, the cultural nucleus of Barak Valley, the history of Durga Puja extends over two and a half centuries. By the early twentieth century, the emergence of community-based (*barowari*) Durga Puja marked a significant transformation. What had once been primarily a household ritual gradually evolved into a collective public celebration, reflecting broader processes of urbanization, social organization, and cultural assertion. Among the oldest household Pujas of Silchar are those of the late Durga Shankar Dutta and the Bhuiya family, while early community Pujas such as the Janiganj Puja organized by the business community and the Jahaj Gudam (Godown) Puja hold a prominent place in local memory.

Today, Silchar is adorned with more than three hundred community Durga Pujas, alongside a few continuing household traditions. During the autumnal month of *Sharat*—when clusters of white clouds drift across the crystalline blue sky—the city prepares itself for the advent of the Goddess. Markets bustle with activity; textile and jewellery shops flourish; artisans, decorators, musicians, and labourers immerse themselves in preparation. For four consecutive days, the city becomes an expansive open-air gallery. More than three hundred elaborately designed *pandals*—temporary architectural installations adorned with lights, sculptures, and thematic art, transform Silchar into what may aptly be described as the largest religious art exhibition of the region. Residents and visitors alike move from *pandal* to *pandal*, seeking the *darshan* of Devi Durga, experiencing not only devotional fulfillment but also aesthetic delight.

In contemporary times, Durga Puja in Silchar transcends its strictly religious framework. It has evolved into a multidimensional cultural phenomenon, integrating visual arts, performance, craftsmanship, commerce, and community engagement. The festival generates seasonal employment for numerous individuals, among them the *mritshilpi* (clay artisan), the *dhaki* (traditional drummer), *pandal* designers, light technicians, painters, and various artisans. Yet, at the heart of this vast celebratory network stands the idol of Goddess Durga—the sacred image that anchors devotion and artistic expression alike.

Tradition of Idol Making in Barak Valley:

The responsibility of crafting these sacred images rests primarily with the *Kumbhakar* community, traditionally associated with pottery and clay craftsmanship. Idol making is a laborious and demanding vocation, requiring technical skill, aesthetic sensitivity, ritual knowledge, and physical endurance. In Barak Valley, this profession has been transmitted across generations, forming an unbroken lineage of artisanal heritage.

Historical accounts suggest that in the earliest phase of idol making in the Valley, the practice was initiated by the *Grahacharyas* ritual specialists who created images of deities such as *Shani*, *Kali*, *Shitala*, and the *Navagraha* for the purpose of *Grahapuja* (planetary worship). Their sculptural practice was primarily functional and ritualistic in orientation. Alongside them, members of the *Sutradhar* community traditionally skilled in carpentry and image-making also engaged in the crafting of sacred forms.

However, as the social and religious demand for diverse idols increased particularly with the expansion of Durga Puja and other community festivals the responsibility gradually shifted toward the *Kumbhakar* community. Their long-standing expertise in working with clay, honed through generations of pottery production, enabled them to adapt and refine the techniques necessary for larger, more complex sculptural forms. Over time, they emerged as the principal custodians of idol-making in the Valley. Meanwhile, the Grahacharyas increasingly confined themselves to their traditional roles in astrology and ritual practice.

Thus, the evolution of idol making in Barak Valley reflects not merely a change of artisanship but a broader process of social specialization, cultural adaptation, and artistic growth. It is within this historical and cultural milieu that Panpatti often referred to as the ‘Kumartoli’ of Silchar emerged as the epicenter of a century-old idol-making tradition, sustaining both the spiritual life and the visual culture of the region.

Durga Puja and the Role of Panpatti:

Among the many cultural attributes that distinguish the Bengali community, devotion expressed through image worship occupies a central place. The ritual life of the Bengali Hindu household and community is inseparable from the sacred image the clay embodiment of divinity that transforms belief into visible presence. In the Bengali-dominated Barak Valley, this devotional culture fostered the growth of numerous *Kumbhakar* (potter) families whose hereditary vocation has long been the crafting of idols for religious worship. Their annual calendar revolves around the Durga Puja season, when months of preparation culminate in intense labour, artistic concentration, and collective anticipation.

At the heart of this sacred economy stands Panpatti, situated in the very core of Silchar. For over a century, Panpatti has functioned as the principal centre of idol making in the Valley, earning for itself the affectionate epithet the “Kumartoli of Silchar.” The comparison is drawn with Kumartuli, the globally renowned quarter of Kolkata where generations of artisans have shaped the iconic images of Durga and other deities. In a regional sense, Panpatti mirrors that legacy: a dense settlement of artisan households where sculpting is not merely an occupation but a way of life, transmitted from father to son across generations.

The history of Panpatti’s emergence as an idol-making hub is intertwined with patterns of migration and cultural exchange. During the pre-Independence era, skilled idol makers from Dhaka and other districts of what is now Bangladesh frequently travelled to Silchar during the festive season. Some were commissioned by affluent patrons; others arrived independently, seeking opportunities in the expanding religious landscape of the Valley. Many would return home after the season’s work. However, the upheaval of Partition altered these seasonal rhythms. A number of artisans chose to settle permanently in Panpatti, transforming the locality into a stable and thriving nucleus of idol production. Among the early generation of distinguished craftsmen, the name of Rohini Paul remains especially significant in local memory.

For decades, the artisans of Panpatti supplied an impressive number of idols each year—serving both community (barowari) and household pujas. In a single season, one family could produce between thirty to fifty idols of varying sizes. Besides Durga, they crafted images of Kali, Saraswati, Manasa, Viswakarma, Ganesha, Lakshmi, Shiva, and other deities according to ritual demand. The workshops bustled with rhythmic activity: the shaping of straw armatures, the layering of clay, the patient drying under the autumn sun, the delicate painting of eyes in the ritual moment of *chokkhu daan*. Panpatti thus became synonymous with sacred craftsmanship in the Barak Valley.

Yet, like many traditional craft centres across India, Panpatti has not remained untouched by the forces of modernity. Over the past two or three decades, profound shifts in social structure, aesthetic preference, and economic aspiration have altered the cultural landscape of Silchar. Durga Puja has increasingly evolved into a competitive spectacle, where innovation, scale, and thematic experimentation attract public attention. Puja committees now frequently commission renowned idol makers from West Bengal,

Tripura, and other regions. Professional sculptors and academically trained artists bring new materials fibreglass, thermocol, mixed media and contemporary sculptural concepts into the field.

Students from the Department of Visual Arts at Assam University, Silchar, along with emerging amateur artists, have also begun experimenting with diverse mediums and thematic installations. This competitive environment has undeniably enriched the artistic dimension of Durga Puja, elevating the sculptural quality and conceptual ambition of the festival. However, it has simultaneously marginalized many of the traditional idol makers of Panpatti, who though immensely skilled within inherited practices often lack exposure to modern materials, contemporary design sensibilities, and large-scale infrastructural resources.

Economic pressures compound these artistic challenges. The cost of raw materials clay, straw, bamboo, paints, costumes, ornaments has risen steeply. Each idol requires significant investment in decorative elements, yet the average selling price, often ranging between ten to twenty thousand rupees, leaves only a narrow margin between expenditure and profit. Sudip Paul, a third-generation representative of one such artisan family, has articulated these difficulties with poignant clarity. His father, the veteran Suresh Paul, continues to work in the studio established by his grandfather, the late Balaram Paul, who settled in Panpatti after Partition. Despite the area's reputation as the "Kumartoli of Silchar," Sudip observes that its former glamour is steadily fading.

One of the most pressing issues is spatial constraint. Panpatti, once a relatively open artisan quarter, has gradually transformed into a congested commercial locality. Most idol makers operate from rented premises, often too cramped to accommodate large-scale creations. The limited workshop space restricts them to producing idols of nine or ten feet at most insufficient to satisfy the growing demand of community puja committees, which increasingly prefer colossal, theme-based installations. Consequently, many committees turn to external artists who can provide grander spectacles.

The shift toward thematic and experimental pujas, while artistically stimulating, has placed traditional forms at risk. The classical iconography and stylistic conventions that defined Panpatti's Durga images are gradually overshadowed by dramatic reinterpretations. In this competitive climate, many Panpatti artisans survive by serving to low-budget community pujas and household worshippers who remain loyal to traditional aesthetics.

Ironically, despite their central role in shaping the festival's most sacred element, the idol itself, these artisans often remain unrecognized. Awards and accolades are typically bestowed upon the organizing committees, with the sculptor's name seldom acknowledged. Idol making demands extraordinary skill, patience, physical endurance, and spiritual dedication. It is a craft that matures only through years of disciplined practice, yet the artisan's labour frequently dissolves into anonymity once the festival concludes.

Faced with shrinking profits and mounting labour, many idol makers hesitate to encourage their children to continue the profession. Some attempt to adapt, experimenting cautiously with contemporary trends; others abandon the ancestral craft in search of more stable livelihoods. Today, only six or seven families in Panpatti remain fully engaged in idol making. Among them are Nitai Paul, Satya Ranjan Paul, Shyamal Paul, Gopi Paul, Suresh Paul, and a handful of others who persist despite adversity. Where once a single family might produce forty or fifty Durga idols in a season, the number has now declined to approximately twenty on average.

This decline poses not merely an economic concern but a cultural one. Panpatti represents more than a cluster of workshops, it embodies a century-old tradition that has shaped the devotional and artistic identity of Silchar. If thoughtful intervention, institutional support, and community awareness are not mobilized, this historic craft centre may gradually recede into memory. The loss would not only diminish the livelihood of its artisans but also impoverish the cultural heritage of the Barak Valley itself.

In the tension between tradition and modernity, Panpatti stands at a crossroads, its clay still moist with possibility, yet its future uncertain.

Panpatti: The Brothel and the Paradox of Sacred Soil:

Panpatti, known primarily as the “Kumartoli” of Silchar for its century-old idol-making tradition, occupies a more complex social geography than that of a mere artisan quarter. Alongside its sculptural heritage, the locality has long been associated with another controversial yet historically embedded institution a brothel area situated in its immediate vicinity. This juxtaposition of sacred craftsmanship and stigmatized livelihood renders Panpatti a space of layered cultural contradictions.

Historical accounts and oral testimonies suggest that organized prostitution in this area dates back at least to the period of the Second World War. During that time, Silchar functioned as a strategic transit and garrison town. Soldiers travelling toward the eastern front are said to have frequented the locality, and local women entered into sex work as a means of subsistence within a wartime economy. Some narratives further claim that even in the late colonial period the area was visited by British tea planters and officials, though documentary verification of such claims remains limited and largely anecdotal.

Over the decades, the character of the locality has evolved. What once may have been a loosely structured settlement gradually developed into a more organized red-light area. At present, a significant number of commercial sex workers (CSWs) reside in and around Panpatti, many living with their families. The system is often mediated by agents, while senior women commonly referred to as *mashi* supervise and manage day-to-day operations.

Legally, prostitution in municipal areas is subject to regulatory restrictions. At one point, under Section 256(1) of the Assam Municipal Act, 1956, the Silchar Municipal Board reportedly issued an eviction notice concerning the Panpatti brothel. However, despite such administrative actions and repeated appeals by civil society organizations to district authorities, the settlement has continued to function for decades. Its physical proximity to the Sadar Police Station adds another layer of irony to the situation, underscoring the complex interplay between law, social reality, and administrative inertia.

Yet beyond its socio-legal dimension lies a striking cultural paradox, an intimate ritual connection between the brothel and the Durga Puja festivities of Silchar. This relationship revolves around the practice of collecting “*Punya Maati*” (sacred soil) from the threshold of a prostitute’s house for incorporation into the ritual bath (*Mahasnan*) of Goddess Durga. The soil is traditionally gathered from the *nishiddho palli* literally, the “forbidden quarter” and symbolically merged with clay used in crafting the idol. The ritual is marked by a poignant irony. Women engaged in prostitution are often marginalized, stigmatized, and socially ostracized throughout the year. Yet during Durga Puja, their doorstep soil becomes indispensable to the sacred process of invoking the Goddess. The priest, as part of ritual protocol, symbolically seeks and receives this soil before the commencement of the worship.

Various interpretations attempt to explain the philosophical logic behind this practice. One popular belief suggests that when a man enters a prostitute’s home, he leaves behind his virtue or moral façade at her threshold. Consequently, the soil outside her dwelling is believed to contain the essence of that relinquished purity. Incorporating this soil into the idol thus symbolizes the transformation of moral impurity into divine sanctity.

Another interpretation frames the ritual as a subtle acknowledgment of the marginalized. By including soil from a prostitute’s dwelling, the ritual affirms that even those relegated to society’s periphery are part of the cosmic and social order. In this reading, the practice becomes an act, however symbolic of inclusion, suggesting that no space or community lies beyond the embrace of the Goddess. Durga, as the universal mother, transcends social hierarchies; thus, the ritual soil affirms that divinity arises from every stratum of existence.

Contemporary perspectives further interpret the custom as an expression of inclusiveness within Hindu ritual practice a reminder that sacredness is not confined to socially sanctioned spaces. However, critics

also argue that the ritual does little to alter the material realities of sex workers' lives. The symbolic reverence during Durga Puja rarely translates into sustained social dignity or structural change. Hence, the practice stands as both a profound metaphor of integration and a reflection of enduring societal contradictions.

In Panpatti, therefore, the sacred and the stigmatized coexist within a narrow geographical radius. The same locality that gives form to the divine image of Durga also participates directly or indirectly in the ritual that binds the Goddess to society's margins. This coexistence deepens the anthropological and cultural significance of Panpatti, rendering it not merely an artisan settlement but a microcosm of broader Indian social paradoxes.

Conclusion:

1. Durga Puja in Silchar has evolved beyond a religious festival into a major cultural institution integrating art, craftsmanship, and community participation.
2. Panpatti has served for more than a century as the primary centre of idol making in Silchar and the wider Barak Valley.
3. The growth of Panpatti as an artisan hub was significantly influenced by the migration of skilled idol makers from regions of present-day Bangladesh before and after the Partition of India.
4. Idol making in Panpatti has been sustained through hereditary transmission of skills within the Kumbhakar community, creating a distinctive craft lineage.
5. Rising material costs, lack of adequate workspace, and declining profit margins have placed considerable pressure on traditional idol makers.
6. The emergence of theme-based pujas and the involvement of professional artists from other regions have intensified competition, marginalizing many traditional artisans.
7. The number of families engaged fully in idol making in Panpatti has significantly decreased over the past few decades, posing a threat to the survival of the tradition.
8. The presence of a nearby brothel area and the ritual use of "Punya Maati" in Durga Puja highlight a complex relationship between sacred ritual and marginalized social spaces.
9. Preservation of this heritage requires policy intervention, financial assistance, and recognition of traditional artisans as custodians of intangible cultural heritage.
10. Without timely cultural awareness and structural support, the historic idol-making tradition of Panpatti may gradually decline, resulting in the loss of a vital component of the cultural identity of Silchar and the Barak Valley.

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