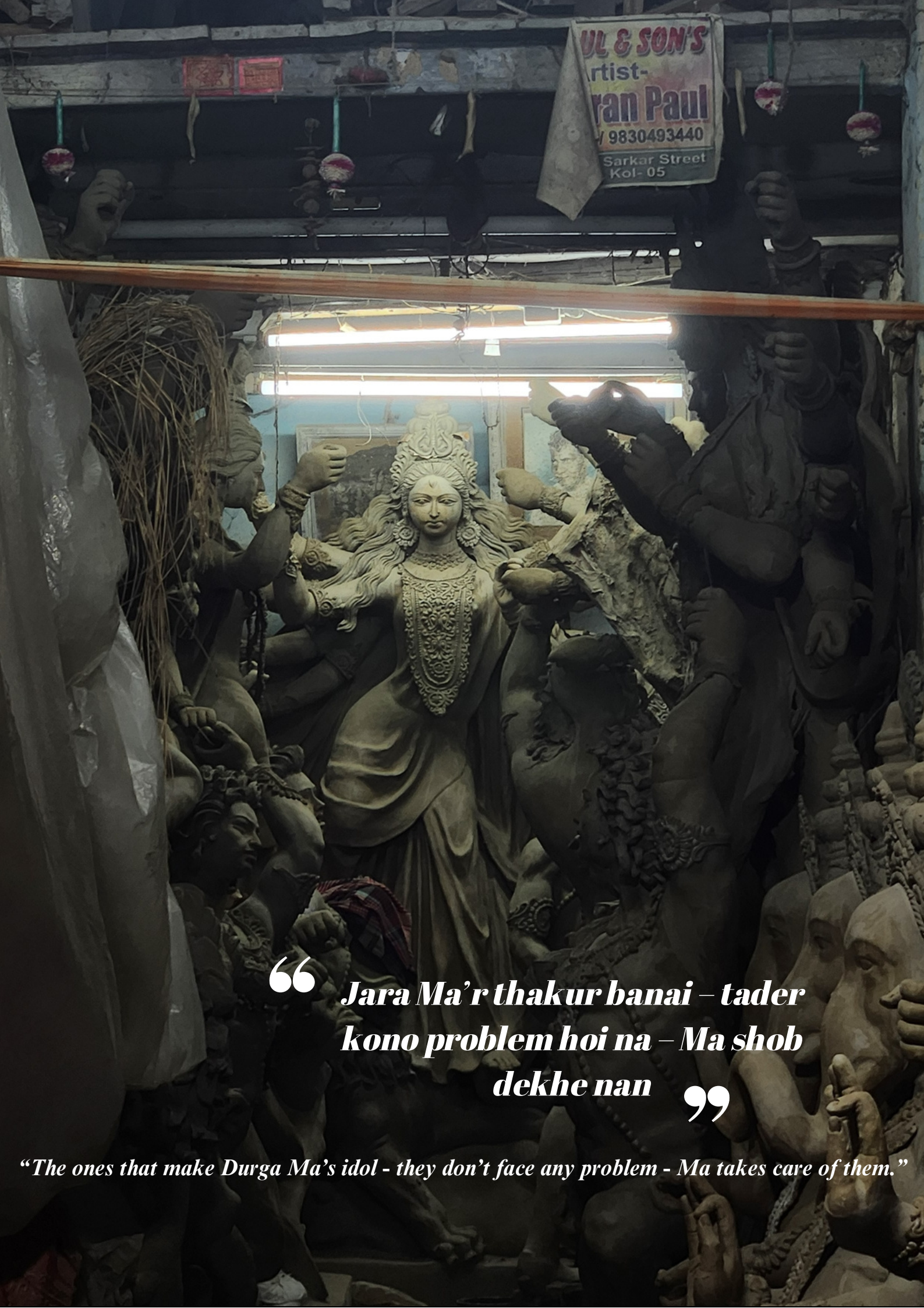


Kumortuli

Understanding The Mortal Lives
of The Makers of The Immortal.

-Aarushi Nandi, JGLS.



**“ Jara Ma’r thakur banai – tader
kono problem hoi na – Ma shob
dekhe nan ”**

“The ones that make Durga Ma’s idol - they don’t face any problem - Ma takes care of them.”

Durga Pujo has always been synonymous for every Bengali with festivities, streets decked up with colourful lights, appetizing meals, and never-ending happiness.

However, amidst these thousand stories lies the un-heard story of the mortal life of the makers of the immortal - the idol sculptors of *Kumortuli*.

'Kumortuli' – the 'land of the potters' lies in the quaint, rustic streets of North Kolkata. Its inhabitants are the *'Kumors'* from the *'Pal'* community of *Krishna-Nagar*, who migrated to Kolkata approximately hundred years ago, and since then this ordinary lane has become the workshop where divinity herself is created.

However, as glorious as this may seem, the reality could not be farther away from it.

As poverty, loans and neglect cripple the industry at present, does not promise a very-bright future either.





In a one of a kind study facilitated by the British Council and West Bengal Government's Department of Tourism, the total idol-making market in Kumortuli area is pegged at INR 35 crore with the approximate total number of Durga idols manufactured estimated at 3500.



**“ Amader kono respect
nei – labour to labour e
thakbe ”**

“We have no respect. After all a 'labour' will remain a 'labour' only for the society.”





The West Bengal Government recognizes Kumortuli as a 'slum'.

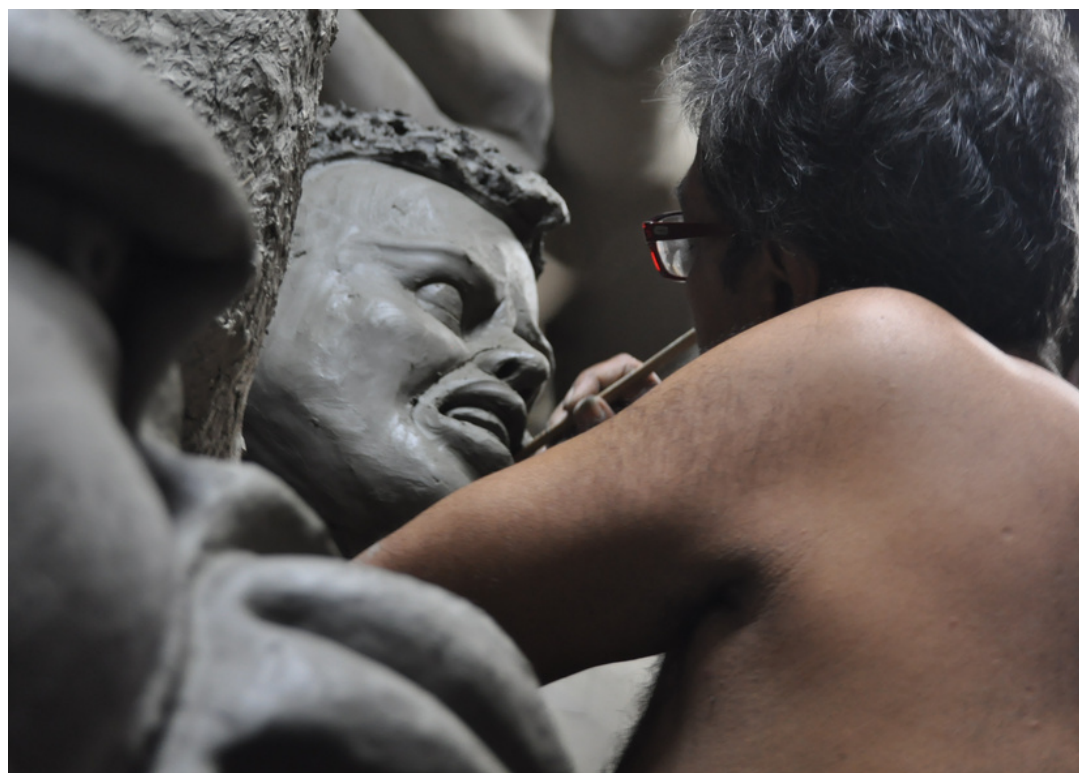




One of the main issues experienced by the artisans is the lack of respect for their work.

These artists are not seen as creators of divine art but are termed to be as described by Raja Pal “low-class wage workers” that work with “dirty mud” and earn their living “without putting in any substantive or professional and qualified effort”.

He emphasizes that since there is no recognition, thereby no financial security resulting in a declining interest of future generations to pursue this art form.





The misrepresentation of them as “workers” and their art as “ordinary waged labour” and their working quarters as “slum”, has undermined the validity of their work as a profession, and much less as a skilled artistic endeavour.

To break out of this cycle and bring the deserved artists into the spotlight and to empower them to enforce their rights, IPR law could be a viable solution.





**“ Eita akta byapsha – art form dekhe
toh pet bhorbe na. ”**

“This is a business. Asking the public to acknowledge it as an art form, will not feed us.”



Intellectual Property Rights Law is an emerging field of legal protection that is gaining immense attention from organisations world-wide for preservation of traditional arts and crafts.

For the most part, IPR law was never enhanced or implemented in order for it to be used as an appropriate mode of legal protection for traditional cultural expressions (TCE).

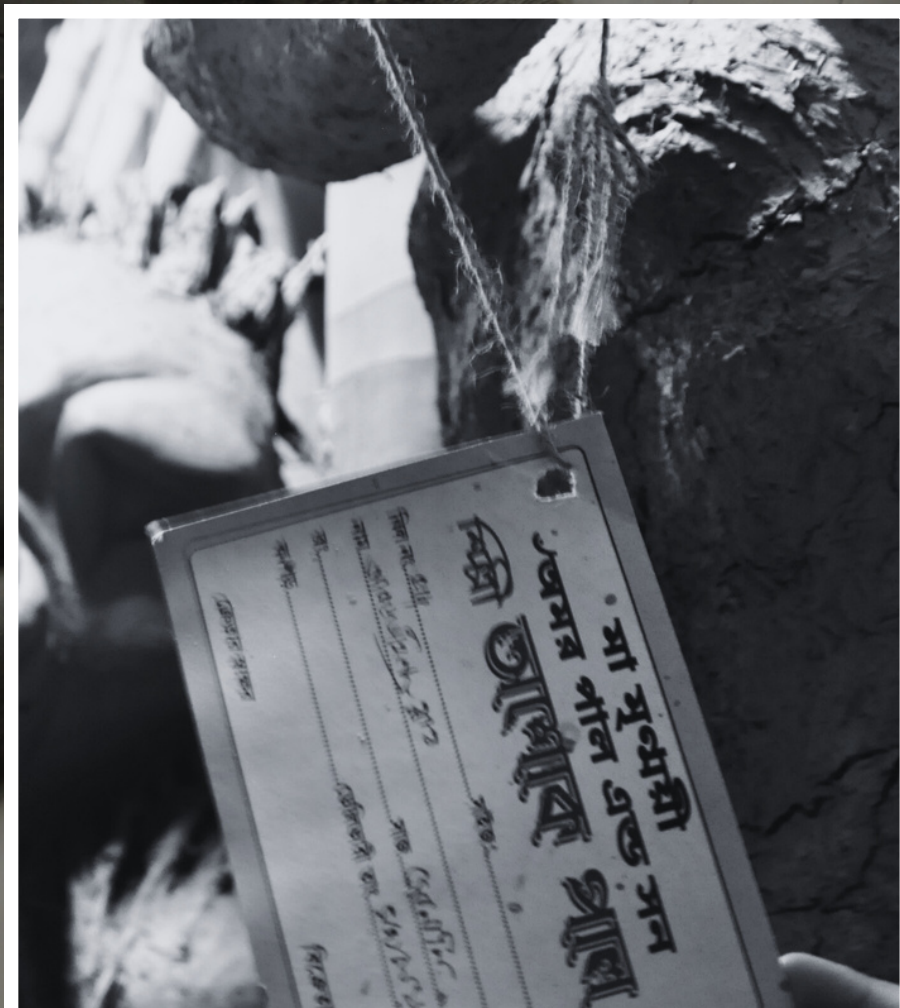
However, in recent times, with the efforts of WIPO (World Intellectual Property Organization) and the recognition awarded by UNESCO to multiple TCEs around the world, the dialogue is changing.

At the international level, WIPO created an Intergovernmental Committee on Intellectual Property and Genetic Resources, Traditional Knowledge and Folklore (IGC), which has been discussing instruments for the protection of TCEs.

Among the crucial requirements required for an art form to qualify as a TCE, the Kumortuli Idols satisfy each requirement.

However, the characteristic that must be emphasized on is the uniqueness of each murti. One of the most important feature to consider in any aspect of IP law is the ‘uniqueness’ or ‘specificity’ of the expression in consideration. The more distinguishable the features, the more easier it is to receive a recognition under IP laws.

In regard to this, the concept of “gharanas” among the Kumortuli artisans plays a very important role.





Gharana is the concept of a specialized school within a larger community where each school is distinguished based on one particular unique trait or feature while the whole remains the same.

Amongst the Kumortuli community, a gharana is created primarily and most commonly through changes in the facial features of the Durga Idol.

The *Chala* – it refers to the background board against which the idol is placed.



The traditional Durga Murti has always been constructed on ‘*ek chala*’ where in the Murti consisting of Ma Durga, and her children (Lakshmi, Saraswati, Kartik and Ganesha) are all constructed against a single board.

This was the traditional depiction of the ‘Durga and her family’ signifying the unified, joint Hindu Bengali family.

The prevalence of this was most common among the ‘*bonedi-bari*’ (elite Bengali house) *pujos* and is still found only among the traditional familial *pujos*.

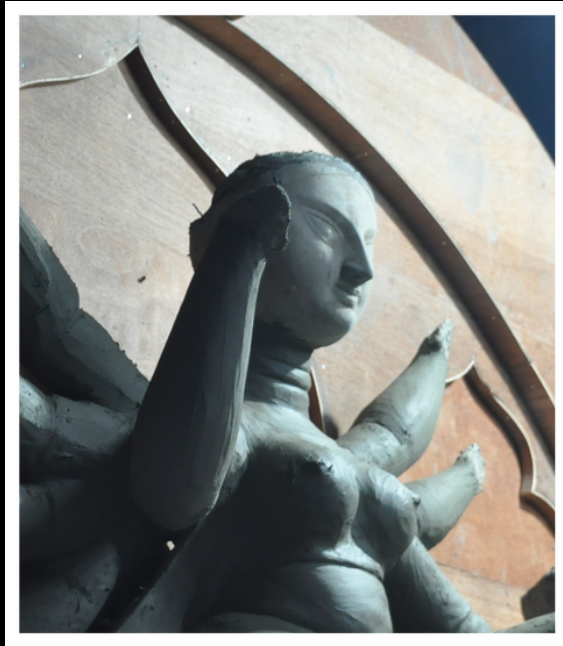


The more recent pujos held in the community pandals, organised by various clubs follow a *'panch chala'* format where in every individual murti is built against a different backdrop symbolically marking the sociological change of joint families to nuclear families in the Bengali society.





The Face – the primary indication of an artist's gharana in Kumortuli is marked by the facial features of the Durga Murti. On the most fundamental level, it can be briefly divided into two types of faces – firstly, the *bangla mukh* and secondly, the *gol mukh*.



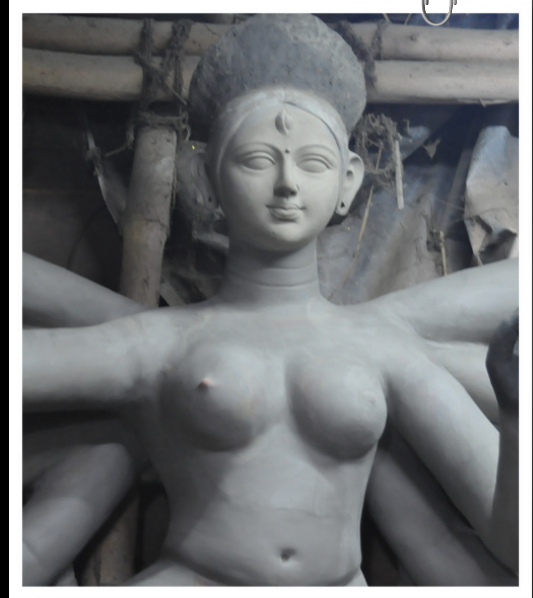
“The Bangla Mukh”

The *Bangla mukh* is the traditional face that was sculpted by the first few generations of kumors when they were only catering to the familial ‘*bonedi bari pujo*’.

The typical feature of this type of face is *taana chokh* (extending eyes – stretched from the centre of the forehead to the ends of the face on either side) and *choto thoth* (small lips pursed together).

“The Gol Mukh”

In this form, the eyes on the murti are not stretched, but very evenly shaped, much more akin to an ordinary woman’s features and the lips are also more evenly shaped without it protruding with sharp edges.



This face is a more contemporary form of sculpting, mostly used in the community club pujos.



**“ Kada mati ghat te chaiche na – kada
ghata – shob jaigai eitar respect hoi
na. ”**

*“They do not want to work with all this mud - working with mud and all- regardless of
the outcome - doesn't receive respect everywhere.”*



An estimated extra 200,000 to 300,000 people visit Kolkata per day alone during Durga Pujo. There are about 28,000 community sponsored pujas in the state, with nearly 2000 in Kolkata and more than 200 such celebrations have budgets running into crores of rupees.

However, unfortunately, the artisans responsible for the nostalgic, sacred grandeur that persists over the city, are left out of this celebration and remain cramped up in the dark alleyways of North Kolkata, mixing their ‘dirty mud’ and employing their ‘uneducated’ and ‘unskilled’ labour while the rest of the city celebrates the immortal creations sculpted with their mortal hands.

Maybe it is time to open our eyes and identify the work, the skill, the knowledge and the resilience of these artists that fight everyday to keep the culture alive, and hopefully they do not in the near future have to introduce themselves by saying “*labour toh labour e thakbe*”.



**“ Eita amader bektigoto jibika
- Jonmo theke pawa. ”**

“This is our 'personal' - traditional profession - these skills are present with us since birth.”