

Overhaul of procurement process slows down work at idol hub

Clay bottleneck hits Kumartuli

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Kumartuli: By mid-June, artisans in Kumartuli are usually done building the basic structure of Durga idols. This year is an exception.

At 11am, the lanes of Kumartuli appear deserted. There are next to no idols drying in the sun. Those that are standing at attention, lining shop sides, are all-straw or half-straw and half-clay. The artisans are inside their respective shops, sweeping the floor or nursing a cup of tea.

The shops making accessories for the idols — crowns, ornaments, saris — have their shutters down.

Babu Pal, the secretary of the Kumartuli Mritshilpo Sanskriti Samiti, which is the association of idol makers, said: "There is no supply of clay since election day (April 29). We have been set back by a month."

"The first batch is supposed to arrive any day now," he added promptly.

The change in government and the resulting overhaul of the unwritten rules governing the idol-making trade — par-

ticularly the supply of clay — are being blamed for the delay.

Traditionally, truckloads of clay were supplied to Kumartuli and other idol-making hubs in and around Calcutta, including Kalighat, Howrah, Sinthi, Panihati, Sodepur, Barasat and Habra. The clay was sourced from several riverine areas, notably Falta, Diamond Harbour, Canning, Gosaba, Jibantala and Uluberia.

The supply chain began with the "maati dealer", who controlled access to the land from which the clay was extracted. In many cases, the dealer was not the actual landowner. He would sell the clay to the "supplier", who in turn sold it to idol-makers, the *bhnar*-makers, brick kilns, small and big potters, and real estate promoters.

Every year, at least 600 truckloads of clay are supplied to the idol-making hubs of Kumartuli, Ultadanga and Maniktala. A single truckload is enough to make around 35 to 40 fair-sized idols.

Tapas Pramanik, 55, a "dealer" from Diamond Harbour, said: "Earlier, we used to source clay from river banks,



Unfinished idols in a workshop in Kumartuli on Wednesday. Picture by Sanat Kr Sinha

but the irrigation department put a stop to that a year ago. So we used abandoned land; we would identify these with the help of the block land records office. Once the election results were out, that process came to a halt."

Pramanik told **Metro**: "On May 6, the local BJP leader asked us to stop procuring clay in this manner. He said such

indiscriminate procuring of clay was tantamount to *maati churi* or theft."

Pal said that soon afterwards, suppliers were informed of a new rule: the responsibility for verifying the legality of the clay source would now rest with the end users — idol-makers and potters. They would have to ensure that the clay came from

land backed by all required documents, including a no-objection certificate (NOC) from the landowner.

With the clay tied up in red tape, idol-making is on pause, and the *cha* drinkers of the city are having to make do with paper cups instead of the *bhnars*.

Kumartuli alone employs 600 artisans; 3,500 others who are directly employed; and another 2 lakh who are indirectly associated with this industry.

Overnight, the movers and shakers of the last category, the "maati dealers", have been removed from the clay supply chain.

Pal, from the Kumartuli association, said: "Artisans like me had to scout around for genuine landowners who would let us source clay from them. Next, we had to submit the documents of such land as well as the landowners to the BLRO (block land revenue officer)."

He added: "We have identified four landowners. It has taken us a whole month to do this." Now that the *maati* has been spoken for, can Maa be far behind?