MANY DURGAS

For years, they have lent their craft, time and toil towards the making of the centrepiece of the Durga Puja, the idols in all their detail. **Graphic** celebrates the women who make the deities festival-ready

Illustration: Suman Choudhury



Kripamoyee Karmakar
of Bonbirsingha in Bankura



About 150 kilometres west of Calcutta lies Bonbirsingha, a remote village in Bankura district. There was a time when it was known as a hub of silkweavers. Now, the ancient craft cannot quite keep up with the smart powerlooms.

In one corner of the village live the Karmakars, a family of traditional blacksmiths.

Kripamoyee, 49, married into this family 30 years ago. She is a specialist of sorts; she paints Durga and her family on canvas or on paper every year. The complete work is known as Thakurani Pat or Pater Durga (**in pic, left**).

Several households in Bankura worship the Thakurani Pat. Unlike the clay idols that are immersed in water every year, a traditional Pater Durga is preserved at home all year round. It is only replaced when a new canvas is painted the following autumn.

It was one of Kripamoyee's father-in-law Nitai Karmakar's forefathers who had made the occupational shift — from blacksmith to artist. But Kripamoyee's husband didn't follow in his father's footsteps. He took up metalwork, a more profitable calling that supports the family round the year.

Nitai decided to train Kripamoyee, his daughter-in-law, who had a knack for painting. For nine years, she helped her father-in-law paint four Thakurani Pats every year before Durga Puja. Rest of the year, she assisted her husband. Before his death in 2001, Nitai passed the mantle on to his daughter-in-law.

Kripamoyee says, "Since 2002, I started working full-time on Thakurani Pat. In the beginning, I copied my father-in-law's work but gradually developed my own style."

In 2011, she decided to do something she had never done before. She recreated the rare Mahamari Pat that depicts Shitala, the goddess of smallpox and an incarnation of Durga, for the erstwhile zamindar family of Jamkuri.

Legend has it that whoever draws the *pat* that is worshipped on Nabami dies soon after, but saves the village from the deadly epidemic. "My father-in-law had forbidden me. But I wanted to break the cycle of superstition," says Kripamoyee.

The act brought no apparent harm. On the contrary, scholars and art connoisseurs started coming to see her work and commission more projects. In 2013, Kripamoyee was invited to the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts in Delhi to exhibit her Thakurani Pats. This was followed by more invitations from various national museums and exhibitions.

"This year I have received multiple orders for Durga *pats* from many places, including theme pujas in Calcutta," she tells **The Telegraph**. To meet the rising demand, she has trained her son Arup, daughter Mala and daughter-in-law Brishti.

Prasun Chaudhuri



Photo: Moumita Chaudhuri

Mukti Pramanick
of Kumartuli, Calcutta

She has been making ornaments for Ma Durga for 40 years. On the day of this interview, she is crafting the *mukut* or headpiece.

"The work has become simpler over the years," says Pramanick. "Nowadays, there are moulds. I copy the design onto a paper and then paste the beads, zari and sequins in place. But things were way different even in the 1990s," she adds.

Pramanick works in a small workshop with her son, niece and nephew. She says, "My father was a priest but he married me into the Pramanick family of Kumartuli who are *shaaj karigars*."

To get back to her story, she is one of the few *karigars* today who work with *bullen*, which is fine metal wirework. These are entwined with the same length of golden thread and used to make designs on the deities' ornaments and accessories.

"Chemical adhesive was not available then, at least not to us. My husband used to make a kind of adhesive by heating resin extracted from pine trees and wax collected from hives. It is very dangerous because the smallest of mistakes can burn up the whole place," she says, pointing at a mound of handmade adhesive.

Her son Debashish learnt the trick from his father. She adds, "Without this, we cannot stick *bullen* on the headpiece, the wristband, the armlets...." Says Debashish, "The chemical gun is easy to work with. But *bullen* will not hold if you use modern-day adhesives. That is why most workers have shifted from it and use zari instead. But I have not given it up, nor has my mother."

Moumita Chaudhuri

Chandana and Bandana Kar *of Boalia, Howrah*

Mahisasuramardini, the historic audio montage soldered in popular imagination to Birendra Krishna Bhadra, describes how the 10-armed Goddess Durga received divine weapons from various deities when she was invoked by the gods to defeat the fierce buffalo-demon.

Each of the 10 weapons symbolises a divine power. She uses these to destroy the force of evil and all negativity, according to the *Puranas*.

The Sudarshan Chakra or discus gifted by Vishnu stands for *dharma* or righteousness, the *vajra* or thunderbolt gifted by Indra signifies unshakeable confidence and so on and so forth.

The weapons that adorn the hands of the Durga idols in Puja pandals are manmade, mass manufactured mostly by artisans of Boalia village near Birshibpur in Howrah.

These weapons or *astras* made of aluminium foil, cardboard and cheap metals are transported to various shops in the idol hub of Kumartuli. These are sold as packages.

Among hundreds of artisans stand out two sisters-in-law — Chandana and Bandana Kar.

They cover the faux weapons with foil, then paint them in red, blue and yellow.

"When we first arrived in this village after getting married, we were astounded to find *astra* workshops in several homes," says Bandana, the younger of the two. "We saw how men and young boys fashioned these." Something about the craft interested them and they offered their services.

The request was a little unusual since it was a male-dominated space. On a trial basis, Sanjay Manna, manager of a workshop, assigned them some work. As they sharpened their skills, Chandana and Bandana got more work.

The payment is not princely but enough to cover their personal expenses. Says Chandana, "We don't do this just for the money; it gives us immense joy that our weapons adorn the hands of the goddess in faraway places."

Prasun Chaudhuri





Photo: Subhabrata Maitra

Reba Paul
of Ghurni, Krishnanagar

Durga *chaali* or *chaalchitro* is the traditional hand-painted curved frame that works as the backdrop for Durga and her family. These days though, it is a rarity.

Reba Paul, 79, has been painting *chaalchitros* for six decades now. Last year, during a visit to Krishnanagar's Ghurni — the hub of clay idolmakers — I met her. She was engrossed in painting on coarse handmade paper the mythic scene from *Devi Mahatmya* wherein the goddess manifests in fierce forms to vanquish powerful demons.

She said to me, "I learnt the craft from my husband and father-in-law, who supplied *chaalis* to Kumartuli. There was a huge demand those days."

She spoke about how she started as a helper to speed up work to meet stiff deadlines. Those days artisans used natural pigments such as indigo, turmeric and vermillion. "Now I use synthetic colours," she adds.

Her husband Sosthi Paul died 23 years ago, but she has continued with the work mostly because she enjoys it. She told me how her married daughters visited her frequently and urged her to stop working. "But it helps me earn a living and stay independent," she had added.

Even five years ago, she travelled all the way to Kumartuli with her *chaalis*. "Some theme puja artists placed their orders with me," she had recalled.

When I called her a fortnight before Durga Puja she sounded somewhat low on energy; she hadn't received too many orders this year.

She told me, "Now I have to compete with computer prints. Imagine that."

Prasun Chaudhuri

Khairunissa Begum *of Domjur, Howrah*

The woman with her back to the door of the one-room structure is thrashing what looks like bunches of black ropes. With every movement, she brings down a bunch on a rectangular wooden board with nails stuck on it.

Later, Khairunissa Begum tells me, "The coarse jute has to be beaten like this. Only then will it turn into silken strands."

The *karigars* of Kumartuli use these to make the tresses of various deities from Durga to Kali, Jagaddhatri to Lakshmi to Saraswati."

Every year from August to January, Khairunissa and her ilk get really busy. Domjur block is in Howrah district, a little over 30 kilometres from Calcutta. It is known as the tressmakers' hub.

But my story does not begin with Khairunissa. It begins with Sheikh Ansar, who is an *ostagar* or master craftsman, and has been in the tress trade for generations.

Outside Ansar's house is a parked van. Sacks full of jute are being loaded on to it. The sacks are huge. "About 50 kilograms but the volume makes them look bulkier," says Ansar.

He continues, "There are nearly 35 families in this village whose main occupation is making tresses for idols. The men procure the jute rolls from the farmers. The rolls have to be cut into specific sizes and then dyed."

The dye comes from Calcutta's Burrabazar. "We buy 25 kilograms of colour for ₹8,000. Jute costs ₹130 per kilo," says Ansar.

The next step is to sun-dry the dyed jute.

Once dyed, over 100 women work on the tresses. Ansar suggests I meet Khairunissa.



Photo: Moumita Chaudhuri

Khairunissa's house is on the other side of the village. Ansar's 12-year-old grandson shows me the way. En route, I see more women at work. Almost every household has heaps of dyed jute lying in the courtyard.

"I am not an *ostagar*. I am only a *karigar*, my job is to comb the jute," says Khairunissa by way of introduction.

If she is surprised that someone wants to know about her work in such detail, she doesn't let on. Instead, she talks about the stages and processes like a professional.

She says, "When the *ostagar* sends us the dyed jute, the first job is to separate them into thin bundles. The thinner the bundle, the silkier the hair. Some bundles are long, so they fold them in half. After being beaten, the jute is washed and put out to dry."

Finally, it is rolled on *pyakati*. These are sticks that are obtained after drying the main stalk of the jute plant. This will make the silken strands look curly. The *ostagars* then dye it one last time.

Khairunissa makes ₹150 per *bojha*. "You spread your hand out and grab as much jute as you can. That is a *bojha*," she says. One kilogram of jute yields three dozen packets of finished hair.

Moumita Chaudhuri