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A Postcolonial Reading of a Diverse Craft Economy

Rishika Mukhopadhyay

This essay brings together J. K. Gibson-Graham's diverse-economies framework and Kalyan Sanyal's postcolonial capitalist development to unpack the heterogeneous economic processes of clay idol making practice in the Kumartuli neighborhood of Kolkata, India. This craft is rapidly getting transformed through state sanctions and corporate funding. Consequently, scholars have identified this encounter as this craftwork's exposure to and absorption within capitalism. This essay unconventionally reads the differences within Kumartuli's seemingly capitalist modes of production to make legible the absence of alternative discourses, thereby teasing out regimes of enterprises, coexisting class processes, and noncapitalist labor relations within a wage-labor setup. The paper examines the financial sector's sponsorship and the postcolonial state's development-driven governmentality, yet at the same time, identifies how they do not fully enroll the sector within capitalist production logic. Craft workers' and women owner-artisans' mundane counterhegemonic politics, which claims socio-economic justice, is seen as disrupting the processes of the accumulation economy.

Key Words: Craft, Development, Diverse Economy, Labor, Postcolonialism

This essay gives in-depth insight into the economic organization of a craft practice located in the city of Kolkata, India, by bringing out the complexity and diverse production processes within a heterogeneous economic practice through a diverse-economies framework (Gibson-Graham and Dombroski 2020; Gibson-Graham 2006). The essay accounts for the Indian state's role in sustaining the craft sector through developmental measures operationalized as a mode of governance but also considers whether state initiatives bring the craft enterprise under the capitalist mode of production or whether they create provisions for diversity to exist without forcing craft enterprises to enter the normative market relation.

Contemporary Western scholarship has theorized the craft economy as a sector that models alternative modes of production and marketing (Luckman and Thomas 2018; Gowan and Slocum 2014). New-age designer-makers are often perceived as pushing back against the capitalist production regime of mass-manufactured goods through digital spaces that constitute an ethical, creative economic

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space (Luckman 2015). This moment in history has been applauded as a "renaissance of the handmade," whereas scholarship also acknowledges tensions within the privileged and gendered nature of such micro-entrepreneurial work (1–6). My field of study, however, is distinctly different from this economic evocation of craft. My work focuses on religious idol making in the Kumartuli neighborhood of Kolkata. Existing in the region for more than three centuries, this clay-making craft is traditionally a hereditary caste-based profession,[1] hence commonly known as a "traditional" craft (Sen 2016). However, it should be examined separately from India's vast and, to some extent, impoverished craft sector because it has enjoyed the rare privilege of being a ritual craft.[2]

Kumartuli, named after the potter caste, is at least a 250-year-old neighborhood. Now a notified slum adjoining the river Hoogley, this neighborhood hosts five hundred registered artisans who make life-size Hindu clay idols for the city's biggest annual religious festival and small/medium-size idols of gods, goddesses, and realistic statues throughout the year. The process of idol making, which involves natural materials such as bamboo, straw, and clay, and the space that is Kumartuli, with its meandering lanes and cramped workshops, have become a spectacle in the city over the last decade. This space produces the material embodiment of the goddess on a yearly basis, leading to city-wide carnivalesque festivity and finally to the artisans' creations being immersed in the river after worship (Guha Thakurta 2015; Bhattacharya 2007).

A female artisan's 20/20 studio was the main base for this essay's research during the two months leading up to the main festival, Durga puja (Durga is the name of a goddess; *puja* refers to a worship ritual indicating religious festivity). The lives of the artisan and her seven *karmachari* (artisanal laborers) were observed. The essay draws further upon nine interviews and ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2018–19, presenting an interwoven account of ethnographic and economic analysis.[3]

This idol-making craft has gone through a rapid transformation in the last two decades with the corporatization of religious festivity and with state support of faith-based extravaganza having taken a central place in India's public life.

1. The artisans of Kumartuli originally hail from the traditional artisanal caste known as the *Kumbhakar* or *Kumar*. They used to be involved in making clay pots and pans in village society. According to Heierstad (2017), even though this occupational group belongs to the lowest strata, within the *Sudra* caste in this oppressive caste hierarchy, they were considered pure or clean *Sudra* along with nine other artisanal, trading, and agricultural professions known as *Nabasakh* (for a detailed discussion on caste and modernity, see Heierstad 2017). Their seasonal migration to the burgeoning colonial city of Kolkata, starting from the mid-nineteenth century, marked a transition in their social identity as they came to be known as *mritshilpi* (clay modellers).

2. India's craft sector is the second-largest source of employment after agriculture, with 16.7 million people working in this sector in 2009–10. Around 40 percent of rural and 35 percent of urban households are engaged in craft work (Viswanathan 2013).

3. The given names of research participants have been replaced by pseudonyms.

Questioning the "traditional" aspect of this craft and commodification of caste, scholars have identified that "modernity and capitalism perhaps are the best terms to describe and analyse the recent changes Kumartuli has undergone" (Heierstad 2017, 9). In contrast, I take an unconventional route to reading the "differences" within Kumartuli's seemingly capitalist production processes to highlight absences in the existing scholarship (Gibson-Graham 2020). While not disqualifying that a transition, albeit discontinuous, toward a capitalist mode of production is visible, I tease out the noncapitalist and alternative relations of production, attempting to express the hitherto suppressed discursive spaces of economic diversity.

Reading Heterogenous Development Economy

Following the framework proposed by diverse-economies scholarship, this essay uses the modalities of enterprise, labor, and finance to unpack the object of analysis: the craft economy (for a schematic table, see Gibson-Graham 2014, S150). Idol makers' role in and engagement with the market for sourcing raw materials and selling finished products and the resultant negotiations that take place in this domain of transaction have been kept outside the essay's scope. I accept the need to "queer" the capitalocentric theoretical standpoint that renders a variety of economic forms and transactions in any society invisible (Gibson-Graham 2006). Citing Bonaventura de Sousa Santos (2004), Gibson-Graham (2020, 483; also see Santos 2016) describe this significant shift as a movement from a "sociology of absences" to documenting "ecologies of difference." To decenter the hegemony of a singular economic framework that reduces complex sets of power relations to one capitalist logic, along with other scholars, I am thinking in this essay through the provocation of a radical heterogeneity (Fickey 2011). However, I am also interested to investigate the ethical nature of some of the already existing differences that constitute noncapitalist and gendered labor relations. Furthermore, I reflect on the question of power and consider the state's role in maintaining these small-scale craft enterprises while exposing them to market capital.

A year after Gibson-Graham published *A Postcapitalist Politics*, Kalyan Sanyal (2007) published the book *Rethinking Capitalist Development: Primitive Accumulation, Governmentality and Post-colonial Capitalism*. The principal enquiry of both these frameworks involves the space of the "outside" of capitalism and how to explain its existence (Gidwani and Wainwright 2014). However, Sanyal's departure from Gibson-Graham is significant as he proposes that the outside, or the noncapital, is produced, perpetuated, and sustained by capitalism, which this essay will query. The continuity of these practices—indeed, with significant adjustments and transformations in the present era—make them a distinct case in the postcolonial economy.

I agree that, in the case of postcolonial economies, the sustained growth of the informal or unorganized sector in the postindependent period entails that the

capitalist system does not thrive solely by annihilating the "other" but by negotiating "the world of difference" (Sanyal 2007, 8). Sanyal argues that the capitalist system is comprised of a "complex of capital-non-capital perpetually locked in a relation of contradiction and mutuality" (39). According to him, capital is part of the accumulation economy, and noncapital constitutes the need economy. In the need economy, the production is governed by the logic of need, and the surplus is only used for immediate consumption. Sanyal, like other development economists, often views the informal or unorganized sector as the need economy and consequently as noncapital (Basu 2019), which is a domain of heterogeneity with "informal arrangements and a network of oral contracts and relations of reciprocity" (Sanyal 2007, 212). Various forms of labor can also be noticed in the need economy, such as "pure self-employed, family labour, communal labour or even wage labour and their various combinations" (212). This theorization finds a stark similarity with the idol-making craft sector. Moreover, Sanyal proposes a reverse flow between accumulation and the need economy: that is, from capital to noncapital, which is an important explanatory framework for my case.

In contradiction to the claims from the postdevelopment school, Sanyal proposes that in developing nations this reverse-capital/resource flow occurs in the name of development. The surplus accumulated in the domain of capital is often transferred back to the need economy as microcredit for self-help groups and the promotion of self-employment for women via NGOs and corporate social responsibility (CSR) schemes. I should note that the development schemes aimed toward particular craft groups—such as idol makers, in my case—are a form of governmentality, masquerading as the generosity of a state rather than as political redress. I should also note that development-driven resource transfer is limited to those selective craft economies with distinct sociocultural capital. But the question remains: does the circuit bring the craft sector under the capitalist regime, or does this form of governmentality ensure that the need economy coexists with the accumulation economy without fully integrating them?

Multiple Class Processes in a Family-Run More-than-Capitalist Craft Enterprise

To position the idol makers within a diverse-economies setup, it is helpful to contextualize some trends of economic production experienced by this sector over time. Historically, the owner-artisan was a self-employed person in a village with the occasional involvement of family labor as the only source of the reproduction of value (Chakrabarti 1985). The potter's profession used to be simple in terms of the artisan's relationship with the production process as the potter had control over the means of production. The raw material was abundant in the potter's natural surroundings, and family labor would help in the production. In the early nineteenth century, when potters started to seasonally migrate to

the emerging colonial city of Kolkata, the land would be leased by the urban landlord, following the pattern of a "patron-client economy" (Heierstad 2017, 148). The produced commodities, both religious idols and potteries, had an immediate market in household and religious festivities, and the return was enough for the subsistence of the artisan family. The enterprise would follow the structure of a communal or independent noncapitalist firm. This especially holds true for idol making as a precapitalist activity encountering a capitalist mode of production. This hereditary caste-based profession started to change its character with the introduction of hired seasonal labor to meet its production demand when idol worship expanded from aristocratic residential houses to the public sphere (Goldblatt 1981). During the introduction of wage labor in this industry, which can be traced back at least a hundred years, these master craftsmen were part of the hand-to-mouth subsistence economy. It was then categorized as a regime of simple reproduction in which "although capitalist relations of production were being reproduced, shop owners must nevertheless have operated on a subsistence basis" (105). Such idol-making economic enterprises from the 1980s closely resemble Sanyal's conceptualization of the need economy, the domain of noncapital. Here, surplus value was spent on everyday consumption or used for the following year's investment to buy the means of production (such as raw materials and labor) and for subsistence survival during the long months of the off-season when there was no religious festival to make idols for. The surplus produced under these circumstances would not account for accumulation on a large scale.

However, during my fieldwork in 2018, I found this enterprise had gone through a substantial change whereby subsistence and need cohabit with accumulation, due to involvement of wage labor and exponential demands generated by a festive economy. I propose that the present operational nature of the enterprise can be termed a family-run more than a capitalist firm. Morrow and Dombroski (2015) use the term "more than capitalist" to signify life's work that is necessary to sustain lives yet that (quite consciously) produces possibilities other than a capitalist ethos. A more-than-capitalist understanding allows us to remain cautious and therefore not to frame the idol-making enterprise as a solely capitalist enterprise, because doing so will erase multiple noncapitalist production regimes, class processes, and labor relations (sometimes oppressive) operating within the craft enterprise. Yet the more-than-capitalist framework also enables taking the argument beyond the dialectic of capitalist and noncapitalist enterprises and labor relations and acknowledges the overlapping and contested terrain of this economic politics.

The nature of the enterprises in this craft economy is heterogeneous, and three scales of production reflect stark differences in how they deploy wage labor, afford rented land, produce volume, and generate surplus. Conventionally, they are divided into small, medium, and large-scale enterprises, but I am going to identify these family-run businesses differently: those (a) solely run by an artisan-owner; (b) those jointly run by father and son, both artisans; (c) hereditary businesses

managed by a son who is not an artisan; (d) art-school-graduate sculptors and idol makers from the idol-making community. This categorization helps to distinguish and compare the differential nature of owner-artisans' labor in the process and their role in the resultant surplus generation.

The solely operated enterprise run by struggling artisan owners remains outside the scope of wage-labor employment and continues to operate as part of a need economy. In some instances, such owners manage to hire one or two seasonal laborers. A jointly run enterprise by a father and son allows them to rent two workshops and to increase the scale of production with the help of seasonal laborers. In both these cases, where the main artisan toils alongside the laborers, Sanyal (2007, 214) notes a resemblance to capitalist relations in this production, yet "because of the low level of technology and productivity, both the employer and his workers have a low level of income and consumption," situating them within informal need-based production.

However, there is a marked change when the enterprise is managed by sons who are not artisans themselves. They are the business managers and supervise the production, whereas the entire production is dependent on artisanal laborers. A veteran artisan who recently passed away, who I will call Subir Pal, made this point abundantly clear: the next generation hasn't learned the craft (personal communication, 3 October 2018). These businesses thrive because of their association with the names of their forefathers. The value of the production is associated with the main artisan's name, gained from previous generations' skills. Thus, this intergenerational craft work becomes one step removed from the direct skills of the owner-artisans. They become businesspersons with responsibility for investment, management, administration, supervision, and branding. The surplus generated by the work is appropriated by the family members in a transition toward an accumulation economy.

For a fourth fraction of artisans, the emerging group of art-school graduates who chose to acquire professional training, hereditary training acts as an added advantage. They participate in traditional idol making and employ laborers during the main season (July–November). As creative minds they also get contracts from big festival organizers to curate theme-based *pandals* (marquees) and idols. They like to be known as skilled sculptors, and they get independent contracts from various state and nonstate agencies outside the puja season to make statues in fiberglass, stone, cement, and bronze. Therefore, for over seven months in a year, they function as independent self-employed workers. One such sculptor, who I will call Bimal Pal, said to me, "I have a steady stream of demand for statues and models, and hence I can compensate" during the lean season (pers. comm., 19 November 2018). His role affirms that "any one economic actor participates in many kinds of economic relations in the diverse economy, no one of which can necessarily be designated as primary or essential" (Gibson-Graham 2006, 75).

This statement is equally true for the economic roles performed by the artisanal laborers I will discuss in the next sections. In both cases, the focus is shifted from the overall enterprise to key players in this particular economy, following the

analytical position of class as a process (Smith et al. 2008). Individual actors, here as owners, perform multiple and hybrid class identities at a given time. Rather than a fixed class identity and its resultant antagonism, owners themselves move between various class positions. Not only the extracted surplus value of the laborer in the idol-making industry but the owner's labor as a self-employed independent sculptor is yielded as a necessary means of survival, enhancing the possibility of partaking in a more-than-capitalist production relation.

Diverse Labor Politics: The Ethical Implication of Noncapitalist Alternatives

In 2018, 2,800 laborers worked and lived in Kumartuli during the peak season, according to the secretary of the artisan forum Kumartuli Mritshilpi Sanskritik Samiti (pers. comm., 14 February 2019). Migrant seasonal workers come to Kumartuli from the surrounding rural areas, echoing the seasonal migration route of the forefathers of the now established owner-artisans of Kumartuli. Different contract types and payment modes reflect the diversity within this wage-labor economy. Some workers are employed from February to November, but the surge of work occurs from July to November, when Kumartuli is most busy due to the puja festival season. For beginners in the industry, the daily wage would be ₹500 per day (approximately US$6). Senior workers would get ₹1,000 up to ₹2,000, depending on the time of the year, their responsibility, and their efficiency. Payment of a monthly salary is hard to come by as most workshops pay their workers a lump sum at the end of the season, calculated by a daily rate. On a normal day, the work continues from 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. with a break of 2.30–3.00 hours in the afternoon. During overtime, closer to the main festival, the working day is often stretched to midnight. The workers live in the dingy loft that every workshop has, take baths in the river, and use a communal toilet.

The exploitative nature of the work is often explained with reference to the accepted traditions or customs of the craft sector. For example, the relationship between a young apprentice and an owner-artisan doesn't fall under a purely monetary wage relation and can be framed under a noncapitalist wage relation (Bose 2016). Though unpaid apprenticeships are not widely prevalent, I witnessed owner-artisans discussing the positive benefits of such relations. One such discussion revealed that a young boy came to help in the household chores of an artisan after they met with an accident. The boy was learning the craft and doing some care work, assisting the artisan to recover. The artisan wished to employ someone like the boy next year, as well, but was unable to find anyone. In some of the workshops, the workers help in making tea, fetching timely water from the municipal tap, and undertaking small household chores, but the relation of mutual support doesn't extend beyond that.

A beginner who is learning the craft is often expected to spend the most time on household chores and will receive full board (food and shelter) in addition to the knowledge that he receives during his stay. This is part of a *guru-shishya parampara* (teacher-disciple tradition), in which the student is expected to come and stay in the teacher's house to observe, learn, and follow the educator's path. The student is treated as a member of the household. Veteran artisans shared with me that a life of struggle is the only way of learning. Saroj Malaker said, "Can you imagine today's generation learning the craft as we did? Imagine the hardship we have endured! My father used to make scathing remarks and reprimanded me severely ... If they can't endure hardship, they can't learn the craft" (pers. comm., 4 December 2018).

Struggle, perseverance, and hardship are seen as part of the training process. The principle of learning is premised on an absolute surrender in which one doesn't question one's master, or guru. Owner-artisans' own learning trajectories had often followed this process, as they'd commonly learned from their fathers, uncles, older brothers, or other elders of the craft community. Despite having the position of owner-artisan, many artisans' small one-bedroom households in Kumartuli's slum highlight their humble backgrounds (though some of them have managed to buy assets elsewhere in the city). The living and working conditions of the workers these artisans employ are not out of the ordinary, as the owner-artisans have already gone through the same process, and many of them continue to live in the same locality.

One elderly artisan, Ratnakar Pal, lamented that nonmonetary relationships between workers and owners have deteriorated in the last ten years: "No no! Now it is a 'give and take relation' between the worker and the owner. They couldn't maintain trust in the relation. You can't clap with one hand, one needs to behave accordingly to keep that relation. They know their self-interest and I mean only work. It is a monetary relation now. The familial relation ends when this transaction starts" (pers. comm., 20 October 2018). This craftsman dwells in an era where a monetary transaction has a derogatory meaning attached to it, and under the guise of valorizing and romanticizing familial relations, unpaid labor has therefore been justified. As Gibson-Graham (2006) have shown in their diverse-economies framework, varieties of unpaid labor are compensated in different ways. In the context of Kumartuli, I suggest that, for the young apprentice, in exchange for their unpaid work, the knowledge and skill education of idol making and the experience of staying in a workshop are considered compensation (63).

Family members who often help the owner-artisans in their work might be compensated with love and support alone. The nonmonetary nature of the work by the *shishya*, or the owner-artisan's family members, remains a form of unpaid labor, though the compensation does not disqualify the work from assuming an economic role and contributing to the success of the workshop: any unremunerated labor helps produce a surplus value that is appropriated by the owner-

artisan, albeit for reasons of consumption, need, and sustenance. Therefore, added compensation would not make the nonmonetary wage relation any less exploitative.

Gendered Labor: Between Care and Compensation

The question of nonmonetary production relations becomes more complicated when we consider how conventional gender roles subscribe to unpaid labor in this craft sector, though these roles exercise a value of care. Seasonal laborers are either provided food, or arrangements for cooking their own food are facilitated by the owner-artisan. In other instances, they are given money to eat from the nearby affordably priced hotel.

I observed in Medha Pal's studio that not only was food provided but the female owner-artisan took the responsibility of cooking two daily meals for seven of her workers for the duration of the two months I was present in the workshop, alongside working with the workers in the evening. Sometimes the workers took turns helping her with daily food and grocery shopping. In other workshops, such as male owner-artisan Ratnakar Pal's Bagbazar-neighborhood workshop, I witnessed the workers being given a food ration and access to a stove and gas cylinder to cook for themselves (field note, 20 October 2018). Even on a visit during the quiet season, a gas cylinder and a stove could be seen inside in Medha Pal's workshop for the workers to cook for themselves.

The gesture of providing food can be explained in two different ways. First, food is often used as compensation for working overtime without a wage. I witnessed an incident of rebellion among workers regarding this issue. The owner, clearly unhappy with the growing resentment and demands from the workers, explained to me that two different artist forums, one representing West Bengal and another East Bengal idol makers, have two different policies for overtime. Later, the joint secretary of Kumartuli Mritshilpi Sanskritik Samiti affirmed that the forum of West Bengal idol makers had agreed to a ten-hour workday and had decided to compensate overtime with the offer of food four times a day. The East Bengal artists' forum, Kumartuli Mritshilpi Samiti, had decided upon eight hours of work where workers would arrange for their own food, after which workers would be paid overtime (pers. comm., 14 February 2019). Nevertheless, I observed workers surpassing ten hours once overtime had started.

Given that the workers' ten-hour schedule (clearly exceeded at peak times) and unhealthy, substandard, makeshift living arrangements that violate the standards of basic living conditions, the gesture of offering food may offer some offset to the poor living and precarious working conditions. The labor conditions appear exploitative, and the provision of food and shelter becomes a perfunctory gesture by the owner-artisan to redress these deplorable conditions. In addition, any kind of social security in the workers' job cycle is completely absent, and with

any disruption in the consumption side of the business, they are the most vulnerable and must bear the brunt of being unemployed. This has become more problematic, one of the workers told me, since they no longer have a functioning union because the *maliks* (owners) didn't approve of it. During my walks in the neighborhood, I did see the workers' organization's office, which was established in 1973. Heierstad (2017) notes that the workers' union once played a major role in regulating and negotiating their working hours, holidays, and a living wage. However, it was closed at that moment, and I couldn't verify its present status.

The case of providing food can also be interpreted from a gendered perspective. When a woman owner-artisan cooks for the workers, it is also a form of unpaid labor that a male artisan would not be expected to do. My conversation with Medha Pal suggests that she chose to cook for the workers rather than be forced to do so under the compulsion of the gendered norm. While she has the means to supply provisions to the workers who can cook for themselves, she decided against it. I also noticed during my fieldwork that, when Medha Pal arranges for holidays with her mother, some of the workers accompany her. It may also be said that a different value regime operates under the wage-labor contract when a woman assumes the role of an owner-artisan. Cooking, providing food, or taking workers on holidays are distinguishing markers of economies of care in some cases (Morrow and Dombroski 2015). Here, the worker is not the only entity being compensated with food for their overtime work, but a woman owner-artisan's unpaid labor as a cook and support outside working hours shows that empathy and care are in operation. Medha Pal's work diversifies the economy further as the gesture of cooking entails a more-than-capitalist production relation between a woman owner-artisan and her workers, who also appropriate her labor and care work.

The above discussion raises quite a few questions about the ethical implications of already existing nonmonetary alternatives in a diverse economy. The exploitative nature of women's work, as well as traditional working/learning relations within a craft community, sit in opposition to purely contractual wage labor. One must ask, however: are these alternatives intended, and are they justified? Traditional familial relationships that enroll craft workers and apprentices within the extended families or customs of women cooking for an entire household are common production relations in this craft community. I would suggest that, in this case, such nonmonetary relationships as part of noncapitalist formations are often romanticized. They are imagined to be a social safety net, but it must be stressed that established norms and customs—such as unpaid overtime labor, extracted by providing food, and the performance of gender roles and caste relations—are symbols of oppression and violence that should not be glorified. They violate aspects of social justice, and one needs to challenge the "mundane, yet exploitative, sites of informal employment" within this diverse economy (Samers 2005, 877).

Migrant Craft Workers: Skill, Mobility, and Agency

The workers are consciously pushing back against this exploitative production relation as they become increasingly mobile, realize their value in the production chain, and assert their agency. Now workers may demand an advance of ₹10,000 before starting the work, as Sandipan Pal, an owner-artisan, told me (pers. comm., 26 September 2018). A detailed discussion with five workers in Medha Pal's workshop suggests that, in terms of the contract, the system as currently practiced reveals an autonomy favoring the worker, with owners finding it hard to negotiate (field note, 2 October 2018). Even if workers are nominally hired for the entire season, they might leave the workshop if it doesn't suit them, taking advantage of the open, verbal contract. This in turn enables high demand for labor during the main season, and workers can choose where they want to work. Some workers make it a point not to work in the same workshop for more than five or six years. They believe the owners take advantage of the long-term relationship and loyalty.

Additionally, workers are not completely dependent on selling their wage labor in the labor market of Kumartuli. They are not simply alienated laborers working in a factory line. They have a lineage in making idols, either because of their caste background or because they have switched jobs from a similar artisanal caste such as carpentry. The common thread that connects the lives of the workers in Medha Pal's workshop is that at least one of their family members is also involved in the craft, either in their village or in Kumartuli. There are often examples of apprentices who have learned the craft under the aegis of an owner-craftsman in Kumartuli and who then open their own independent workshops in remote corners of the city where a small area of land can be easily rented. Due to interstate migration, some travel to other parts of the country where their skill is in demand to make similar idols and statues. Two senior workers in Medha Pal's workshop migrate outside of West Bengal during the main season of Durga puja. They earn more compared to the rest of the group during this time as they work independently and then come back to work with Medha Pal before Kali puja in October (Kali being the name of a goddess). Even though craft work is not an aspirational career within the hierarchy of the modern knowledge system, the life-size realistic idol making of Kumartuli is highly distinguished. I observed that a client from Kerala arranged flights for Medha Pal's workers to come and make a Durga idol during the peak season because their skill is highly valued.

Furthermore, the workers don't own the necessary means of production in the city, but they often switch between working under a *malik*/owner-artisan in Kumartuli and becoming self-employed when they go back to their villages to make similar idols. As the main festival approached, I observed village artisans who are specialists in one set of artisanal work come to Kumartuli to assist (field notes, 1 October and 7 October 2018). Drawing the eyes of the goddess is one such area. In Medha Pal's studio, I met Bhelo da, who before Durga puja

paints the eyes of the goddess across various workshops in Kumartuli and in other places in and around Kolkata, such as Saikia and Barahnagar. He calls it "paikari hare chokh deya" (someone who paints eyes in a wholesale manner). He might receive contracts to paint eyes for fifteen to twenty thousand idols during the peak season, but this specific skill is not otherwise required for the entire duration of the main season or during the lean season. Throughout the year he works from his village home in the Nadia district making small idols for domestic worship purposes. He sells them in Kumartuli as well as from his village home.

Bhelo da moves between two class identities: an artisan who paints eyes as a contractual wage laborer and an independent idol-maker in his village home, in charge of his own means of production. Thus, multiple class processes also operate among workers, like some of the owner-artisans in Kumartuli, as discussed before. Working in Kumartuli gives them enough social capital to prosper in their places of origin and to challenge place-based hierarchies. The workers also told me that their houses in the village have far better infrastructure facilities than what they get in Kumartuli, reflecting Rogaly's (1998) observation that seasonal migration enables workers to start accumulating capital, albeit on a very small scale.

Through these means, workers sought to transform and challenge the labor relationship with owner-artisans. Yet these strategies do not always end the systemic structure of oppression. As noticed by Geert De Neve (2005, 200) in a study on the Indian textile industry, "The power loom workers appear successful in escaping individual owners whom they do not like, yet fail to escape structures of subordination that keep them tied to the employers as a group." The wage laborers in Kumartuli also cannot escape the structure of precarious employment, but they try to break free and find a way to establish their subjectivity as independent artisans. Thus, I must recognize that seasonal migrant workers are challenging dominant constructs of wage labor, asserting their rights, negotiating power dynamics, and gaining autonomy. Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan's (2003) study on the circular migration of the two most deprived groups, Dalits and tribal peoples from the Indian drylands, foregrounds such moments as intended or unintended "body politics." They submit these elements of resistance, political consciousness, and agency formation as an articulation of "counterhegemonic politics." Similarly, I read craft skill, seasonal/interstate migration, mobility, and resultant class processes as engendering autonomy and the salient agency of the craft laborer.

This diverse economic space is as much a political practice as it is an economic one (Jonas 2016). The political consciousness of exploitation can also inform the economic politics of wage labor. This politics can be further altered by gendered subjectivities of care and responsibility. A will for progressive change, both in terms of social and economic relations, is observed in this case. Though it does not necessarily lead to the formation of an "intentional economy" (Gibson-Graham 2006, 101), it creates its own version of a mundane and unspectacular political-economic space. For a postcapitalist future, active ethical intervention has

been seen as one of the principal motivations for *performing* noncapitalist and alternative economic systems. In other words, within the postcapitalist framework, alternatives do not simply exist at the periphery but are consciously *made* by economic actors/groups with distinct agency and intent. Such intervention carves out a space for a postcapitalist politics of alternatives that are rooted in collective action, hope, and solidarity. It involves a "conscious and combined effort to build a new kind of economic reality" (xxxvi).

The case of the idol-making craft presented above significantly differs from the performative politics of the alternative. Independent sculptors, women artisans, and seasonal workers in this enterprise are not actively or consciously trying to present an anticapitalist alternative or to create postcapitalist futures. However, I argue that, beyond a political radicalness of transformative change, a space for everyday and ordinary practice can exist. Within this economic organization, multiple forms of enterprise and class positions simply exist, and some existing noncapitalist labor relations have been strongly questioned because they disregard tenets of social justice. The workers in this system do not necessarily confront the capitalist system, but they increasingly challenge the established exploitative norms to thwart nonmonetary production relations. They are even harnessing the formal means of political organizing through labor unions, despite the challenges posed by the owner-artisans. There is an emerging "oppositional consciousness" (Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan 2003, 202), which may not have the celebrated characteristics of a "pure, romantic, figure of resistance" (Chatterton and Pickerill 2010, 479), but it does not foreclose the possibility of a hopeful future for this sector.

The Flow of Capital

Let me now turn attention toward some influences, incentives, and relaxations from the state. Moreover, this craft has enjoyed rare privilege due to its association with a religious festival that has received sponsorship from the corporate sector. By engaging with Sanyal's (2007) work and paying attention to the postcolonial condition of this diverse economy, I will examine how both these factors are bringing microentrepreneurial practices within the larger discourse of the state's development-driven governmentality. Whether this problematic of development subsumes the craft sector within the capitalist logic of production or lets its socioeconomic infrastructure prevail is a question I will grapple with in this section.

The niche market of Durga puja in the homes of aristocratic families has slowly expanded to public spaces over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Durga puja has been a community affair organized in temporary *pandals* (large, decorated bamboo marquees), in and along neighborhood lanes, in apartment blocks or open parks, and on grounds in the city. In the last twenty years, the

puja is also being observed by the Hindu Bengali diasporic community, to whom some of the Kumartuli artisans export fiberglass idols all over the world.

To understand how this has propelled growth in Kumartuli idol production over time, a small example might help. When Medha Pal took over her father's profession in the 1990s, only ten idols of Durga were made in her studio. In 2018, she made at least fifty Durga idols, apart from making idols for at least ten other religious worships throughout the year. West Bengal has approximately 10,000 Durga puja celebrations across the state, with the capital city of Kolkata having a concentration of 4,500 pujas in 2019 (Niyogi and Mukherji 2019). The funds to support this five-day-long festival is heavily based on local subscriptions, along with occasional sponsorship from local businesses with advertising banners. A boom in the festive economy in the postliberalization period can be attributed to corporate sponsorship and political patronage. In the last two decades, the nature of this sponsorship has changed significantly as the main annual festival of the city, Durga puja, has scaled up to become "the most spectacular, extravagant, and publicized event in the city's calendar" (Guha Thakurta 2015, 1). More than a ritual religiosity, it is now a public street-art festival fueling the city's economy. The British Council's (2019) creative mapping project estimates the economic worth of the festival is US$5 billion, which is a major livelihood generator for the state. The corporate sponsorship for an individual puja ranges from ₹1.5 to ₹10 million, of which one can assume a substantial amount is invested in the idol itself by the festival organizers. Kumartuli, where the main attraction of this religio-cultural festival, the idols, are being made and which hosts several ancillary crafts, is not outside of this capital flow.

State Exemption for Promotion and Protection

The relation between the state and idol makers can be unravelled through the exemptions and fuzzy regulations whereby the industry flows in and out of capitalist market norms, facilitated by the state. This also challenges the strict division of informal and formal economic arrangements. All registered owner-artisans who are part of the two artisan organizations must have a municipal trade license, which makes them eligible for bank loans. The requirement to have a municipal license brings the industry under regulation; however, that does not make it mandatory that artisans make direct tax payments. Only those artisans who reveal an income above tax-exemption thresholds are liable to pay income taxes. Some of the artisans I was working with revealed that they don't pay any direct tax. An insider of the idol-making craft industry suggested that a small-scale artisan would have a yearly income of ₹300,000. Only some large-scale workshop owners pay income taxes, those for whom not only their transactions but also their income often amounts to millions. Artisanal businesses with a turnover of ₹2 million, provided they follow certain rules, have been exempted from indirect

taxes such as the Goods and Services Tax (the GST; see PTI 2017; Mastani 2017). In addition, their products, the religious idols, are also exempted from the GST. These two examples show that the state creates provisions for the nonpayment of taxes for the artisanal sector by relaxing controls and easing regulations to facilitate the idol-worship market, maintaining its fuzzy boundaries.

Special bank loans are a common source of finance for many artisans in Kumartuli. Since bank nationalization in 1969, private moneylenders have become less powerful in Kumartuli. Medha Pal received a bank loan from 1995–2013, which usually ranged between ₹15,000–20,000. Yet many artisans could not repay the loans due to the high interest rate, and this has decreased their profit margins over the years, with some defaulting. The joint secretary of the artisans' forum thereafter asked the ministry of cottage industries, during the previous Left Front government, to lower the interest rate and shift from commercial to cooperative banks. These changes didn't come through, due to the unsatisfactory repayment of loans. The Union Bank of India and UCO Bank have stopped this facility, but another, the Bank of Baroda, has started giving loans to artisans again. A bank official says the loan amount gets sanctioned through two artist forums. The condition of the loan involves a full repayment within ten months. No equated money installment (EMI) or collateral is required. Most artisans take the loan in July and repay it by November or February. Some artisans with large-scale businesses take loans of up to ₹500,000.

Sustained initiatives from the government have improved sanitation, water supply, lighting, paved roads, and waste management in Kumartuli. The Left Front government came up with an urban-renewal plan for a complete infrastructural upgrade and development of the whole neighborhood in 2007 (Mukhopadhyay 2020). Therefore, on one hand, a prolonged effort has aided the idol-making craft through measures of infrastructural development, subsidies, public-sector loans, and allowances. And on the other hand, though I haven't discussed it in this essay, recent years have seen the promotion of the state's tourism and heritage industry by capitalizing on Kumartuli's brand value, Durga idols.

Development-Driven Governmentality

Drawing on Sanyal (2007), I delineate two phenomena that are happening in this rapidly transitioning space of the need economy. First is clear evidence of a flow of resources from the domain of capital (financial sector) to the so-called domain of noncapital in the form of the craft sector and, in this case, to the idol-making industry. From corporate funding of the festival to bank loans to idol makers, this industry is witnessing an external inflow of capital. Rural crafts, textiles, and handicrafts have received considerable impetus from the government. In 2018, West Bengal reported a maximum number (5,269,814) of micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSME) in the country, with a share of 11.62 percent of all

enterprises (PTI 2018). The same report suggests that the biggest bank credit flow of US$15 billion took place in the MSME sector of West Bengal. The capital-deprived craftspeople were at one point living in a state of "financial apartheid" because of their exclusion from the formal financial system (Taylor 2011, 485). The state had hoped that small credit from public-sector banks would be a means of social reproduction for this sector and that the craft producers would be exposed to merchant capital (Sanyal 2007, 15–18). Though this change is visible in Kumartuli's craft sector, microfinance in the form of bank loans distributed for development and poverty alleviation has also created a cycle of debt (Taylor 2011).

Second, the state incentives and allowances for this sector can be seen as a form of governance and mode of power that Sanyal (2007, 170), following Foucault, calls governmentality. This form of governmentality of the postcolonial state, Sanyal proposes, has a key motive for development, livelihood generation, and the uplift of the poor, which brings a stream of finance into the need-economy sector. The proposition for such state-initiated development can be heavily contested, however, as many examples of infrastructural development projects result in the dispossession of the poor from their land, throwing them out of their traditional livelihoods (Bhaduri 2018; Whitehead 2010). Therefore, the postcolonial democratic state, because of its electoral politics, often shows signs of contradiction, which Chatterjee (2016, 109) calls "pushes and pulls of governmentality." It navigates between, on one hand, accumulation levels that interest the urban upper class, aligning with capitalist interests, and, on the other hand, "providing social security in the informal sector" for the rural and urban poor (108). Albeit selectively, the reproduction of the craft sector is ensured by national and international agencies, both state and nonstate, that fund poverty-alleviation schemes, livelihood generation, and skill-building projects. The promotion of microcredit for self-employed artisans and loans for women in the microentrepreneurial sector is a target for this development-driven governmentality, allowing the sector's "access to means of productive resources" (Sanyal 2007, 65). In Kumartuli, providing infrastructure, giving allowances, and facilitating bank loans and tax cuts can be framed as extensions of this developmental politics. I submit that this politics makes the state induce capital into this craft sector while also creating provisions and exemptions facilitating its status as a more-than-capitalist enterprise.

Conclusion

This essay responded to the provocation of marking differences within a craft economy, in that process making capitalist, noncapitalist, and more-than-capitalist processes visible. Moreover, the essay adds the role of state and external

sponsorship into the discussion, noting how the postcolonial state infuses capital in the craft sector, asserting its claim to embrace the rhetoric of the development agenda.

The diverse-economies lens enables the essay to advance the proposition that the capitalist mode is only one mode of economic practice among many in the craft sector. Nuances within the economic organization of a specific craft practice have been brought out. A wage worker can also be a self-employed artisan in a different space or during a different time of year. Owner-artisans can function as independent more-than-capitalist firms when modeling and sculpting in their own time and with different materials. Artisanal laborers' skill, mobility, and wider scope of migration endow them with power and agency to negotiate against the exploitative labor relations perpetuated by both capitalist and noncapitalist production regimes. Their demand for greater autonomy often hinges upon the two-prong strategy of unionization and finding new opportunities to gain autonomy, creating a distinct labor subjectivity rooted in a counterhegemonic consciousness.

The essay also shows how women owner-artisans often succumb to nonmonetary labor roles via feudal relations with their workers, distributing their surplus in a noncapitalist manner. However, this can be interpreted as a display of different formulations of value and care. In that process, the essay puts forward a strong case for how craft economies' structures and logics can be reframed by social processes of class positions, caste relations, and gendered roles. Instead of romanticizing or glorifying, the essay has revealed exploitative noncapitalist practices and has questioned the efficacy of existing alternatives, which are often embedded in notions of tradition and custom.

This study's significance is to reconfigure the diverse-economies approach within a postcolonial setting, revealing "spatial and space specific" motivations through which these practices thrive (Jonas 2016, 11). Using Sanyal's (2007) proposition of a reverse flow of capital from spaces of capital to noncapital, the essay considers the possibility that infrastructural provisions, welfare schemes, and state exemptions for the idol-making craft sector to some extent marshal the state's promise of development. The same process also brings seemingly traditional sectors, such as crafts, "that are out-of-joint with time into line with the normative agenda of capital accumulation and economic growth" (Gidwani 2008, xv), while not fully eliminating their differences. In other words, diversity within this sector is granted so that the complex and interlocking web of capital and noncapital in a postcolonial craft economy can perpetuate.

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