

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

**OCCUPATIONAL MOBILITY OF CHITRAKARS AT PRASASTHA IN
HOWRAH, WEST BENGAL**

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Abstract: *The study is based on socio-economic condition of idol makers of Prasastha in Howrah district of West Bengal, India. Prasastha is identified with the zone of idol makers who trace their lineage to Chitrakar, artists by caste, who have shown marked occupational mobility as they are idol makers. In Hindu caste system generally the kumbhakars are associated with idol making. The occupational mobility was gradual, but the post pandemic phase the occupational mobility was starker as the idol making took a back seat and their occupational profile changed. In pandemic situation they were losing many things by physically or psychologically. The present paper focusses on the occupational shift of the Chitrakars at a micro level.*

Key words: Caste based occupation, occupational mobility, capitalism, market socialism, small-scale industry, large scale industry.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Social anthropology essentially differs from the other social sciences owing to the emphasis on the field experience through which data is collected and in cases the data is matched with a theory or a theory is generated which can be applicable to other narratives too. A social scientific technique in classic form immerses oneself in an uncontrolled research setting, whose way is unparallel than other disciplines. It is therefore important for anthropologists to understand the special qualities of their field experience, its purposes, the methodological assumptions that underlie it, and the ways in which it influences the development. Ethnography is a qualitative method for collecting data often used in the social and behavioural sciences. Data are collected through observations and interviews, which are then used to draw conclusions about how societies and individual's function.

“Chitrakar” is a caste of Newar community of Kathmandu valley, Nepal. According to occupation, Newar community is classified into varnas, of which Chitrakars are the painters and mask makers. Etymologically Chitra in Sanskrit means image and “kar” means one who gives shape. This caste is called Puna in Nepal. In Nepali dialect, the word Puna seem to be derived from the ‘Sanskrit’ or ‘Pali’ language ‘Punnapra’ or ‘Patta’ or “scroll” or “fabric”. The religious figure called powers is also derived from punnapra or patta, this painting was originally made by raising fabric made of animal gum and clay. Equally like other Newar

communities the Chitrakars trace their lineage from the Tibeto Burmese tribes. So, one can assume that the painters are a heterogeneous group rather than an ethnically homogeneous group. Although casteism has declined, but in Kathmandu there are still some painters or Chitrakars who have retained their tradition as an artist. Painters or chitrakars practice both Buddhism and Hinduism with an emphasis on traditions of magic. In Pingla village of West Midnapur district, in West Bengal, India, there is a village famous for potua. There is the inhabitant combined painting and music into each other's art [1,2, 3] The chitrakars as subsistence occupation made idols and did not even make other clay objects. At present, the idol makers, that is the kumbhakars of Kumamortuli have also joined here.

2. METHODOLOGY

The changing governance policies, the creative industries and cultural tourism, are triggering a socio-spatial transformation in Chitrakar Para. The social-cultural practices, the everyday lives of the residents and the spaces of productions of the Chitrakar Para neighbourhood, are elements of focus in this research design.

Examining how the changing practices of the idol-making and Pottery industry and the tourism initiatives of the government have triggered a change in the socio-spatial differentiation of Chitrakar Para and adjoining areas is critical in understanding through research methodology. The spaces in the densely built informal setting of Chitrakar Para are being contested continuously, negotiated and reconfigured, threatening existing practices and everyday lives of residents to accommodate newer and increasing demands of idol- production.

In this regard, the research aims to examine the situated and culturally embedded practices of idol-making and Pottery in Chitrakar Para in response to the ongoing spatial transformation and policy changes. However, as there is dearth of academic literature on the Chitrakars, this anthropological ethnographic study is the main stay in conducting this study.

Qualitative techniques form the basis of this research to critically engage with the generation and analysis of empirical data gathered through detailed ethnographic study. This research work covers the field, which falls at the intersection between architectural and human geography.

The central research question, through the identified case study, seeks to draw a relationship between spatiality and everyday social practices. For this purpose, both architectural and human geography research tools and techniques were used in combination to achieve the research objectives. Human geography research methods influenced the exploration of the place. Architectural research methods with a qualitative approach to suit the case study were at the centre of a conceptual framework.

To 'Follow the idol making' and documenting the processes and flows of the industry was based primarily in Chitrakar Para. The entire network was introduced to this process and interrogated for future analysis. Participants in the idol-making community were based in two adjacent locations, as a result of the stalled planned intervention in Prasastha Chitrakar Para, it was crucial to identify the network of supply chain and the actors involved to document the same. However, documenting processes over a wider area and interviewing actors proved difficult.

Case study research is particularly useful in developing context-dependent knowledge from phenomenological studies, as highlighted in the literature review; several inner wards of India's older cities are inhabited by poorer communities, who are involved in creative livelihoods. These neighbourhoods are

generally informally built, well connected to the city's networks and have been through processes of legitimization.

This case study is reflective of a similar neighbourhood and draws on citywide and national politics while portraying socio- economic inequalities and rapid urban transformation. The basic point of query of this study is to understand the relationships between material processes, everyday social practices and spatiality through phenomenological explorations of place-based functions. The aim of the research is context and place specific; to trace material processes and everyday social practices that shape the culturally-embedded and situated idol-making practices in Chitrakar Para. There is also the assessment of the reconfiguration of the spaces of production within the place-based network of idol-making, which is the focus of the study, that explores the link between spatiality and idol-making practice in the said neighbourhood of Prasastha. In the wider context, the case study explores a cultural, traditional industry based in an informal neighbourhood of a postcolonial city.

The supply chain of idols has been mapped through global consumerism in interdisciplinary studies including media, human geography, science and technology studies, and traced through the market trend for the production and distribution, to make connections between the producers and their distant 'western' consumers. This type of ethnographic study involves research carried out in multiple locations and addresses geographies of production, transportation and consumption of commodities and the underlying narratives of exploitation of the labour market.



Figure 1. The supervising teachers with 2022 final semester Anthropology students

3. RESULTS

In this field work for analyzing the data some information's which had been collected were converted in quantitative data by census as well as observation method (Figure 1 - 2).

Table 1. Economic status of the idol makers of Prasastha

Categories	Male (%)	Female (%)
Earners	57.37	4
Earners but dependent	14.75	16
Dependent	27.86	80

[The economic status of both male and female idol makers are shown in this table, maximum male members were earners and maximum female members were dependent they usually help males to their urgent idol making order]

Table 2. Idol making priority status of the Chitrakars of Prasastha

Categories	Male (%)	Female (%)
Primary	88.25	0
Secondary	2.75	98
Both	9	2

[In this table the priority of occupation (idol making business) is presented. The maximum males were primarily in idol making business and some males were in idol making business and others were engaged with jobs or occupation, and for the females this business is almost secondary occupation].



Figure 2. Idol-making industry in Chitrakar para of Prasastha

4. DISCUSSION

Through this theory, anthropology is able to highlight different aspects of society and therefore this branch has the ability to give birth to new trends through different theories [4].

This work is on a small settlement that had been associated with earthen clay works since about 150 years ago; Clay dolls were made here few decades back and were limited to about three or four families. They mainly chose idol making as their main profession after training from places like Kumortuli and Kalighat. Incidentally, most of the Patuas and Chitrakars here came from South 24 Parganas and Medinipur and continues to make a living by of making idols of gods and goddesses from clay. However, by analysing the socio-economic condition, it has been found that pandemic enforced lockdown has taken a huge toll on the idol making business like any other business. They had to liquidate their working capital. Later, when the lockdown was lifted, demand of idols increased than before but the situation did not improve because they had to repay their loan. They did not receive any assistance from government or private grants or help.

But in recent times keeping in mind the social situation, the next generation of younger Chitrakars have thought of adopting other professions or being involved in other professions. At this time business is only the main part of economic organisation of a community. Earlier idol making belonged to a traditional system because for generations they stayed in their traditional caste based occupation. According to Max Weber we cannot put this profession in the category of Capitalism theory because from the given data it seems that they did not receive any kind of public or private grants or aid. Capitalization theory states that social support is essential for a business to survive as a whole or to become part of society at large, the people of the study area mentioned, did not receive any help during various difficult times. That is, their repeated exposure to such neglect made their plans for self-reliance more palatable. They increasingly surrounded themselves with the idea of their market socialism theory, i.e., they increasingly believed in their idea of market socialism theory. From this theory it was observed that a business which is completely managed by its own businessmen and in which the entire business profit loss capital etc. matters are solely the responsibility of the business itself where no external i.e., government private help is dependent on the business itself.

The business of idol making can be classified in small scale industries because according to the theory, a business when its capital gain and loss continue to be close to the same extent as a large-scale business and can represent its business which is limited to a small area due to economic reasons, then it can be classified as small-scale industry. Nevertheless, some tradesmen used their knowledge of idol-making as seasonal occupations such as house-painting and pandal making, which can be interacted with the functional theory of economic anthropology. Besides, these painters all belong to other backward classes but belonging to general caste, but they are mainly engaged in this work as a hobby or learning, so the Chitrakar cannot be clumped in the caste base occupation of economic anthropology.

Karl Polanyi had critically opposed the concept of 'true capitalism' in many of his remarkable works such as, 'The Great Transformation' (1944), 'Trade and Market' (1957) etc. and provided his own view on capitalism. He focused on the construction of labour class and defined the 'Condition of labour'.

Nature of a free market: Supplier and demander

In the book 'Trade and Market' (published in 1957, in Early Empires), Polanyi and Arensberg mentioned the feature of a free market economy. According to them, in the free market a person can play both the roles of a supplier as well as a demander. Being a supplier he can not only control the production of his supply but also fix its price as his own will. In a similar way when buying the raw materials necessary for his production, he have to depend upon some other suppliers and he buys those items whose price has been fixed by the sellers.

In the studied area a similar kind of chain was observed. Here the idol makers produce the idols and fix the price themselves. Obviously there remains enough scope of bargaining by the customers, but still they never decrease the price after reaching a pre fixed price. Customers “pay his price and so dance to his tune”, as mentioned by Polanyi. Similarly like the feature of the free market, they need to buy raw materials as their requirement from two local shops namely ‘saajghor’ and ‘shilpighor’. “Price of the items sometime escalates in the local shops so that the respondents have to go to Burrabazar, Kolkata. But no fixed price is present there as well. The raw materials are bought at the prevailing price sometimes it becomes the sole reason for incurring loss in the business”, It rightly follows ‘the nature of free market’ as mentioned by Polanyi and Arensberg.

Non-existence of true capitalism

In ‘The Great Transformation’ published in 1944, Polanyi opposed the view of true capitalism. Earlier capitalist market was described as a fully self-regulated economy and a system of ‘traders and merchants,’ always seeking for profitable opportunity. But Polanyi claimed that a fully self-regulated, ideal capitalist market can never exist. He explained market as a place where there is always a conversion of labour into a commodity and for this reason, he said a market always needs some protection from state. Thus, may be invisible from outside, but there is always some supreme intervention is present which protects the market. So true capitalism never exists according to Polanyi.

In the studied area ‘Prasastha’, the role of several banks and money lenders can be understood in this context. Here they play the role, similar to the ‘strategic state intervention’, mentioned earlier by Polanyi. There is always profit and loss in business. But in every year before they initiate making the idols of Goddess Durga, they borrow the money which is never possible to invest by themselves only as they do not have such capital. In majority of cases, they borrow the money from money lenders instead of a bank. The informants are comfortable in borrowing owing to relations with them from long ago. The trust enjoyed between them as well, contributes much to the symbiotic relationship of lending and borrowing. The chitrakars have their fixed borrowers here as well. They return their money after a particular time which varies and have different conditions as well. This chain is thus perennial.

According to Polanyi, “the conversion of labour into a commodity is destructive in the absence of strategic intervention that might provide protection”. Here the chain of money lenders and the shop owners is a strategic system which provide strength (by providing money) to the market and which stops it to be a freely functioning entity.

Accumulation of wealth in social formation

Polanyi also defined wealth as the foremost thing to construct in any social formation. However, he didn’t try to explain the wealth and money in a synonymous way. It could be anything that stands as an asset to the society. He explained it by considering wealth in the form of female fertility. He also mentioned four essential properties of wealth which are as follows:

- a. Wealth must provide a flow of benefits to the individuals owning it.
- b. If managed in proper way, it should generate growth (obviously nonnegative) over time.
- c. Wealth is something which further generate resource and that never achieves redundancy in its magnitude. It should always provide positive values.

d. However the benefits generated by the asset could devolve across generations.

Now in the studied area, the knowledge of idol making can be considered as the wealth asset, and Polanyi's wealth accumulation concept can be related with it. At first it is important here to mention the nature of knowledge they acquire. "Knowledge is kind of information, understanding or some kind of skills someone get from experience or education" (britannica.com). But in Prasastha, the art of making the idols, the knowledge possessed by the 'potuas' are not like normal set of attributes, rather they are indigenous in nature. It has been accumulated over the years and generations after generations. It is an oral tradition based on some practices which they are carrying with them. It also follows the dynamic nature of knowledge. As found in the case study, in several areas the thinking of customers has changed just for an instance in case of ornamentation of the idols. And it automatically changed the way of traditional practise and became a reason of change in knowledge.

So, in case of the idol makers, they are producing the idols using their indigenous traditional knowledge. Then they become products of the market attached with a fixed price. They idols are sold and the manufacturer is getting a price for it. In next generation if the owner gives birth to a boy he will learn the things from his childhood and after reaching the age of 17 or 18 he will start making those as well. So here the knowledge is providing a flow of benefit to the individuals who have own it. It is fulfilling the first criteria provided by Polanyi.

The seniors don't require to teach the juniors the skills required for the production of idols. So under effective management this knowledge shows growth. And day by day the teen children practise the skills with their father and uncle and become skilled artists. So here it is fulfilling the second condition of Polanyi's theory.

In his third criteria Polanyi mentioned the non-redundancy nature of wealth. Here knowledge is always non-redundant without some specific exception. If the child never comes into this business, then it is a thing for consideration. But in other cases, it will always have positive social value.

In his fourth condition Polanyi postulated about a mechanism by which the benefits of the asset evolve. But 'Prasastha potopara' is experiencing a gradual shift in the occupation. According to the respondents, there is no security in this business. So they are educating their children and they don't want their children to come in this business as well." Now in some cases it is seen that they are doing something else but are also attached to this idol making business as a secondary occupation. He has two or three labours and they are doing most of the works. Only a few things like 'chokh dewoa' or barnish is done by the owner himself. Or there are instances as well, of two brothers (one is cousin in relation to other) are joint owners of a single shop though their fathers had separate stores. Here the monthly income from the store gets divided among them. So, the mechanism here is shifting to some other occupation because of which the benefits from the wealth asset (which is knowledge) devolve. Thus it is fulfilling Polanyi's fourth condition as well.

To sum up here, the chitrakars in Prasastha is, a small occupational group of 'potuas' having the primary occupation of idol making with their own market economy. Which rightly follows the nature of a free market mentioned by Polanyi in his book 'Trade and Market'. Secondly, Polanyi also opposed the concept of true capitalism and explained it in 'The Great Transformation'. Here also their economy does not act as a true capitalist way as they get protection from an outside source which has no relation in this entire system.

And lastly there is a wealth asset present in the formation of their society which generates growth and benefit and also follows the feature of wealth as mentioned by Polanyi earlier.

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6. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

Authors of this article do not have any conflict of interest.



Figure 3. Case study in Chitrakar para of Prasatha

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