



MURTIKAR

IDOL ~ MAKERS *of* PEN



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MURTIKAR

IDOL~MAKERS of PEN

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Special Project
**Documentation of the *Ganesha*
idol-makers in Pen, Maharashtra**

Dec 2015

Guide
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Declaration

I declare that this written submission represents my ideas in my own words and where others' ideas or words have been included, I have adequately cited and referenced the original sources. I also declare that I have not misrepresented or fabricated or falsified any idea / date / fact / source in my submission. I understand that any violation of the above will cause a disciplinary action by the Institute and also can evoke penal action from the sources which have not been properly cited or from whom proper permission has not been taken when needed.

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Approval Sheet

The Design Research Project titled Murtikar: Idol-makers of Pen by Ameya Narvankar, is approved for partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of 'Master of Design' in Visual Communication.

Guide:

Date:

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Abstract

The elephant-headed god, Lord *Ganesha*, is one of the most beloved and revered amongst the Indian deities. Every year, we celebrate the ten-day-long *Ganesh Chaturthi* festival in his honour. In the western states of India, particularly Maharashtra, families welcome the god by installing *Ganesh murtis* (idols) in their homes and setting up *pandals* in public places. Traditionally made with clay, and now PoP (Plaster of Paris), they come in a variety of shapes, sizes and designs. But little do we know about the '*murtikars*', the people responsible for crafting these beautiful idols.

My curiosity to learn more took me to the small town of **Pen** in Maharashtra, home to the traditional *Ganesha* idol making industry. All year around, the *murtikars* here work in their *karkhanas* and mass produce the idols that are then sold in metro cities.

During my visit to Pen, I was exposed to the various processes of idol making and got a peek into the life of the *murtikar* for whom the traditional art form has evolved into a year round occupation.

Pen & Idol-making

Situated 80 kms away from Mumbai lies Pen, a small town which has attained a global reputation for their perfectly crafted *Ganesha* idols. Here, making *Ganesha* idols is not just an industry but a passion. The 'Made in Pen' *Ganeshas* travel not just to Mumbai and Pune, but are also popular with the Marathi speaking population settled in US, UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and so on.

History of idol-making

Located in the Raigad district of Maharashtra, the town has been known for their hand-crafted idols since the time of Peshwas. In those days, the original practice was to draw mud from the courtyard, make a simple Ganesha idol from it and then immerse it in water. It was a private affair that the priestly class of Brahmins participated in.

It took a historic event to propel the craft into a full-fledged industry. In response to the British ban on political gatherings, Lokmanya Tilak introduced the concept of *Sarvajanik Ganesh Chaturthi* (public celebration) to unify the Indian masses. Pune was the epicenter of this movement; and Pen's proximity to it led to the festival gaining popularity amongst its Brahmin population. To cater to this sudden surge, many from the community

took on idol making as a full time occupation.

As demand peaked, other communities too, switched to idol-making and started their own units. The industry began to grow and there was no looking back.

The opening of the Thane Creek Bridge in 1970s improved access to Pen from Mumbai. With improved road networks and transport, along with increased financial support from the banks, Pen's *Ganesh* industry continued to flourish. Today, there are over 550 such units producing about six to seven lakh idols with an annual turnover of nearly Rs 8 crores.





KACHHYA MURTYA

The painting of idols happens in batches. The army of raw idols occupy the space outside a *kaarkhana* waiting for their turn to be coated in bright neon colours.



HOME-MADE PAPADS

Very few women in Pen participate in idol-making. Many are instead involved in the cottage industry of making *papads* and *pohe* at home.

Purpose of the study

Despite Pen's proximity to my hometown Mumbai, I had never visited the place. It would always be this signboard or a marker which one would pass on their way to Alibaug. The thought of traveling solo and conducting a study in my own backyard appealed greatly. Also the fact that I spoke the local language and was privy to the Konkan culture, was an added advantage.

A personal journey

I grew up in a typical Maharashtrian nuclear family in the city. While *Ganesh* festival is an important celebration for us, my own family never installed an idol at home. I would instead spend my time at my friends' houses making *modaks*, singing *aartis* and visiting *pandals* in the city. As I grew up, my faith waned and I stopped doing all those things. Strangely enough, my name - Ameya is a derivative of one of *Ganeshas* names. By understanding the faith of these *murtikars* and what motivates them to worship *Ganesh* all year round, I wanted to rediscover my own faith. This journey is also an exploration of my own self and my relationship with *Ganesh*.

The people

To conduct a visual ethnography and understand the community involved by observing their activity of idol-making was the starting point of the project. I wanted to hear their stories and learn about their culture and traditions. Did they differ a lot from my own culture? What are their aspirations? Are they content with the idyllic pace of the town or are they drawn to the city life?

The process

As an art and design student, I was also curious to learn how the idols were sculpted. How do they learn the craft? Does one require formal training and are their centres set up by the government to facilitate that? were some of the questions that were racing in my mind.

The market

During my secondary research I came across news articles that highlighted the challenges faced by the idol-makers in Pen. There is an increasing demand for idols from the cities, but there is not enough labour available locally. What could be the reasons that have led to this?

Environmental concerns

Come the time of *visarjan* (immersion), news agencies would begin reporting the toll the practice has on the water bodies. I wanted to hear what the *murtikars* felt about the practice. Was there any intervention from their side to bring an eco-friendlier *Ganesh* to the public? Has there been any dip in their sales with families adopting non-traditional means and worshipping symbolic *Ganeshas* - coconut, *rangoli*, betel nut, etc.

Role of women

Since the work is primarily physical labour, are women allowed to partake in the activities? If not, how else do they keep themselves occupied? Pen is also known for their *papads* and *pohe* industry. Does that promote women entrepreneurship instead?



Shrikant Deodhar
MO.9423093202

A rendezvous with Shrikant Deodhar



MR. SHRIKANT DEODHAR
4th generation Ganesh idol-maker in Pen
& President, *Pen Murtikaar Sanghatan*

While secondary sources of information are available on the web, I felt I would get a greater insight from someone who is closely associated with Pen. My search led me to a meeting with **Mr. Shrikant Deodhar**, a fourth generation artist and sculptor from the Deodhar family, who have pioneered the *Ganesha* idol industry of Pen.

I first met him in Mumbai at a Rotary Club event, where he was a guest speaker and was displaying his work. He was accompanied by his associates Sunil Sawale and Kiran Patil who also run their own workshops in Pen. We briefly discussed how I could go about doing my design research. He has closed down his own workshop but would direct me to his associates' *kaarkhanas* wherein I could observe the making of an idol from start to finish. He also mentioned that they have set up a small gallery and information centre that would also help me learn about the process.



Visual ethnography & documentation

I began the project intending to conduct a visual ethnography on these *murtikars*. I wished to understand how the business has survived down from one generation to another. Their values and beliefs; their motivations, aspirations & concerns; the challenges they face; and their relationship with the craft and Ganesha himself, were some of the queries I had in my mind.

Visual Ethnography

Visual ethnography is the qualitative study of human life & culture using visual documentation methods. It is a research method that is conducted by observing people in their natural environment. The people in Pen are accustomed to the city folk and media visiting their town to photograph and document the industry. However, personally I was not entirely comfortable invading upon someone's workplace and felt a bit exploitative. I confided my apprehensions to Shrikant who told me to not worry about that. The Penkars take immense pride in their work and are always willing to share it with everyone.

Methodology & approach

I mainly observed the making of both clay and PoP idols in two workshops (Trimurti Kala Mandir & Shree Pataneshwar Ganesha Kala Mandir), as well as spoke with the people concerned - the owner of these workshops and the artisans that work under them.

Knowing that they are not camera shy, I felt photography would be the most reliable tool. I wanted to be the least invasive and not make them too conscious, so, I opted to use my mobile phone. I also kept a diary at hand wherein I would jot down names and notes, to recall later.

My approach to ethnography was to let the artisans show me the whole process of making an idol. As each artisan was assigned to a certain task, I went about chronologically from one person to another. I would strike a conversation with them and try and learn more about them.

I had initially planned a questionnaire but as the conversations took place, I let go of my structure and let them progress organically. New topics I had not thought about earlier would emerge. They too had questions for me regarding what is it that I exactly study, about where I come from. On revealing I was from Mumbai, they often had stories to tell about their interactions with the city. I would further elaborate on these in later sections.

A change in direction

As a method, ethnography requires that I spend a quality amount of time observing and studying the activity and the community. However, **after gauging the information and insights I had gathered; and factoring in the amount of time I spent in Pen, I believe it would not be fair to term my study as ethnographic research.** I have presented my observations as a documentation of the craft instead, and how the social life of the town revolves around this year round cottage industry.

* स्वच्छ पेण सुंदर पेण *

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पेण नगरपरिषद पेण

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मुख्याधिकारी

उपाध्यक्ष

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How to get there?

Pen has a vantage point in terms of location due to its proximity to both Pune and Mumbai, which has played an important role in creating a fixed market for the industry.

To travel to Pen from Mumbai and back, the state transport(ST) bus is the most reliable and economic form of transportation. The journey takes around roughly 2-3 hours. There is also a railway station connected to the town that falls under Konkan Railways.

The ST bus drops you at the bus stand which is located right in the middle of the town square and is walking distance to all amenities within the town. A local guesthouse is immediately next to the stand and offers cheap accommodation for visitors.

Local Transport

Most of the working population here including the artisans own two-wheelers. For those who wish to travel quickly within the town, there is an alternative - a shared six-seater taxi called Vikram that accommodates at least a dozen people.





KASAR ALI

A street in Pen. It originally housed the Kasar community (bangle-makers) in Pen. But as the popularity and demand of idols increased, the other communities switched to the booming trade. Several such *alis* (streets) named after the previous trade can be found in Pen.

Deodhar legacy

With my contact established, I embarked on my visit to Pen. After a 2-3 hrs journey from Mumbai by a state transport bus, I reached the idyllic town of Pen. I was to go meet Shrikant Deodhar again, this time at his workshop - *Kalpana Kala Mandir*. I asked a few locals to the whereabouts of the place, but they were clueless. On mentioning the Deodhar name, they were quick to point where to head. It was interesting to see how the workshops are identified by the family who runs them.

Nestled in *Kasar Ali*, I found Shrikant Deodhar's home cum workshop. With the manufacturing unit shut down, he now enjoys the retired life working on sculptures as a hobby and travelling across the globe to promote Indian sculpture making.

An alumnus of Sir J J School of Art, he has seen the industry grow and was willing to share his story and experience. He began by narrating the story of how idol-making began as a family occupation.

A family business

It all started with his great grandfather Bhikaji Deodhar who migrated to Pen in the 1860s for livelihood. Shrikant

recounted, how his forefathers were blessed with the 'artist' gene. They were engaged in the traditional family business of tying turbans and painting masks for festivals. Their craftsmanship in making *Ganesha* idols for the festival too was unparalleled. Since they were so skilled, the landlords would ask them to make idols for them, and in return they would barter for rice and other goods. Thus, the idol making began on a small scale.

Thereafter, business continued to grow under his grandfather Baburao Deodhar who introduced the use of PoP in idol making. PoP as a substitute to clay allowed them to prepare idols that were larger, sturdier and easier to transport to the cities. This change led to the flourishing of the industry from 1950 to 1980. Business increased and Baburao's two sons Rajabhau and Vamanrao took it to greater heights. Their *kaarkhana* had over 100 workers at one point of time and many of them later started their own idol making units, building the Pen brand name.

The fourth generation of Deodhars - Rajabhau's son Anand and Vamanrao's son Shrikant continued the family legacy

by starting their own workshops. A city education allowed them to aspire greater things and expand their brand beyond the traditional idol-making. Both have now taken leaderships and managerial roles and have reduced their scale of production considerably. They now spend their time working on sculpting as a hobby in their respective workshops.

Shrikant also conducts seminars in art museums across the globe promoting the art of idol-making. He was also elected and has been serving as the President of *Pen Murtikaar Sanghatan* since 2000.

Anand is a master sculptor and has set up a small gallery to display his and his father's art, next door at Deodhar Kala Dalan.

The cousins are perhaps the last generation of Deodhars to be a part of the traditional art as their children have studied and settled abroad. I wondered if this would be the same case with the *murtikars* in the workshops who perhaps aspired for a better life for their future generations too.



AN EVERYDAY SIGHT IN PEN

As I walked down every *ali* (street),
I could see rows of idols drying in the
sun. The artisans sit indoors in their
home-workshop diligently crafting
their next masterpiece.

The setup of a *kaarkhana*

As one passes down an ali (street), they can see rows of unpainted idols left for drying in the sun outside every kaarkhana. The kaarkhanas are small makeshift workshops and function in more or less similar ways. Each kaarkhana specialises in making either clay or PoP idols, or both. A majority of the businesses in Pen rely on PoP idol sales.

Infrastructure

The workshops are indoor and often attached to the home of the owner. The artisans sit cross-legged on the floor and work on the idols for hours. Some innovations have been done by the owners to make their life easier by constructing work benches and rotating stools. There is no heavy machinery involved in the making of the idols.

Raw material

None of the raw materials used in the making of the idols are local. The shadu(clay) is sourced from Bhavnagar in Gujarat while the PoP comes from Rajasthan. Traditionally, colours from natural sources like turmeric, palas tree, etc were used. But they are not available in large quantities so they have resorted to using Camlin poster paints and powdered pigments.

Storage space

Larger the workshop, larger the business and more number of artisans moulding idols. They are perpetually running out of space for drying and storing the finished idols. From the courtyard to the roof, no inch of space would be spared. During the monsoon, storage becomes an issue. The newer generation I observed has become more efficient and have built warehouses with levels to increase storage.

Process

The kaarkhana operates as a factory. Each artisan is assigned a duty - kneading the clay, moulding the image, colouring the idol and so on. Shrikant says that there are around 20-25 steps involved in the making of a single idol. Special attention is given to the painting of the eyes, as that is what makes the idol so life-like. The eye painter is a coveted role and only the most skilled artisans are allowed to do that.

Working hours

The artisans work all through the week except Sundays. They begin work in the morning at 8:00 am and clock in at around 5:00 pm in the evening. Since a majority of the orders are placed well in advance, they have a set target to achieve by the end of the week. As the festival approaches

and deadlines have to be met, they work overtime and during the nights as well. The ten-day festival is the only period when the production is halted.

Salary

The artisans are paid at the end of every week. The payment varies according to the idols they have made. Better finished idols net good money. The eye painters are the highest paid.





THE PROCESS

How an idol is brought to life...

After my chat with Shrikant Deodhar, my first stop was the clay(shadu mati) idol workshop - Trimurti Kala Mandir owned by Baliram Pawar. Hidden in the by-lanes of Dattar Ali, I finally arrived at my destination. Pawar used to work as an artisan with the Deodhars before he began his own unit. Today, he and his family runs of the largest clay-idol making workshops in Pen.

The workshop was much larger compared to the ones I had observed during my walk from Kasar Ali. There were three levels. The ground for making the idols, the upper floors to be used as storage. It was frenetic with activity, each person was surrounded by rows of completed idols.

Through series of photographs, I have attempted to reconstruct the major steps involved in bringing the Ganesha to life.



01



02



03

POP MOULDS

The moulds for the body, head, trunk, hands and throne are separate. Smaller idols have only two pieces - body & hands.

The clay is knead at the beginning of the work week, and around 150 idols can be made from each batch. As per the orders they have received, 2-3 varieties of Ganeshas are made simultaneously during each work cycle. In the next step the clay is gently pressed into the moulds (negatives) using bare hands.

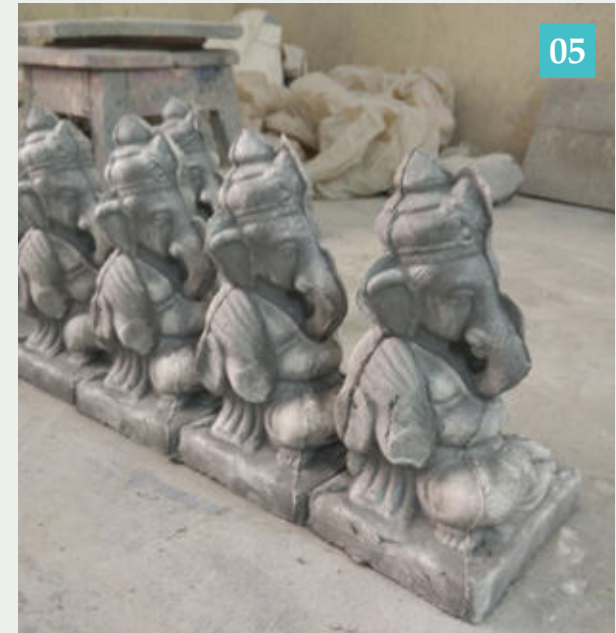
01. Original Image

The sculptor creates the original image of Ganesha from which the mould is created. Beads are often used to add uniformity and precision.

02. Preparation of Clay

03. Moulding

The mould is dusted with a powder sack called 'shankagiri' before the clay is pressed on to it.



With no moments to waste, the artisan would begin to cast another idol. The idol pulled out from the cast is very raw and goes through a series of steps till it is perfected. In another corner of the room, a different artisan would be busy attaching these bodies and limbs together with a solution of water & clay. Using wooden tools, he would carefully remove any excess clay, smooth out the cracks and add in the intricate details.





04-07. Joining & finishing

The individually moulded parts are then joined together, smoothed and perfected using wooden tools and brushes. The tools are unique to each artisan and are hand-crafted by him as per his style.



ARTISAN'S PERSONAL TOOLS

Ravi takes immense pride in his craft and has been perfecting idols for over 40 years. His set of handmade tools have been his constant companion ever since.



08. Drying

The clay idols take over 2-3 days to dry completely and are left out in the sun to speed the process. As there is also a space crunch, the outdoor area also doubles up as temporary storage.

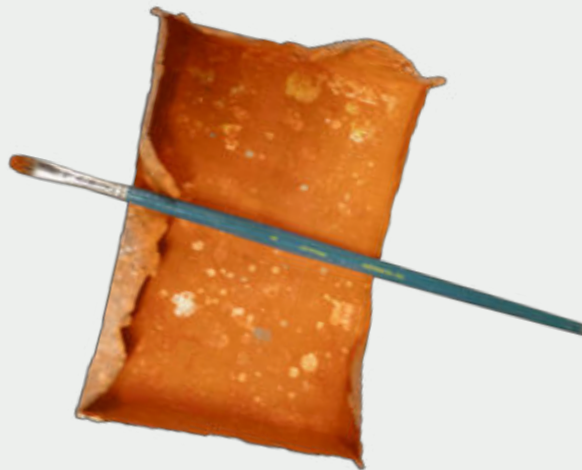


09. Polishing

After drying, the idols are polished with a sanding paper and perfected till they are smooth to the touch.



The painting begins with the application of a base paint for the body. The artisans refer to it as 'safeda'. This is ideally done with the use of paint spray and is the only involvement of machinery in the whole process. This is not a daily activity and is often done when batches of raw idols are ready to be painted. Next, shading is done with a powdered orange paint using a brush. The owner of the workshop himself participates in this activity.



10. Application of Primer

11. Shading

An orange powder is lightly dusted on to the idol to give it dimension.



12



13

The 'Made in Pen' idols are known for their bright and beautiful colour combinations. The painting happens in a separate section of the *kaarkhana*. First, the clothes are painted with vibrant yellows, reds and violets. Next, details and shading is done. The ornaments and eyes are painted lastly. Rajendra, their eye painter is highly skilled and very carefully adds the last touch.



14

12-13. Painting

3-4 artisans sit together to paint one idol. Each one would be assigned a colour and a body part to paint. They come in a powdered form and are mixed with glue and water to form a paste that is applied.

14. Eye-painting

A coveted job performed by the most skilled artisans. The life-like painted eyes gives the *Ganesha* its soul and vitality.



Just when I thought I was done looking at all the steps involved, Baliram Pawar says that I have not yet met the most important person - the transporter. Perhaps the most busiest person, Patil spends the day moving 1-2 idols at a time to the warehouse upstairs where they are packaged in plastic wrap till the time comes for them to be delivered to the retail markets.

In addition to clay idols, Trimurti Kala Mandir also makes PoP idols on a smaller scale. There are three artisans who handle the PoP idol-making but as they were on a vacation I opted to visit another workshop to understand the difference in both the processes.



- 15. Storage**
The completed idols are covered in plastic film and are transported to the nearby warehouse



THE PROCESS

The making of a Plaster of Paris(PoP) model

Shree Pataneshwar Ganesha Kala Mandir

To see the process for making PoP idols, Shrikant directed me to Kiran Patil's workshop - Shree Pataneshwar Ganesha Kala Mandir. I initially ended up at his home since I assumed like the previous kaarkhanas it was attached to their home. But alas, that was not the case. It was a bit farther away from their home, so I hitched a ride from the good samaritans of Pen.

I recalled briefly meeting him earlier in Mumbai when I spoke with Shrikant. He was a much open, and jovial fellow. He was eager to speak at length and showcase his workshop which was under renovation.

He is an artist himself and makes the original idols from which the moulds are made.

A major difference in the two apart from the material is the mould. Clay idols use moulds made from PoP, while PoP idols use rubber.



Strips of gauze are brushed with a moulding liquid and placed over the original image coated with varnish. It takes upto 30 layers to construct the rubber mould. A rubber mould is durable, more accurate with the impression and details, and can be used to cast more than 500 idols.



Once the rubber mould is ready it is placed within a PoP mould for support and turned upside down. The PoP powder is mixed with water to form a thin solution which is then poured in the cast. The artisan dips his hand in and spreads it around removing the excess mix. Natural fibre(katha) is added for stability in larger



idols. Then it is allowed to set which takes about 30 minutes. The hands are moulded separately using a similar process.



The painting stage is similar to that of clay idols. Powdered colours and Camlin poster paints are used. As Pen is a wholesale market, retailers often buy the polished idols and then paint them as per the current trend and demand.

After observing the making of both clay and PoP idols, I understood their similarities and differences. The original idol in both cases is sculpted from clay and requires immense skill. The mould that is cast from the original is the major difference between the two techniques. For clay idols, the mould is made from PoP, whereas for PoP idols it is made from rubber. The PoP idols are not only easier to make, but as a material it is sturdier, lighter and can be used to make idols as large as 5 feet in height.

The ropes are then untied and the mould suit is opened to reveal the beautifully detailed idol. The hands are then connected and the idol is polished. Unlike clay idols which require a lot of finishing, PoP idols retain their finer details. A white primer is applied before the idol is painted. To distinguish polished idols from the freshly cast idols, the artisans would mark it with a colour. This negates the need to touch it every time to check.







THE MURTIKAR

A day in the life of an artisan...

In addition to my trips to the two workshops, I would also drop by and chat with artisans in smaller *kaarkhanas* in the *alis*. Even they had stories to tell and would welcome me in to their homes for tea and snacks.

My starting point of the conversations were to ask about the process. Then I would quiz them about how they spend their day. They would be surprised that someone is also interested in their life and not just the craft.

The day begins early in Pen. They finish their household work and eat a heavy breakfast. Most of the artisans stay close by and walk to work. Many of them even own scooters and drive their children to school before their work shift. They are quite punctual and reach by 8:00 am. As the casting process can be a messy affair, they bring a change of work clothes along.

There is no hierarchy amongst the artisans and they share the same rapport with the owners as well. They chat amongst themselves about local politics or listen

to the radio in the background as they work diligently. Many of them have been making-idols since childhood and have over thirty years of experience. Their eye for precision and detail is unmatched. After all, the reputation of Pen lies in their fine workmanship.

Idol-making as a hereditary profession is not always the case. Some of the murtikars used to work in a soda factory at Vashi village in Pen Taluka. But due to low wages and heavy load of work they quit and became murtikars. After observing and hands-on experience, they quickly picked up the trade. Several others have similar stories to tell. They say that despite it being laborious, there is a certain dignity to idol-making. *We get to be indoors, are sitting in one place, there is no workload, we are at peace seeing the smiling god every moment.*

We begin to discuss their personal lives. They love what they do and never felt forced to do it but perhaps did it because it was an easier choice. But they would not force their children to take up the craft. If they are keen they would be drawn to it, but we want them to study in school and aspire for a better life.

Soon it is time for lunch so they disperse. As they stay close by they choose to go

home, and on the way pick their children from school. A few people carry their own dabbas. Lunch generally consists of a traditional Maharashtrian meal of bhakri and vegetables. After the lunch break, it is back to work for the artisans. They continue their production hoping to meet their intended goal.

At the Pawar workshop, the owner joins the activities. As he once used to be an artisan himself working at Deodhars, the conversation moves on to the aspirations of the workers. I asked him what motivated him to begin his own business, were there any challenges he had to face. Like the craft, managing the business too can be learned as an apprentice. The Deodhars were very supportive in his endeavour. He explained to me the division for expenditure - 80% goes to labour, rest is on material. Pointing at his son and brother, he says that if the labour is from the family itself, you are saving money.

There are not many women working in the industry but if you see them, they are likely from the same family. We encourage our daughters and daughter-in-law to paint the idols. Some of them are even skilled enough to paint the eyes.

At 5:00 pm work stops and they head home. The rest of the evening is spent

with the family, they say that it is no different from how I would spend time back in the city. They would go shopping,



I do not get a vacation. I also make idols at home which I and my wife retail during the festival in Dadar. Do visit next time.

Yeshwant Phanse,
on learning I was from Dadar



Rajabhai Deodhar made a statue honouring his worker Mahesh Belloshi for his years of service.

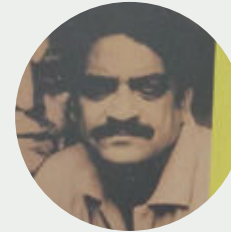
Rajendra Mhatre,
on explaining the bond that owners and artisans share



I have been sanding idols over the last 50 years and had started when I was just 8 years old.

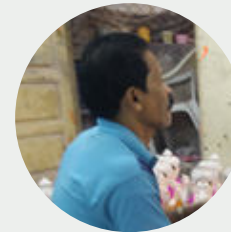
Shirish Bhagat,
prides himself on being one of the oldest in the profession

watch a film at Moreswar Adlabs or go out for a meal. The next day the same cycle continues.



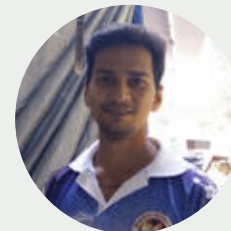
You should go see them how they get wasted at night and beat up their women.

Anand Deodhar,
when I tried to explain to him what visual ethnography is



The men who do *aakhni*, they get paid like bank officers.

Kashinath Pawar,
humours about the salary given to the eye painters



They do not collect their salary at the end of every week. They fear they will spend it all on alcohol.

Kiran Patil,
on how the artisans devise ways to save money

MR. KIRAN PATIL

At the age of 32, he runs one of the largest PoP idol workshop in Pen.



THE MURTIKAR

The owners share their concerns...

An art form or a printing technique

During my meeting with Shrikant in Pen, he riddled me with an important question. Who are the *murtikars*? Are they the sculptors who make the original image? or the *kaarigars* who cast the idols from the moulds? Are they not just printers reproducing the original?

He is concerned that today Pen is not producing enough artists. The same designs are used every year. But since they have a decided market at the beginning of each cycle, there is not much that can be done in terms of exploration.

Kiran Patil, on the other hand, who is also a sculptor, has tried to bring innovation to the traditional art form. For the sake of precision and a uniform impression when a rubber mould is cast from it, he has introduced the use of beads in making of the original image.

A generation gap

Shrikant feels that the newer generation lacks the discipline they had. They do not have the patience to sit in one place and work religiously for hours. They are more

interested in driving their scooters and tempos here and there.

At the Pawar workshop I noticed that most of the artisans there were over the age of 40 and had years of experience behind them. This was not the case at Patil's workshop, where almost all the artisans were young college going kids. I quizzed him about this and he shrugged it off saying that you need to understand how to keep them happy. A healthy dose of alcohol seems to do the trick.

Role of technology

Some of the workshops maintain web portals but the primary form of advertising still remains word of mouth.

With the advent of smart phones, however, communication has become much simpler for the business. The tech-savvy owners like Kiran and Sunil Sawale receive orders for the year over Whatsapp. Sunil feels it is a curse as well as a boon. The patrons keep pestering him continuously to send pictures of the idol-making process.

Storage & meeting the demand

The demand for the idols have been increasing every year. With the increase in volume of production, newer problems have cropped up - labour and storage.

Shrikant says that labour can be managed but their skill remains in question. Pen is known for their quality and craftsmanship, but now that is suffering because of novice labour.

Kiran shared his ledger of orders for this cycle. He said that they have a certain number of fixed customers every year. Almost all of them are retailers. They can foresee their production power and take in orders only till a certain period, in his case, the month of March. He says that if they are not able to complete the order, it is not just their name that is sullied, but the reputation of Pen also suffers.

Since delivery does not start until a month before the festival, they run out of space to store all these idols. The Government is trying to remedy this by allotting spaces in the taluka for production. They also have plans to set up training centres, in their bid to establish Pen as a model town for local crafts.

Environmental issues

Shrikant strongly believes that the water pollution issue is highly exaggerated. He

brings up a report by the Pollution Board that said that PoP contains gypsum which does dissolve although after extended periods of time. He does not condone the immersion in water bodies practice but feels everyone has an agenda. If you compare the pollution level during the festival it is equivalent to that of a chemical factory in a single day.

It is the use of toxic colours which cause pollution and efforts have been undertaken from their side by introducing natural colours. Also clay idols can be recycled and some initiatives have been launched at the local level to facilitate it.



MR. SUNIL SAWALE

He admits that smartphones have made their lives simpler although it being a constant source of distraction.





GANESHA EVERYWHERE

Right from the discarded pile of Ganeshas which have become a hunting ground for scavengers to the plush multiplex named after Ganesha as Moreshwar Adlabs.



Insights

My sojourn in Pen offered me glimpses of the *murtikar's* life and their attitude towards life.

A collective co-existence

The workshops are not in direct competition with each other. Each of them have established their market. The standard designs they make may differ slightly. No one has a copyright over any of them. In fact, if a workshop is failing to complete an order they turn to another workshop for help. They believe in maintaining a collective reputation of Pen.

Perhaps the only healthy competition I noticed was in the form of Premier League styled cricket matches wherein each workshop in the *ali* participates to win the cash pool.

New generation of idol-makers

The industry had evolved over the years under the leadership of Deodhars. With the new generation of idol-makers, it is ready to undergo another evolution with the aid of technology, government intervention and reforms.

The *kaarkhana* camaraderie

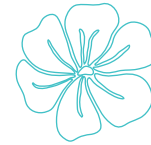
There exists a skill based work division but the lack of an evident hierarchy amongst the artisans was refreshing to see. The willingness to make the life of the artisans under their employ simpler was exhibited by each of the owners. The *kaarkhanas* have bonded all these people together as one family.

A secure industry

The market for *Ganesha* idols is perennial. In fact, it is projected to grow with increase in demand. Shrikant shared that unless the Government suddenly passes a proposition banning PoP idols, there are otherwise no threats to the industry. Despite it being a laborious occupation it has a certain dignity to it, and faith in *Ganesha* will continue to draw more people towards it. Also the fact, that unlike other idols, Ganesha does not have a fixed image. The form of Ganesha can be represented in numerous ways and experimented with to create new designs.

Missed opportunities

Post-visit discussion with the guide made me realise that there were so many more questions that remain unanswered. If I would have dug deeper I could have perhaps learned more about the role of caste within the idol-making community. The role of women too could have been explored in detail. In addition, I did sense a rift between the two Deodhar cousins and with further prodding I could have landed upon a more in-depth history of the celebrated family.



Epilogue

Once a humble village, Pen has now become a bustling town. Tall, modern buildings can be seen as one enters the town. Swanky cars dot the narrow lanes and by-lanes alongside rows of raw, unpainted idols. Malls and multiplexes have emerged but they still bear the name of the Lord. Despite all this commercialisation; the connection and bond the town shares with *Ganesha* can be seen in every nook and corner, even today.

Citation

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Glossary

aakhni - the process of painting the eyes of the Ganesha idol

ali - pronounced as आली, streets in Pen

Ganesh Chaturthi - the 10 day festival celebrated in honour of Lord Ganesha in the western parts of India

Ganesh - The elephant headed god who is revered as the destroyer of all obstacles in India. Also known as Ganesh, Ganpati

kaarigar - a craftsman, artisan

kaarkhana - a makeshift workshop where the idols are crafted

murtikar - a contested term; as per my understanding both the sculptor and the craftsman are murtikars

Pen Murtikaar Sanghatan - Association of Ganesha idol-makers in Pen

PoP - (Plaster of Paris) a gypsum based powder when mixed with water accelerates

Moreshwar Adlabs - a multiplex cinema hall in the town

safeda - primer applied to a polished idol

shadu mati - china clay

Vikram - a shared six seater taxi used for public transport within the city

