



## **Enriching the legacy of clay craftsmanship of South Bengal: A study on Majilpur Doll**

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### **Abstract**

The handicraft industry of Bengal is very diverse. Various types of handicrafts made with different natural items have been evolved in the rural interiors of Bengal. Majilpur Dolls or Jaynagar Dolls are one of those finest handicrafts which evolved during the 17<sup>th</sup> Century in Majilpur, a neighborhood of Jaynagar in south twenty four parganas. Simple and vivid appearance of majilpur dolls made these one of the most quaint and appealing handicraft items of south Bengal. These dolls have been showcasing the clay craftsmanship of Bengal for a long time. Dice and clay are the basic materials to make these dolls. The mythological, folk, and contemporary figures of Bengal have been portrayed wonderfully through these dolls. However, at present with the age of globalization and modernization the modes of entertainment have been changing significantly. Due to these reasons, the demand of majilpur dolls is decreasing drastically. Although, artist Sambhunath Das from Jaynagar, is still trying to keep alive these endangered dolls with his great craftsmanship. He attends several fairs, exhibitions in different parts of Bengal to sell his dolls. Even though, several shops of Kolkata are now purchasing majilpur dolls from him for the demand of customers. The future of majilpur doll is not satisfactory due to low demand and competition with other products. However, at present people from urban areas are now being informed about this heritage dolls, through the exhibitions, online shopping platforms etc. Therefore, these initiatives are the necessary steps to keep this laminating clay dolls alive.

**Key Words:** Folk, Handicraft, Heritage.



## Introduction

Rural areas of southern West Bengal are the tapestry of innumerable exquisite crafts and craftsmanship. From a timeless period, numerous of crafts have been evolved in the rural interiors of South Bengal. Majilpur doll is one of those crafts which had evolved in an abandoned river course of Jaynagar in South 24 Parganas district. From the 17<sup>th</sup> Century (Bongodorshon Information Desk, 2024), people started to settle in the dried river course, which came to be known as Majilpur. The artists of Majilpur, were offered to witness a distinctive combination of clay craftsmanship and diverse themes through their handcrafted dolls. These dolls are known as Majilpur dolls, known for their simple but most vibrant look. Generally, the dolls are made with clay and after drying in fire or sunlight, colours are given. *Garjan Tel* (Oil produced from Garjan tree) is used to give the lustre look to these dolls after finishing the colour. These dolls are broadly divided into two themes, first the deities or mythological figures and second the contemporary characters, such as *Babu*, *Bibi*, and animals etc. The poor artists found their source of income and livelihood by selling these aesthetic dolls. But at present, with the rapid advancement of technology, the mode of entertainments has been shifting and that involves in the losing fame of this wonderful craft. Although the art enthusiasts are still interested to purchase these dolls by influenced the appealing looks. Now a days only artist Sambhunath Das is making the Majilpur dolls not only for income generation but also to keep safe and alive this beautiful artefact with his skilled craftsmanship.

## Study Area

Majilpur is one of the prime neighbourhoods of Jaynagar in South 24 Parganas, having the latitude 22°10'31" N and longitude 88°25'12" E. Beside Jaynagar, along the eastern part of the railway line towards Namkhana block from Sealdah, Majilpur is situated. Once Majilpur was considered one of the popular Janapadas of Bengal due to its well-developed navigational connection with the river Bhagirathi and its paleochannels, which are mentioned in several bengali literary texts and essays. At present Majilpur is a small urban neighbourhood under the Jaynagar Majilpur Municipality.

## Objectives



Majilpur's doll has been occupying an important and prestigious position in the handicraft industry of West Bengal. The present study has been conducted to reveal the significance of Majilpur doll in the clay craft and craftsmanship of south Bengal. Which features made these dolls one of the most attractive and demanding handicraft items of Bengal, is selected as an objective. The present status of the Majilpur dolls has also been traced through the present study.

### **Discussion**

In the handicraft diversity of West Bengal, Majilpur Doll has been carrying its legacy for a long period. The skilled craftsmanship of clay doll making made these dolls one of the significant intangible heritages of rural West Bengal. Why the Majilpur dolls are significant in the rural handicraft industry of south Bengal, their alluring characteristic features and present status have been discussed under the following heads.

#### ***Glimpses from the history***

Majilpur doll has a glorious past. The fame and popularity of Majilpur dolls had been traced back to the 17<sup>th</sup> Century when the first settlement took place at Jaynagar and Majilpur. Majilpur was a renowned Janapada of south Bengal that came to be known from the Medieval bengali literatures like *Manasamangal*, *Chandimangal*, and *Chaitanya Charitamrita* etc. Once the river Adi Ganga which is a paleochannel of Bhagirathi-Hugli had a well developed course in Majilpur, but with the passage of time, the river course became dried and on the abundant river course (popularly known as *moje jaowa ganga*), people came to settle. This area was named as Majilpur. After the development of human habitation, rural artists started here to make clay dolls for their earnings. The popularity of Majilpur doll was started when the Zamindar family of Duttas from Jessore, Bangladesh, came to Majilpur and settled (The Bengal Store). Kalicharan Peyada who was the security of Zamindar family, came to Majilpur and he had a special artistic skill of making Tepa Putul (doll making by pressing the clay with finger). Beside his duty he made clay dolls for the childrens of Zamindars. His son Janakinath Das and grandson Harinath Das were also popular artists. Harinath Das has popularized the authentic Majilpur dolls. He found the influence of local culture by visiting the outskirts of Sundarbans and imposed those observations on the dolls (Ghosh, S., 2010). Despite fine and meticulous detailing, they used to make dolls in a very simple way.

This simple style but vibrant look made Majilpur dolls as the unique artifact of Majilpur and the overall southern Bengal. Subsequently, this craftsmanship legacy has been passed down to their descendant Manmatha Das who received the President's Award in 1986 for making the Jagannath-Balaram-Subhadra idol in their inherent style (Ghosh, S., 2023). Making the clay dolls was the sole source of income of Majilpur's artists, due to the satisfactory demand. The artists made various dolls on diverse themes, including mythological, folk and contemporary figures. The folk traits of deltaic south Bengal were reflected through these dolls along with the renowned deities.

As discussed earlier, Majilpur dolls are famous for their simple but vivid appearance. For these exquisite characteristics, these dolls are very much attractive and hold a reputed position in the doll diversity of West Bengal. The most distinguishing features and craftsmanship that made these dolls very much significant among the handicraft items of Bengal have been illustrated below.

### ***Doll Making Process***

The craftsmanship behind these dolls is worth mentioning. There are several steps to make these dolls. Pioneer artist Sambhunath Das stated "that majority of the dolls made from dice". At first clay moulds are fitted in a dice and kept for some time. After that the mold extracted from the dice and kept in sunlight or fire. It is an interesting fact that the dolls of gods and goddesses are not fired, these are kept in sunlight for drying. After drying, the dolls are painted with vibrant colours and gum of tamarind seed is used for long term consistency of colour. At last, a special oil named *Garjan Tel* is used for bright and shiny appearance.

### ***Types of Majilpur Doll***

Majilpur dolls are made using dice (Udbodhan- Ramakrishna Math Bagbazar, 2025). Various subjects are depicted through the Majilpur dolls. Broadly, these dolls are divided into two types, mythological and contemporary. Mythological figures are the potent and signage of these dolls. From the dawn of its evolution, both classical and folk deities have been made. Doll of deities were the prime choice of villagers, so that the artists mainly made the doll of Shiva, Durga, Kali, Jagatdhatri, Ganesh Janani, Radha Krishna, Krishna Balarama, etc. Beside these popular mythological figures, folk gods and goddesses are also a significant attraction of Majilpur dolls.

According to the artist Sambhunath Das, folk deities mainly from Sundarbans and the rural outskirts of south Bengal including *Banbibi, Dakshin Ray, Gazhi, Manik Pir, Makal Thakur, Sitala, Ateswar*, etc are predominantly made. Apart from mythological and folk deities, contemporary subjects like animals (cat, peacock, horse cow, bull, Makara the vahana of Ganga etc.), elite class man commonly known as Babu Putul, social customs and behaviours of people, can be seen. However, these dolls are known as another names like *Tepa Putul, Ahladi Putul*, etc.



**Figure 1:** *Durga (Majilpur Doll)*  
Artist: Sambhunath Das  
Source: Photo taken by Author



**Figure 2:** *Contemporary and Folk figures*  
Artist: Sambhunath Das  
Source: Photo taken by Author



**Figure 3:** *Cat (Majilpur doll)*  
Artist: Sambhunath Das  
Source: Photo taken by Author

### **Characteristic Features and Significance**

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As mentioned earlier, the simple and vibrant appearance have helped majilpur dolls to hold one of the significant position in the clay doll diversity of West Bengal. Majilpur dolls have been considered as a wonderful example of clay craftsmanship in Bengal. These are made with a single mold of clay. In spite of intricate detailing as other dolls of Bengal including Krishnanagar clay dolls, Panchmura dolls, Terracotta dolls of Bishnupur, Majilpur dolls are famous and noteworthy for their simple finishing. Generally the figures of the deities are bulky. Both male and female divine figures are crafted in such a way that they appeared bulky. It can be easily said that majilpur dolls are the portrayal of the middle class bengali people. The appearance of goddesses are completely similar with the bengali higher-middle class women. *Ganesh Janani* (Fig 5) is an ideal example of portrayal of bengali women and her motherhood *through the*



*Figure 4: Dakshin Ray  
(Folk deity of  
Sundarbans)  
Artist: Sambhunath Das  
Source: Photo taken by  
Author*

*divine figure Durga and her son Ganesh. Majilpur dolls have been connecting the gods and human from its time of evolution. The impact of local legends about the appearance of folk deities are intrinsically found in these dolls. The god Dakshin Ray who is worshipped in the villages of Sundarban to save the villagers from tiger attack, is wonderfully crafted in a Majilpur style. The vehicle or vahana of Dakshin Ray (Fig 4) is a Bengal tiger and his clothings are very attractive. These appealing looks of local gods can beautifully be*



*Figure 5: Ganesh  
Janani (Durga and her  
son Ganesh)  
Artist: Sambhunath Das  
Source: Photo taken by  
Author*

Some art enthusiasts and researchers found the similarities between Kalighat Paintings and Majilpur dolls (Udbodhan-Ramakrishna Math Bagbazar, 2025). The appearances of dolls have much similarities in respect of bulky figure, extended eyes and simple looks, etc which can be observed in the Kalighat paintings also. Although, the eminent artist Sambhunath Das, who is still carrying the legacy of these clay dolls, has not accepted the relationship with the kalighat paintings. According to his statement, “Kalighat Pat and Majilpur dolls are completely different from each other”. Majilpur dolls are only found in Jaynagar, majilpur. And it can be traced from the evolutionary history of majilpur dolls and Kalighat pats that, creation majilpur dolls were started

from the 17th Century while kalighat paintings were originated in the middle of 19th Century. Therefore, the majilpur dolls were originated much before the kalighat paintings. However, contemporary figures including Bengali elite class men called as *Babus* (Fig 6) and their wife *Bibis* (Fig 7), their affairs, and several occupation of people (Fig 8), etc are depicted meticulously through these dolls that similar with the contemporary figures of Kalighat paintings.



**Figure 6:** Babu Putul  
Artist: Sambhunath Das  
Source: Photo taken by Author



**Figure 7:** Babu and Bibi  
Artist: Sambhunath Das  
Source: Photo taken by Author



**Figure 8:** Bhistiwala (water Carrier)  
Artist: Sambhunath Das  
Source: Photo taken by Author

One of the attractive features of these dolls is use of vibrant colour and colouring method. Das said that “in previous time natural colours are used, but at present use of natural colour takes too much cost and time. Hence, the market used colours are now being used and gum from tamarind seed used as a medium”. However the bright and vibrant colours made these dolls very attractive. It is noticeable that there are no shades on the base colours. From this perspective Jaynagar dolls are different from kalighat pats. Because in the kalighat figures the use of shade is essential. The eyes, figures of dolls are made with the fine brush strokes. And at last a fine coat of Garjal oil is given on these dolls for shiny look. Therefore, all these enigmatic features of majilpur dolls have helped to hold a significant position in the handicraft items of Bengal.

### *Present Status*

It is undeniable that the environment friendly Majilpur dolls and their fine craftsmanship hold a significant position in handicraft realm of Bengal. However, with the age of globalisation, the modes of entertainment have been changed significantly. Once the clay dolls which were used for playing of childrens, now on the way to its extinction. Majilpur dolls are one of those laminating handicrafts which is still surviving. Skilled artist Sambhunath Das is the only descendant of Manmatha Das, who is still carrying the legacy of this wonderful craft and craftsmanship of Majilpur dolls. Although artist Sambhunath Das is very much concerned about the survival of these dolls. As per his statement, “nowadays the plastic toys are occupying the market and used widely as play items, therefore the demand of Majilpur doll is decreasing”. At present people are not interested to purchase these clay dolls, however several people come at the residence of Sambhunath Das at Majilpur to purchase these dolls. He addressed that “the people who come to purchase, the number is very limited, several college and university students also come for their own research purpose”. He also mentioned that the market value of these dolls is not satisfactory. Making and selling of these clay dolls are not able meet the livelihood alone. Henceforth, beside these clay doll making das is also made clay idols for earnings. However, the demand of majilpur dolls have been increasing in urban areas. For this reason, his dolls have been selling to the several shops (Fig 9) and entrepreneurs in Kolkata through online (Daricha, 2023). He also attends several fairs for selling his dolls in Kolkata and other parts of West Bengal and India. Das said in an interview that, “at present he is the only artist who is still making the Majilpur dolls not only for income but also for his passion and urge to keep the heritage of these dolls alive”.

Although it is important to note that these dolls are now being displayed in several museums, exhibitions and art galleries, etc. In the Indian Museum (Fig 10), National Museum of Delhi, British Museum, in the Smithsonian Institute, and in Rama Krishna Mission Institute of Culture of Kolkata, the various collections of the majilpur dolls are observed (Bhattacharya, B., 2014). Along with these exhibitions, government organised and private fairs are the prominent ways to showcasing this rural heritage art form and to inform the people of urban areas about the Majilpur dolls.



**Figure 9:** Collection of Majilpur dolls at Bengal Store at Jodhpurpark, Kolkata.  
Artist: Sambhunath Das  
Source: Photo taken by Author



**Figure 10:** Exhibitions of Majilpur dolls at Indian Museum.  
Artist: Sambhunath Das  
Source: Photo taken by Author

## Conclusion

Majilpur dolls have been showcasing the rural heritage through its appealing look almost for three centuries. Various mythological, folk, and contemporary figures of Bengal have been portrayed through these dolls for a long time. Sambhunath Das an eminent artist, is still carrying the legacy of these dolls, who is the eighth descendant of legendary Kalicharan Peyada. He is the only artist left in Jaynagar who make these wonderful dolls still at present. Despite of their sophisticated and vibrant appearance, the demand of these dolls has been reducing day by day. According to the artist the market value of Majilpur doll is very low and not profitable. Along with the hurdles, eminent artist Sambhunath Das has been making these dolls by his passion and deep affinity. However, several art enthusiasts from other states and suburbs purchase these dolls for their personal collections. Nowadays, these dolls are selling to some fairs and shops around Kolkata and other areas of West Bengal and India. Several online marketing sites are also engaged in selling of these dolls. These are the necessary steps to inform the urban people about these delicate dolls of Majilpur. Museum display and exhibitions are also important to keep this wonderful art form alive. If the childrens are informed about these dolls, craftsmanship and its legacy and school exhibitions are organised on these rural heritage art forms in school, college and other institutions, hence these will be the ensuring steps to make safeguards for the Majilpur dolls.



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