

Sharell Cook, Sep 2013

There are just two weeks remaining until the Ganesh Chaturthi Festival in Mumbai. It's one of the city's biggest and most anticipated festivals of the year. More than 200,000 idols of Lord Ganesh will be worshiped and immersed in water over the 10 days of the festival. Artisans are busy around the clock at workshops in south Mumbai's Lalbaug district, as it's a race against time to get all the idols finished. The labor-intensive process of handcrafting the Lord has been going on for around three months. It involves specialized skills, handed down from generation to generation, and workers come from as far as Bihar to assist.

**Keen to see the making of Lord Ganesh for myself, I decided to embark on this Ganpati Bappa Morya! Meanderings in Lalbaug guided walk, [offered by Breakaway](#).**

My guide for the adventure, Ramanand Kowta, was a man of diverse interests. He joined the tourism industry on a whim 10 years ago, after a lengthy corporate career followed by a stint in organic farming. I quickly discovered that he was a man of remarkable spiritual insight as well. In addition, he had a knack for photography, which delighted me.

With great anticipation, we set off for one of the biggest idol workshops in the area. Located north of the Lalbaug Flyover, it was a cavernous makeshift structure that had been fashioned out of bamboo poles and blue tarpaulins behind iron gates. Inside, idols of different sizes and designs sat, row upon row, in various stages of completion. The smaller ones at the front were painted, packaged and tagged, awaiting collection. Some had been elaborately draped with glittering jewels. However, many of the larger ones were still being shaped out of plaster. Immense, they loomed over me. One, sitting atop a huge ball, was surrounded by scaffolding so that the artisans could climb up and access it. They were still applying plaster to it too. I couldn't help but wonder how the work was going to be done in time for the festival. After all, the painting that would transform the idols from plain white figures into the much loved elephant god required so much detail.

Near Chinchpokli Bridge, we visited the workshop of Mr Ratnakar Kambli, the head of Kambli Arts. Renowned artists and sculptors, three generations of the family have been making Mumbai's most famous idol -- the Lalbaugcha Raja -- since 1935. For them, idol making is more about love than money and they focus on decoration work for the remainder of the year.

The surprisingly humble and unpretentious Mr Kambli invited us in, offered us a cold drink, and gave us laminated photos of the Raja sitting on his throne in all his glory. Chatting to him revealed that while the idol had been fully assembled, it was yet to be painted. Approximately one and half months are required to complete the 12 foot idol. Its parts are first cast from molds in the workshop and then transported to its heavily guarded site in Lalbaug market, as it's too big to be carried whole. The idol's legendary look, now patent protected, was created by Mr Kambli's older brother Venkatesh who was a graduate of the Sir J. J. School Of Arts. As for its elaborate set, it's been entrusted to designers including illustrious Bollywood art director Nitin Desai.

Mr Kambli also explained that its been necessary to adapt the design of the Lalbaugcha Raja, to enable it to fit under the new Lalbaug Flyover when being carried out for immersion. Some of its parts, including the crown, are now being made to fold down.

All around the workshop, artisans who'd toiled throughout the night slept on bedrolls under statues of the Lord. Despite the light and noise, their minds were enviably at peace in his presence.

In other workshops that had mushroomed on the roadsides, young craftsmen were diligently sculpting and painting. Some were not even out of their teens, but they were already so adept at the sacred art.

My tour concluded in the Lalbaug spice market. I left feeling joyful and unburdened by my divine voyage, which brought me so close to Lord Ganesh, the remover of obstacles. There was such beauty in the many creative expressions of him and the effort that was being devoted to bringing them to life.