



# Bell-Metal Industry Of Assam: It's Problem And Prospect

(A case study of Sarthebari, Assam)

Dipanjali Sarma

Assistant Teacher, Baghmara M.E School

## Abstract:

The bell metal industry in Assam is a revered traditional craft deeply rooted in the state's cultural heritage. With origins tracing back centuries, this artisanal expertise has been passed down through generations in Sarthabari, one of India's oldest bell metal clusters. Renowned for their exceptional skill, artisans from this region cater to a broad market spanning Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka. Despite its cultural and economic significance, the industry faces existential threats. Intense competition from inexpensive alternatives and machine-made products, coupled with the influx of aluminum and plastic items, poses a significant challenge to the survival of Sarthabari's bell metal craftsmen, imperiling a cherished tradition.

**Keywords:** Bell Industry, Traditional Craft, Sarthabari's Bell metal Craftsmen, Problem and Prospect of Bell Metal Industry.

## 1. Introduction:

Bell metal items are a big part of Assamese culture. Many families hold onto these items because they reflect their identity. They often use them for religious rituals and weddings. In Assam, Sarthebari is known for its bell metal craftsmanship—it's actually the second most famous handicraft in the region! However, with today's global economy—including trade deals & foreign investment—the traditional cottage bell metal industry in our state feels uncertain. It's essential to check on how this industry stands regarding its patterns, economic impact, problems with production & marketing, plus how everyone involved sees things.

## 2. Historical Context:

The story of bell metal crafting goes way back to around the 7th century AD. There're many records showing that this industry began during the reign of King Kumar bhaskar varman of the Varman Dynasty. This king even gifted drinking vessels to another ruler named Harshavardhana. Interestingly, there's evidence that

skilled masters of bell metal were around long before then! A notable Chinese scholar named Hieuen Tsang received cymbals during his visit to India—these were made from bell metal too.

However, it was truly during the Ahom dynasty when things took off many Ahom kings showed great interest in this industry, especially King Swargadeo Siva Singha. Their support helped it thrive! People from all walks of life—kings & commoners—used bell-metal utensils regularly. Under royal encouragement, artisans created beautiful items like Sarai (trays), Gudgudi (hookahs), and various vessels. Some even made cannons for battles!

King Siva Singha even praised an artisan named Jieu Dhan Kahar early in the 7th century for his talent! Jieu Dhan had a love for art and was awarded much land as recognition for his skill. He crafted a wooden tiger housing cymbals that made roaring sounds when moved—that's quite impressive! His descendants still carry the title 'Chaudhary' proudly.

### 3. Objectives of the Study:

1. To find out what challenges the bell-metal industry faces.
2. To suggest some ways to uplift their situation.

### 4. Methodology Followed:

For this study, we conducted a field survey with face-to-face interviews to gather information directly from respondents- 23 people participated. We had a prepared questionnaire covering topics like income approaches, recreation habits, tools used in crafting, business details & marketing systems.

We gathered secondary data too—this came from places like the Directorate of Industries and reports from various local agencies such as the Assam Cooperative Bell Metal Utensils Manufacturing Society.

### 5. Findings of the Study:

In our findings about different aspects of the bell-metal industry. We noted several vital points:

#### 5.1 Principal Items:

1. Cymbals
2. Bhogjhora
3. Dugdugi
4. Pikdani
5. Bankahi
6. Banbati
7. Buddhist taal used for prayers
8. Dofola bati often used by some tribal groups during marriage ceremonies

## 5.2 Investment Amounts:

We looked at how much money firms invest on a monthly basis and discussed various ranges of these investments (like shown in Table-1 & Fig-1.1).

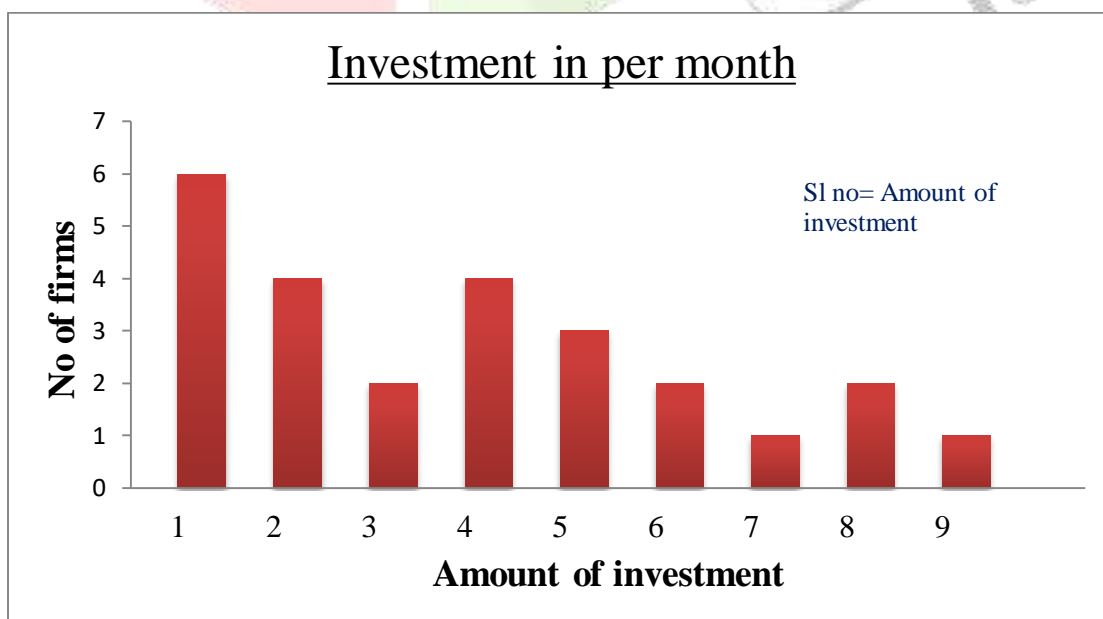
These insights help us understand this beautiful craft's past while figuring out ways to help it move forward into a brighter future!

**Table-1: Amount of investment (per month)**

Sl. No	Amount (in Rs)	No of firms
1	10000-20000	6
2	20000-30000	4
3	30000-40000	2
4	40000-50000	4
5	50000-60000	3
6	60000-70000	2
7	70000-80000	1
8	80000-90000	2
9	90000-100000	1

Source: Field Survey 2024

**Figure 1.1: Amount of investment**



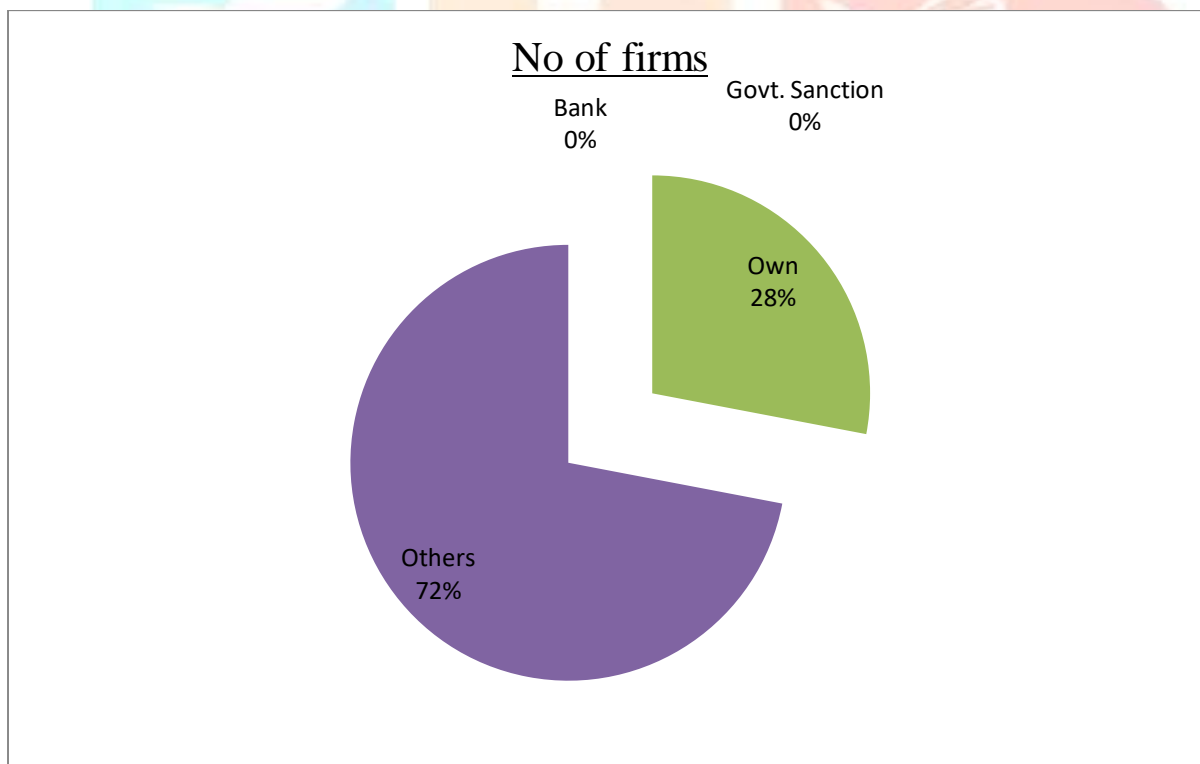
### 5.3 Source of invested capital:

In the study, we tried to know about their different sources of invested capital and had seen that they mainly made investment in oneself or others as borrowed money from others. There was no financial assistance from bank and Govt.

**Table-2: Sources of invested capital**

Sources	No of firms
Bank	0
Govt. Sanction	0
Own	7
Others	18
Source: Field Survey 2024	

**Figure 1.2: Sources of invested capital**

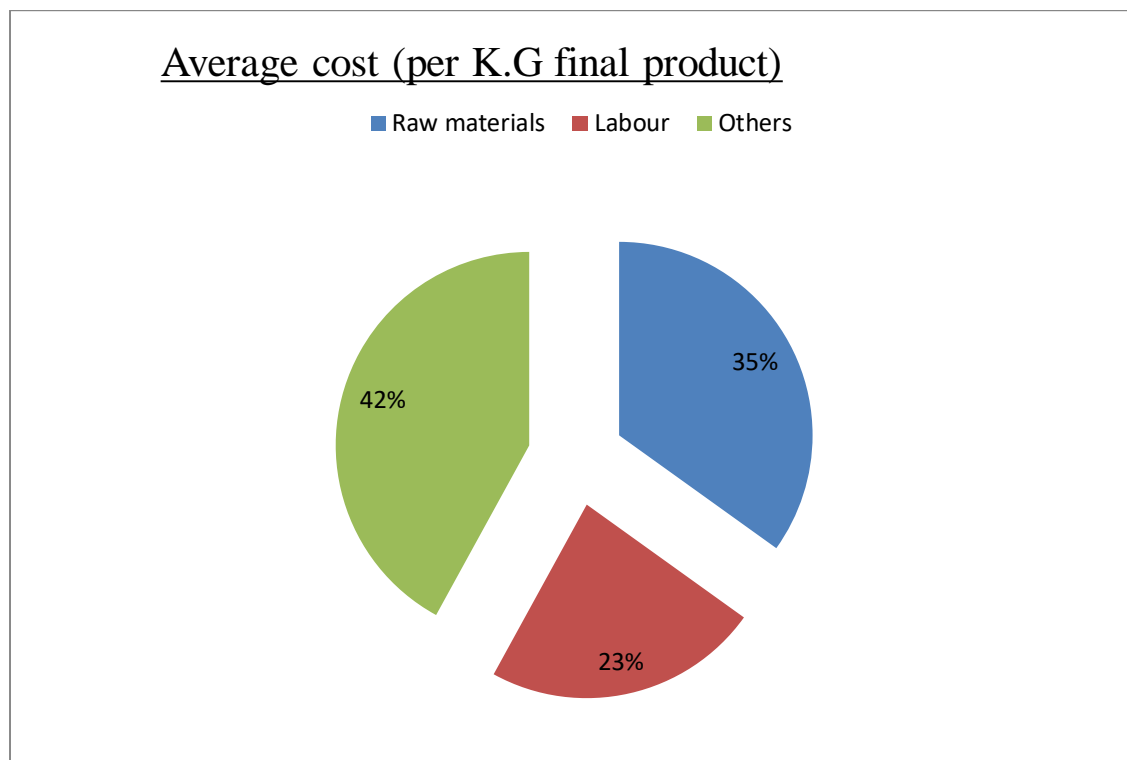


### 5.4: Cost of production:

We had categorised the different levels of cost of production in per K.G final product as cost of raw materials, cost of labour and others and obtain the average cost as shown in Table-3 and fig-1.3.

**Table-3: Cost of production**

Types of production cost	Average cost (per K.G final product)
Raw materials	881.6
Labour	583
Others	1061
Source: Field Survey 2024	

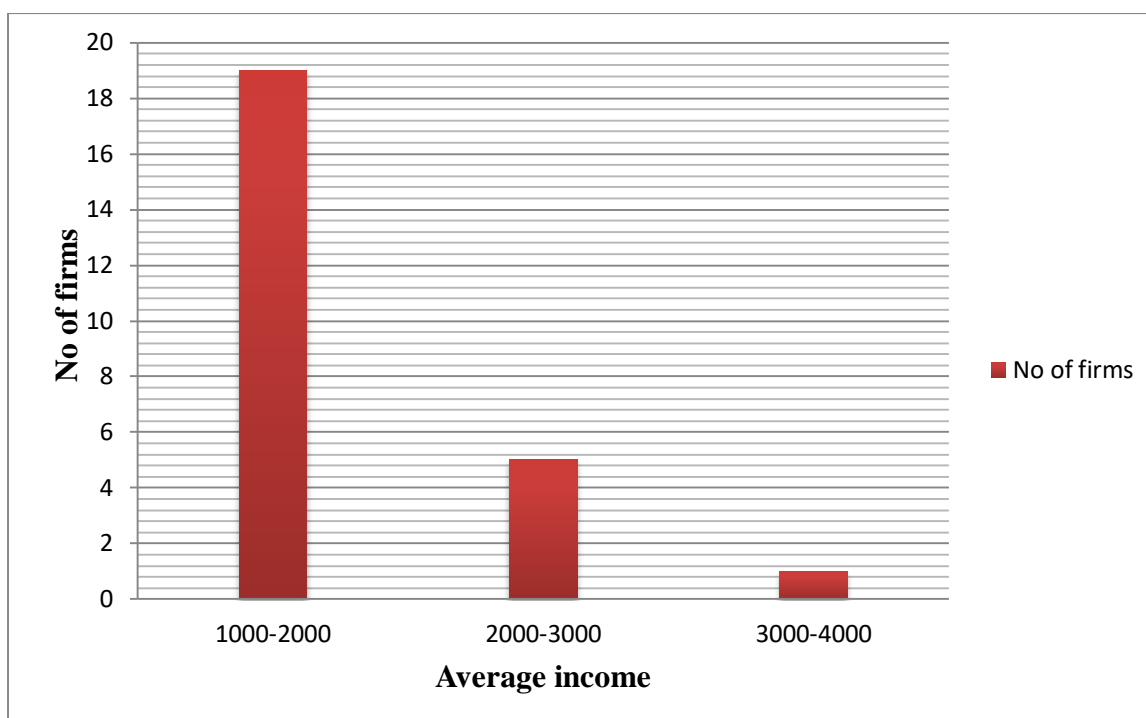
**Figure: 1.3: Cost of production**

### 5.5 Average income per K.G final product:

In the study, we found that most of the artisans' average income of per K.G final product not more than Rs.2000. Their income is very as compared to their cost.

**Table-4: Average income (per K.G final product)**

Average income in Rs ( per K.G final product)	No of firms
1000-2000	19
2000-3000	5
3000-4000	1
Source: Field Survey 2024	

**Figure: 1.4: Average income of per K.G final product**

### 5.6 Problems faced:

The bell-metal sector faces a lot of challenges. Producers struggle with the supply of raw materials, energy, finance, & market access. Here's what we discovered about the issues holding this industry back:

- A big problem for the bell-metal industry is the lack of quality raw materials & energy. Because they can't get the right stuff, artisans often use scrap materials from local markets. This hurts the overall quality of the products.
- The owners of garhsals (workshops) also have trouble because energy supplies are irregular & not enough.
- Prices for charcoal and coke have gone up too. This puts pressure on workers since they have to pay for energy costs out of their earnings. So, their income drops despite all their hard work—making it tough to make ends meet.

d. Another major issue is finance. Many artisans need more working capital to create their products. Only a few units can afford to buy raw materials with their own money. Most artisans are financially weak and rely on village moneylenders who charge high-interest rates, which just adds to production costs. Recognized financial institutions don't really help these rural craftspeople due to poor repayment records and complicated procedures that artisans might not understand.

e. Marketing is another tough spot for this industry. The workers haven't developed any real strategies to figure out what customers want. They tend to make things based on their own ideas instead of looking at market demands and interests. This means traditional products often can't meet market needs anymore.

f. Bell metal products are beautifully designed, but sadly machines can't replicate these designs easily, which limits mechanization in production.

g. Workers work in tough conditions that harm their health—things like respiratory issues, chest pain, & eye diseases.

h. There's fear among workers about duplicates of their work flooding the market! Customers often can't tell genuine items apart from fakes and might end up buying cheaper versions made elsewhere.

Now, let's talk about what areas really need attention:

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- a. Upgrading technology
  - b. Connecting everyone involved in the cluster
  - c. Practical skill development training for making different products
  - d. Support for marketing these products
  - e. Help with securing raw materials
  - f. Creating a Common Facility Centre

Here are some ideas:

This internationally known craft could become a good livelihood option if the Government steps in by:

1. Looking into problems faced by bell-metal craftsmen now & sorting them into engineering or management issues with solutions.
2. Increasing the supply of raw materials & providing them at lower costs.
3. Using project funds to build a proper market network so artisans can sell directly without middlemen.
4. Setting up a Common Facility Centre (CFC) to improve infrastructure where artisans can access better machines for various processes such as testing materials, cutting sheets, designing products, etc.
5. Offering basic health insurance to help improve artisans' health.
6. In this globalizing world, artisan marketing efforts need to come together so they can thrive in both product and factor markets.

## 6. Conclusion:

In conclusion, artisans are the lifeblood of the bell metal industry, and their productivity and sustainability are paramount. Currently, inefficient time utilization and low earnings threaten the sector, with only 40% of artisans' time being utilized effectively and their numbers dwindling daily. To combat this, strategic modernization and technological integration are urgently needed. Collaborative efforts from state governments and local communities are essential to equip cottage industries with the necessary skills and access to thrive amidst intensifying competition. A critical step is to curb the proliferation of counterfeit products that undermine artisans' hard work. However, with innovative design, skill development, and entrepreneurial engagement, the future of bell metal craftsmanship looks promising. Empowering the next generation of artisans will pave the way for a resilient and vibrant industry, ensuring the preservation of this cherished cultural heritage."

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