

# Problems and Challenges faced by the Craftsmen /Artisans engaged in the production of Bell metal Products - A Study made in Sarthebari of Assam

**Abstract:** Assam is having a unique identity in the field of cottage industries. Bell metal industry is one of them. Bell metal utensils are the part and parcel of Assamese society. Bell metal has been receiving a greater importance in Assamese culture and traditions since ages. But the artisans (kanhar) engaged in the production and marketing of bell metal products are facing numerous challenges. Through this research paper the Researcher focuses on the challenges faced by the bell metal artisans and tries to provide certain measures to overcome such challenges. The study is done with the help of primary and secondary data.

**Key words:** Bell metal, Craftsmen, Artisans, Assamese culture, Challenges etc.

## Introduction:

History says existence of Bell metal craft in Assam can be traced back to 7<sup>th</sup> century when the King Bhaskarbarma of ancient Kamrup gifted Kangshapatra (a vessel made of bell metal) along with many other articles made of bell metal to King Harshabardhana of Kannauj. During Ahom regime (1228-1826 A.D) this craft enjoyed a great place as the royal courts, castles and drawing rooms of royal families were decorated with various kinds of bell metal utensils. The Ahom rulers used to take their food in Maihang Kahi (traditional Assamese dish made with bell metal) and Maihang Bati ( traditional Assamese bowl made with bell metal).

Bell metal is a mixture of Copper and Tin , usually approximately 4:1 ratio of Copper to Tin i.e 78% Copper and 22% Tin. It is a hard alloy used for making bells, utensils, instruments and various decorative items such as cymbals, water pot, sarai (a platter or tray mounted on a base), dish, bowls, figures of deities, swords, draggers, musical instruments etc. An Assamese family is incomplete without bell metal. Every auspicious occasion right from marriage to worship, bell metal utensils are widely used. Bell metal industry is the second largest handicraft of Assam after Sericulture. Sarthebari of Assam is well known for this ancient folk craft. Most of the families of this village have been practicing this art since many years. The hard alloy of bell metal forms a beautiful shape in the efficient hands of these skilled craftsmen. But the artisans or craftsmen engaged in this industry have been facing uncountable problems and challenges since ages. A detail analysis of problems and challenges faced by artisans is made in this paper.

## Review of literature

The literature review in respect of present research study are-

- P. K Deka(1986) in his article “Asomor Samaj Aru Sabhyataloi kanh Silpir Arihana ( Contribution of bell metal artisans towards Assamese culture and traditions)”,published in the souvenir of Golden Jubilee Celebration of Assam Co-operative Bell metal Utensils Manufacturing Society ltd has mentioned about the problems faced by craftsmen in producing bell metal ware and contribution made by them for the development of bell metal industry.
- Prabin Baishya(1989) in his book “Small and Cottage industries of Assam” has mentioned about the income of bell metal artisans.
- K.N Deka in his book “ Aikhan sarthebari” published in 1995 mentioned about the problems of bell metal industry and its future prospect of development.
- G.Deka (2006) in his thesis “Sarthebari Anchalar Lokasanskritik Adhdhyayan” has mentioned in details about the bell metal craft.
- Goswami (2009) also mentioned about the various problems faced by bell metal industry and urged upon the issue of ‘trademark’ by the concerned authority for Sarthebari Bell Metal products.
- Nakul Talukder(2011) in his article “ Asomor Jatiya Sampad Kanh Silpir samashya aru Samadhan” published in Sonali Prabandha Bithika of Bharati Adhyayan Chakra mentioned about the problems faced by bell metal workers in the process of production and marketing of bell metal products along with future prospect of bell metal.

- Dr. Rupam Roy(2014) in his study “Entrepreneurship Evolution of Cluster Industry in Assam- with special reference to bell metal industry of Sarthebari has stated in details about the bell metal industry regarding increasing prices of raw materials, problems faced by artisans, financial assistance provided by various institutions etc.
- Mrinal Malla Patowary in his book “ Sarthebari sabhar Etibrita aru kisu kotha” published in 2014 had stated thoroughly bell metal cluster of Sarthebari. He wrote bell metal craft and Sarthebari village are the two sides of one coin.

### Objectives of the study

1. To highlight the challenges faced by bell metal artisans
2. To provide some measures to overcome such challenges
3. To know about the initiative taken by the government in improving living and working conditions of artisans.

### Research Methodology

**Population:** The population of the study constitutes all the people of Sarthebari engaged in bell metal production. There are 280 production units in Sarthebari and around 5-7 artisans are engaged in each unit.

**Sample:** A sample of 28 bell metal production units i.e about 150 craftsmen are selected for study.

**Sampling Technique:** The Researcher used non-probability (convenient) sampling technique to carry on the research study.

### Sources of Data:

**Primary Data:** Primary data are collected from field survey in the bell metal production units, conducting direct personal interview with the craftsmen at source where they are asked many questions with the help of a schedule to collect various information. The researcher also collects some information from the officials of Assam Co-operative Bell Metal Utensils Manufacturing society Ltd by conducting interview.

**Secondary data:** Secondary data are collected from various books, journals, articles,newspapers , websites etc.

### Challenges faced by bell metal artisans

The challenges faced by bell metal craftsmen are given below-

1. **The increasing price of bell metal raw materials:** The bell metal raw materials are generally imported from Kolkata and even countries like Bangladesh and Pakistan and stored in Fancy Bazar of Guwahati city. The craftsmen have to pay more prices to purchase these raw materials as the market of bell metal raw material is under the control of capitalist businessmen. Government has no control over it. As a result the capitalist businessmen often increase the prices of these materials by showing artificial scarcity.
2. **Lack of funds :** Bell metal products can be produced by using two methods. One is from broken bell metal( used as bell metal raw material) and the other is by mixing copper and tin in appropriate proportion. But the second method is very costlier. The bell metal artisans do not have sufficient fund to adopt the second method of production.
3. **Fuel scarcity:** Charcoal is used as fuel in producing bell metal products. But deforestation causes scarcity of charcoals.
4. **Traditional tools and techniques:** Artisans are still using old tools and techniques in producing bell metal ware because of non availability of new methods of production, modern tools and techniques and sophisticated machines, which consumes more time as well as energy. Because of these the design of the finish products are becoming outdated now.
5. **Competition:** The craftsmen have to face high degree of competition with the products which are very much cheaper as compared to bell metal products. Now- a- days the market is flooded with those lookalike products with attractive design imported from other states. Therefore consumers interest towards costly bell metal products are reducing. On the other hand illiterate and poor artisans are completely unaware about the marketing strategies which can be used as weapons to revive the cluster.

6. **Unhygienic working environment:** The working environment of the bell metal craftsmen is very pathetic. Because of this unhygienic living and working condition the craftsmens' health is continuously deteriorating. They easily get attacked by various diseases.

7. **Insufficient capital:** The craftsmen always face the problem of insufficient capital to run the business. Though bell metal is a tradition of Assam still the government showing less interest for the development of this craft. When the researcher put this question to the secretary of Assam Co-operative Bell metal Utensils Manufacturing society Ltd, he told that once in 2005 the Governor of Assam provided rupees 3 lakhs to the industry. But it was not enough for the proper development of the industry.

### Suggestions and conclusions

The bell metal craft is internationally famed and popular. Each year lots of products are exported to countries like Bhutan, Nepal, Myanmar, Germany, Italy, Japan etc. Therefore this craft of Sarthebari is having a high potentiality of growth and development. It is impossible without the help of craftsmen or bell metal artisans. The all round development of artisans are necessary for the long term survival of bell metal cluster. The government should first provide some basic infrastructural facilities like transportation and communication, electricity, medical facilities, schools and colleges, establishing rural craft museums etc. If the government provides financial incentives to artisans to purchase tin, copper, zinc etc. required to produce new bell metal then the cost of bell metal finish products will decrease. As a result the market demand will increase automatically. Apart from these various seminars and workshops should be organized to create the awareness among people towards bell metal products and by using print and electronic media publicity of the craft should be made. GI (Geographical Indication Registration) and trade mark for bell metal products of Sarthebari are of utmost necessary to preserve the authenticity of this craft. The government should provide modern machineries to the artisans which will help them to produce bell metal finished products by applying less effort and time.

The bell metal utensils have the capacity to kill germs and improve digestion and preserves food for long time. The people also consider it as a sign of aristocracy. So proper initiative should be taken for long term survival of this heritage folk craft of Assam by making all round development of the craftsmen engaged in this field.

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