

Product Adaptation: Popularizing Bell Metal Handicraft Product of Sarthebari as a Tourism Souvenir

Dr. Birinchi Choudhury

Assistant Professor,
Department of Economics,
B.B.K. College, Nagaon (Barpeta)
Assam

Abstract

Bell metal handicraft is an important handicraft of Assam. Different products of this handicraft have been getting socio-cultural and religious importance over centuries. The uniqueness of this handicraft is that the technique of production is purely traditional and hereditary. Though there is no any shortage of demand of the products of the handicraft, there are ample opportunities to increase the flow of tourist to Sarthebari through product adaptation. There are number of studies undertaken on bell metal handicraft of Sarthebari most of which highlighted the problems of the handicraft. No studies are found which focused on the potentialities of product adaptation. The study is based on primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected through focus group discussion, unstructured personal interview and Delphi method. The study concludes with some recommendations.

Keywords: Bell Metal, Handicraft, Cultural Identity

Introduction

In Assam, the position of bell metal handicraft is next to handloom and textile. It is one of the important and popular types of metal used to manufacture different kinds of day to day utensils and decorative items (Devi, 2016). Though the bell metal works are also found in other parts of the country viz. West Bengal and Chhattisgarh, the composition of the alloy is different in Assam which is unique in nature. In Assam, the alloy is made by consisting 78% copper and 22% tin. Though tin and copper is the main raw materials of bell metal, the artisans of the handicraft use scrap bell metal utensils as raw materials. For giving required shape of the melted bell metal, the artist use charcoal as fuel to heat the metal.

Without the utensils of bell metal product, the Assamese culture is incomplete. Every family tries to maintain those articles as marks of their cultural identity. They are mostly used in day to day life, in religious rituals and marriage ceremonies. The whole ritual activities of Nava Vaishnava religion which was propounded by Srimanta Sankardeva cannot be done without bell metal utensil. The Puja of Shakta, the Prasanga of Vaishnava, the worship of Buddhist all use bell metal utensils as a holy tool of worship. Even in marriage of girls, it is customary that parents present bell metal utensils to their daughters. In every cultural and religion activities in Assam, the bell metal utensils are used and preferred. Whenever a guest comes to a family, the family welcomes their guests by offering areca nut in Baata, a bell-metal

utensil. Even a guest feels delighted when some offer meals in bell metal dishes. Thus, we cannot think about the Assamese culture without the use of bell-metal utensils. The use of bell-metal utensils is not only concentrated in Assam alone. Its use has crossed the state as well as national border. Dafla, a unique tribe of Arunachal Pradesh, which is surrounded by South China, uses a peculiar type of bell metal dish. The dish is known as Dafla Kaahi in Assam. No other places of India except Assam produce this utensil. Thus a utilitarian tool of Dafla culture is made solely in Assam. The magnitude of bell metal handicraft is not end here. Four types of musical instruments, cymbal, known as Pachang, Bheri, Cemen, and Romo are produced at Sarthebari of Assam which have international market. These musical instruments are used in the Buddhist religious rituals in Bhutan, Myanmar, Sri-Lanka, Thailand etc. Hundreds of Bhutanese traders come to Sarthebari, stayed here for many days and returned with their required bell metal products to sale in the international market.

Statement of the problem:

The bell metal handicraft has a very rich history in Assam. Of course, the genesis of bell metal handicraft works of Assam is not known. There are number of legends regarding the origin of the handicraft. One legend expressed that the bell metal handicraft was started in Assam during Mauryan Period i.e. during 321-185 B.C. (Mishra and Sultana, 2015). During Mauryan, the supremacy of Buddhist emerged in terms of culture, trade and commerce. They spread all over the South East Asian countries. One group came to Assam through Burma accompanied with Kanhar (bell metal worker). The Assamese learnt the skill and started to produce different utensils and musical instruments (Deka, 1994). Another legend expressed that the bell metal handicrafts started in Assam during Gupta Age i.e. during 320-647 A.D. (Deka, 2012). However the written documents reveal that during 7th century, Kumar Bhaskar Barma, King of Kamrup (the origin name of Assam) gifted Kangshapatra (a bell metal item) to King Harshabardhana of North India.

The bell metal handicraft got royal patronage specially from Ahom (1228-1826 A. D.). During Ahom regime, the use of bell metal utensils was restricted within the royal families. The Ahom kings engaged Kanhars to produce Bartop (a great gun) and Barhilo (cannon-balls). Even today, the Singphos of Jagaloo of Tinsukia district produces the souvenir of Hengdung and export it to Myanmar (Sahay, 2015).

The Konch kings also gave patronage to the bell metal handicraft. King Biswa Singha (1515-1540 A.D.) cared the kanhar (Sastri and Saliha, 2002). Naranarayana (1530-1586 A.D.), the most powerful kind during the regime of

Konch also gave shelter to bell metal artisans (Deka, 1995). During his time Vaisnavism, a branch of Hinduism who believes in existence of only one God emerged. The founder of this religion established numerous satras (a place where worshiped). The Vaisnavish started using different bell metal utensils in their religious activities and later on became part and parcel of the religion. Besides, during the regime of Konch, different bell metal utensils were exported to Bhutan and this has been continued till today.

During the colonial period of British in Assam (1826-1947), the control of bell metal handicraft went to the mahajans who used to exploit the bell metal artisans. To remove the exploitation of the traders, the artisans established Assam Kanhar Sangha Limited in 1933. This was registered under the co-operative regulation Act 1912 in 11th June, 1939 in the name of Assam Co-Operative Bell Metal Utensil Manufacturing Society Ltd. This is the most important development activity of the handicraft because by this activity the handicraft had been freed from the exploitation of the Mahajana. It is the oldest survive co-operative society of the state today which has been making considerable profit. It has not only been helping different problems of the bell metal workers but also making considerable profits with 12 branches in different parts of Assam. During the era of globalization, the existence of a handicraft based co-operative society based on a handicraft is a significant message. Another important thing is that the production process of this hereditary handicraft is completely manual by using traditional tools. The main raw materials of the handicraft are scraped bell metal utensils and charcoal. The skill is completely hereditary. A product which is completely manually produced with traditional technique can attract researchers, academicians, policymakers and traders. By observing all these potentialities, the bell metal handicraft can be positioned as tourism product. The making process, the hereditary tradition, the co-operative system, the products, the museum of the co-operative etc. all can be focused as tourism products. No studies are found which positioned bell metal handicraft as a tourism product. This study has filled this research gap by focusing the potentialities of the handicraft as a tourism product.

Review of Literature:

Different studies are found related to bell metal handicraft of Assam. Some of the major studies are discussed here.

Sarma (1978) found in his study that the bell metal industry has been facing competition from substitutes which are cheaper and more attractive. Even then there is no any official attempt to reduce cost of production through improvement of production process and

established a better market. The poor artisans rely on village money lender who charge high rate of interest. Choudhury (1995) is on the opinion that due to marketing difficulties and economic problems, the artisans have to sell their products to the middlemen. Deka (1995) states that an important challenge of bell metal industry is that it has to face competition from machine made product specially in case of dishes, bowls etc. from Uttar Pradesh and other parts of India. The design of their product are imitate and produced in machine outside Assam at a lower cost. It is a serious threat for the bell metal industry of Sarthebari region. Choudhury (2010) in his study suggested for opening a website in the name of Assam Co-operative Bell Metal Utensil Manufacturing Society Ltd. and sell its share in national and international markets. The people associated with this have to think about to open retail outlets in various places outside Assam. Moreover, participation in national and international fair, exhibition etc. also help in understanding the qualitative side of bell metal items to the people of other state and country. He is also on the opinion that in the age of globalization, various colourful and attractive items are available in the market at lower price. It will reduce the demand for the bell metal product since the price of bell metal items is very high. To satisfy all the customers, training for the artisans is necessary for quality improvement of the product. Deka (2010) also provided same line of thought. According to him, various attractive products are available in the market. In this situation modernization and product diversification of this industry is necessary to increase demand for the products in the market. It is very important to adopt modern technology in production and also necessary to have knowledge of the bell metal artisans about tastes and preferences of the consumers in the present market. According to Sarma (2010), the tastes and preferences of the people have changed. In such a situation it is important to produce according to the demand of the consumers. Roy (2014) is on the opinion that the artisans should try to produce at low cost but beautiful so that it can compete the products of the global markets. He advocated the use of machine and modern equipments in the production process. Kalita and Prosad (2016), state that the bell metal product has to face number of problems viz. lack of capital and fund, lack of raw materials, dependence on Mahajans, decreasing marketing orders, traditional design and items, training problems, fluctuations in price, poor infrastructure etc.

Thus it is seen that the existing literature explained various problems of bell metal industry, competition face by it from cheap substitutes, threat from duplicate product and also explained the necessity of product diversification and modernization. The studies are concentrated with the

problems of the bell metal industry of Sarthebari. No studies are found which tried to position bell metal handicraft as a tourism product. The present study has focused bell metal handicraft as a tourism product.

Objectives of the Study:

The objectives of study are:

- i. To find out the socio-economic and cultural contribution of bell metal handicraft.
- ii. To identify the challenges encountered by the bell metal as a tourism product
- iii. to assess the future viability of bell metal craft through SWOT analysis.

Study area:

Sarthebari is one of the oldest towns of Barpeta District, Assam. The location of the place is 26.35°N 91.22°E. It is nearly 90 km away from Guwahati. According to the 2011 census, the total population of Sarthebari was 6,913. The literacy rate of Sarthebari city is 91.79 %. The town is famous for historic bell metal handicraft. Of course bell metal works are done in the neighboring villages of Sarthebari too viz. Karakuchi, Gomura, Namsala, Amrikhowa, Bengapara, Kamarpara, Palla etc. However, the handicraft is concentrated more at Sarthebari.

Methodology:

In the study, data were collected from both primary source and secondary source. As per as the first objective is concerned, a focus group discussion was conducted at the study area. The panel of the group comprised representatives of Naba Vainshav Dharma, Haridevies, Damodardevies, Shaktas, Buddhist of Bhutan tourist came to Sarthebari, a folk culture activist who has in-depth knowledge about folk cultures of all communities and tribes of Assam, a social worker of the locality, a representative of Rabha tribe, a representative of Bodo tribe, a representative of Konch-Rajbanshi community and one academician from the department of Assamese of a college. The representatives were intentionally selected as they have depth knowledge about the subject and have the capacity to highlight the socio-cultural contribution of bell metal handicraft in Assam. The information collected from the secondary sources viz. newspapers, journals, and books have been incorporated with the results came from the focus group discussion.

As per as the second objective is concerned, data were collected through unstructured personal interviews of different stakeholders of the bell metal handicraft. The interviews were undertaken from 12 head artisans because from the pilot survey it was known that at present only 12

types of utensils are made in bell metal handicrafts. Besides, 15 arabdaries (who supply bell metal utensils to the retailers located in other parts of Assam) of the bell metal utensils who are dealing in 15 districts, 4 raw material suppliers out of which one from charcoal, one from scraped bell metal, one from muhi (metal melting pot) and one from coal, all 30 retail outlets of the bell metal utensils located in the study area, the secretary of Assam Co-operative Bell Metal Utensil Manufacturing Society Limited were also interviewed. The survey was a census.

In case of SWOT analysis, Delphi method was undertaken. The panel of the group comprised one head artisan, one media personal, one academician, one vendor of bell metal utensils, one arabdari, one retail outlet, one representative of Assam Konhar Shilipi Sangha and one representative of Assam Co-operative Bell Metal Utensil Manufacturing Society Limited. While members of the panel were selected, emphasis was given that all are stakeholders of the handicraft. Before starting Delphi method, important points got from literature review and from the personal interview related to second objectives were enlisted. Those enlisted points were distributed to each member separately for seeking their personal view. After three rounds of repeated circulations, some unanimous points were found.

Besides the above mentioned methods, personal observation of the researcher had also played an important role while collected primary data. Secondary data were collected from the bulletins of Assam Co-operative Bell Metal Utensil Manufacturing Society Limited, journals, edited books etc.

Results and discussion:

Socio-economic and cultural contribution of bell metal handicrafts:

Bell metal as a Cultural identity

A bell metal handicraft is one of the oldest and important handicrafts of Assam. The most important thing is that without the bell metal utensils we cannot think about the Assamese culture. All tribes of Assam use cymbals in their traditional dances. Bell metal utensil is regarded as cultural identity of Assamese people. Each Assamese family feels pride to have bell metal utensils. In the marriage of a daughter, it is social customs that parents gifts some bell metal utensils viz kanhi (dishes), baati (bowl), lota (water pot), kalah (big water pot), baata (utensil used to offer areca nut, mouth freshener spices etc), chariya (a big container) etc. No social activity can be imagined without the use of bell metal utensils. Every Assamese family welcomes their guests by offering areca nuts in baata.

Xorai is also an important container made of bell metal used by Assamese people. It is used as a decorative symbol

in traditional functions such as during Bihu dances. It is also used to offer gift to a person for felicitations.

In Ojapali dance, one of the oldest art forms of Assam, too the performers use Khutitaal (palm sized cymbal). In Bihu dance, Bihu taal (cymbal used in Bihu dance) is used. Besides, Ojapali and Bihu, in all kinds of folk songs and dances of Assam, people use bell metal musical instruments.

Bell metal utensil is not only the part of Assamese culture; it is also a part of some tribes of Arunachal Pradesh too. The Dafla tribe of Arunachal Pradesh use Daphla Kaahi and Dafla baati produced at Sarthebari. It is the tradition for the Dafla tribe to keep bell metal dishes and bowls with in each family.

Bell metal as a religious identity:

Assamese is a land of Nava Vaishnav Dharma founded by Sri Manta Shankardeva. In all religious activities of Nava Vaishnav Dharma, the devotees use Baata, Xorai and Bhor taal (very big sized cymbal of weighted 2.5 kg to 10 kg). Bhortaal is a part and parcel of Assamese religious music specially Ek-Xaran Naam Dharma of Sankardeva, Pransanga of Harideva, and Prasanga of Damodardeva. Besides, it is used in Thiyo Naam (religious music-song-dance performed in standing), Nagara Naam, Boha- Naam, Gayan- Bayan performance etc. It is the sole musical instrument in the Bhor-taal Nritya played in the Lower Assam. Even the Sakta? uses bell metal utensils for their religious activities. The Ojapali dance is an integral part of Maa Manasha Puja where taal made of bell metal is used. The Buddhist all over the world use cymbals in their religious songs and prayers. Different types of cymbals viz. cimen, very, pachang, romo which are exported are made at Sarthebari.

Bell metal as a source of livelihood and foreign exchange earnings:

Bell metal handicraft has been a source of livelihood for the people of Sarthebari area. The young generation of this area does not look after the government jobs. The economy of Sarthebari area is completely bell metal centered. The business, the trade etc are dependent on bell metal handicrafts. The products are exported to Arunachal Pradesh, West Bengal and Delhi. Not only that bell metal utensils have been exported to different countries especially in the South-East Asian Buddhist countries.

Challenges encountered by bell metal as a tourism product:

Lack of sensitization

UNWTO advocates the development of rural tourism as a source of livelihood. Development of community based

tourism or rural tourism may game changer step for the people of Sarthebari area. The tourism based on bell metal handicraft can generate huge employment opportunities for the local people. But unfortunate thing is that there is no sensitization among the people of the locality. Number of evidences are found where traditional way of life are being centre of attraction for the tourist. The Old Village of Kumrovec, Croatia (Horjan, 201), Huay Pu Keng & Mae Aw villages of Thailand (Lacher and Nepal, 2010) are the examples where tradition is positioned as a tourism product.

Administrative negligence:

It is found that Sarthebari is being neglected by the Assam Tourism Department. The Assam tourism department has not promoted the place and artwork till date. Even the department has not enlisted Sarthebari as a destination of tourist' attraction in its brochures (Medhi and Patowary, 2015).

Poor infrastructure:

The infrastructure of Sarthebari area is not well. Nearest rail stations of Sarthebari is Pathsala (21 KM), Nalbari (24 KM) and Barpeta Raod (47 KM). The nearest airport is LGB International Airport of Guwahati (79 KM). But the road connections from these places to Sarthebari are very poor. Of course, a lodge was established at Sarthebari by Assam Tourism Development Corporation. This has slightly solved the problems of lodging. During field survey, most of the tourists revealed that though they enjoyed the destination, they faced the problems of poor roads, lack of electricity etc. The drainage system, garbage disposal system and sanitation and hygiene system are not up to the mark.

Poor promotion of bell metal products:

'Souvenirs and mementoes form an important part of the tourist experience of the destination' (Medhi and Patowary, 2015). Whenever a tourist visits a destination he brings back not only memories and experience but also some products as souvenir. Therefore, the artists of the bell metal handicraft have to sincere about that. They have to produce some light weighted and handy products so that the tourists can carry those as souvenirs.

SWOT analysis of bell metal handicraft as a tourism product:

Sarthebari is the sole destination where the bell metal handicrafts is found. It produces such type of cymbals which are being used by Buddhist people of many South Asian Countries. Being, one of the oldest handicrafts of Assam, the bell metal handicraft is fighting for survival. The main problems of this handicraft are replica of products produced in Barpeta Road (Assam) and shortage

of raw material specially charcoal. Of course, the replica of cymbal is not possible since it needs a special skill and that skill can be achieved after the repeated practices of 5 to 7 years. Besides, the artisans of a particular area of Sarthebari are skilled in making cymbal.

Strength:

- The only place of bell metal handicraft in Assam
- Export quality product being exported to many South Asian Countries
- Unique design of some products viz. cemen, bheri, pachang and romo of which replica is not possible.
- It has a very rich history.
- Medicinal importance
- Cultural and religious importance of the product.
- Traditional method of production which could be a reason of attraction for the tourists
- Reusable product

Weakness:

- Lack of awareness in outside the State about the Sarthebari's natural and cultural uniqueness
- Lack of coordination among Assam Tourism Department, tour agencies of the state and Assam Cooperative Bell Metal Utensils Manufacturing Society Limited.
- No railways, poor road condition, lack of cleanliness and hygiene environment of the area
- Negligence of the Assam Tourism Department and Assam Tourism Development Corporation regarding the promotion of the destination.
- No trade mark or geographical indication

Opportunities:

- Very high potentiality to develop as an attractive community based tourism destination
- Introduction of new products according to the demand
- Promotion though websites, e-commerce viz amazon.in or flipkart.in or kahibati.in etc.

Threat:

- Use of char-coal as raw materials which is very scarce today
- Use of Replica
- Hiked price of scraped bell metal utensils which is the main raw materials of the handicraft.

Conclusion and recommendation:

The study has revealed many novel things. It is clear that

