

Извештај о истраживању

## From a Lump of Metal to an Object of Art: Brief Notes from a Trip Around Assam

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The authors spent some time in the villages around Town area committee in Barpeta region in September 2022. The mentioned area, situated in the Indian federal state of Assam, has been known since long time for handcrafting different metal utensils (mostly out of bell metal), which today have an important role in everyday and ritual life. We have observed their work in Sarthebari and talked to people who make them. We obtained important information about the certain position of these objects in creating identity of people in Assam.

*Keywords:* India, Assam, fieldwork, tradition, identity, bell metal utensils, handmade.

The authors of this work spent some time in the villages around Town area committee in Barpeta region<sup>1</sup> in September 2022. The mentioned area, situated in the Indian federal state of Assam<sup>2</sup>, has been known since long time for making different metal utensils (mostly out of bell metal<sup>3</sup>). We have observed their work in Sarthebari<sup>4</sup> and talked to people who make them (Figure 1). Bell metal objects are fabricated manually and made by using a simple technique which has been passed down from generation to generation since ancient times. And various of these artifacts, as they said, are items at a price, even though the cheaper machine production has been developed for a long time. Although handmade objects are significantly more expensive than industrial ones, every family wants to have such items in their posses-

<sup>1</sup> Barpeta is town in district Barpeta (Assam, India).

<sup>2</sup> Assam is state in Northeastern India, south of the eastern Himalayas along the Brahmaputra and Barak River valleys.

<sup>3</sup> Bell metal or bell bronze is an alloy used for making bells and related instruments, such as cymbals, as much as the other objects. It is bronze usually a 4:1 ratio of copper to tin (typically, 78% copper, 22% tin by mass). Ron 1986: 40–50; s.a. *How Bells Are Made*.

<sup>4</sup> Sarthebari is one of the most prominent places for making bell-metal items. There are 280 bell metal units in Sarthebari providing employment for 5000 people (Kalita 2007).

sion because they are symbols of their identity. Every visitor is pleased to have been served in a bell metal bowl (Dutta 2020: 15). A family that uses bell metal utensils is regarded as most prestigious and cultured family. If you are offered any meal in bell metal utensils by any Assamese family, then you must be sure that you are offered the highest respect. One of the authors of this text (Zoja Karanović) experienced it as a guest in the villages of BARPETA region, as she was served a dish on a handmade bell metal utensil (Figure 2). It is also believed that the utensils manufactured using bell-metal have certain medicinal properties and consuming food in these utensils keep intestinal problems at bay. "Food in bell and brass metal utensils help the people to maintain health because of the presence of copper in bell and brass metal products" (Dutta 2020: 15). Also, drinking water in bell-metal glasses aids, as they said, in cleaning your body due to certain mineral present in these glasses. So, without the use of bell metal utensils, it is difficult to think about everyday life of the Assamese people. Because of that bell metal objects are the second largest handicraft of Assam (after bamboo craft).



Figure 1. Bhupen Rabha in the conversation with craftsmen



Figure 2. Food served in bell metal dish to Zoja Karanović and Dragana Ratković by Bobita Bhupe's wife, in their house

The use of these bell metal items testifies of their importance from long past. Dishes made of metal, as much as musical instruments and decorative items, were and are used in religious rites and in marriage ceremonies. Plates and metal trays with a stand at the bottom known as *baata* are used to serve areca-nut, and are used in felicitations too (Figure 3). It is customary that during marriage of daughter, the parents bestow bell-metal utensils. The bell metal utensils are used in every cultural and religious ritual of Assamese people. The bell-metal utensils are used in the state festival of Assam (in Bihu) (Dutta 2020: 11–14). All this speaks of their sacral and profane value for Assamese people.

In the Assamese society the bell-metal objects occupy an important place in the life and economy. In western Assam, there were centres for bell-making in Gauripur, Bilasipara and Sapatgram-Asharikandi-Kartimari. Apart from these, some production units of bell metal industry were shifted from Sarthebari area to different places of Assam. Such temporary shifting of production units is locally termed as *Parbah*. Reportedly, they were settled at Kalbari, Maligaon, Fatasil Ambari, Kumarpara, North Guwahati of Guwahati city. Similarly, some other production units were shifted to Jorhat, Sivsagar, Maran, Nazira, Dibrugarh, Chepan, Khowang, Sapekhaity, Golaghat, Nagaon, Lakhimpur and Narayanpur to establish temporary *garhsal* and return home before the commencement of Sarthebari *Sobha Mahotshab* (Tamuli 2009). However, at present, this practice is almost abandoned. At present, there is no bell-metal handicraft production centre available in other parts of Assam and it is now concentrated at Sarthebari and its surrounding villages of Barpeta district. Around those villages, as we could testify, one can hear the sound of hammering the metal from every passing household (Figure 4). The

objects made by the artisans in the mentioned place are *kalah* (water pot), *sarai* (a platter or tray mounted on a base), *kahi* (dish), *bati* (bowl), *lota* (water pot with a long neck) and *tal* (cymbals) (Bhuyan, Pant 2021: 14). It is a matter of wonder that all the Buddhist countries in the world use a particular musical instrument made of bell-metal i.e. cymbal (Figure 5). It is a matter of honour for Assam that some special types of cymbals used specially in South East Asia are made in Sarthebari of Barpeta.

The use of the traditional utensils made of bell metal are listed by Dr. Birinchi Choudhury of Sarthebari (Table 1).

Table 1

Utensils/ Instruments	Meaning	Uses
<i>Kaahi</i>	Dish	Taking meal
<i>Baan kaahi/Mayang</i>	Dish with a stand	Taking meal
<i>Baati</i>	Bowl	Taking curry
<i>Baan Baati</i>	Bowl with a stand	Taking tea, curry
<i>Bata</i>	Plate with a stand	Offered items for honour
<i>Lota</i>	Water vessel	Used for drinking water
<i>Kolah</i>	Water vessel	Used for storing water
<i>Xorai</i>	A traditional symbol of Assam	Used for offering greetings
<i>Taal</i>	Cymbal	Musical instruments used in different types of songs – folk & traditional, religious, modern. For different kinds of songs different types of <i>taals</i> are used.
<i>Bhutiya Taal</i>	Musical instrument	Used by the Buddhists in religious rituals



Figure 3. Zoja Karanović as a felicitation got a small bell metal cup with bottom at Baosi Banikanta Kakati College, Nagaon, Barpeta, Assam



Figure 4. Craftsmen in Sarthebari



Figure 5. A man with a cymbal in Sarthebari village

It is known that these craft objects were used since long time at the royal courts, castles and the drawing rooms of royal families were decorated with various kinds of bell metal utensils. Bell-metal craft in Assam was traced

back to 7<sup>th</sup> century (Jiyaur s.a.), when King Bhaskarbarma of ancient Kamrup<sup>5</sup> gifted *Kangshapatra* (a vessel made of bell-metal), along with other articles made of bell-metal. And King Harshabardhana of Kannauj was given Kanhar Taalbadya (cymbal made of bell metal) to Chinese traveler Hiuen Tsang during Ahom dynasty (1228–1826 A.D) (Dutta 2020: 12; Bhuyan, Pant 2021: 12). The Ahom rulers<sup>6</sup> 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).

According to a legend, during the Mauryan Period (321 B.C. to 185 B.C.), there was a great increase in the volume of trade and commerce all over the country. The Buddhist traders had established their supremacy over the culture of trade and commerce and they spread all over the continent of Asia. They flourished due to the support of the then powerful King Ashoka, who occupied the royal throne in 268 B.C. After embracing Buddhism, he sent a group of missionaries to South-East Asian countries (Deka 1994: 66– 68). On their way to Burma, the missionaries had to pass through Assam. As the products of bell metal are deeply rooted to Buddhism, the *kanhar* (bell-metal craft man) must have accompanied the missionaries so that they could produce the required bell metal products for religious purposes. For spreading Buddhism in Assam, some of the missionaries along with a few *kanhars* probably settled in different parts of the state. The people of Assam learnt the art of bell metal smithy from these *kanhars*. However, Buddhism failed to make much impact on Assamese society, but the art of bell metal smithy took deep roots in certain centres having congenial environment for its development (Deka 1994: 66–68).

The process of production of these objects, as it was as shown to us, is simple and traditional. To manufacture the bell metal objects artists (called *Kohars/Kanhar*) use simple tools and equipment. The instruments and machinery are the same as those used in the metalworking industry. The main tools and equipment used by the artisans in manufacturing brassware are anvils (*Belmuri*), hammers (*Chatuli*) and chisels (*Akul*). In order to shape the metal files into the desired shape they use *Dulari*, *Gasha*, *Saria*, *Piri*, *Khanta* (a bell-metal polishing instruments) (Daimary 2022). We have seen some of them. Process of making, as we have witnessed, includes cutting raw materials, bending, turning metal sheet, assembly, brushing, polishing (with clay, fiber jute, rice bran, mustard oil, charcoal, borax, zinc) (Figure 6).

At first, the craftsmen put raw material of brass metal in a small round shape (Figure 7) inside an iron vessel and place it in the fire vent, also known

<sup>5</sup> Bhaskaravarman (600–650) was the last king of the of medieval Kamarupa (region in nowadays Assam) Varman dynasty.

<sup>6</sup> The Ahom kingdom (1228–1826) is a late medieval kingdom in the Brahmaputra Valley Assam (Guha 1983: 3–34; Gogoi 2006).

as *Kah Galuwa Apor*, in the local language. The brass sheets are cut into various sizes required for the different type of products ready for processing. The fire vent is occasionally pumped with machines to ignite the flames and is melted by using coal to heat the metal and to give the molten metal its required form. It is manufactured in the thin sheets brought from the two rolling mills (Figure 8) after heating until thin round plates of the desired size and thickness are obtained (Figure 9). The craftsman and the units procure their requirements directly from the mills. After that they mold the portions into required shapes by beating method with the help of hammer and chisel. The adjoining parts are fastened with brazing. The articles are smoothened with the help of a file and a little shine is given by rubbing with sand (Figure 10).



Figure 6. Process of finishing bell metal object



Figure 7. Raw material of brass metal in a small round shape



Figure 8. Rolling mill



Figure 9. Round plates of metal



Figure 10. Final products



Figure 11. Assam Co-operative Bell-Metal Manufacturing Society Utensils Ltd.

Major problem in the industry, as they said, is the raw material which is imported mainly from Pakistan and Bangladesh, since ancient times till today. And usually, it is not purchased directly but from the middleman who really make a profit. The market is under control of traders and the craftsmen are forced to pay high prices (Kalita 2007). That is why manufacturers are joining together in associations like Assam Co-operative Bell-Metal Manufacturing Society Utensils Ltd. (Figure 11), which we have visited, too. There we talked with people and observed the preparation of metal for processing. And on that occasion, preparatory actions were carried out for a more detailed investigation of this segment of the material culture of Assam, since the handmade items in Barpeta are an important segment of identity that is continuously passed down from generation to generation and lasts for centuries.

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## Illustrations

Figures 1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11– photographs by Zoja Karanović.

Figures 2, 4, 8, 9 – photographs by Bhupen Rabha.

Од комада метала до уметничког предмета:  
белешке с путовања по Асаму

*Бупен Раба и Зоја Карановић*

Резиме

Аутори су провели неко време у селима на подручју градске општине у регији Барпета у септембру 2022. Ова област налази се у федералној држави Асам у Индији, и одавно је позната по ручној изради металног посуђа и инструмената (углавном од бронзе), који данас имају значајну улогу у свакодневном животу и ритуалима. Посматрали смо њихову израду у месту Сартебари и разговарали с људима који их праве. Добили смо значајна обавештења о месту ових предмета у обликовању идентитета народа Асама.

*Кључне речи:* Индија, Асам, теренско истраживање, традиција, идентитет, посуђе и инструменти од бронзе, ручна израда.

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