

Cultural Value of Bell metal Utensils in the Assamese Society

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Abstract : Bell metal utensils are an integral part of the Assamese culture. Every Assamese people keep it in their family as a symbol of their rich cultural heritage. From day to day activities to wedding ceremonies and even in the religious rituals to various festivals where aren't it used? This handicraft industry has a glorious past. It got royal patronages from the Ahom and the Koch kings, the two prominent dynasties of Assam and it will not be exaggerated if we say that Jaat Kahi (a bell metal dish) made by Puspa Kanhar (a bell metal artisan of Assam) could able to impress Queen Victoria. Sarthebari, a small town of Assam is the main hub of bell metal handicraft. Therefore, it is known as Kanh Shilpa Nagari (the bell metal craft town). Now, this glorious industry is on the verge of extinction. For its revival government should give keen interest, unless a part of the Assamese culture will be paralysed. Several studies have been conducted on this handicraft industry, most of which highlighted only on the problems faced by this industry but there are very few articles which emphasis on its cultural value. Therefore, in this article our primary focus will be to reveal its cultural value and for that purpose data have been collected from both primary and secondary sources.

Key words : Assamese Culture, handicraft, Sarthebari, Jaat kahi.

1. INTRODUCTION :

Assam, the land of red river and blue hill is known for its rich cultural heritage. Various things like- ethnic diversity, folk music and dances, folk art and craft, Satras and Naamghars etc. have enriched and ennobled its culture. One of the handicraft for which the Assamese people feel pride is the craft of making bell metal utensils. It is very difficult to trace the genesis of this industry in Assam. There are a number of legends regarding its origin. However, the written document reveal that it dates back to 7th century, Kumar Bhaskar Varma, king of Kamrup gifted a unique Kangsapatra – Temabata (a bell metal product), Xorai and Kanhar Taalbadya (cymbal made of bell metal) to Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang. In the later period it got the royal patronages from the Ahom and The Koch kings.

In Assam, Sarthebari is the main hub of bell metal handicraft. Therefore, it is popularly known as Kanh Shilpa Nagari (The bell metal craft town). About 40 percent people of this area is directly or indirectly associated with the manufacturing of bell metal utensils. The popularity of bell metal utensils are not limited within Assam only, infact its popularity has crossed the state as well as gained reputation in the international level too. Dafla kahi and Baati (a unique dinner set) used by the Dafla tribe of Arunachal Pradesh is made in no other places of India except Assam. Besides, some musical instruments relating to Buddhist tradition is also made in Sarthebari, Assam. Therefore, every year hundreds of traders from Bhutan and Nepal come to Sarthebari and returned with their required bell metal utensils.

Bell metal utensils are the part and parcel of the Assamese culture. The study of the Assamese culture will be incomplete if we do not study the role of bell metal utensils in the Assamese society. Every Assamese family tries to keep these utensils in their household as a mark of their cultural identity. These articles are mostly used in day to day life, religious rituals, and various festivals and ceremonies of the Assamese society. Moreover, in a single sentence we can say that these utensils occupy a revered position in the Assamese society.

2. Objectives of the study : Keeping the following objectives in forefront this article is prepared :

- To find out the value of bell metal utensils in the religious rituals of Assam.
- To find out the value of bell metal utensils in Bihu, the state festival of Assam.
- To find out the value of bell metal utensils in the Assamese wedding ceremony.

If we conduct a systematic and detailed study on the above mentioned objectives then along with the value of bell metal utensils in the Assamese society, a comprehensive view of The Assamese culture will surely be come out.

3. Methodology : To analyse the selected topic, here we have used the Descriptive and Analytical method.

4. Discussion : For the convenience of discussion , we have divided the whole topic into three parts viz.—

- Importance of Bell metal utensils in the religious rituals of Assam .
- Importance of Bell metal utensils in Bihu , The state festival of Assam .
- Importance of Bell metal utensils in the Assamese wedding ceremony .

4.1. Importance of Bell metal utensils in the Religious Rituals of Assam:

The Neo – Vaishnavate movement was started by Srimanta Sankardeva in Assam in the latter part of the 15th century . It has a great socio – cultural impact in the Assamese society , in fact , it has changed the socio -religious sphere of the Assamese Hindu society . The movement started by him was different from the other contemporary cults of Vaishnavism flourishing in the other parts of India . The cult of vaishnavism propagated by Srimanta Sankardeva is popularly known as “ Ek Saran Naam Dharma “ the Radha Krishna cult of Vaishnavism is not acknowledged here . Srimanta Sankardeva believed that people can attain salvation by devoting to a single God – Lord Krishna or Vishnu and who can be worshipped only by uttering his various names (Naam) . For the propagation of “ Ek Saran Naam Dharma “ he established the Satras and Naamghars (the prayer house) , both institutions are his unique contribution to the Assamese culture .

The Satras and Naamghars are the epicentre of the Assamese culture . Since the time of Srimanta Sankardeva , various bell metal products are used in these institutions . While chanting the hymns of Naamghosa (a hymn book composed by Sri Sri Madhab deva , a disciple of Sankardeva) and Kirtan (a hymn book composed by Srimanta Sankardeva) , it has the tradition to play Bhortaal (a big size cymbal made of bell metal , weighted 2.5k.g to 1ok.g) without these Bhortaal the hymns of these two holy books may lose its significance. Besides , it is also used in Thiyo Naam (a group activity , where people used to sing the religious hymns in standing posture having the different gesture of the body) . Baha Naam (hymns performed in group in sitting posture) and Paal Naam (the recitation of religious hymns for a pre-decided period of time without any interruption) etc. Moreover , in all religious activities of “ Ek Saran Naam Dharma “ , the devotees , extensively use bell metal products like – Bata (a kind of tray having stand) ,Xorai (a kind of tray having stand and cover on top) and Bhortaal etc. Again , at the entrance of each Temple and Naamghars of Assam a Ghanta (a kind of bell) is kept hanging and the devotees ring the Ghanta while entering and coming out of the temple and Naamghar. The auspicious sound of the Ghanta filled the heart of devotees with utmost devotion and this Ghanta is made of no other things than bell metal . In the Naamghar , at the morning and the evening , there is a custom to play Doba (a special kind of drum) and Borkanh (a kind of bell , flat and round shaped) . Hearing the holy sounds of these instruments coming from The Naamghar , the villagers chant the name of Lord Krishna with great devotion. This Borkanh is made of nothing but bell metal .

In Assam , the followers of ‘ Sakta Cult ‘ are also accustomed with the usage of bell metal product in their religious activities . ‘ Ojapali dance ‘ is an integral part of Manasa Puja (worship of one of the Goddesses of Shakti) where ‘ Khutitaal ‘ (a palm size cymbal) made of bell metal is used . The priests , worshipping God and Goddesses in Assam use a special kind of Ghanta (a small hand bell) is made of bell metal . Therefore , it will not be exaggerated if we say that no religious rituals are possible in Assam without the use of bell metal items . In Assam, in the Naamghars, Satras , Mandirs (temples) and Dewalayas (Shrines) there ,an extensive usages of bell metal utensils are seen .

4.2 Importance of Bell metal utensils in Bihu , The state festival of Assam :

Assam is the land of feast and festivals. Various festivals are celebrated in Assam , in different seasons of the year. One of the most important festival of Assam is Bihu . The Assamese people celebrated three types of Bihu , Viz.- Bohag Bihu or Rangali Bihu , Kaati Bihu or Kangali Bihu , Maagh Bihu or Bhogali Bihu . Among all these three types of Bihu , the people of Assam make so much merrymaking during the Bohag Bihu or Rangali Bihu. It continues for seven days , and during these seven days the people of Assam express their joy and happiness through Bihu dance (a folk dance of Assam) , Bihu Song and Huchari . In all these activities bell metal utensils are an integral part .

In a number of Bihu songs , there are the reference of various bell metal utensils . A few songs are explained below :

In the following extract from a Bihu song , the singer mentions about the kanhar Baati (a bowl made of bell metal) and bless the common folk to have a long and peaceful life :

“ Eta baatit Naharu
Eta baatit panaru
Eta baatit khutura shak
Muror suli singi akhirbad karisu
Raij toi kukhale thak “ (Sarma , 2006)

In an another Bihu song , the singer mentions the name of kanhar Bata (a tray having a stand , made of bell metal) in this way :

“hatot paan Bata loi
Barat olai aasu moi “ (Patowari , 2010)

Here, in this extract the singer wants to convey the message that a girl (singer) is waiting at the gate to welcome the guests with a kanhar bata and Betel nuts on it .

There is a custom in the Assamese society that during the Rangali Bihu when a Huchari team goes to a household to perform Huchari , that particular household has to keep a Bata or Xorai having betel nut and Gamosa (a particular type of towel used by the Assamese people) on it in their front yard .This Bata or Xorai is made of bell metal.

It is also noteworthy to mention that while singing Bihu song or performing Bihu Huchari several folk musical instruments are used and among these instruments , a special kind of cymbal, made of bell metal is also used. Again , sometimes , it is also seen that while performing Bihu dance , The Nachani (the girl performing Bihu dance) dances holding a kanhar kaahi (a dish made of bell metal) in their palm and creates an aesthetic scene which is enough to fascinate an audience .

In Kaati Bihu as there is not so much feasting and merrymaking, therefore , except general use in household, we do not found any extensive use of bell metal product .

Bhogali Bihu is a festival of feasting . During this Bihu The Assamese people invite guests to their home and give them to eat chira (flattened rice) , pitha , laru and Jolpan (a special kind of cusine of Assam) etc. And Jolpan is served in nothing other than a bowl made of bell metal . After serving Jolpan , there is a tradition to offer Tamol -Paa (betel nut) and it is also offered in a kanhar Bata .

Bihu is the state festival of Assam . It has a greater significance in the life of each and every Assamese people. The utensils made of bell metal is so closely attached to Bihu that without these items it might loss its significance to a greater extent .

4.3 Importance of Bell metal utensils in the Assamese wedding ceremony :

In Assam , the wedding ceremony is known as Biya .It has also enriched the Assamese culture too .It incorporates many functions and in each function , there , an extensive usages of bell metal utensils are seen. Starting from the day of Joran (an integral part of the Assamese marriage system and generally , the day before the day of wedding is known as Joran) to the end of the marriage , the Assamese people are accustomed with the large scale usages of bell metal products .

On the day of Joran , generally , the groom send ornaments , attires and cosmetics etc. To his bride in the hand of his mother/father accompanied with a few relatives . The importance of Joran lies in the fact that in this function itself the ‘ Sindoor Daan ‘(putting red vermilion powder along the prating of bride's hair) activity is taken place . When the group of people go for Joran reach the bride's home , her mother welcomes them with a Kanhar Bata or Xorai having betel nut on it and the bride is offered the attire , ornaments and cosmetics etc. Sent by the groom on a Kanhar Bata or Xorai , here lies the significance of Bata or Xorai in Joran .

On the day of wedding a ‘Paanitola’(bringing holy water for ceremonial bath of the bride and the groom) function is organised . In this function , a dish beautified with Saki (an earthen lamp) , a big bowl, adorned with rice and banana , and vessels like – kalah (pitcher made of bell metal) Ghoti -Lota (both are used as a substitute of glass as well as to bring water) are used to bring holy water , which are made of bell and sometimes brass metal . Therefore, in Biya Geet (wedding song) also the references of bell metal utensils are found . The following extract is an example:

“ Uliyai aana kanhare Kalah a
Bhanga futa sau
Maire Biyare paani tuliboli jau “ (Patowari , 2010)

In the above extract , the Aiyoti (women who sings wedding song and go to bring holy water) request the mother of the bride to bring out pitcher made of bell metal so that by checking whether it is broken or any pours on it , they can go to bring holy water .

In Assam , there is a tradition , since long time that on the day of wedding , the groom have to keep a daponi (a small round and flat shaped bell metal item having a short handle) in his hand . Again when the groom reaches the bride's house for marriage , he is welcomed by the bride's father in a special way where the usage of kanhar kaahi (a dish made of bell metal)is used and before welcoming the groom , his feet are washed with a mixture of curd and orange and this mixture is brought in a bowl made of bell metal . When the nuptial knot of an Assamese girl is tied , her parents send along with her some utensils to the groom's home . These utensils are locally known as – kaahi , baati, Ghoti-Lota , Chariya , Kalah etc. – most of these utensils are made of bell metal and some are made of brass. On the occasion of marriage a feast is also kept and here after serving meal people are offered betel nuts on A Bata. After, marriage , a

Maandhara (a kind of felicitation) programme is kept where the newly married couple conversely felicitate the elder and younger members of each other house as a mark of respect or as a token of love with different types of gift items . These gifts items are offered in a kanhar Bata or Xorai . Besides , in this occasion , Bata or Xorai are also used as gift items .

Thus , the bell metal products take a pivotal role in the Assamese wedding ceremony . Besides , wedding , in other ceremonies like – Annaprasanna (the act of offering first meal of rice to a child) , Churakarana (the ceremony of tonsure) etc. also the extensive usages of bell metal product are seen .

5. CONCLUSION :

The bell metal products are regarded as an important household asset in every Assamese family . It occupies a special position in the Assamese society too . In the Assamese society , it is believed that the habit of taking food in the bell metal utensils helps to maintain a sound health . Therefore , most probably , during the Ahom reign in Assam , the kings and other higher officials used to take food in Maihang Kaahi and Baati , a unique dinner set made of bell metal . The bell metal artisans of Assam were so expert that they even built Bortop , an artillery used in war . Being satisfied in the works of Jiudhan , a bell metal artisan of Sarthebari , Assam , the Ahom king Shiva Singha gave him a copper plate as a reward and along with it he also offered him exapura (one hundred pura , it is a system of land measurement in erstwhile Assam) tax free land and also gave him the title Choudhury . The bell metal artisans were so much fond of their craft that one Puspa Kanhar (a bell metal artisan) , who had been jailed for raising a rebellion against the British for imposing higher tax , used to build kanhar Kaahi (dishes) and Baati (bowl) in jail . The particular type of Kaahi and Baati that he built inside the jail were later became famous as jail Kaahi and Jail Baati. The utensils made of bell metal are a part and parcel of The Assam family . Every Assamese family keep it as a symbol of their rich cultural heritage . In fact , the study of the Assamese culture will be incomplete without the study of the role of bell metal utensils in the Assamese society . But due to the reasons like – poor infrastructure , administrative negligence , lack of modern technical knowledge and poor financial conditions of the artisans etc. This handicraft industry is on the verge of extinction. The ‘Assam Co-operative Bell metal Utensils Manufacturing Society Limited ‘ (ACBMUMSL) was established in 1933 (erstwhile known as Assam kanhar Sangha Limited ; got its present name after registered under Co-operative regulation Act 1912 in 11th June 1939) for providing marketing facilities , helping the poor artisans in case of finance and raw materials , but this age old institution has to some extent become ineffective to fulfill the present need of bell metal artisans. Therefore , Government should give keen interest to revive this industry from the clutches of extinction , unless a part of the Assamese culture , for which the Assamese people feel pride will be paralysed.

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