

Creation of Employment through the Bell Metal Industry of Sarthebari, Assam

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Abstract:

The bell metal industry of Sarthebari in Assam is an important traditional handicraft industry that contributes to employment generation and provides livelihood opportunities to a large number of people. The industry supports employment not only through direct involvement in the production of bell metal articles but also through cooperative institutions and marketing networks. The present study examines the employment-generating capacity of the bell metal industry of Sarthebari by analysing the involvement of workers in production, cooperative activities, and marketing. The data indicate that a total of 2,248 workers are associated with the industry, of whom 2,164 (96.26%) are directly involved in production and marketing-related activities, while 84 (3.74%) are indirectly involved through the marketing network. Among the directly involved workers, 2,086 (92.79%) are artisans engaged in production, demonstrating the central role of traditional craftsmanship in sustaining employment. The study also highlights the contribution of *Mahajans* or *Arabdaris*, who function as visiting traders and connect Sarthebari's products with markets within and outside Assam, including international Buddhist markets. The findings suggest that the bell metal industry serves as an important source of employment, income generation, preservation of traditional skills, and expansion of local products into wider markets.

Keywords: Bell metal industry, Sarthebari, employment generation, artisans, *Mahajans*, traditional handicraft, marketing.

1. Introduction

Traditional handicraft industries constitute an important component of India's rural and local economy. Besides preserving cultural heritage and traditional knowledge, handicrafts provide employment opportunities to artisans and other workers associated with production, distribution, and marketing. In many regions, such industries operate as community-based economic activities and provide livelihood opportunities where alternative employment opportunities may be limited. Mandal et al. (2022) observed that folk crafts make a significant contribution to the economy and can generate employment and economic stability among local communities. The bell metal industry of Sarthebari, Assam, represents one such traditional industry. Sarthebari is widely recognised for its distinctive bell metal craftsmanship, in which

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skilled artisans produce a variety of household, ceremonial, religious, and cultural articles. The industry is not confined to the production process alone. It involves a wider economic network comprising artisans, cooperative institutions, traders, employees, and other persons associated with the distribution and marketing of finished products. Employment generated by the bell metal industry can therefore be understood at two levels: direct employment and indirect employment. Direct employment includes artisans engaged in manufacturing and workers employed in different sections of cooperative organisations, whereas indirect employment includes persons involved in trading and marketing activities outside the production units.

The present study attempts to examine the employment structure associated with the bell metal industry of Sarthebari and to understand how the industry contributes to livelihood generation through production and marketing activities.

2. Objectives of the Study

The study was undertaken with the following objectives:

1. To examine the extent of employment generated by the bell metal industry of Sarthebari.
2. To analyse the involvement of workers in different sections of the industry.
3. To examine the role of cooperative societies in generating employment.
4. To understand the role of *Mahajans* or *Arabdaris* in the marketing of bell metal products.

3. Methodology

The study is based primarily on field-level information relating to the bell metal industry of Sarthebari. Information regarding the number of production units, artisans, cooperative society workers, and persons involved in marketing was collected and organised according to their nature of involvement.

For analytical purposes, workers were classified into two broad categories:

- **Directly involved workers:** artisans engaged in production and employees working in different sections of the cooperative society.
- **Indirectly involved workers:** *Mahajans* or *Arabdaris* and their employees engaged in the marketing and distribution of bell metal products.

The collected information was presented through tabular and graphical methods. Frequencies and percentages were used to understand the relative contribution of different categories of workers to total employment.

4. Results and Analysis

4.1 Employment Structure of the Bell Metal Industry

The employment structure of the bell metal industry is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Involvement of Workers in the Bell Metal Industry of Sarthebari

SL No.	Involvement of Workers	Section			No of Unit	No. of Workers	Total Workers (%)
1.	Directly involved	Production	Artisans		322	2086	2086 (92.79%)
		Marketing	Co-operative Society	Selling Section	15	56	78 (3.47%)
				Industrial Section	1	3	
				Managing Section	1	12	
				Rolling Mill	1	7	
2.	Indirectly involved	Marketing	Arabdaris or Mahajans	Mahajans	33	33	84 (3.74%)
				Employees		51	
Total No. of Workers							2248 (100%)

4.2 Dominance of Artisans in Employment Generation

The data reveal that artisans constitute the largest group of workers associated with the bell metal industry. A total of 2,086 artisans are engaged in production across 322 units, representing 92.79% of the total workforce. This finding demonstrates that employment generation in the bell metal industry is strongly dependent on traditional production activities. The industry therefore provides livelihood opportunities primarily through the continuation of artisanal skills and traditional manufacturing practices. The large number of artisans also indicates that bell metal production remains relatively labour-intensive. Unlike highly mechanised industries, the production of bell metal articles requires specialised skills and considerable human involvement. Consequently, traditional knowledge and craftsmanship remain important economic resources for the local community.

4.3 Employment through the Cooperative Society

The cooperative society represents another important component of the employment structure. A total of 78 workers are employed in different sections of the cooperative organisation. Of these, 56 workers are associated with the selling section, 3 with the industrial section, 12 with the managing section, and 7 with the rolling mill. The selling section accounts for the largest share of cooperative employment. This indicates the importance of marketing and distribution in the functioning of the industry. Production alone does not ensure the economic sustainability of artisans; organised marketing is necessary for connecting producers with consumers. The cooperative society therefore performs an important economic function by providing an institutional mechanism through which bell metal products can be marketed and distributed.

4.4 Indirect Employment through Marketing

In addition to direct employment, the bell metal industry generates employment through its marketing network. The study identifies 33 *Mahajans* or *Arabdaris* who are indirectly associated with the industry. These traders employ a further 51 persons, bringing the total number of persons associated with this indirect marketing network to 84. The role of these traders is significant because they provide a link between producers and markets beyond Sarthebari. They purchase finished products either directly from artisans or from the cooperative society. In some cases, they also provide raw materials to artisans and subsequently collect the finished products. Thus, the relationship between artisans and traders extends beyond a simple buyer-seller relationship. The traders may also facilitate production by supplying materials and creating a market for finished goods.

5. Role of *Mahajans* in Market Expansion

The field information indicates that *Mahajans* or *Arabdaris* play a distinctive role in the marketing system of the Sarthebari bell metal industry. They function as visiting traders who distribute bell metal products to different parts of Assam and other regions of India. Some traders specialise in particular products according to the requirements of specific markets and communities. For example, *dafla kahi* and *dafla bati* are produced for communities in Arunachal Pradesh. *Hatikhujia bati* is another product associated with this specialised market. According to information obtained from the traders, certain traditional bell metal articles have cultural significance among communities outside Assam. This creates a specialised demand for particular products and enables artisans to produce articles according to market-specific requirements. This market linkage is important for employment because it allows production to continue beyond the limits of local consumption. The ability of traders to connect Sarthebari artisans with external markets consequently expands the economic opportunities associated with bell metal craftsmanship.

6. International Market Linkages

An important finding of the study is the presence of an international marketing connection. According to the field information, three of the 33 *Mahajans* market products such as *bhutiya taal* and *bati* in Buddhist-majority markets, including Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar and Tibet. Cymbals have particular significance in Buddhist religious and cultural practices, creating a specialised market for such products. The traders reported that products are initially transported to Nepal, from where they may subsequently reach other markets. This indicates that the economic significance of the Sarthebari bell metal industry extends beyond the local and regional economy. Traditional products manufactured by local artisans can become part of wider cultural and commercial networks. Such market expansion has potential implications for employment because increased external demand can stimulate production and sustain the livelihoods of artisans and persons involved in associated activities.

7. Discussion

The findings demonstrate that the bell metal industry of Sarthebari functions as an interconnected employment system rather than merely a production activity. The

overwhelming majority of workers are artisans directly engaged in production, while a smaller but important group is employed in cooperative and marketing activities. The dominance of artisans, accounting for 92.79% of the total workforce, highlights the centrality of traditional craftsmanship to the industry. This is consistent with the broader role of traditional handicrafts in generating livelihood opportunities through skill-based employment. At the same time, the presence of cooperative workers and *Mahajans* demonstrates that employment generation extends beyond the workshop. Production, institutional management, selling, trading, and distribution are interconnected components of the industry's economic structure.

The marketing network is particularly significant because artisans depend upon access to consumers for the economic value of their products. *Mahajans* help connect production units with distant markets, while the cooperative society provides an institutional channel for selling products. Consequently, the sustainability of artisan employment is closely related to the effectiveness of these marketing mechanisms. The findings also suggest that cultural demand can contribute to economic sustainability. Products associated with particular cultural or religious practices may have specialised markets outside Assam. Such demand creates opportunities for artisans to continue producing traditional designs while also generating income. However, the dependence on traditional production and intermediary marketing networks also suggests the importance of strengthening market access, product promotion, digital marketing, design development, and institutional support. Such measures could potentially improve the economic opportunities available to artisans while preserving the traditional character of the industry.

8. Conclusion

The bell metal industry of Sarthebari represents an important source of employment and livelihood in Assam. The study identified a total of 2,248 persons associated with the industry. Among them, 2,164 persons (96.26%) are directly involved in production and cooperative activities, while 84 persons (3.74%) are indirectly involved through marketing activities. Artisans constitute the dominant workforce, with 2,086 persons (92.79%) engaged in production. This demonstrates the continued importance of traditional craftsmanship as a source of employment. The cooperative society further contributes to employment through its selling, industrial, managing, and rolling-mill sections. The study also highlights the important role of *Mahajans* or *Arabdaris* in connecting Sarthebari's artisans with wider markets. Their activities extend the reach of bell metal products beyond the local area and, in some cases, to international markets. Thus, the bell metal industry contributes not only to the preservation of Assam's traditional cultural heritage but also to employment generation, livelihood support, market development, and the continuation of indigenous artisanal knowledge. Strengthening institutional support, improving marketing opportunities, promoting traditional products, and expanding access to wider markets may further contribute to the sustainability of this traditional industry.

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