

CHAPTER – IV
BELL METAL INDUSTRY IN COLONIAL
AND POST-COLONIAL ASSAM

COLONIAL PERIOD

At the beginning of the colonial rule, the bell metal industry in Assam was running with age old technology under the traditional organisational framework. The bell metal products did not receive immediate attention of the Colonial Government. No doubt there were instances where the British authorities applauded the bell metal products of Assam and awarded the *kanhars* for their excellent craftsmanship.¹ The bell metal products of Assam were exhibited outside and constituted a part of the exportable items from the province.² But the bell metal products like both raw and manufactured silk were not prominent exportable items from Assam and there was no large scale trade involved in it. There was no global demand for the bell metal products like raw silk and silk products. Hence, no experimental project on the bell metal industry was taken up by the Colonial Government. This might be also because of the fact that other metallurgical industries like the brass metal smithy, iron smithy, gold smithy, etc existed in Assam.

¹ Pusparam Kanhar of Sarthebari was awarded by Queen Victoria for making the *Jat Kahi* which was displayed at an Imperial Exhibition organised in London in the year 1870 (as cited in Copy of the *Plan Proposal Submitted by Asom Samabai Kanhar Sangha Ltd.*, Sarthebari to the Government of Assam, 31.6.1969).

² K. L. Barua, *Report of the Department of Industries, Assam, For the Year 1919-20*, Assam Secretariat Printing Office, Shillong, 1920, p. 3; K. L. Barua, *Report of the Department of Industries, Assam, For the Year 1920-21*, Assam Government Printing Office, Shillong, 1921 p. 5; K. L. Barua, *Report of the Department of Industries, Assam, For the Year 1922-23*, Assam Secretariat Printing Office, Shillong, 1923, pp. 2-3

Although, bell metal industry did not secure immediate colonial attention, the policies in general adopted by the Colonial Government towards the traditional industries of Assam had a disastrous effect on this metal industry. As already stated, the technology involved in the bell metal industry was very old. But the Colonial Government took no measures to introduce any kind of technological innovation there in the light of the industrial inventions made in their mother country. No impetus was made to provide any kind of technical and industrial education to the *kanhars* until the Department of Industries took measures in this direction from 1935 onwards. This resulted in having no change in the traditional outlook of the people associated with the bell metal industry. As such they could not think anything new in terms of making improvement in the system of production, design of the products, marketing, etc in the light of the industrial revolution and the subsequent changes made in industrial production as well as marketing system.

Along with the problem of technological backwardness and non-commercial outlook in the bell metal industry, there was gradual decrease in demand traditionally enjoyed by the bell metal products amongst the Assamese people. As per the traditional structure of this metal industry, the bell metal products were only made as per the demand of the customers. They were made as per order and not manufactured in large quantities for sale.³ As such there were no readymade bell metal products available in the market for sale. Moreover, the large entry of machine made goods affected the magnitude of production of the bell metal items in the province. Low priced factory products of equal service and durability such as the enamel ware or

³ H. K. Barpujari, (ed.), *The Comprehensive History of Assam, Volume-V*, Publication Board Assam, Gauhati, 2004, p. 104

china ware began to attract the attention of the common people.⁴ The iron ware, brass ware, china ware, etc imported from outside provided tough competition to the indigenous bell metal products.⁵

E. A. Gait has mentioned that there was the absence of professional castes among the bell metal workers (except the *kansari* caste in the Surma Valley) of Assam. This absence accounts for the low standard of skill amongst them for which their products could be easily supplanted by the imported products.⁶ All this led to decrease in demand resulting in the low sale of the bell metal products which was somewhat unexpected for the *kanhars* and they had to face hardship for survival. Until the colonial period, there existed direct relationship between the *kanhars* and their customers. As per the order or demand they made the products and by selling it earned the sole profit. The *kanhars* had the sole control over the production and marketing.⁷ But decrease in demand gradually eroded away the age old direct relationship facilitating the entry of intermediaries in the future.⁸

The low sale of bell metal products correspondingly resulted in decrease in income for the *kanhars*. This decrease in income became more troublesome as there was the new burden of paying the variety of taxes imposed by the Colonial Government that also in cash. Very soon whatever cash the *kanhars* earned from their sale was all lost in paying the excessive colonial taxes and they were in bare need of

⁴ E. A. Gait, 'Brass and Copper Wares in Assam' in *Notes on Some Industries of Assam From 1884 to 1895*, Assam Secretariat Printing Office, Shillong, 1896, p. 113

⁵ H. K. Barpujari, (ed.), Volume-V, op. cit. p. 106

⁶ G. N. Gupta, *A Survey of the Industries and Resources of Eastern Bengal and Assam for 1907-08*, Secretariat Printing Office, Shillong, 1908, p. 39

⁷ K. B. Deka, *Kanh Shilpa Nagari Sarthebari*, Gyanodoi Book Stall, Sarthebari, 1994, p. 21

⁸ M. C. Goswami, 'Bell Metal Workers of Sarthebari, Assam' in *Bulletin of the Department of Anthropology, Volume-II*, Gauhati University, Guwahati, 1973, p. 5

cash.⁹ Monetisation of economy introduced by the British was on a limited extent and there was extreme shortage of money.¹⁰ This further increased the problem of the *kanhars* in securing cash as they required money to continue with their age old profession. Borrowing money in the form of advance or loan was the only option left before the *kanhars* to secure cash which they could invest in their industry as the working or trading capital. This created a favourable situation for the entry of usury capital in the bell metal industry which proved highly disastrous for the *kanhars* and the industry as well. But there is no concrete information on the rate of interest charged on the money advanced or loan taken by the *kanhars*.

Investment required in the bell metal industry increased under the colonial regime. The *kanhars* used to make products either from the bell metal prepared by them or from the scrap metal. But during the colonial period, there was sharp increase in the prices of the raw materials required to prepare the bell metal. The raw materials were also not easily available. This was because raw material of any variety were utilised by the British to feed the industries in Britain. Hence, the *kanhars* from then onwards had to prepare their products only from the scrap metal and this process still continued. Old bell metal products were collected by the *kanhars* as scrap and products were made out of it which was a kind of recycling. It was observed by G. N. Gupta that the *kanhars* generally manufactured their article by melting down the old items.¹¹ But the cost involved in this recycling process and manufacturing was also quite high for which the bell metal products were costlier than those of the similar

⁹ Jalad Baran Ganguly, *An Economic History of North-East India, 1826 to 1947*, Akansha Publishing House, New Delhi, 2006, p. 126

¹⁰ Sudeshna Purkayastha, *Indigenous Industries of Assam: 1870-1925*, KP Bagchi and Company, Kolkata, 2005, p. 80

¹¹ G. N. Gupta, op. cit. p. 20

imported varieties. Being costlier the bell metal products could not be bought by all. This aspect of the bell metal products is beautifully depicted in a proverb given below:

mone mukhe aase mohor gakhire kanhar batiye nai

The proverb means that I have the desire and mouth to drink buffalo milk, but I do not have the bell metal bowl for drinking the milk.¹²

The bell metal products were not only costlier, it was bulkier, its shape and design was age old and over all finishing was less attractive than the similar machine made products. Infact Kanak Lal Baruah in his report on the industrial condition of Assam mentioned that “the bell metal utensils prepared in Assam are fairly good, but the Assamese artisans do not polish their wares so well”.¹³ It was also stated in the industry report for the year 1930-31 that “Assam bell metal is considered superior to that of Bengal, but the articles prepared suffer from want of workmanship and design”.¹⁴ All these drawbacks definitely provided an advantage to the machine made products that entered from outside in capturing the place or rather market of the traditional bell metal products. Demand for imported enamel ware or china ware increased steadily among the Muslims and the immigrant tea garden population of Assam. This definitely led to declination in the bell metal production, but the industry did not die out completely. Fortunately for the bell metal industry, majority of the

¹² P. R. T. Gurdon, *Some Assamese Proverb Compiled and Annotated*, Assam Secretariat Printing Office, Shillong, 1903, p. 15

¹³ Rai Bahadur Kanak Lal Barua Bahadur, *Note on the Industrial Condition and Possibilities of Assam*, Assam Secretariat Printing Office, Shillong, 1916, p. 9

¹⁴ I. Majid, *Report of the Department of Industries, Assam, For the Year 1930-31*, Assam Secretariat Printing Office, Shillong, 1931, p. 3

Assamese people were Hindus and they were averse to the idea of substituting their age old traditional bell metal utensils with the imported items.¹⁵

Survival of the bell metal industry does not however mean that *kanhars* had a very comfortable earning. Rather, the condition of the *kanhars* deteriorated as for continuing the bell metal smithy they had to resort to borrowing money from the money lenders. The money lenders were the *kayans* who greatly utilised this financial difficulty of the *kanhars* to their advantage by gradually penetrating into the business of the bell metal products. The erosion of the age old direct relationship between the *kanhars* and their customers also facilitated the *kayans* in entering into the bell metal business. The *kayans* started to act as the middlemen or intermediary between the *kanhars* and the customers and thereby destroyed whatever remnant of the pre-colonial direct relationship was there. Even in some cases there entered between the *kayans* and the *kanhars*, a second class of middlemen called the *byapari* who bought metal and money from the *kayans* and advanced them to the *kanhars* and took back the finished articles to the *kayans*.¹⁶

There was no way for the *kanhars* to check this penetration of outsiders into their business as they needed money and orders for manufacturing their products. Both these needs were fulfilled by these outsiders. The *kayans* mostly gave in advance the scrap metal to the *kanhars* who took it as they do not have the required capital in procuring scrap metal of their own. As such the *kayans* started to import the scrap metal from outside such as Calcutta, Rangpur, Koch Behar and other places. They also collected the scrap metal from the customers and made products from these scrap

¹⁵ Priyam Goswami, *Indigenous Industries of Assam Retrospect and Prospect*, Anshah Publishing House, Delhi, 2005, p. 58

¹⁶ G. N. Gupta, *op. cit.* p. 40

metal through the *kanhars* and sold them to the customers.¹⁷ The *kayans* thereby controlled the entire business of bell metal products. Their position in the bell metal industry became the most powerful one as they had the opportunity to cheat the customers and to dictate the *kanhars* to act as per their direction and they fully utilized this position.

With the *kanhars* coming under the clutches of the *kayans*, they lost their control over the industry as well as the business involved in it. The *kayans* started to fix the wages as they got the sole power to fix the making cost of the products. They intentionally lowered the wages by forcing the *kanhars* towards economic hardship. They ordered the *kanhars* to make only those products in which they had more profit. As a result, the *kanhars* were no longer able to make products of their own choice.¹⁸ The *kanhars* used to take the scrap metal from the *kayans*, make products out of them as demanded and submit the finished products to the *kayans* for which they got a minimum amount as the making cost i.e. wage. The wage was a fixed one and price of the advanced scrap metal was deducted from it. The rate of the wage was fixed as per seer of the manufactured article which however varied with the quality of the article turned out.¹⁹

To further exploit the *kanhars*, the *kayans* followed certain practices in order to derive maximum profit. First, the *kayans* sometimes used to advance more scrap metal to the *kanhars* than the actual weights in order to make the products. This extra quantity of bell metal was called *baltikah*. The *kayans* used to pay the wages to the

¹⁷ K. B. Deka, op. cit. p. 23

¹⁸ Birinchi Choudhury, *Bell Metal Industry of Sarukshetri Block in Barpeta District of Assam: Its Problems and Prospects*, UGC Funded Research Project, 2006, p. 17

¹⁹ G. N. Gupta, op. cit. p. 40

kanhars on the basis of per seer of the manufactured articles. But in no case, the *kayans* used to pay the *kanhars* for the extra quantity of bell metal which was turned out into products by the *kanhars* along with the weighted scrap metal advanced by the *kayans*. The *kanhars* had to sell their labour free of cost for that additional amount of bell metal, the *baltikah*. Secondly, in the course of the production, a part of the bell metal was exhausted or destroyed while burning in fire or cleaning the products. This lost part of the bell metal was known as *mulmara*. To make a balance of this lost bell metal, the *kayans* used to deduct a part of the wages of the *kanhars*. The *kanhars* thereby lost a considerable amount of money from their wages. Thirdly, the *kanhars* at the time of delivery of products had to pay Rs.1 against every 40 kg of finished bell metal products to the *kayans*. This practice was called *gadi chatka*.²⁰

With such exploitations meted out to the *kanhars*, their income level decreased day by day. Contrary to that, the *kayans* made a good earning by selling the products. The profits of the bell metal industry went largely to their pockets and where there were *byaparis*, they also had a small share of the profit. The result was that on an average the *kanhars* earned not more than Rs. 8 to Rs. 10 a month. In some places, the *kanhars* were reported to be in debt. The situation worsened as only the able bodied males could take a share and the other members of the family were of no assistance in the production process. While this was the general condition of the *kanhars*, the *kayans* made a profit of over 25% on their money.²¹ There were only a few independent bell metal establishments where the *kanhars* had a reasonably better earning. These independent *kanhars* used to buy their metal at Rs. 30 to Rs. 40 a

²⁰ Geeta Deka, *Sarthebari Anchalar Loka Sanskritik Adhyayana (Kanh Shilpar Bisesa Ullikhana Saha)* (An Unpublished Thesis), Department of Folklore, Gauhati University, 2006, p. 181

²¹ G. N. Gupta, *op. cit.* pp. 40-41

maund and sold the finished products at Rs. 60 to Rs. 70 a maund. On an average they could turn out between one and a half to two maunds of utensils per month. As such, their monthly profit varied in between Rs. 50 to Rs. 60.²² They prepared articles of average quality for common household use.²³

But this independent class of *kanhars* were only a microscopic group and the overall economic condition of the *kanhars* was very depressing. G. N. Gupta has clarified the point by citing the example of the *kanhars* of Kamrup. The cost of the broken bell metal i.e. the scrap metal was calculated to be Rs. 45 per maund i.e. Rs. 1-2 per seer. The average wage paid to a *kanhar* was Rs. 1 per seer of finished article. In some cases it was less and in some it was slightly more. About five *kanhars* working all day could turn out 3 to 4 seers of the finished article. The gross earnings came from 14 annas to Rs. 1 per head per day. The cost of fuel came to 10 annas per seer of metal. The net earning, therefore, did not come to more than 5 to 6 annas per day or an average about Rs. 10 per month. The finished articles were sold on an average price at Rs. 2-8 per seer. So, while a *kanhar* got only 6 annas per day, the *kayan* made nearly a clearer profit of 8 annas on every seer of metal that he advances.²⁴

This depressive condition of the *kanhars* was further aggravated because of the world wide economic depression which occurred as a consequence of the First World War. During the war period the prices of the items increased greatly. But at the end of the war the prices sharply declined and this decline in economy reached its extreme level in 1929. There was scarcity of money which greatly reduced the

²² Priyam Goswami, *Assam in the Nineteenth Century: Industrialization and Colonial Penetration*, Spectrum Publications, Guwahati, 1999, p. 186

²³ I. Majid, 1930-31, op. cit. p. 3

²⁴ G. N. Gupta, op. cit. p. 40

purchasing capacity of the people. This led to reduction in prices of all the commodities and low sale.²⁵ Despite of having large quantity of bell metal products at stock there was very limited sale with low margin of profit for the *kayans*. As such the *kayans* for the time being stopped advancing scrap metal to the *kanhars* for the manufacture of bell metal products. As a result, the *kanhars* lost their livelihood.²⁶ Infact, by 1929-30 the bell metal industry was in a moribund condition leaving little margin of profit to those who were engaged in it and the industry died gradually.²⁷

Till the first decade of the 20th century the bell metal industry was at least in a running condition at various centres of production. In between 1884-1895, the *kanhars* were able to turn out from one to one and a half maunds of utensils monthly, the wholesale selling price of which varied from Rs. 65 to Rs. 130 per maund and the retail from Rs. 1-12 a seer. Their monthly income was estimated at Rs. 30 to Rs. 80. This estimate however, appears to be exaggerated as expenditure on implements and charcoal has not been taken into account.²⁸ Even then, if we deduct the amount of expenditure on implements and charcoal from the estimated monthly income, a *kanhar* definitely earned sufficient to lead a comfortable life. The value of the articles manufactured in Sarthebari in 1906 was estimated at one and a half lakh of rupees of which about 10 percent was sold in the district and the rest being exported for sale to Upper Assam. There were 400 families of *kanhars* in Sarthebari during the year 1907-08. Out of these 400 families, about 100 families were solely dependent on this occupation and the rest 300 families also had some land for cultivation. In Nowgong,

²⁵ I. Majid, 1930-31, op. cit. pp. 2-3

²⁶ Geeta Deka, op. cit. p. 181

²⁷ J. N. Chakravarty, *Report of the Department of Industries, Assam, For the Year 1929-30*, Assam Secretariat Printing Office, Shillong, 1930, pp. 1-2

²⁸ E. A. Gait, 1896, op. cit. p. 122

13 families were engaged in the manufacture of bell metal at Molankata and Baumigaon. There was also a colony of bell metal workers at Titabar in Jorhat.²⁹

For the first time a census of the indigenous industries was conducted in 1921. These industries were regarded as cottage industries by the Colonial Government. As per the census report of 1921 there were 446 bell metal workshops in Assam. Out of these total workshops, 421 bell metal workshops were in the Assam (Brahmaputra) Valley and 25 bell metal workshops were in the Surma (Barak) Valley. Further, it was reported that the bell metal industry in Sibsagar had declined. But it was observed that at Sarthebari in Kamrup, though the bell metal articles were of no great variety, they showed considerable artistic merit.³⁰ This census report of 1921 covering the decade in between 1910-20 revealed that the trend in bell metal industry was slightly on a declining side almost at all the centres.

The declining trend in the bell metal industry probably got increased since the economic depression of 1929. The effects of this depression were very unfavourable for the local artisans that included the *kanhars*.³¹ Hence, from then onwards till the very end of the British rule there had been a gradual decline of the bell metal industry from its various centres. By 1930-31 the few families of *kanhars* at Namtiali and Titabar in the district of Sibsagar had given up the profession.³² The rest of persons engaged in Upper Assam with the bell metal industry also gave up the profession by

²⁹ G. N. Gupta, op. cit. p. 39

³⁰ *Census of India, 1921, Volume-III, Assam, Part-I, Report*, Assam Secretariat Printing Office, Shillong, 1922, pp. 173-175

³¹ J. N. Chakravarty, 1929-30, op. cit. p. 3

³² I. Majid, 1930-31, op. cit. p. 3

1938-39.³³ This was bound to happen as the wages of the *kanhars* had gone down considerably during the past few years.³⁴ During 1934-35 each *kanhar* could earn about Rs. 6 to 8 only a month.³⁵ The few *kanhars* working independently earn a better living than those under the *kayans* or *byaparis*.³⁶

In Cachar there were bell metal workshops in the villages of Kharilpar, Lakhipur and a few Manipuri villages.³⁷ The business was small and confined mainly to the Manipuris.³⁸ The business was reported to be dull.³⁹ Altogether there were about 10 workshops in the district of Cachar as stated in the industry report for the year 1932-33.⁴⁰ But in 1939-40 the number of Manipuri families engaged in this trade in Cachar district was 10 in Kharilpar.⁴¹ Probably in Lakhipur and other Manipuri villages of the Cachar district the bell metal industry had already declined as there was no mention about it. Nothing can be said about the condition of the bell metal industry in Sapatgram and Bilasipara as there is no mention of the bell metal industry there in the documents of the colonial period.

³³ M. Khurshid, *Report of the Department of Industries, Assam, For the Year 1938-39*, Assam Government Printing Office, Shillong, 1940, p. 5

³⁴ I. Majid, *Report of the Department of Industries, Assam, For the Year 1933-34*, Assam Government Printing Office, Shillong, 1934, p. 4

³⁵ S. L. Mehta, *Report of the Department of Industries, Assam, For the Year 1934-35*, Assam Secretariat Printing Office, Shillong, 1935, p. 4

³⁶ I. Majid, 1933-34, op. cit. p. 4

³⁷ I. Majid, *Report of the Department of Industries, Assam, For the Year 1931-32*, Assam Secretariat Printing Office, Shillong, 1932, pp. 3-4

³⁸ S. L. Mehta, *Report of the Department of Industries, Assam, For the Year 1935-36*, Assam Secretariat Printing Office, Shillong, 1936, p. 3

³⁹ I. Majid, 1931-32, op. cit. pp. 3-4

⁴⁰ I. Majid, *Report of the Department of Industries, Assam, For the Year 1932-33*, Assam Government Printing Office, Shillong, 1933, p. 3

⁴¹ S. L. Mehta, *Report of the Department of Industries, Assam, For the Year 1939-40*, Assam Government Printing Office, Shillong, 1941, p. 6

An exception to this general trend of decline in the bell metal industry was seen at Sarthebari. There the *kanhars* despite of facing severe odds continued their age old profession which popularised the bell metal industry and it spread to the adjoining villages of Sarthebari. During the year 1929-30, there were more than 700 *kanhars* at Sarthebari and the neighbouring villages and this figure increased reaching 1000 in 1939-40.⁴² Actually there existed a traditional system called locally as *prabakh khata* or *prabah* among the *kanhars* of Sarthebari under which they used to go outside to different places for making and selling of bell metal products by temporarily establishing a *garshal* at those places.⁴³

This system was initially followed by the *kanhars* of Sarthebari in the nearby areas which helped them to remain outside the domination of the *kayans* and thereby maintain their age old direct relationship with the customers as during *prabah* they directly used to make products as per the demand of the customers from the locally available scrap metal.⁴⁴ Even there is a lullaby where we found the reference of the system of *prabakh khata* or *prabah* as it has been mention there that the father (a *kanhar*) had gone to a distant place (six months required to reach there) for manufacturing bell metal utensils. The song is:

amar bapa xoru choli
patot nakhai vaat
bapeke geisi kahi gorobha
*choi manhor baat*⁴⁵

⁴² J. N. Chakravarty, 1929-30, op. cit. p. 3; S. L. Mehta, 1939-40, op. cit. p. 6

⁴³ Geeta Deka, op. cit. p. 177

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Hemanta Kr.Sarmah, *Kamrupi Lokogeet Sangrah*, LBS Publication, Guwahati, 1991, p. 185

Towards the end of the 19th century, this system of *prabakh khata* started on a larger scale with the *kanhars* of Sarthebari going to distant places in batches as there was a devastating earthquake in Assam in 1897 which had a disastrous effect on the area surrounding Sarthebari as it completely got submerged with water.⁴⁶ During the year 1907-08, the *kanhars* of Sarthebari occasionally migrated to Gauhati and Barpeta and worked there in temporary sheds. There was a colony of the *kanhars* working in Gauhati.⁴⁷ The *kanhars* of Sarthebari even went to Upper Assam. During the year 1932-33, some of the *kanhars* of Sarthebari went to Upper Assam, started temporary *garshals* in the villages and made articles according to the demands of the localities.⁴⁸ The very next year in 1933-34, *kanhars* from Sarthebari in batches went and worked in Upper Assam during the winter months.⁴⁹

These *kanhars* of Sarthebari who went to Upper Assam worked independently and earned a better living or income than those who worked under *kayans* or *byaparis* in Gauhati. There were also local *kanhars* in some villages in Upper Assam but they could not compete with the *kanhars* of Sarthebari whose articles were superior to those of the local *kanhars*.⁵⁰ For a few months the *kanhars* used to work there and then come back with a good earning. This position had been created by the local *kanhars* in Upper Assam themselves as they had abandoned the bell metal smithy altogether.⁵¹ The *kanhars* of Sarthebari established more or less a direct relationship with the customers in Upper Assam. They used to collect locally the scrap metal and did not take it from the *kayans*. From these scrap metals they used to make products

⁴⁶ Anil Raichoudhury, *Namoni Asomor Madhyashrenee*, Barua Agency, Guwahati, 1998, p. 21

⁴⁷ G. N. Gupta, op. cit. p. 39

⁴⁸ I. Majid, 1932-33, op. cit. p. 3

⁴⁹ I. Majid, 1933-34, op. cit. p. 4

⁵⁰ S. L. Mehta, 1935-36, op. cit. p. 3

⁵¹ S. L. Mehta, 1939-40, op. cit. p. 6

as per the demands of the customers and thereby had a good earning. They were also independent of the control of the *kayans* or *byaparis*.

However, the *kanhars* of Sarthebari working in *prabah* in Gauhati were in a deplorable condition in comparison to those *kanhars* of Sarthebari working in *prabah* in different places of Upper Assam. Majority of the *kanhars* of Sarthebari working at Gauhati were under the *kayans* who supplied them with raw materials and gave them advances for making utensils according to their instructions and took back their finished products.⁵² The wages also decreased gradually as it was fixed by the *kayans*. In 1935-36 the minimum monthly income of a *kanhar* of Sarthebari working at Gauhati under a *kayan* was about Rs. 7 only.⁵³

The *kayans* supplied the raw materials to the *kanhars* of Sarthebari keeping a good margin of profit. But they gave the *kanhars* very low wages for their labour.⁵⁴ Moreover wages were not paid immediately. The *kayans* used to give the *kanhars* in advance the money for the purchase of coal and their articles of food as they used to live there in temporary sheds.⁵⁵ Hence, during the working month's the *kayans* used to give only a little money of the wages to the *kanhars* of Sarthebari for their day to day expenditure keeping the rest in their hands. Only at the end of their work after keeping the accounts, the *kayans* used to pay the remaining money to the *kanhars* of Sarthebari. Actually with this money that was due to the *kanhars* of Sarthebari, the *kayans* probably used to run their business over the *kanhars*.⁵⁶

⁵² I. Majid, 1933-34, op. cit. p. 4

⁵³ S. L. Mehta, 1935-36, op. cit. p. 3

⁵⁴ M. Khurshid, 1938-39, op. cit. p. 5

⁵⁵ S. L. Mehta, 1935-36, op. cit. p. 3

⁵⁶ M. M. Patowary, 'Asom Samabai Kanhar Sanghar Itibritta', in P. K. Deka, (ed.), *Smritigrantha*, Kohi Ram Das Birth Centenary Committee', Sarthebari, 1982, p. 172

There was no other option left for the *kanhars* of Sarthebari working at Gauhati to come out of the clutches of the *kayans*, other than leaving their age old profession like the *kanhars* in other places of Assam have done as they do not have the required capital to run the bell metal industry. Due to this want of capital, the *kanhars* of Sarthebari were very much dependent on the *kayans* for which they could not demand for legitimate earnings from them. But at this crucial time, the *kanhars* of Sarthebari founded a friend, philosopher and guide in the form of Kohi Ram Das who successfully united all the *kanhars* of Sarthebari and the neighbouring villages together against the *kayans*.⁵⁷

Kohi Ram Das of Sarthebari was a teacher in the Sonaram High School, Gauhati from 1930 to 1937.⁵⁸ During the period of his stay at Gauhati, Kohi Ram Das visited the *garshals* established at different places of Gauhati by the *kanhars* of Sarthebari and enquired about their condition, grievances and wants. He thereafter fully realised that for boycotting the *kayans*, the *kanhars* must be united. Further for cementing this unity on a permanent basis, an alternative way must be sought for the running the business involved in the bell metal industry. Hence, by taking all the *kanhars* of Sarthebari and adjoining areas together he attempted to form a co-operative society. He opined that “if a co-operative society could be started the *kanhars* could come out of the control of the *kayans* and stand on their own feet”.⁵⁹ Already G. N. Gupta in 1906 had hoped that “if co-operative credit societies were formed, the *kanhars* would be brought into direct touch with the consumers and this

⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 173

⁵⁸ Ibid. p. 174

⁵⁹ Bandharam Deka, ‘Sarukshe tri Anchalar Arthanaitik Bikaxat Kohi Ram Dasar Abadan’ in P. K. Deka, (ed.), *Smritigrantha*, Kohi Ram Das Birth Centenary Committee’, Sarthebari, 1982, p. 112

would go a long way in removing the main anomaly of the profit mongering *kayans*”.⁶⁰

Then in the year 1916 Kanak Lal Baruah recommended that by introduction of co-operative methods the economic position of the *kanhars* may perhaps be improved.⁶¹ Even during the year 1919-20, the question of forming a co-operative organization for the *kanhars* was being considered. Local British officers and some of the *kanhars* themselves took an active interest in the matter.⁶² Thereafter also several times, the question of organising the bell metal workers on a co-operative basis in its different centres of production or under one co-operative society was raised in the official level for the revival and improvement of the bell metal industry. But no concrete measure was taken in this direction as the Department of Co-operative Societies was inadequately staffed.⁶³

But without receiving any support from the Colonial Government, a meeting was held in Gauhati on 5th November, 1933 under the Presidentship of Kohi Ram Das where all the *kanhars* of Sarthebari working under the *kayans* in Gauhati were present along with the leading persons of Gauhati and students of Sarthebari area studying at Gauhati. In the meeting, after a prolong discussion, an unanimous decision was taken to form a union of the *kanhars* working at Gauhati like a trade union which was to be named as the *Asom Kanhar Sangha*. Every *garshal* in Gauhati was asked to pay monthly 6 paise as donation to the fund of the *Sangha*. An executive committee of the *Sangha* was also formed with Kohi Ram Das as the President. Most of the *kanhars*

⁶⁰ G. N. Gupta, op. cit. p. 41

⁶¹ Rai Bahadur Kanak Lal Barua Bahadur, op. cit. p. 9

⁶² K. L. Barua, 1919-20, op. cit. p. 6

⁶³ J. N. Chakravarty, 1929-30, op. cit. pp. 1-3; I. Majid, 1930-31, op. cit. p. 3; I. Majid, 1931-32, op. cit. p. 4; I. Majid, 1932-33, op. cit. p. 4; I. Majid, 1933-34, op. cit. p. 3

working at Gauhati became members of the *Asom Kanhar Sangha* by signing the membership bond prepared by its executive committee and thereby agreeing to follow the rules, regulations and direction of the *Sangha* as well as to pay the fixed donation.⁶⁴

A movement was thus afoot amongst the *kanhars* of Sarthebari to organise themselves and to work independently of the *kayans*.⁶⁵ Soon the *Asom Kanhar Sangha* lodges its first shout of protest against the *kayans*. At that time the market price of scrap metal was Rs. 41 or Rs. 42 per maund. But some *kayans* used to take Rs. 45 per maund including the price of *mulmara* from the *kanhars*. As such a meeting of the *Sangha* was held at Kumarpara in Gauhati on 7th January, 1934 under the Presidentship of Gameshwar Deka where a decision was taken that no *kanhar* would pay Rs. 45 per maund including the price of *mulmara*. If required the *kanhars* through the *Sangha* would buy scrap metal or buy it individually from someone else at the market price of scrap metal with their own money. Due to this protest, if the *kayans* refuses to give the *kanhars* the money that was due to them in their hands as wages, the *kanhars* could inform the *Sangha* and necessary action would be taken against the *kayans*.⁶⁶ The meeting at Kumarpara and the decision taken there proved to be a historic one as until then no protest of any sort was lodged against the *kayans* by the *kanhars* in Assam.

This historic incident even marked the unity and togetherness that had developed amongst *kanhars* of Sarthebari working under the *kayans* in Gauhati. But still the work was half done as the *kanhars* of Sarthebari working independently in

⁶⁴ Copy of the *Abstract of the First Session of Asom Kanhar Sangha*, 5th November, 1933

⁶⁵ I. Majid, 1933-34, op. cit. p. 4

⁶⁶ M. M. Patowary, op. cit. pp. 175-176

Upper Assam and at Sarthebari have to be incorporated within the *Asom Kanhar Sangha* as its bonafide members along with all the *kanhars* of the neighbouring villages of Sarthebari so that a co-operative society with a store could be started on a sound basis. Soon an opportunity came for organising a meeting for all the *kanhars* of Sarthebari and the neighbouring villages as for the *Sarthebari Sabha*⁶⁷ all the *kanhars* of Sarthebari working outside in *prabah* used to come back to their home.⁶⁸ Hence, immediately after the *Sarthebari Sabha*, Kohi Ram Das organised a meeting of *Asom Kanhar Sangha* on 4th March, 1934 which was attended by all the *kanhars* of Sarthebari and the neighbouring villages. There in the meeting a historical decision was taken unanimously to start a co-operative society and a bell metal co-operative store under the *Asom Kanhar Sangha* which will be henceforth known as the *Asom Samabai Kanhar Sangha*.⁶⁹

For starting the co-operative society, the *Sangha* organized fund by selling a share of Rs. 10 each among the members of the *Sangha*. The members who could not pay Rs. 10 in cash gave scrap metal of that amount. The starting capital of the co-operative society was only Rs. 1100. The co-operative society posed a great challenge to the *kayans* as all the *kanhars* of Sarthebari and the neighbouring villages decided to work under the co-operative and became its share holders. The *Sangha* once again started to prepare bell metal locally along with collecting scrap metal so that it could supply the raw materials required by the *kanhars*. The *Sangha* even paid the wages of

⁶⁷ It is a big festival cum fair which used to take place in Sarthebari every year during the Assamese month of *Magh* (mid January-mid February) and this tradition is still continuing.

⁶⁸ M. C. Goswami, op. cit. p. 5

⁶⁹ M. M. Patowary, op. cit. p. 176

the *kanhars* at an increasing rate.⁷⁰ Then through the co-operative store, proper arrangements were made for the sale of the finished products. The co-operative store was started with a capital of Rs. 2500 temporarily in a public godown.⁷¹ It has been stated in the industry report for the year 1934-35 that the *kanhars* of Sarthebari have organised an association amongst themselves and started a shop in their village with the object of eliminating the *kayans*. The success of their attempt is being watched with interest.⁷²

For some years the *Sangha* run very successfully with a good profit. It is stated in the industry report for the year 1939-40 that the co-operative society of Sarthebari was progressing well.⁷³ In 1939 as the *Sangha* was earning profit, it bought the land and house of a *kayan* at a cost of Rs. 1800 who left Sarthebari as his business was believed to have been badly affected after the starting of the *Sangha*. The office of the *Sangha* and co-operative store was then shifted to this newly bought property.⁷⁴ This was a great achievement for the *Sangha* as they shifted their office and the store to its own building. The same year in the seventh annual meeting of the *Sangha*, a decision was taken to name the *Asom Samabai Kanhar Sangha* in English as 'The Assam Co-operative Bell Metal Utensils Manufacturing Society'. Then on 18th August of the same year (1939) the *Sangha* got registered under the section 2 of the 'Assam Co-operative Act of 1912' as 'The Assam Co-operative Bell Metal Utensils

⁷⁰ Mrigen Deka, 'Sarthebari Kanh Shilpar Uparat Aalokpat', in M. M. Patowary, S. N. Deka and K. Bhuyan, (ed.), *Smritigrantha*, Asom Samabai Kanhar Sangha Ltd., Sarthebari, 1986, pp. 50-51

⁷¹ M. M. Patowary, op. cit. p. 176

⁷² S. L. Mehta, 1934-35, op. cit. p. 4

⁷³ S. L. Mehta, 1939-40, op. cit. p. 6

⁷⁴ M. M. Patowary, op. cit. p. 177

Manufacturing Society Ltd.’ or *Asom Samabai Kanhar Sangha Ltd.*. The registration number is 9/18-8-39.⁷⁵

By arranging the sale of their products through the co-operative society and its store, the *kanhars* derived better profits than they did in the past.⁷⁶ At the eight annual meeting of the *Sangha* in 1940, a decision was even taken to open a branch of the *Sangha* along with a sale depot at Gauhati. The Second World War increased the prices of the food grains and other eatable commodities fetching a good income for the peasants which also increased the sale of the bell metal products.⁷⁷ It was because the buying of bell metal products was then considered as one kind of investment as these products as stated earlier had greater resale value. In 1944-45, the *Sangha* had a profit of almost Rs. 48,000.⁷⁸

The *Sangha* also had some other achievements. The cruel practices followed by the *kayans* like *baltikah* and *gadi chatka* were completely eroded, but *mulmara* continued. Further, it played a strong role in setting the prices of scrap metal and finished products as well as wage rates for various types of bell metal products due to which the *kayans* or *byaparis* failed to exploit the weak bargaining power of the *kanhars*.⁷⁹ Indeed the *Sangha* saved the *kanhars* of Sarthebari and the bell metal

⁷⁵ Dinabondhu Choudhury, ‘Satampurukhiya Sarthebarir Kanh Shilpa: Aadhunikaran Praxangat’ in P. Tamuli and D. Deka, (ed.), *Bhortal*, Reception Committee of the 61st Session of Asom Sahitya Sabha, Sarthebari, 1995, p. 104

⁷⁶ M. H. Hussain, *Report of the Department of Industries, Assam, For the Year 1940-41*, Assam Government Printing Office, Shillong, 1942, p. 7

⁷⁷ Dinabondhu Choudhury, op. cit. pp. 104-105

⁷⁸ Dharmeswar Deka, ‘Asom Samabai Kanhar Sangha Aaru Samabai Andolan’ in M. M. Patowary, S. N. Deka and K. Bhuyan, (ed.), *Smritigrantha*, Asom Samabai Kanhar Sangha Ltd., Sarthebari, 1986, p. 33

⁷⁹ Ibid. pp. 34-35

industry there from being getting perished at a time when the same industry in other parts of Assam almost decayed out.

While at Sarthebari, the *kanhars* by their own efforts saved the bell metal industry from being dying out, no similar effort was shown by the Colonial Government in protecting the bell metal industry from dying out at its different centres of production. For reviving the bell metal industry, the financial position of the *kanhars* had to be improved, they had to be liberated from the clutches of the *kayans*, mechanical methods should be introduced in the bell metal industry, quality and design of the bell metal products must be improved and arrangements must be made for the proper sale of the bell metal products.⁸⁰

During the year 1928-29, the Colonial Government awarded few stipends for training outside the province to some young man in certain subjects which included bell metal works amongst other.⁸¹ The very next year a scholarship was also granted for the training of an apprentice in brass and bell metal work in Benares.⁸² Then during the year 1940-41 an amount of Rs. 150 was provided to the Sarthebari High English School, a private institution established at Sarthebari under Williamson Apprenticeship Scheme for imparting vocational training to the local youths in bell metal smithy.⁸³ Since the introduction of industrial loans in 1921 only an amount Rs.1,000 was issued as loan for the metal workshop as a whole till March 1933.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ G. N. Gupta, op. cit. pp. 41-42

⁸¹ R. N. Phukan, *Report of the Department of Industries, Assam, For the Year 1928-29*, Assam Government Printing Office, Shillong, 1929, p. 1

⁸² J. N. Chakravarty, 1929-30, op. cit. p. 4

⁸³ M. H. Hussain, 1940-41, op. cit. p. 37

⁸⁴ I. Majid, 1932-33, op. cit. p. 20

However, no measure was taken for eliminating the control of the *kayans* over the bell metal industry. Even for technological or mechanical innovations, nothing much impetus was shown from the colonial side. But it was well realised by the colonial authorities that if the design of the bell metal products and the workmanship involved in it was improved, there would have been great possibilities for this industry.⁸⁵ During the year 1929-30, an industrial enquiry was made for securing information about the labour saving machines used in the bell metal industry of Assam.⁸⁶ Then in 1932-33 at the official level, a necessity was felt for establishing a Cottage Industries Institute for improving the existing cottage industries of the province by introducing new ideas there.⁸⁷ But, no such institute was established.

Bell metal smithy was not initially a part of the curriculum of the technical or industrial education provided in the three Technical Schools established at Kohima, Sylhet and Jorhat by the Colonial Government. For the first time it was the Sibsagar Polytechnic Institute, a private institution where during 1935-36 a class was started to teach boys in bell metal work. An expert in bell metal works of Sarthebari was appointed there as the instructor.⁸⁸ Thereafter, only during 1938-39 that the Colonial Government sanctioned the necessary staff for addition of a bell metal section to His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales Technical School at Jorhat to turn out trained workers in bell metal smithy for the gradual development of the bell metal industry throughout the whole province of Assam.⁸⁹ But inspite of being sanctioned by the Colonial Government, bell metal classes were not immediately started during 1939-

⁸⁵ J. N. Chakravarty, 1929-30, op. cit. p. 3

⁸⁶ Ibid. p. 19

⁸⁷ I. Majid, 1932-33, op. cit. p. 2

⁸⁸ S. L. Mehta, 1935-36, op. cit. p. 3; M. H. Hussain, 1940-41, op. cit. p. 7

⁸⁹ M. Khurshid, 1938-39, op. cit. p. 5

40.⁹⁰ It was from 16th July, 1940 that bell metal classes were started and 4 students got admitted in the course. Simultaneously, bell metal classes were also started at the Sarthebari High English School.⁹¹

As far as the sale of the bell metal products were concerned, some positive arrangements were made by the Colonial Government. These measures were taken through the Department of Industries which continued for few years. Bell metal products of Kamrup were displayed at different exhibitions like Social Service Exhibition in Dacca; British Industries Fair in London and Glasgow; Assam Home Industries Show in Shillong; All India Exhibition in Calcutta; Industrial Exhibitions at Gauhati and Sylhet; etc. In all these exhibitions, the bell metal products were much appreciated amongst other cottage products.⁹² But all the bell metal products were from Kamrup, a district of Assam where then Sarthebari lies.

The Government Emporium of Cottage Products opened at Gauhati also facilitated the sale of bell metal products in and outside the province. During the year 1922-23 the amount of bell metal products sale was 250 rupees-6 anna-0 paise.⁹³ The sale of bell metal products from the Emporium continued as per the orders received from outside the province as well as locally. But the actual amount of sale could not be ascertained as the sale of bell metal products was calculated as 'finished products' with many other cottage products incorporated in it.⁹⁴ Still, it was clear that demand

⁹⁰ S. L. Mehta, 1939-40, op. cit. p. 31

⁹¹ M. H. Hussain, 1940-41, op. cit. p. 7, 34

⁹² K. L. Barua, 1919-20, op. cit. p. 3; K. L. Barua, 1920-21, op. cit. p. 5; K. L. Barua, 1922-23, op. cit. pp. 2-3

⁹³ K. L. Barua, 1922-23, op. cit. p. 5

⁹⁴ K. L. Barua, *Report of the Department of Industries, Assam, For the Year 1926-27*, Assam Government Printing Office, Shillong, 1927, p. 7

for bell metal products could not be created in the overseas market.⁹⁵ Then the economic depression badly affected the business of this Government Emporium resulting in low sale of bell metal products like the other cottage products. There was a gradual decline in the total sale of the Emporium and during the year 1932-33 the Emporium was struggling for want of funds.⁹⁶

It can be hence said that the Colonial Government was not very keen on implementing the revival measures in the case of bell metal industry in view of the fact that the return from such investments would be insignificant.⁹⁷ The Department of Industries also lacked adequate staff and money for taking effective measures to organize and develop the local industries like bell metal, brass metal, etc.⁹⁸ As such, all measures of revival were inadequate to regain the lost position of the bell metal industry in Assam. The bell metal industry completely decayed out in the Upper Assam. In the Surma valley, it was in Kharilpar that the bell metal industry continued to exist for some time on a limited scale among the Manipuris. Nothing can be said clearly what happened in the bell metal industry of Bilasipara and Sapatgram. It was only in Sarthebari that the bell metal industry survived successfully because of its unique system of *prabah* and also by starting its own co-operative society. Even from Sarthebari, the bell metal industry got spread to the adjoining villages thereby making the place a unique centre of bell metal industry in the colonial Assam.

⁹⁵ K. L. Barua, *Report of the Department of Industries, Assam, For the Year 1921-22*, Assam Government Printing Office, Shillong, 1922, pp. 4-5

⁹⁶ I. Majid, 1932-33, op. cit. p. 2

⁹⁷ Priyam Goswami, 1999, op. cit. p. 187

⁹⁸ I. Majid, 1930-31, op. cit. p. 2

POST-COLONIAL PERIOD

The bell metal industry had a notable existence mainly in Sarthebari and its adjoining or neighbouring villages like Namxola, Karakuchi, Gomura, Lachima, etc in the post-colonial period.⁹⁹ Infact, Sarthebari happened to be the only continuously existing bell metal industrial centre of Assam from the pre-colonial times and there lies the importance of its bell metal industry. The bell metal industry is also reported to be in existence in Bilasipara and Sapatgram, another two traditional bell metal industrial centres of Assam. But only few bell metal producing units were there in Bilasipara and Sapatgram producing Bengali *bati* and Manipuri *bati*.¹⁰⁰ This shows that the bell metal industry of Bilasipara and Sapatgram in the post-colonial period did not produce any traditional Assamese bell metal products. Further, as already stated no reference of the bell metal industry of Bilasipara and Sapatgram was found in the documents of the colonial period which creates doubt over their existence during that period.

The bell metal establishments i.e. *garshal* were found in the five plain districts of Assam, namely, Kamrup, Nagaon, Sibsagar, Darrang and Lakhimpur in the post-colonial period during a survey conducted on the bell metal industry along with other cottage industries of Assam in 1954-55.¹⁰¹ But from the same survey it becomes clear that the *garshals* found in the new places were actually established by the *kanhars* of

⁹⁹ *Evaluation Study on Bell Metal Industries in Assam*, Directorate of Evaluation, Government of Assam, Shillong, 1975, p. 7

¹⁰⁰ Ananta Deka, *Bell and Brass Metal Industries in Assam: Present Status and Prospects for Development in the Changing Market Environment* (An Unpublished Thesis), Department of Geography, Gauhati University, 2012, pp. 106-109; Bhaben Kalita, *A Geographical Analysis of Bell Metal Industry in Sarthebari, Assam*, (An Unpublished Thesis), Department of Geography, NEHU, 2007, p. 47

¹⁰¹ *Report on A Survey of Cottage Industries in Assam, Volume-II*, Department of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam, Shillong, 1958, p. 2

Sarthebari who has the traditional practice of going outside to work in *prabakh khata* or *prabah*. It has been stated in the survey report that “there used to be seasonal migration of a large number of artisans from Sarthebari to different parts of the State every year in search of employment during slack season”.¹⁰²

This seasonal migration of the *kanhars* of Sarthebari has been testified by the *Sibsagar District Gazetteer* of 1967 where it has been stated that “temporary or seasonal bell metal producing units are seen in different places of the district which are run by group of *kanhars* coming from Sarthebari”.¹⁰³ Even, the evaluation study report of 1975 mentions that the highest concentration of bell metal industry is in Sarthebari and from there a substantial portion moves to different parts of the State in search of employment during slack season.¹⁰⁴ As a result of this migratory system practised by the *kanhars* of Sarthebari, few *garshals* of the *kanhars* of Sarthebari are there in places like Hajo and Ganeshpara (Guwahati city) in Kamrup district and Aakhoibari Kumargaon in Sibsagar district.¹⁰⁵

The bell metal industry in Assam during the post-colonial period refers to the bell metal industry of Sarthebari.¹⁰⁶ Infact, two *kanhars* of Sarthebari, Hareswar Deka in 1966 and Bhagaman Deka in 1986 were awarded with National Prize for their

¹⁰² *Report on A Survey of Cottage Industries in Assam, Volume-I, Part-I (General)*, Department of Economics and Statistics, Government of Assam, Shillong, 1958, p. 54

¹⁰³ *Gazetteer of India, Assam State, Sibsagar District*, Government of Assam, Shillong, 1967, p. 177

¹⁰⁴ *Evaluation Study on Bell Metal Industries in Assam*, op. cit. p. 5

¹⁰⁵ Prabin Baishya, *Small and Cottage Industries: A Study in Assam*, Manas Publications, Delhi, 1989, p. 190; Ananta Deka, op. cit. p. 112; Parikshit Barman, *Management Culture of Assam Entrepreneurs A Case Study of Bell Metal Industry in Assam*, (An Unpublished M. Phil Dissertation), Department of Commerce, Madurai Kamraj University, 2009, p. 19

¹⁰⁶ *Report on Techno-Economic Survey of Brass and Bell Metal Industries of Assam*, Directorate of Industries, Government of Assam, Guwahati, 1988, p. 4

excellent craftsmanship.¹⁰⁷ The position and development of the bell metal industry in post-colonial Assam can be well realised from the status of the industry at Sarthebari. But the categorization of the bell metal industry was found very difficult to be determined, whether it was a cottage or a village or a small scale industry.¹⁰⁸

The functioning of the bell metal industry again centred round the working of the co-operative society, the *Asom Samabai Kanhar Sangha Ltd.* which saved the bell metal industry from dying out at Sarthebari in the colonial period. There were also many *garshals* in Sarthebari and its adjoining villages which were not registered with the *Sangha*, but were independently carrying on with the bell metal smithy. Even then the *Sangha* acted as a bulwark for the bell metal industry thereby directly or indirectly protecting the interest of all the *kanhars*, both registered and non-registered. In 1988 the *Sangha* was felicitated by the Assam State Co-operative Union for dedicatedly and excellently providing service to its members since its very formation.¹⁰⁹

The survey report of 1958 and evaluation study report of 1975 revealed that the organisational pattern of the bell metal industry was still running on the traditional *ojha-pali* system. The working in a hereditary manner generations after generations continued in the industry amongst the male members. The *kanhars* as earlier were the unpaid workers as they had their shares in the profit of the establishment. Only few establishments had some unskilled workers as wage earners. The fixed capital in the industry consisted of the simple old tools and implements. The techniques of production remain unchanged. There was no initiative on the part of the *kanhars* to

¹⁰⁷ *Records of the Asom Samabai Kanhar Sangha Ltd.*, Sarthebari

¹⁰⁸ The Department of Economics and Statistics considered the bell metal industry as a cottage industry in its survey study conducted in 1954-55. Then the Khadi and Village Industries Board discussed about the bell metal industry. Again the Directorate of Industries showed the bell metal industry in their directory as small scale industry.

¹⁰⁹ *Copy of Felicitation Certificate* dated 14th November, 1988

either adopt modern tools and implements or evolve improved techniques of production.¹¹⁰ Only from 1970 onwards a winding machine was used instead of the traditional *bhati* to provide air to the fire in the furnace.¹¹¹

Actually lack of knowledge on the part of the *kanhars* and inadequate finance were invariably found to be the reason for the non-adoption of modern implements and improved techniques of production in the bell metal industry. The laborious process of hammering continued. This primitive method could be easily replaced by employing suitable machines. The products of the industry remained the same with traditional shapes and designs. New products or new designs were very rare and as a result the market for the bell metal products was more or less limited. As such, the bell metal products failed to compete with substitute products of attractive design and cheap price.¹¹²

The *Asom Samabai Kanhar Sangha Ltd.* at Sarthebari was dedicatedly engaged in supplying raw materials to its registered *kanhars*, receiving in turn the products by paying wages to the *kanhars* and marketing the products. It possessed neither any workshop nor any tools and implements of its own. The registered *kanhars* worked in their own establishments and used their own tools and implements. As a result the *Sangha* could not exercise effective control over their manufacturing activities. The *kanhars* were not whole-heartedly co-operative and found to be mainly interested in their own establishments. Production on behalf of the *Sangha* was of secondary importance to them. As a consequence, the scale of production of the

¹¹⁰ *Report on A Survey of Cottage Industries in Assam, Volume-I, Part-I (General)*, op. cit. p. 54; *Evaluation Study on Bell Metal Industries in Assam*, op. cit. p. 2

¹¹¹ Bhaben Kalita, op. cit. p. 117; *Evaluation Study on Bell Metal Industries in Assam*, op. cit. p. 2

¹¹² *Report on A Survey of Cottage Industries in Assam, Volume-I, Part-I (General)*, op. cit. pp. 54-55; *Evaluation Study on Bell Metal Industries in Assam*, op. cit. p. 3

Sangha was not that satisfactory which affected its income. For all these reasons, the *Sangha* failed to check completely the exploitation meted out to the *kanhars* by the business class comprising of merchants and middlemen.¹¹³

The existence of merchants and middlemen in the business of the bell metal products became possible as the *Sangha* and the *kanhars* had inherent weaknesses with financial constraints being the prominent one. All the raw materials required in the bell metal industry were obtained from the dealers outside the State. Even a substantial volume of the old bell metal collected from different parts of the State goes to those dealers resulting in unnecessary increase in the price of the raw material. A heavy investment was required as a working capital in the bell metal industry. But the *kanhars* do not have the large capital required for investment nor did the *Sangha* have the capacity to fulfil all the requirements. As such the *kanhars* accepted credit supply of raw materials from the merchants and middlemen on the condition that the finished goods would be sold back to them at fixed prices which were usually lower than the market prices.¹¹⁴

The role of the *kanhars* who were the actual producers ends with the selling of the bell metal products to the merchants or middlemen. These products were sold both inside and outside the State. But the marketing was controlled by the business class and they earned the actual profit. The status of the *kanhars* merely remained that of a wage earner. Hence, in order to improve the condition of the bell metal industry as well as the *kanhars*, the survey report of 1958 emphasised on checking the

¹¹³ *Report on A Survey of Cottage Industries in Assam, Volume-I, Part-I (General)*, op. cit. p. 55

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 55-56

domination of the middlemen and merchants. For implementing this check, three valuable suggestions were made which are as follows:¹¹⁵

- A 'Collecting Organisation of the Kanhars' should be opened for collecting the required raw materials and supplying it to the *kanhars* at a lower cost.
- For marketing of the bell metal products, a financially strong 'Marketing Organisation' should be set up.
- Credit facilities should be provided to the *kanhars*.

But no initiative was taken by the Government of Assam for implementing the suggestions. Hence, again the evaluation study report of 1975 reported that the bell metal units mostly used the scrap bell metal of which 70% to 80% was provided by the middlemen or merchants and rest by the *Sangha* in case of being a registered unit. Non-registered bell metal units used to get the required scrap bell metal totally from the middlemen or merchants who used to brought it from Mirzapur in Uttar Pradesh and also from Pakistan.¹¹⁶ The middlemen and merchants also used to take back the finished products after providing wages to the *kanhars*. *Mulmara* price was not given and sometimes the *kanhars* were given deferred payment and even less payment of wages on the plea of no sale of products. The whole profit used to go to the merchants and middlemen with the *kanhars* being relegated to the position of a wage earner.¹¹⁷

Generally the rates of wages for different bell metal products were fixed in common by the *Sangha* and the business class. But the difference was that the *Sangha* does not used to exploit the *kanhars* and pay them their wages irrespective of brisk or

¹¹⁵ Ibid. p. 56

¹¹⁶ *Evaluation Study on Bell Metal Industries in Assam*, op. cit. pp. 2-3

¹¹⁷ Ibid. p. 10

slack sales. The *Sangha* marketed the bell metal products independently through its branch cum sale offices at Fancy Bazar (Guwahati), Jorhat, North Lakhimpur and Tezpur and a sale depot at its head office in Sarthebari.¹¹⁸ The working of the *Sangha* in between the period 1967-68 to 1972-73 is mentioned below in the table 4.15:¹¹⁹

Table 4.15: Working of the Asom Samabai Kanhar Sangha Ltd.
(1967-68 to 1972-73)

Year	No. of Membership	(Rs. in Lakhs)				
		Paid Up Share Capital	Working Capital	Value of Scrap Bell Metal Purchased	Wage Paid	Profit (+) or Loss (-)
1967-68	807	0.15	5.49	2.39	1.16	0.23 (+)
1968-69	817	0.15	5.49	2.85	0.95	0.04 (+)
1969-70	1070	0.33	5.52	2.05	0.71	0.29 (+)
1970-71	1130	0.35	5.24	3.27	1.81	0.16 (+)
1971-72	1154	0.36	4.97	3.29	1.01	0.29 (+)
1972-73	1171	0.37	4.95	2.77	0.86	0.65 (+)

The Evaluation Committee constituted in 1973 by the State Planning Board, Assam even categorised the bell metal units as small units with annual income of less than Rs.5,000; medium units with annual income in between Rs.5,000 to Rs.10,000; and large units where annual income exceeds Rs. 10,000.¹²⁰ The Committee found that the price of the scrap bell metal was rapidly increasing over the years. The price

¹¹⁸ Ibid. p. 11

¹¹⁹ Ibid. p. 13

¹²⁰ *Evaluation Study on Bell Metal Industries in Assam*, op. cit. pp. 1-2

was Rs. 16.75 per Kg during the year 1970. It became Rs. 18 per Kg in 1971. Then in 1973 the price became Rs. 25 per Kg. Further, it increased to Rs. 30 per Kg in 1974 and thereafter to Rs. 32 per Kg in 1975. But there was no corresponding increase in the wages, i.e. making cost received by the *kanhars*. This made the condition of the *kanhars* very miserable as there was an inflationary rise in their cost of living.¹²¹

The poor *kanhars* even could not approach the commercial banks for getting credit because of their lack of credit-worthiness and procedural difficulties. Hence, they had to take loans from money lenders at higher rates of interest which further made their condition miserable. As such there was shifting of *kanhars* from their hereditary occupation to other occupations and the percentage of shifting was more in the small bell metal units.¹²² The financial constraint was also the same for the *Sangha* with the issue of sales tax and non-payment of the loan amount of Rs. 2 lakh remaining unsolved.¹²³

The Committee found that the *Sangha* as well as the *kanhars* were in a very deplorable condition for which the bell metal industry has failed to develop in the State. The Committee as was also instructed to suggest some measures for solving the problems in the bell metal industry, it made certain suggestions which are as follows:¹²⁴

- The improvement in supply of scrap metal to the *kanhars* alone would not economically uplift their condition unless there was increase in the rate of

¹²¹ Ibid. p. 12

¹²² Ibid. p. 4

¹²³ Ibid. p. 13

¹²⁴ Ibid. pp. 5-6

making charges. But during the upward revision of the making charges, there should not be increase in the price of the product. This aspect deserves immediate attention of the Department of Industries and Department of Co-operative, Government of Assam.

- The Department of Industries, Government of Assam should initiate research programme for modernising the production process and design to attract a large and regular market. They should also train up *kanhars* to handle modern equipments to increase the production. Good design and technical quality were the two most urgent needs for the revival of the bell metal industry.
- The crisis at present faced by the bell metal industry could be easily tackled if the Department of Industries, Government of Assam counter it with a suitable policy. The Assam Government Marketing Corporation Limited with the help of the *Sangha* should start to secure orders, procure raw materials and supply it to the *kanhars*. The Corporation should take back the finished products for marketing after paying proper wages to the *kanhars*.
- The Department of Industries, Government of Assam with the help of the Small Industries Service Institute should work out a model unit for the bell metal industry which could run economically and efficiently. In working out such a model unit, all components should be provided. All other bell metal units in the State may be designed taking this as a model unit.
- The Assam Government Marketing Corporation Limited should assess the credit needs for each model unit and tie it up with Nationalised Banks for financing so that the revival of the bell metal industry and employment for these traditional artisans in the State do not suffer for the lack of credit.

But no immediate measures were taken by the State Government or programmes were included by the State Planning Board for the development of bell metal industry in the State on the basis of the suggestions put forward by the Evaluation Committee. Again in between 1985-1987, a techno-economic survey was conducted on the brass and bell metal Industries of Assam by the Directorate of Industries, Government of Assam and the report was published in 1988. No difference was seen on the organisational pattern, tools and products of the bell metal industry in this report. The highest concentration of the bell metal industry remained at Sarthebari. The *Sangha* expanded its business by establishing branch cum sale offices at Sarthebari New Market, Ganeshguri (Guwahati), Dispur, Sibsagar and Golaghat. Few private bell metal shops were also established at Sarthebari for the selling of the bell metal products.¹²⁵

In 1955 at the initiative of Debendra Nath Sarma, the then Hon'ble Member of Parliament from Assam, the then Hon'ble Union Minister of Industries Manubhai Shah came to Sarthebari to know about the condition of the bell metal industry there. The Union Minister visited the office of the *Sangha* and at a general meeting held there under the Presidentship of Debendra Nath Sarma promised to provide a rolling machine to the *Sangha*.¹²⁶ Thereafter in 1956-57, the Government of Assam provided the *Sangha* a loan of Rs. 2 lakhs. Out of this an amount of Rs. 60,000 was spent in 1957 for purchasing the rolling machine at a subsidised rate from the

¹²⁵ *Report on Techno-Economic Survey of Brass and Bell Metal Industries of Assam*, op. cit. pp. 6-7

¹²⁶ *Minutes of the Meeting held in 1955 at the Office of the Asom Samabai Kanhar Sangha Ltd.*, Sarthebari

Government of India and about Rs. 1 lakh was spent for the construction of a building for the *Sangha* including the shed to run the rolling machine.¹²⁷

An engineer from Germany came to Sarthebari for installing the rolling machine. Technical persons were also brought from Mirzapur in Uttar Pradesh for providing training to run the rolling machine amongst few selected local youths.¹²⁸ The rolling machine required about 1,800 to 1,900 kg of raw material on a daily basis for its normal running. It successfully ran for 7 to 8 months. But thereafter the rolling machine stopped running due to inadequate supply of raw materials, lack of required working capital, non-availability of skilled workers and high cost of production of the metal processed in the machine.¹²⁹

The non-functioning of the rolling machine not only disrupted the newly modernised production programme but also wasted a large portion of the loan amount without any output. As a consequence, the *Sangha* failed to repay the loan amount of Rs. 2 lakhs to the State Government and the loan interest kept on increasing. The accumulated interest alone of the loan up to the year 1972-73 was estimated at Rs. 64,70,900. The Assistant Registrar of Co-operative Society, Barpeta suggested the *Sangha* to clear up the arrears in a phased manner from the net accumulated profit of Rs. 2.90 lakhs earned from the year 1940-41 to 1966-67. But the *Sangha* did not pay any amount to the State Government.¹³⁰ Rather, the *Sangha* requested the State Government to take measures to re-start the rolling machine to which no attention was paid. Finally, in 1998 the *Sangha* gave the rolling machine on lease to a local

¹²⁷ *Evaluation Study on Bell Metal Industries in Assam*, op. cit. p. 12

¹²⁸ *Records of the Asom Samabai Kanhar Sangha Ltd.*, Sarthebari

¹²⁹ *Evaluation Study on Bell Metal Industries in Assam*, op. cit. p. 12

¹³⁰ *Ibid.* p. 13

businessman who repaired the machine and started running the machine by employing skilled person which greatly helped the *kanhars* at Sarthebari.¹³¹

The Bell Metal Artisan Association was established at Sarthebari on 17th September, 1964 to establish unity and oneness amongst all the *kanhars*, both registered and non-registered with the *Sangha*. This was felt very necessary to put forward under a common banner all the problems of the *kanhars* as well as to demand the government to initiate measures for the development of the bell metal industry. The Association demanded increase in the wages, i.e. making cost of the products for the *kanhars* and to provide the *kanhars* the price of *mulmara*. Further, the Association requested the *Sangha* to take some concrete measures so that the bell metal industry secures its rightful attention from the government.¹³²

From 1978, a protest movement was started by the *kanhars* under the banner of the Bell Metal Artisan Association in order to secure for them the price of *mulmara*. Looking at the intensity of the protest and genuineness of the demand, the then Executive Committee of the *Sangha* in 1979 took a bold and historic decision to provide the *kanhars* 0.30 grams per Kg of bell metal as *mulmara*. The *Sangha* itself from that year started providing 0.30 grams of bell metal per Kg as *mulmara* to its registered *kanhars*. This decision of the *Sangha* and its subsequent implementation also forced the merchants and the middlemen to provide the price of *mulmara* to the *kanhars*.¹³³

In 1966, the Department of Industries, Government of Assam made a provision to set up a Common Facility Service Centre at Sarthebari and allotted an

¹³¹ *Record of the Asom Samabai Kanhar Sangha Ltd.*, Sarthebari

¹³² Bhaben Kalita, op. cit. pp. 160-163

¹³³ *Records of the Asom Samabai Kanhar Sangha Ltd.*, Sarthebari

amount of Rs 0.14 lakh for it.¹³⁴ But it was in 1978 that the Common Facility Service Centre was established at Hirabori Reserve in Sarthebari by the Department of Industries, Government of Assam. The Department had 120 *bighas* of land in that reserve and provided 60 *bighas* of it to the *Sangha* for the construction of the Centre. The Centre was provided with 1 rolling machine, 3 polish machines, 1 weight measuring machine and some modern instruments. The total cost of the machinery was Rs. 24 lakhs, excluding the elements of duties and taxes. The responsibility of installing the machineries was taken by the National Small Industries Corporation Limited. But the machineries were not immediately installed and the Centre practically remained in the non-running condition.¹³⁵

In 1990, the Government of Assam once again ordered the National Small Industries Corporation Limited to install immediately the machines at the Common Facility Service Centre, Sarthebari.¹³⁶ The installation of the machineries was done in 1991. The same year the National Small Industries Corporation Limited at their own cost organised a 15 days training programme for 10 *kanhars* of Sarthebari by skilled technical person at the Common Facility Service Centre so that locally they could run the installed machineries. The trainees were selected by the Office of the Directorate of Industries, Government of Assam and were provided daily stipend of Rs. 20. But all was in vain as the Common Facility Service Centre did not start its functioning till the end of 20th century. Rather, the whole complex of the Common

¹³⁴ *Evaluation Study on Bell Metal Industries in Assam*, op. cit. p. 14

¹³⁵ *Report on Techno-Economic Survey of Brass and Bell Metal Industries of Assam*, op. cit. p. 9

¹³⁶ Letter no. *DI (1) 76/88/pt-1/392* dated 10 May, 1990

Facility Service Centre was occupied by the Indian Army and was utilised as their camp.¹³⁷

On 25th, 26th and 27th August, 1967 the Assam Industries Conference was organised at Shillong by the Department of Industries, Government of Assam where the delegates from the *Asom Samabai Kanhar Sangha Ltd.* participated to place the problems of the bell metal industry of Assam before the assembled delegates and officials of the Government of Assam. In the Conference, discussion was held on the present condition and future possibilities of bell metal industry in the State. It was well realised by the delegates in the Conference that the bell metal industry was facing various crisis mainly for want of adequate fund, scarcity of raw materials (copper, tin, bell metal scrap and charcoal), competition with machine made bell metal products from outside the State and absence of a full-fledged scheme for development. Besides, the *Sangha* faced financial constraints mainly because of the sales tax imposed upon its bell metal products which took away a huge portion of their capital as the *Sangha* could not realise the sales tax from the customers due to keen competition. As such, a situation has emerged where if the *Sangha* does not gets protection from the incidence of the sales tax, this important indigenous industry of Assam might get extinct forever. All schemes drawn up then for the resurgence and development of the bell metal industry would also become futile.¹³⁸

In order to solve all these problems, the *Sangha* from their own gave certain suggestions in the Conference which are as follows:¹³⁹

¹³⁷ Ananta Deka, op. cit. p. 200

¹³⁸ *Report of Assam Industries Conference*, Department of Industries, Government of Assam, Shillong, 1967, p. 21

¹³⁹ *Ibid.* pp. 21-22

- The indigenous bell metal industry of Assam is purely a village industry like that of blacksmithy which is included in the schedule of the Village Industry for which raw materials are exempted from the sales tax. As such the Government of Assam should declare the bell metal industry also as a Village Industry and include it in the schedule for the remission of the sales tax.
- Protection should be provided to the indigenous bell metal products from the machine made bell metal products which enters the local market from outside the State.
- At the minimum 60 tons of copper and tin or scrap bell metal are required monthly by the *Sangha* for supplying bell metal to its registered *kanhars*. But the *Sangha* is not capable of meeting this very basic monthly demand. The purchase of smaller quantity of raw materials as per the financial capacity of the *Sangha* is inadequate for the use of the rolling machine and is also insufficient to feed the existing *garshals*. Hence, the Government of Assam should make necessary arrangement to meet this demand for raw material unless and until the *Sangha* becomes able to purchase it on its own. But again the allotment of any smaller quantity of raw material will not solve the problem of *Sangha* and improve the material condition of the *kanhars*.
- The Government of Assam may purchase at least 50% of the bell metal products of the *Sangha* till the *Sangha* becomes able to manage this business in a sound footing.
- The Government of Assam by appointing experts should draw up a new workable scheme for the development of bell metal industry in the State. To

implement the new scheme, the State Government should provide the required money in the form of grants-in-aid.

- The rolling machine of the *Sangha* is lying idle for want of technically skilled personnels and required raw materials. The capacity of this rolling mill is so great that if it could be put to work it can feed the demand of all the *kanhars* of Assam. So, steps must be taken by the Government of Assam to re-start the rolling mill by appointing technically skilled personnels and supplying the required raw materials. Local *kanhars* should be provided training by the technically skilled personnels to run the rolling mill.
- A training centre should be opened at Sarthebari to train the *kanhars* for adopting the available up-to-date technology in the manufacturing process of the bell metal products. For providing training, master craftsmen in bell metal smithy should be brought from outside at the expense of the State Government. In the training centre, new modern designs may be introduced as per the changing taste of the customers.
- Sarthebari area may be electrified as a measure for the development of the bell metal industry.
- Like copper and tin, charcoal is an essential raw material for the bell metal industry. As such, the Government of Assam may annually allot few charcoal *mahals* exclusively and directly in the name of the *Sangha* from the Government reserve forests.

Although, the *Sangha* made above mentioned suggestions along with highlighting the problems of the bell metal industry in Assam, no recommendation was made by the Assam Industries Conference to the Government of Assam for

initiating measures for the survival and development of the bell metal industry in Assam.

During the 20th century, few Ministers of the Government of Assam including a Chief Minister of the State visited Sarthebari and witnessed the condition of the bell metal industry there. The *Sangha* felicitated all of them and placed the problems of the *kanhars* and the bell metal industry through memorandums so that the traditional bell metal industry develops and flourishes in Assam on the modern lines. But only certain measures were taken by the State Government on the basis of the memorandums to solve the problems of the bell metal industry.

On 25th November, 1958, Mahendra Nath Hazarika, the then Hon'ble Minister of Cottage Industries and Rural Development, Government of Assam visited Sarthebari. At Sarthebari, the Minister witnessed the plight of the bell metal industry because of lack of finance, technology and market. The *Sangha* requested the Minister to provide assistance to develop the bell metal industry so that the illiterate and poor *kanhars* do not lose their age old profession and thereby becomes unemployed.¹⁴⁰

Biswadev Sarma, the then Hon'ble Minister of Industries, Government of Assam visited Sarthebari on 7th November, 1971 to personally assess the condition of the bell metal industry in the State. Actually, the Minister had decided to frame a full-fledged policy for the development of bell metal industry. The *Sangha* praised him for his decision and hoped that the policy would be very soon implemented which would relax the sales tax imposed on the bell metal products or would provide

¹⁴⁰ Copy of the *Memorandum Submitted by the Asom Samabai Kanhar Sangha Ltd.*, Sarthebari to the Hon'ble Minister of Cottage Industries and Rural Development, Government of Assam, 25.11.1958

equal amount of money as additional grant to the *Sangha* on a permanent basis. Further, the Minister was requested to handover 7 *bighas* of land in the industrial area of Guwahati for bell metal establishments as the allotment was already made in this direction by the State Government on 22nd March, 1961. Request was also made to provide a piece of land in the market area of the proposed new capital city at Guwahati for opening up of a sales outlet of the *Sangha* which would greatly facilitate the sale of the bell metal products.¹⁴¹

A month later on 8th December, 1971 Jogendra Nath Saikia, the then Hon'ble Minister of Co-operative, Government of Assam visited Sarthebari. The *Sangha* on behalf of all the *kanhars* requested him to solve their basic problems like lack of capital, lack of raw material, technical backwardness, relaxation of sales tax and need for a large market. The Minister was also requested to adopt a planned policy of practical nature for the revival of the bell metal industry which provides employment to about 2,000 *kanhars* and provides basic amenities of life to almost 10,000 people.¹⁴²

Few years later on 15th October, 1975 Bishnu Prasad, the then Hon'ble Minister of State for Co-operative, Government of Assam visited Sarthebari and the *Sangha* on behalf of the *kanhars* placed before him the following demands:¹⁴³

- The State Government should provide a grant of Rs. 1 lakh to the *Sangha* as a financial assistance to fulfil the basic need of scrap bell metal for the *kanhars*.

¹⁴¹ Copy of the *Felicitations Provided by the Asom Samabai Kanhar Sangha Ltd.*, Sarthebari to the Hon'ble Minister of Industries, Government of Assam, 7.11.1971

¹⁴² Copy of the *Felicitations Provided by the Asom Samabai Kanhar Sangha Ltd.*, Sarthebari to the Hon'ble Minister of Co-operative, Government of Assam, 8.12.1971

¹⁴³ Copy of the *Memorandum Submitted by the Asom Samabai Kanhar Sangha Ltd.*, Sarthebari to the Hon'ble Minister of State for Co-operative, Government of Assam, 15.10.1975

- For the collection of charcoal (a basic raw material), the *Sangha* demanded the allotment of a revenue free forest area (*mahal*) with trees by the State Government.
- To organise training programmes locally on the use of modern tools and machineries for the *kanhars* so that they could produce items of modern taste and demand.
- To replace the old rolling machine provided to the *Sangha* in 1957 with a new up-to-date rolling machine and provide other necessary modern tools and machineries.
- To exempt the *Sangha* from paying the already due amount of sales tax and to make the bell metal products free in future from paying the sales tax.
- For expanding the market of the bell metal products, the State Government through notification should make it compulsory for the jails, hospitals, hostels, secretariat, inspection bungalows, schools, colleges, courts, police stations, etc in the State to purchase the required bell metal products only of indigenous variety.
- To make provisions for the sale of the indigenous bell metal products through the various government sales outlet, both inside and outside the State.

Then on 9th January, 1993 the then Hon'ble Chief Minister of Assam, Hiteswar Saikia visited Sarthebari where the *Sangha* presented a memorandum stating the problems faced by the bell metal industry along with certain demands to solve those problems. The memorandum is as follows:¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁴ Copy of the *Memorandum Submitted by the Asom Samabai Kanhar Sangha Ltd.*, Sarthebari to the Hon'ble Chief Minister, Assam, 09.01.1993

- The *Sangha* annually had to pay a large amount of money as the sales tax, but it could not collect it from its customers because of competition in the market. The Asom Gana Parishad Government in 1988 exempted the whole amount of sales tax the *Sangha* was required to pay till 31st March, 1985. Now from 1st April, 1985 till date, the *Sangha* again had to pay the sales tax amounting to Rs. 28,25,518.75. As such, the *Sangha* requested the Hon'ble Chief Minister to exempt the due amount of sales tax and in future through necessary legislation to exempt the bell metal products from paying the sales tax.
- To make arrangements through the Department of Industries, Government of Assam for running the rolling machine provided by them in the Common Facility Service Centre for compressing the liquefied scrap bell metal into cakes.
- To provide scrap bell metal, tin, copper and charcoal to the *Sangha* at a subsidised rate in order to solve the problem of scarcity of raw material.
- For expanding the market of the bell metal products, the State Government should make arrangements for the compulsory use of only indigenous bell metal products in jails, hospitals, hostels, secretariat, inspection bungalows, schools, colleges, courts, police stations and all other Government Offices in the State.
- To provide financial assistance of Rs. 50 lakhs to the *Sangha* for fulfilling the requirement of scrap bell metal and charcoal as well as for the publicity and expansion of the traditional bell metal industry in the State.
- To provide *shilpi* (artist) pension to the old *kanhars*.
- To establish an Office of the Superintendent of the Department of Industries, Government of Assam and a branch of the Assam Co-operative Apex Bank at Sarthebari.

The *Asom Samabai Kanhar Sangha Ltd.* on 31st June, 1969 also submitted a small Plan before the Government of Assam for the development of the bell metal industry. The following measures are included in the Plan:¹⁴⁵

- An industrial estate should be opened for the bell metal industry so that all the bell metal establishments, i.e. *garshals* could be set up under a large common set up.
- Rolling machine, polishing machine, moulding machine, drilling machine and weight measuring machine should be provided for the common benefit of all the *garshals*.
- To reduce the dependence on scrap bell metal, the government should provide a fixed quota of copper and tin in the name of the *Sangha* so that bell metal can be directly produced.
- The condition of electrification should be improved at Sarthebari so that uninterrupted electricity could be received which would be necessary for running the demanded machineries.

But unfortunately the Plan was not materialised. Hence, the *Sangha* once again in 1988 placed the Plan of 1969 before the Government of Assam with certain modifications for modernising and developing the bell metal industry so that it could compete successfully in the changing market scenario. The modified Plan of the *Sangha* contained the following measures:¹⁴⁶

- An industrial estate should be established at Sarthebari where 300 and more bell metal establishments could work together under one common roof with all the

¹⁴⁵ Copy of the *Plan Proposal Submitted by Asom Samabai Kanhar Sangha Ltd.*, Sarthebari to the Government of Assam, 31.6.1969

¹⁴⁶ Copy of the *Modified Plan Proposal Submitted to the Government of Assam*, 1989

facilities like electricity, machineries, technical assistance, raw material, financial help, etc available. For this every bell metal unit should be provided with atleast 2 rooms for their establishment. Besides, there should be a sub-branch of a Bank, designing centre, godown and the head office of the *Sangha* should be shifted there. Residential facilities also should be provided for the employees of the *Sangha*. The already established Common Facility Service Centre should be brought into function.

- To reduce the physical labour of the *kanhars*, save time and decrease the production cost, the *kanhars* should be provided with already expanded bell metal cakes instead of scrap metal as rolling machines were available to do so. This would also decrease the requirement of charcoal to 3/4th times of the general requirement. Further, the production of the bell metal products will be speedy which would in return increase the earnings of the *kanhars*.
- To maintain pace with the modern taste of the customers and competitive market, well trained and dynamic people should be appointed in the proposed designing centre. These trained people would evolve new designs for the bell metal products and provide training to the *kanhars* which would help in modernising the traditional bell metal industry. But while modernising the bell metal products, the traditional uniqueness of the products as a handicraft item should be maintained so that the customers identifies them in the market.
- A full-fledged branch of any commercial bank or Co-operative Apex Bank should be opened at Sarthebari through which the *Sangha* could carry out its transactions.

- A Co-operative Grocery Store should be opened within the jurisdiction of the *Sangha* at the premises of the proposed industrial estate so that the *kanhars* and other employees working there could get the daily required food items and other essential items at a subsidised price.
- To fully utilise the capacity of the rolling machine provided in the Common Facility Service Centre, brass metal could also be compressed in the rolling machine and the expanded brass metal cakes could be supplied through the *Sangha* to the brass metal industry at Hajo and Baniyakuchi, an adjoining village of Sarthebari. This would not only help in developing the brass metal industry but will also expand the business of the *Sangha*.
- At the centre area of the industrial estate, a large pond would be dug out which would be utilised as fishery and this would annually earn several thousand of rupees. Surrounding the fishery, betel nut tree, coconut tree and betel leaves plant would be planted which again would be a permanent source of income.
- After the full implementation of the Plan, a press machine would also be installed in the industrial estate for the manufacturing of steel utensils.

The Government of Assam initially showed eagerness in faster implementation of the proposed Plan. 160 *bighas* of land in the Paka grazing reserve in Sarthebari was allotted by the Department of Revenue, Government of Assam for the construction of the proposed industrial estate. At the same time, the Department of Fisheries, Government of Assam from its untied fund of Planning provided 2 lakhs of rupees for digging out a pond in the industrial estate and breeding of fish there.¹⁴⁷ Then through its Department of Finance, the Government of Assam

¹⁴⁷ *Records of the Asom Samabai Kanhar Sangha Ltd., Sarthebari*

exempted the due amount of the sales tax of the *Sangha* to create a cordial environment for implementing the proposed Plan of modernisation and development. Further, the Department of Finance, Government of Assam advised the Department of Industries, Government of Assam to provide financial assistance to the *Sangha* at par with the amount of sales tax it had to pay since 1st April, 1985 until the newly placed Plan was not fully materialised. But the advice was not accepted by the Department of Industries.¹⁴⁸ In spite, of all these positive moves the Plan was ultimately not implemented.

The Department of Industries, Government of Assam provided loans to the bell metal industrial units under the Assam Aid to Industries Act, 1953 from 1960-61 to 1971-72. The loan was paid only for a period of 12 years that also not continuously with gaps in between. The reason for this stoppage was identified by the District Industrial Centre, Barpeta as non-return of the loan by the *kanhars* of Sarthebari.¹⁴⁹ The following table 4.16 will provide details about the loan provided by the Department of Industries to the bell metal industrial units:¹⁵⁰

Table 4.16: Loan Provided by the Department of Industries to the Bell Metal Industrial Units (1960-61 to 1971-72)

Year	Amount (in Rs.)	Number of Bell Metal Industrial Units
1960-61	1,000	1
1961-62	700	1

¹⁴⁸ *Industrialization in Assam and Economic Reforms*, Government of Assam Publication, Guwahati, 1998, pp. 54-55

¹⁴⁹ Ananta Deka, op. cit. p. 177

¹⁵⁰ *Evaluation Study on Bell Metal Industries in Assam*, op. cit. p. 25

1962-63	500	1
1963-64	800	1
1964-65	2,900	3
1965-66 to 1966-67	Nil	Nil
1967-68	7,000	2
1968-69 to 1970-71	Nil	Nil
1971-72	500	1
Total	13,400	10

In between 1965-66 to 1969-70, the Department of Industries, Government of Assam for a period of 5 years supplied raw materials, copper and tin for preparing fresh bell metal amongst the *kanhars* of Sarthebari and the details of it is mentioned below in the table 4.17:¹⁵¹

**Table 4.17: Raw Materials Supplied by the Department of Industries
Amongst the *Kanhars* of Sarthebari (1965-66 to 1969-70)**

Year	Name of Raw Materials	Quantity (in Kg)	No. of Kanhars Benefitted	Value of Raw Materials (in Rs.)
1965-66	Copper and Tin	8,586	250	1,81,405
1966-67	Copper	4,001	250	36,803
1967-68	Tin	1,294	250	33,189
1968-69	Copper	1,888	250	23,515
1969-70	Tin	492	250	19,180

¹⁵¹ Ibid. p. 26

In between 1980-1990, the Department of Industries, Government of Assam offered loans to the *kanhars* through the General Manager, District Industrial Centre Barpeta and Sub-Registrar, Office of the Co-operative Societies, Barpeta. But again the loan was not provided every year.¹⁵² The following table 4.18 will provide details about the amount of loan provided:¹⁵³

Table 4.18: Loan Provided to the *Kanhars* by the Department of Industries, Government of Assam (1980 to 1990)

Year	Amount (in Rs.)
1980-81	3,57,500
1982-83	7,000
1984-85	10,000
1986-87	38,000
1987-88	1,20,000
1988-89	4,00,000
1989-90	6,00,000
Total	15,32,500

The Khadi and Village Industries Board of Assam in its meeting held on 7th January, 1984 discussed about the condition of the bell metal industry in the State and understood that the industry was in a dying condition although it has unlimited potentiality and scope which could render real economic relief to the rural artisans.

¹⁵² *Report on Techno-Economic Survey of Brass and Bell Metal Industries of Assam*, op. cit. p. 13

¹⁵³ *Report on Techno-Economic Survey of Brass and Bell Metal Industries of Assam*, op. cit. p. 14; Records of the *Asom Samabai Kanhar Sangha Ltd.*, Sarthebari

The industry was facing stiff competition from machine made products coming from outside the State. The Board felt that it had become necessary to provide financial assistance to the artisans of the bell metal industry. Hence, the Board through its resolution number 7 of the meeting took the decision that “the bell metal industry may be included in the Schedule of Industries of Khadi and Village Industries Commission”.¹⁵⁴ The Board also started marketing the bell metal products through their sales outlet called Khadi Gramodyog Bhandars established at different commercial areas of the State.¹⁵⁵

In December, 1986 the new Industrial Policy of Assam was announced by the Asom Gana Parishad Government for serving the local interests. The new policy aimed at encouraging growth and promotion of all industries based on local resources, local demands, local scarcity conditions and local environment.¹⁵⁶ In the light of this new policy, the Government of Assam in 1987 set up a Committee to study the issues and problems involved in the reorganization and modernization of the bell metal industrial units in the State. But the report was not submitted by the Committee. During the same year the Government of Assam purchased a share of Rs. 1 lakh from the *Sangha*.¹⁵⁷ This purchase of share made the State Government a share holder of the *Asom Samabai Kanhar Sangha Ltd.* Then in 1988, as already stated the Government of Assam exempted the *Sangha* from paying the outstanding due amount of sales tax from the time of independence to 31st March, 1985 which amounted to Rs.

¹⁵⁴ *Report of the Khadi and Village Industries Board, 1984-85*, Government of Assam, Guwahati, 1987, p. 19

¹⁵⁵ *Industrialization in Assam and Economic Reforms*, op. cit. p. 53

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.* p. 11

¹⁵⁷ Amlan Baruah and S. B. Roy Choudhury, *Assam State Gazetteer, Volume-I*, Government of Assam, Guwahati, 1999, p. 446

2,65,67,066.¹⁵⁸ In 1988, the Small Industries Service Institute, Government of Assam also arranged a study tour to Bihar accommodating 10 *kanhars* from Sarthebari and their officials in order to study the techniques of bell metal smithy at Surenja and Parev, near Patna.¹⁵⁹

During 1993-94, the Small Industries Development Bank of India decided to boost the few bell metal industrial units at Hajo along with the brass metal industrial units there. The Bank planned to improve the design, production and marketing of the brass and bell metal products. Expert artisans were brought from Moradabad for providing training to the local artisans.¹⁶⁰ Then in 1999, the North Eastern Development Finance Corporation Ltd. took an initiative to modernise the traditional brass and bell metal industry in the State by inculcating quality consciousness in the minds of the artisans so that its products becomes marketable in the international market. For the purpose of providing training, 3 experts on Designing of Handicraft Products were invited from Germany and they provided training to a selected group of artisans from Hajo and Sarthebari.¹⁶¹

But, inspite of all these trainings provided by experts from outside; various memorandums submitted; machineries, loans and raw materials provided by the State Government and survey study conducted, the bell metal industry at the end of the 20th century remained in its traditional set up. The design of the products mostly remained the same. Same old tools and implements were used. The only modernisation was the use of the rolling machine and the winding machine. The *Sangha* with its branch cum sale offices at different places continued to be the only organization fighting

¹⁵⁸ Order No. *FTX. 168/84/263* dated 14/9/1988

¹⁵⁹ Letter No. *DI (I) 82/87/61* dated 17th August, 1988

¹⁶⁰ *Industrialization in Assam and Economic Reforms*, op. cit. p. 55

¹⁶¹ *Annual Report of NEDFI, 1999-2000*, Guwahati, 2001, pp. 64-65

continuously for the survival and development of the bell metal industry in the State. Despite of receiving inadequate assistance from the government, there were 280 bell metal industrial units in the State providing direct employment to 1,720 numbers of *kanhars* in the year 2000.¹⁶² The *Sangha* also continued to produce products through its own registered units and thereby earning profit at an increasing rate. For instance, in 1995-96 the total quantity of finished products of the *Sangha* stood at 2,21,86,000 kilograms providing a profit of Rs. 5,28,892.02 which increased in 1999-2000 to 2,25,80,000 kilograms and Rs. 8,87,239.10 respectively.¹⁶³

To have an idea on the present situation of the bell metal industry a case study has been conducted in Sarthebari.¹⁶⁴ Sarthebari is a town located in the Barpeta district of Assam. Its geographical location is in between latitude 26.21° to 26.35°N and longitude 91.13° to 91.22°E. During the case study, the bell metal industry at Sarthebari and its adjoining villages is found to be in a running condition with the same old technology. However, a new rolling machine has been bought by the *Sangha* in 2012 at an estimated cost of Rs. 45 lakhs from Kolkata as the old rolling machine run by a private businessman on lease has stopped working in the year 2005. For running the machine, expert machine man has been brought from outside and employees of the *Sangha* used to assist him. The new rolling machine is much stronger than the old one and provides compressed bell metal cakes to the *kanhars* at a faster rate. This has greatly reduced the physical labour of the *kanhars*.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶² *Record of the Asom Samabai Kanhar Sangha Ltd.*, Sarthebari

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ The case study in Sarthebari is conducted in between 7.5.2017 to 11.5.2017.

¹⁶⁵ Information provided by Dipak kr. Deka (age 45), Secretary of the Asom Samabai Kanhar Sangha Ltd. at Sarthebari on 11.5.2017 during interview.

Now a day the *kanhars* also can buy compressed bell metal cakes from the private metal dealers. As informed by some *kanhars*¹⁶⁶ of Sarthebari, the price of these bell metal cakes used to be in between Rs.700-Rs.750 per kg. In case of scrap bell metal, the price used to be in between Rs.650-Rs.700. The raw materials are brought by the private metal dealers of Guwahati from Mirzapur, Patna and Pakistan. But these private metal dealers are not associated with the selling of the finished products. For the selling of the finished products, many shops have been established in Sarthebari. Some of these shops are established by the *kanhars* themselves.

The non-registered *kanhars* in general used to sell their products through agents called *arabdars* in local language. Some of the agents¹⁶⁷ told that they used to take the products from the *kanhars* and sale it to the bell metal shops located in different places of Assam. Their main business area is in Upper Assam as the bell metal products of Sarthebari have a great demand there. The *kanhars* even directly used to sale its products to the Marwari dealers in Guwahati and other stores in the city.

The Secretary of the *Sangha* further informed that the marketing network of the *Sangha* also has expanded as new branch cum sales office are established at Sarthebari Bus Stand, Paltanbazar and Ulubari in Guwahati city and Pathsala. The bell metal products are also sent to Nepal and Tibet through Siliguri. In 2015 the online marketing of the bell metal products have also been started by three youths of Sarthebari and for it they have designed a website called www.kahibati.com. The area

¹⁶⁶ Interview was taken with Ghameswar Deka (age 51) and Biju Deka (age 42) at *Jomother supa* area of Sarthebari on 7.5.2017; with Arun Tamuli (age 58) and Sanjit Tamuli (age 38) at *Tamuli supa* area Sarthebari on 8.5.2017; with Ganesh Lahkar (age 46) and Monoj Barman (age 34) at *Atather supa* area of Sarthebari on 9.5.2017.

¹⁶⁷ Interview was taken with Rameswar Talukdar (age 45), Banamali Bhuyan (age 53) and Anil Deka (age 49) at Sarthebari on 10.5.2017.

of their business is initially restricted within the country and both online and cash on delivery mode of payment is accepted. But the online sale has not received a good market till now.¹⁶⁸

Absence of product diversification has been one of the major drawbacks of the bell metal industry. The *kanhars* said that it is very difficult to provide manually all types of shape to the bell metal as it is a very hard alloy. The rolling machine can only provide the round or circular shape. Even then a few *kanhars* of the area tried to produce some new products like wall clock, flower vase, etc out of the bell metal. But all these products have not much demand in the market on a regular basis. Hence, the *kanhars* made these products only on demand and otherwise continued producing their traditional products. Again to maintain the quality of the products, the *ojha kanhars* have started to produce only specific products in their *garshal* as per their expertise. As such there are now a day different *garshals* for producing *kahi* and *bati*, *ban kahi* and *ban bati*, *lota* and *bota*, *tal*, etc.

Regarding the assistance from the government, the Secretary of the *Sangha* informed that the State Government has taken no measure to open the Common Facility Service Centre and it is still in use as an army camp. The problem of the sales tax remains unsolved. In 2005, the State Government promised to provide Rs. 1.5 crores as financial assistance to the *Sangha*, but the amount was not released. Fortunately, in 2013 the then Governor of Assam Janaki Ballabh Patnaik visited Sarthebari and promised the *Sangha* to provide financial assistance. At his initiative, the then Chief Minister of Assam Tarun Gogoi provided an interest free loan of Rs. 5 crores to the *Sangha*. The *Sangha* in two instalments of Rs. 25 lakhs each had

¹⁶⁸ Information provided by Sanjit Deka (age 27), the Manager of the Office of the kahibati.com at Sarthebari on 8.5.2017 during interview.

returned Rs. 50 lakhs to the State Government and has made a request for the redemption of the remaining amount. Other than the assistance from the government, the Nalbari Branch of the State Bank of India in 2005 provided financial assistance of Rs. 16,500 each to 190 bell metal establishments of the area.

It can be said that the bell metal industry though remained traditional offers lots of scope to prosper and positively contribute in providing employment to unemployed youths, earn foreign currency through export of products, help in boosting the state economy, contribute towards developing the tourism sector and many more. But for this the State Government and also the Central Government instead of short term measures should make a comprehensive plan to develop the bell metal industry in Assam and most importantly should give full concentration in materialisation of the comprehensive plan.