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BELL METAL UTENSILS AND ITS USE IN LIFE CYCLE RITUALS IN ASSAMESE SOCIETY

Abstract

Assam is a land where diverse forms of metallic utensils like bell (an alloy of copper and tin) and brass (an alloy of copper and zinc) metal utensils are used in utilitarian, aesthetic and ritualistic purposes. These items are the symbolic expression of Assamese culture. As bell metal is considered as the purest of all metals, its use in the ritualistic contexts are somewhat compulsory in Assamese society. Life cycle rituals are that part of human being where lots of bell metal products are used. Without these items life cycle rituals are incomplete. Now a days it is seen that due to its high price the use of these items is decreasing. Though the use is decreasing, in some context its use is inseparable in Assamese society. Both rural and urban people use these items in the same manner. Through this paper the researcher wants to highlight the rituals connected with the life cycle rituals and the uses of bell metal items in different contexts in Assamese society. Both primary and secondary sources of data are used for completing this research paper.

Keywords: *bell metal, cottage industry, kahars, utensils*

Introduction

India has adverse cultural background. This diversified culture is reflected in the art and craft of the artisans of different parts of India. Each area has its own particular, indigenous art and craft forms reflecting its identity. From very ancient days people of different parts of India have been in the habit of using hand made goods. These goods were used not just for utilitarian and aesthetic use, but also for socio- economic and religious purposes. We have seen ample proof in our Vedic literatures as discussed by Sahay (2015:191). These handmade crafts from various materials including metal goods were used for all sorts of religious and social functions. Metal handicrafts were also present in Assam from very early times. At the very beginning, the craft persons made some organic materials and later on from inorganic material

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like burnt clay, sometimes from carved out stone and metal like copper and its alloy (Medhi 2018:35). The concept of metal alloy was found in an ancient epic i.e. Matsyapurana (Chattopadhyay 2000:45). Many of the metal shapes have been derived from clay forms (Dhamija 1970:50). These depict a technological transformation that took place across time and space. Among metallic objects, utensils made of bell metal *Kaha*, (an alloy of copper and tin) occupy a special place in Assamese society.

Bell metal utensils are the symbolic expression of Assamese culture. Symbols are considered as visible expression of a culture, proper identity of a culture and it expresses religious and social behaviour of human being. Thus it influences the entire human life. They are the language of religion, of magic and of cultural expression and ultimately it linked to the socio- cultural context of that particular society.

Each group of people has ethos, idioms, cultural imagination and concept of craft. For a son, what his father produced, he does the same. He inherits the symbols that determine the size and shape of the products and its uses more or less unchanged. Their clients also share the same symbols. The existing forms of the utensils present in Assamese society are the continuation of the symbols of the past. From utilitarian to ritualistic purposes utensils occupy a special place in Assamese society. The ethos remains unchanged in Assamese society in context of using utensils. From the long past, people use some kind of utensils made of bell metal. Though the uses of these utensils are somewhat decreasing in some ritualistic context but its use is compulsory in Assamese society. It is the cultural recognition of Assamese society. In Assam making of bell metal utensils date back to the 7th century when the king of Kamrupa Kumar Bhaskar Barman had offered some bell metal utensils with other gifts to Harshavardhana the king of Kanauj as a token of friendship (Choudhury 2018:70).

There are various technological and cultural changes taking place in Assamese society. In course of changing situation they are able to preserve their past cultural elements along with the composite values, idioms, and mores of different sections of people. Expression of such elements in material term can be observed in material cultural items such as utensils. We cannot imagine the Assamese culture without these metal items. It is the identity of Assamese culture.

Statement of the Problem

Jaitly (1990:09) has mentioned that 'Indian handicrafts are not products of individual artists, enveloped in a shell of inward- looking egocentricity, searching for a method of intense self expression. It is an art of the people, which means that skills are not in the hands of individuals but have seeped, spread and taken root through time, through generations, through communities, through music and dance, ritual and prayers'. Utensils are such

an aspect of culture which is used for the preservation of social and cultural heritage and transported from one generation to the next generation. It is connected with the values, norms, beliefs and idioms of a particular culture (Medhi 2018:35).

Utensils are the symbolic expression of a culture and its importance and glory are expressed in folk songs, proverbs and in adages like the one below which compares the bell metal utensils with beautifully adorned girls of Hajo area and skilled weavers of Assam silk of Sualkuchi of Assam.

Sarthebaria Lota HajeliaFota Mur Konia Japi SualkuchiaApi

In Assam, bell metal is known as *Kaha* and the maker is known as *Kahar*. The *Kahars* of Sarthebari belong to the caste group of Kalita and Keot. The Kalitas occupies a high position among the Sudra caste groups of Assam. From early morning the *Kahars* work manually at their workshop (*garshal*) with their traditional equipment. It is a hereditary occupation, confined mostly to the above mentioned caste groups. But if we see utensils in the context of ceremonies or rituals, we see that there is no ceremony either religious or any other cultural event where utensils are not used and in Assam a lot of change have taken place in the context of rites and customs of the Assamese people, but the role of bell metal utensils as an integral part of those rites, have not changed considerably.

In Assam, utensils are considered as valuable cultural assets and form an important part of rituals and ceremony. This paper is an attempt uncovers the importance of bell metal utensils in the life cycle rituals in Assamese society. For this purpose, research and data collection was undertaken at Sarthebari, which is the hub of bell metal craft industry in Assam. Sarthebari is situated in Barpeta District of Assam.

Objectives and Methodology

There are two objectives this work:

- i. To understand the ritual significance of bell metal utensils in Assamese society.
- ii. To situate and identify the role of such utensils in the life cycle rituals in Assamese society.

Collection of data has mainly been achieved through interview method and observation. Focus group discussion was also used for collecting folk songs and associated folk belief system. Besides secondary sources of data have also been used to fulfill the need of theoretical knowledge.

Ritualistic use of the Bell Metal Utensils

The bell metal utensils of Assam may be divided into utilitarian,

aesthetic and ritualistic according to their functional value. Utilitarian and aesthetic utensils indicate respectively the day to day used utensils and decorative items. Ritualistic utensils are connected with the social and religious institutions linked to preserving the cultural heritage of Assam. While performing rituals there is a pattern in the arrangement of utensils and a distinct hierarchy is maintained between utensils made of copper, bell, brass, iron, earthen wares and bamboo products. Copper and bell metal utensils are kept nearest to the gods. This arrangement is because of purity and ancientness (Medhi 2018:36). Bell metal is also used for the quality of its sound. The *ghanta* or *tilinga* (temple bells), *doba* (a big kettle drum made of bell metal), *borkanh* (a gong) and different types of *taal* (cymbals) which are made of bell metal are used for the depth and purity of their tones in Assam.

The different stages in the life cycle of the Assamese people is bound with rites and rituals and in each of them there is a distinct place for the utility of bell metal. It starts with the conceiving of a child by a woman and ends with the finality of mortuary rites. In all these functions the use of bell metal utensils is inevitable. However, bell metal items cannot be used during some periods which are considered as impure state, such as menstruation and delivery periods for females. During menstruation, a girl or woman can neither be touched by others nor can they touch other objects including metal objects. In fact, as mentioned by Ferro- Luzzia woman even cannot appear before male persons (1974:113).

During the course of pregnancy certain religious functions, especially in the fifth, seventh and eighth month of pregnancy, are observed. In the fifth month, the Assamese people celebrate a ceremony which is locally known as *Panchamrit Khuwa* (consumption of five foods considered as auspicious). This ceremony is observed for the well- being of the unborn baby and the health of the mother. This is also a ceremony to highlight the importance of taking proper care and consumption of nutritious meals for the mother. On that day the women folk take two *batis* (bowls) and inside one *bati* is kept a pair of betel nut and in another is kept a pair of betel leaf and it is kept covered. A *Nam-Prasanga* (community ritual prayer) is organized at the conclusion of which the pregnant lady is asked to choose only one *bati*. If she uncovers the betel nut *bati* then it is believed that she will give birth to a baby boy. In case the *bati* contains betel leaf, then she will have a baby girl. In this ritual the bowl is essentially made of bell metal.

In the 7th month of pregnancy another ritual is performed in Assamese society whose name varies from region to region. This ritual is known as *Khuani* or *KaporDiya*¹ (feeding or cloth giving ceremony) in Assamese language. In this ritual the pregnant lady and her husband is served with curd and puffed rice in a bell metal bowl. The 8th month of pregnancy is considered as an impure state for the pregnant lady. This ritual is known as *Aathmahpala* (observance of the 8th month) in Assamese language. During this month she

abstains from domestic work and cannot touch household items including bell metal items. But she can touch Kumar pots (Kumars are the scheduled caste group of Assam) made from clay. They considered it as ritualistically impure. After completing eight month she is allowed to do all household work.

The use of bell metal utensils is prohibited till the baby completes one month since mother and child are both considered to be in an unclean state (*suwa*). In case of baby boy one day of pollution period is decreased. Such restrictions are in force till the time of *Luthurimukhatdiya* ceremony. This ceremony is observed normally at the age of 3 or 5 months of the newborn. It should be an odd month. Here *luthuri* means a boiled mixture of rice powder, milk, sugar and salt, the consistency of which is loose. This ritual is performed because at this age the baby needs weaning food and reduces the intake of mother's milk. Usually the maternal uncle (*mama*) feeds the baby for the first time. The utensils ideally used in this ritual is a bell metal *bati*, glass, *ghoti* (a small and slender water pot with a neck) or *lota* (a kind of pot with round stomach and a neck used for storing water) and a *samus* (spoon made of copper) which are brought by the maternal uncle.

Annaprasanna is an important custom in which the baby is fed with solid food of rice with different types of curries for the first time by the maternal uncle. This ceremony is basically celebrated on the 5th, 7th or 9th month of the newborn baby. It should be an odd month and should be celebrated before the growth of the milk teeth. It is customary to bring a set of *kahi* (dish), *bati*, *ghoti* and *lota* and a glass made of copper from the maternal uncle's side. This set is usually used at the time of feeding. Other invited guests also bring in gifts of different kinds of bell metal items such as *kahi* (especially *pandhoa*, a small size bell metal dish usually have 400-500 gm), *bati*, *ghoti*, *lota* etc. People prefer to give small size bell metal items in this ritual since it is meant for the baby. Giving bell metal item is a prestigious gift and the giver also feels proud to give such a valuable gift in Assamese society.

After birth ritual, puberty is the second life cycle ritual. It is known as *tulanihowa* or *puspitahowa* or *dhuonihowa*. It is the starting of the first menstruation period in a girl's life. The girl is considered as a *puspitakoina* (pubescent bride). The room where the *puspitakoina* lives is somewhat isolated from the other people because this period is considered as *suwa* (unclean) in Assamese society. During her period of isolation two bowls, one containing rice grain with a pomegranate and in another bowl rice and a particular type of grass, *dubari* is kept inside the room. A small twig of mango tree with five leaves is kept in a bell metal *ghoti* or *lota*. These things are not touched by the girl. Every morning and evening three pre-pubescent girls come and light an earthen lamp and sprinkle water from the *ghoti* and also sprinkle rice three times. This is known as *Aagdia* in Assamese language. Here all the utensils used in this custom are made of bell metal since it is a pure metal that cannot be contaminated by *suwa*.

On the day of attaining menarche, the *puspitakoina*'s mother and other women folks prepare two *sarai* (a bell metal tray with stand) for giving the news to the neighbouring area and this ritual is known as *Jopathoa* or *jananidia* in Assamese language. The hidden meaning of this ritual is that through this ritual the girl's family members spread the news that the girl is matured for marriage. In this ritual the women folk prepare two *sarai* and in one *sarai* is kept betel nut and betel leaf, a knife, a bunch of pomegranate or a bunch of figs (*dambaru*) and these things are tied by an *aanakatachadar*. An *aanakatachadar* is a long piece of cloth which is woven and completed in one day. The length must be about three meter long and it cannot be cut with any scissors or a knife. Each end of the *chadar* is beautifully designed with the loose threads of the cloth. In another *sarai* is kept rice powder, *aakhoi* (the rice grain is dry fried and the puffed rice separates from the husk), and small pieces of betel nut and betel leaf are wrapped in jackfruit leaf so that it looks neat and tidy. Finally these things are given to someone of the neighbouring household. In this ritual the utensils which are used is made of bell metal.

On the 4th day of puberty, a ritual is observed by the village women folks with the water brought from the three corners of a pond in a small bell metal pitcher (*kalah*). After she is bathed, she is brought to the courtyard. Here the *Aagdia* ritual is performed as mentioned earlier. It is the sign of purification² in Assamese society. The same bell metal items such as *kahi*, *bati*, *ghoti* and *lota* is used in this context.

Marriage is the third life cycle ritual. Without the use of bell metal items, marriage is incomplete in Assamese society. *Kahi*, *bati*, *kalah*, *ghoti*, *lota*, *dugdogilota* (a water vessel with a long and narrow neck), *dapni* (one flat round and handle based bell metal item) etc occupy a special place in this context. From *Joran* to the end of the marriage ceremony, the use of bell metal item is inevitable.

Joran is a kind of pre- marriage ceremony in which the ornaments, clothes, costumes and other useful materials of a girl are given to the bride in her mother's house by the groom's family. In this ceremony the groom's party has to be welcomed by bride's family from the entrance. This is called as *doragharakaadora* ceremony. In this ceremony a *kahi* with *saki* (earthen lamp) and one pair of *tamul-pan* (betel nut- betel leaf) is essential. The main aim of *joran* consists of putting vermilion mark on the forehead of the bride by the groom's close relative. In this ceremony the vermilion (*khendur*) should be brought in a bell metal small box and it is called in the local language as *Khendurgolabati*. In the olden days, if the groom's family does not bring *khendur* in this *bati* then the people of the bride's side do not allow them to put *khendur* on the bride's forehead.

Panitola is one of the important ceremonies where *kahi*, *bati*, *kalah* are essential items. In this ritual all the village folks go to the pond to fetch water

for bathing the bride and the groom. Bride's or groom's mother takes a *tekeli* (earthen pot), another close relative takes the *borkalah* (big pitcher made of bell metal) and three or more odd number close women relatives take *sarukalah* (small pitcher made of bell metal). The *borkalah* carrying lady has also a *kahi* with earthen lamp, incense sticks (*dhup*), betel nut and betel leaf and a knife. Another lady takes a *duni*. Here *duni* means a *hatiKhujia* Bell metal bowl (a big bowl) in which some rice and a bunch of bananas are kept. In this ritual almost all utensils used are of bell metal. Even in the *Biyans* (marriage songs) also these utensils names are mentioned. One such *Biyana* is mentioned here which describes that the female folks invite the mother of bridegroom to come out with necessary bell metal vessels for collecting holy water-

Chotaloteogi-dogi O harimajiatebati

Uleaahabarormayekputraaaherati

Uileaanapitlorkalahhangaphutechau

Aru aanakanharghoti- lota

Bapurbiyarpanitulbajau

At the time of *Dora -Koina* Adoraceremony, a bell metal *kahi* with *saki*, *dhup* and one pair of *tamulpan* is used and in another *bati* is kept some mixture of milk and banana which is used at the time of washing the foot with water carried in a *ghoti* or *lota*. All these utensils are made of bell metal. This ritual is celebrated because on that particular day the *dora* and *koina* plays a central role and occupies a higher rank in the society and distinguishes him or her as a *dev* (god) or *devi* (goddess) respectively.

Throughout the day of the wedding ceremony the bride and groom have to carry a *dapni* (a round shaped bell metal disc with a small handle). During marriage ritual the priest orders the groom to touch bride's head and right shoulder with *dapni* along with his mantras. This ritual is celebrated because in the Hindu society it is believed that by touching the bride with *dapni*, the bride becomes shorter than the groom. The hidden meaning of this ritual is that the husband is always higher than his wife in Hindu society. Even this ritual is also mentioned in the Mahabharata too. Rebati, the wife of Baloram was much taller than Boloram. So at the time of marriage Rebati's right shoulder and head was touched by a *mukhal* (an iron plough cutter). After that Rebati was shorter than Boloram. Now in the place of the *Mukhal*, the priest uses a *dapni*. *Dapni* is an essential item in the marriage ceremony.

Baran Kora is one of the most important ceremonies where bell metal utensils occupy the central role. In this ceremony the bride has to give a set of bell metal items as gift from mother's side. These items include a set of *kahi-bati*, *kalah*, *dugdogilota*, *charia*, *ghoti*, *lota*, *bota* (a kind of bell metal tray for keeping betel-nut on or offering things from to a god or a respectable person).

Number of item varies according to the economic level of the family. Whoever handovers the bride to the groom has to offer these set of bell metal items. It is a mandatory ritual. Another set is brought from the maternal uncle's side. Without bell metal item this ritual is not complete. In the *biyanams* also such type of items are mentioned. One of such kind of *biyanam* is mentioned here-

Chainiropareghuraniparua

Tole bohi ase Ram Chandra Baruah

Ram Chandra Baruaipekhandhorise

DasarathRajaiaKahi Dan Korise

Kahi Dan Kora HoiTapara- Tupura

Aru Dan Kora HoiSonareKhafura

SonareKhafuraiMelisePahi

Ram Chandra BaruarUthiseHahi

In this *biyanam*, the womenfolk express the list of utensils which are offered by the father-in-law at *Baran* function. After completing rituals at bride's house the *dora* and *koina* sit in the courtyard and at that time women folks sing *biyanam* with a humourous touch. In these songs also some bell metal utensils are also mentioned. Like

KahoreKahi Oi KahoreBati

DurarSrikrishnaiBojaiseBahi

Bahir Mat KhuniAaideuaKande

Aru AtabasarRakhibo Lage

MaekeRakha Hoi BonareDukhe

DeutakeNarakheKhaturarMaje

Here the bride does not want to leave her mother's house; the mother is willing to keep her because her daughter helps her at home but the father does not want to increase his enemies by keeping his daughter at home.

There is also a ritual that the bride has to touch some bell metal utensils with her foot before entering into her in laws house for the first time. It is the customary belief that touching of bell metal utensils increases the pride and prestige of the bridegroom's family. *Pakhakhel* is another marriage ritual where the bride and groom have to search for a ring and coins inside a bell metal pitcher and bowl respectively. The women folk's believe that if the bride finds out immediately the ring and coin then she can understand the groom's family members soon otherwise it can take time. In this ritual all items like pitcher, bowl etc. are made up of bell metal.

The last life cycle ritual is known as death ritual. Till 14 days of death, the deceased household and close relatives are in an unclean state. During this period they abstain from touching household objects including bell metal items or entering into temples and other religious institutions. When the dead body is carried to the cremation ground the male members beat cymbals and sing *nam* (holy songs) so that the soul goes to heaven. Usually *bhortaal* (a kind of large bell metal cymbal) is used in this situation.

On the 10th day of death, the family members perform a ceremony called *Doha*. Usually the priest comes to perform religious rituals according to vedic culture. He always keeps a *tilinga* (bell) with him. On this day the man who performs the last rites and the other sons have to shave their heads. On the 13th day the deceased household performs another ritual called *Sudhi*. On this day the man who performs the last rites prepares some favorite dishes for the dead person. The food is prepared in a clay utensil made by the *Kumars* (schedule caste people of Assam). In Assamese society the *Kumars* pot are considered pure for the first time use and impure for the second time use (Medhi 2018:36). The cooking hearth is made by four standing branches of fig tree. Without these things this ritual is not complete. Finally the prepared food is offered to the dead person. On the 14th day, a ritual is observed which is known as *Sapindan* in Assamese language where a large number of bell metal utensils are donated to the brahmin along with other things like cow, clothes, karahi, pressure cooker and money in form of kind. *Sapindan* means all the family members and relatives of the dead person has offered *pinda* to the dead one. *Pinda* means a mixture of rice, curd, ghee, honey and sugar. The belief associated with this ritual is that the soul of the dead rests in peace and does not harm the family members if they had done anything wrong. Thus from birth to death we have seen the use of bell metal items in different contexts. Almost in all rituals *kahi*, *bati*, *ghoti*, *lota*, *botaandsarai* occupied a special place.

Conclusion

Life cycle rituals play an important role in Assamese society. For performing these rituals various bell metal utensils are used in various contexts. As bell metal is considered to be the purest of all metals, the significance in the ritual context is inseparable and invaluable. As compared with the ancient days the use of bell metal utensils is somewhat decreasing primarily due to its high price. Some sections of the people cannot afford the cost of bell metal utensils. But often it is seen that when the need is for ritual/religious purpose, people do not usually compromise. In the ancient days people gave variety of bell metal items to the bride as endowment. But now a days it is mandatory to offer with the bride one set of kahi, bati, bota and kalah in both urban and rural areas. Likewise in the birth rituals the number of metal items gifted by the maternal uncle is also decreasing. However, when the ceremony of the dead has to be observed, then people do not compromise or

hesitate in giving a variety of metal items to the Brahmin priests for the salvation of the dead person. In urban areas, some changes have come about where people offer iron kerahi, pressure cooker and money in addition to some bell metal items to the Brahmin. But the fact remains that bell metal items do occupy a place of importance in life cycle rites from a ritualistic perspective. Therefore we can say that life cycle rituals will be able to preserve the importance and continuity of bell metal items in Assamese society.

Notes

1. Other name such as *Jeurakhuowa* (nutritious food from mother's side) is also found to be used.
2. Purification rituals commonly involve an act of washing in water as a way of removing uncleanness or pollution.

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