



THE BRASS AND BELL-METAL CRAFT OF MATIARI VILLAGE: TRADITION, COMMUNITY, AND CONTINUITY IN NADIA DISTRICT

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Abstract

The bell metal industry has a rich history and is an indigenous, traditional industry. Due to the availability of raw materials (copper, zinc, and tin) in the eastern Indian plateau region, it is primarily concentrated in the central and eastern parts of the country and is a cottage industry by nature. In contemporary India, ancient weaving and crafting techniques are still practiced and preserved in the most unlikely locations—in villages and on the outskirts of cities. Matiari village, situated in the Kaliganj block of Nadia district, has been known for its traditional brass and bell-metal work for many years. This village is not just a place of production; it reflects the life, economy, and culture of rural Bengal. For generations, the local artisans have been making different kinds of brass and bell-metal utensils, ornaments, and religious items. These products are valued not only in West Bengal but also in many other parts of India for their quality and cultural importance. The main aim of this paper is to understand how Matiari, a small village, gradually became a well-known centre for brass and bell-metal craftsmanship, and how this industry has influenced the local people's livelihood, economy, and cultural life.

Key Words: Brass and Bell Metal, Cottage Industry, Crafts, Artisans, Indigenous

Introduction

From historical view of point brass and bell metal industry is called Cottage industry in Indian perspective. So this is an indigenous and traditional industry which has a glorious past from the ancient times. The brass and bell-metal industry flourished more in eastern India than in other parts of the country. This was mainly because the essential raw materials—copper, zinc, and tin—were easily available in this region. Consequently, along with West Bengal, the craft of making and using brass and bell-metal items became widespread in Assam, Odisha, and Uttar Pradesh. In West Bengal, the districts of Bankura, Murshidabad, and Nadia are the main centers of cottage industries based on brass and bell-metal work. The most important centres of brass and bell metal work are Matiari, Dharmada, Sadhanpara and Nabadwip. ^[1] In the case of Nadia district, there are three major regions known for this craft: a) The Sadhanpara–Bahirgachhi–Dharmada area under the Nakashipara block, b) Nabadwip town and its adjoining areas, and c) Matiari village under the Kaliganj block, which is the focus of our present discussion. The Kánsáris, or workers in brass, rank next in importance to the weavers among the District artisans. Their number is returned at 855 in the Census Return of 1872. ^[2]

Brass and bell-metal industry was once a flourishing industry of the district employing a large number of rural artisans. ^[3] The products crafted in Matiari have earned a distinguished place in both local and national markets for their fine artistry and exquisite workmanship. Brass and bell-metal utensils, idols, , ritual item, cookware, temple bells, lamps, and sacred images are skillfully made here, reflecting the traditional expertise of the artisans. Matiari alone, over 300 families were estimated to be engaged in this trade. ^[4] However, with the passage of time, this once-flourishing craft has faced numerous challenges. Despite maintaining its artistic heritage and creative identity, the brass and bell-metal industry of Matiari is now struggling for survival. While talking about the problems for the decaying of this industry, they have pointed out that information about this work like i.e. no security benefits and daily non-fixed wages, the problems of availability of raw materials, non-reckoned middlemen, poor infrastructure, and decreasing demand of these products are also the major booming handicaps of this traditional industry. ^[5] Rising prices of raw materials, the migration of skilled artisans to other states in search of better income, the increasing use of substitutes such as plastic, ceramic, and aluminum, and the government's lack of effective support in preserving the craft—all these factors have gradually pushed this traditional industry into a state of deep crisis.



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Historical Roots of Matiary as cottage village

Nadia district is an ancient and culturally rich region in the Bengal province. It take its name from the town of Nadia or Nabadwip situated at the present on the west bank of Bhagiratis, but the administrative head quarters and chief city of the district (all though not populous) is Krishnagar. ^[6] Being located in the Gangetic delta region, this region was not only a fertile agricultural region, but also a cultural and educational center. The district of Nadia forms the north-eastern portion of the Presidency Division, and lies between north latitude 24 deg 11' and 22 deg 53', and east longitude 89° 22' and 88 deg 9'. It extends over an area of 2,793 square miles.... ^[7] Nadia or Nabadwip hallowed by the memory of Lord Krishnachaitanya who was born here on 18 February A.D. 1486. ^[8] Situated in the Gangetic and Bardhaman region, Nadia district was not only a prosperous agricultural area but also well-known for its healthy climate, rich cultural environment, and excellence in education and learning. It was a rich agricultural region. The whole district is a network of moribund rivers and streams, but the Bhagirathi, the Jalangi and Mathabhanga are the three which have been for more than a new century, and still are distinctively known as the 'Nadia Rivers'. ^[9]

Matiary, located to the east of the Bhagirathi River, is an ancient semi-urban settlement. It lies in the Faridpur region under the Kaliganj Block of Nadia district. The longitude and latitude of Matiari village are 88.2333263° E and 23.7333403° N respectively. The total area of the village is approximately 6.1917 square kilometers. It belongs to Presidency Division. It is located 47 KM towards west from District head quarters Krishnanagar, Nadia. 11 km from Kaliganj. 139 km from State capital Kolkata.

Factors behind Matiary's Industrial Emergence

The growth and development of industries usually depend upon certain factors which must exist for creating a favourable condition for industrialization. The population of Nadia district had increased considerably in recent years and the land available for agriculture can hardly support the people. ^[10] The district of Nadia is essentially an agricultural district, the bulk of the working population being engaged in various agri-cultural pursuits. ^[11] Brass and bell-metal industry was once a flourishing industry f the district employing a large number of rural artisans. ^[12]

Matiari transformed from an ordinary settlement into a village centered on cottage industries due to three main factors. Firstly, according to the Gangaram Maharashtra Purana, the Maratha attack on the Daihat region of Katwa prompted many artisans and merchants associated with the brass and bell-metal industry to cross the Bhagirathi River and seek refuge in Matiari. Over time, they began their craft there and eventually settled permanently. Secondly, the devastating epidemic known as Burdwan Fever had also affected Katwa, the suburbs of Dainhat, and surrounding areas. To escape the deadly impact of this disease, numerous artisans connected with the brass and bell-metal industry crossed the Bhagirathi and established themselves in Matiari. Thirdly, despite the limited transportation infrastructure, the village's proximity to the perennial Bhagirathi River provided a significant advantage. The river in Nadia is a great advantage for trade and commerce. ^[13] The river facilitated the import of raw materials and the export of finished products, which greatly supported the growth and sustainability of Matiari's cottage industry.

Production Process and Significance

In West Bengal, different regions follow various techniques for the production of brass and bell-metal items. However, in Matiari, the specific methods employed in the crafting process are as follows— **a):** Brass ingots are prepared by proportionally alloying copper and zinc. **b):** These ingots are then processed using rolling machines to produce sheets of varying thicknesses. **c):** Small-scale artisans and traders procure these sheets from merchants and craft a variety of items. Once completed, the items are returned to the merchants in exchange for a predetermined wage. **d):** The finished items are collected by another group of specialized artisans who carry out polishing and finishing processes before returning them to the merchants. **e):** Finally, the products are packed and marketed for sale.



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Through this production process, Matiari produces a wide range of brass and bell-metal items that not only meet local market demand but are also exported to various states across India. ...But utensils for ordinary household purposes, and for use in religious ceremonies, is turned out. ^[14] The products include notable household and ritual items such as *khala* (bowls), *bati* (plates), *balti* (buckets), *jog* (pitchers), *gamla* (basins), *cheri*, *chhura*, and *biryani handi* (pots). In total, approximately 40–42 varieties of household utensils and religious artifacts are manufactured here. Nearly 70% of the village population is directly or indirectly engaged in this industry. In addition to the owner class, the workforce comprises rolling artisans, hammering artisans, casting and welding artisans, polishing artisans, and cutting specialists, all of whom are intricately connected to the craft. At present, Matiari's brass and bell-metal industry is recognized as a major production hub in the industrial map of Nadia district. According to a report of the Directorate of Industries of the Provincial Government published in 1939, Navadwip was re-reported to produce in that year 130 maunds of brass and 125 maunds of bell-metal articles, valued at Rs. 3,800 and Rs. 8,500 respectively. In the same year, while Matiari was reported to produce 12,000 maunds of brass articles, valued at Rs. 3,00,000. ^[15] The demand for its products continues to grow steadily in neighboring districts and states, owing to their superior quality, durability, and traditional craftsmanship.

Under large merchants, typically forty to fifty artisans work together. In the case of small or medium-scale merchants, production often continues with only five to ten artisans. Besides these, there are also independent craftsmen who purchase raw brass or copper sheets from the merchants and, using their own equipment at home, manufacture various types of utensils. These craftsmen then deliver the finished products back to the merchants in exchange for fixed wage. The merchants, in turn, sell these goods directly to wholesale traders. These wholesalers distribute the products to retail sellers, who finally make them available to the consumers.

In this way, a well-organized production and distribution cycle ensures that Matiari's brass and copper products reach the end users efficiently. Mahajans import brass, copper and zine sheets from Europe and sell them to the actual workers at certain rates per seer varying from 1 to 10 aunas according to the quality and kind of work. At Matiari there are about 300 families who are heavily indebted to the mahajans. The condition of the workers cannot be improved unless they are freed from the hands of the mahajans. ^[16] The export and import trade is chiefly carried on by means of permanent marts. So also is the internal commerce of the District, bázárs being common, and everywhere met with at short distances. Fairs and religious festivals form temporary centres of trade, and are the chief marts for the exchange of household products, such as thread, etc. ^[17] The two principal fairs are the Ras-jatra at Santipur, held in October in honour of Krishna; and the Gopinath festival, held on an island of the Bhagirathi at Agradwip, near Kalna, in March. These gatherings, which have been already alluded to in a previous section of this Account, possess a commercial character as well as a religious one. ^[18]

Revival of the Brass and Bell metal Industry in Matiari

The colonial rulers understood the social and economic importance of brass and bell-metal work in Nadia district. In the *Nadia District Gazetteer* of 1910, these crafts were mentioned among the area's notable cottage industries. Later, by 1939, the Provincial Directorate of Industries began compiling production data, showing that the Bengal government had started to monitor such traditional crafts within its industrial reports. This official documentation reflected growing recognition of local artisanal work as part of the broader industrial structure. The records also reveal that Matiari stood far ahead of other centers—it alone produced many thousands of maunds of brass each year. Even after India's independence, the 1951 and 1961 census reports continued to record brass and bell-metal work as significant rural industries in Nadia, identifying Matiari as a major site of production. Together, these sources clearly illustrate that Matiari held a central place in Nadia's metalworking tradition for more than a hundred years, linking its craft heritage to the region's historical identity.

But after the Second World War, the traditional cottage industries of Matiari faced the threat of collapse. The economic condition of the workers in those days, however, was not very satisfactory. ^[19] The war had severely disrupted the Indian economy, leading to rising prices of essential goods, inflation, unemployment, and political instability. These harsh conditions dealt a heavy blow to Matiari's small-scale artisan industries. Moreover, due to wartime restrictions, the main



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raw materials for this craft could no longer be imported from England, worsening the crisis. Later, two companies from Kolkata, “Bengal Metal” and “Golden Metal,” began exporting brass sheets to Matiari, which eased the raw material shortage to some extent. Finally, between 1956 and 1960, a man named Ajit Barman set up a machine in Matiari to produce brass sheets specifically for the copper and brass industry. This marked a turning point, giving the local industry a new lease on life. In 1966, Messrs Harinarayan Sen & Ram Prosad Sen of village Matiari produced 79,673 kgs. of brass utensils providing employment to 32 artisans which was the maximum employment given by any single unit in that year. The following statement gives the principal items manufactured, quantity and the number of persons employed in a single unit for the year 1966. ^[20] Today, it is known that Matiari hosts around 30 to 35 brass sheet manufacturing factories.

Social and Cultural Dimensions

Brass working in Matiari is more than an occupation; it is a shared way of life rooted in family and community. The craft has long been practiced by traditional artisan families, where metalworking skills are carefully handed down from one generation to another. Boys learn by watching their elders alloy, cast, and hammer metal, gradually mastering the techniques through daily practice rather than formal training. Many families still work together in small home-based foundries, where men, women, and children share the labor. In Matiari alone, over 300 families were estimated to be engaged in this trade. At this centre there were 6 mahajan factories and 40 family factories in 1940 employing about 1,000 workers. ^[21] The workshop often stands at the heart of village life, alongside the mosque or local market. Historically, wealthy *mahajans* financed production, while ordinary artisans worked for modest wages. Even today, most families earn little, facing high metal prices and limited market opportunities. Despite these hardships, the craft carries deep cultural pride. Brass utensils and religious items made in Matiari are central to local rituals and festivals such as Durga Puja. In recent years, artisans have begun producing brass idols for overseas buyers, linking their ancestral skills to new global markets. Through this living tradition, Matiari continues to preserve its artistic identity and cultural heritage.

Contemporary Challenges of the Brass and Bell-Metal Industry

In the present era of globalization, liberalization and privatization, the Indian bell metal industry, which is the most important components of the metal craft, is facing tough competition in the emerging manufacturing scenario due to its conventional indigenously developed technology in producing the traditional types of bell metals production. ^[22]

In the present global market, the rising prices of raw materials like copper, zinc, and tin have had a severe impact on the brass and bell-metal industry. Over the past decade, the cost of these basic metals has increased several times, making production much more expensive for artisans and small manufacturers. Once, in areas such as Matiari, Krishnanagar, and Kaliganj of Nadia district, brass and bell-metal utensils like plates, bowls, lamps, bells, and various religious items were produced in abundance. Today, however, production has declined sharply due to higher costs and reduced profit margins.

Along with the price hike, the emergence of cheaper alternative materials has worsened the situation. Aluminum, plastic, and ceramic utensils are now widely available, lighter in weight, cheaper to buy, and easier to maintain. As a result, most households have gradually shifted to using these substitutes. In the years that followed the industry received a set-back owing to the introduction of aluminium utensils in the market. At present it is hardly possible for it to compete with aluminium and stainless steel utensils made in the large and small scale sectors. Scarcity and high price of raw materials have added to the difficulty of the situation. ^[23] The demand for traditional brass and bell-metal products has dropped significantly, forcing many artisans to abandon their ancestral occupation and look for other sources of income. Transportation cost is another major obstacle for this traditional craft. Matiari, being a remote and rural village in Nadia district, lacks efficient transport links with major towns and industrial centers. Carrying raw materials from distant markets and sending finished goods to urban buyers takes a lot of time and money. For small-scale craftsmen, this extra cost often becomes unbearable and leads to economic losses. It may only be said that the old-time industries received a setback with



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the gradual increase in the cost of raw materials, the introduction of mill-made goods and above all, owing to the change in taste which turned the buyers away from traditional products. ^[24]

Environmental pollution has also become a serious concern. The process of melting and shaping brass and bell metal releases large amounts of smoke, metallic fumes, and waste residues. These pollutants gradually contaminate the soil and underground water, posing risks to both agriculture and local health. The most alarming issue, however, is the health hazard faced by the artisans. Constant exposure to fire, smoke, and metal dust causes respiratory problems, eye irritation, skin infections, and even nervous disorders. Occupational health hazards also possess a threat to Bell metal industry as most of the artisans were found to be sufferings with various health ailments. ^[25] These health issues have persisted for generations, yet there are hardly any medical facilities or safety measures available to protect the workers. Occupational health hazards are becoming a serious concern about this industry. Consequently, their living conditions and livelihoods remain highly uncertain.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the brass and bell-metal industry is now facing a complex crisis — rising raw material costs, shrinking market demand, high transportation expenses, environmental degradation, and serious health risks. All these factors have made it extremely difficult for traditional craft centers like Matiari to survive. Still, the artisans continue to hold on to their age-old heritage and craftsmanship with remarkable determination and pride.

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