

Ringling a 'bell'

Ten rural women of Bishnupur village, Rampurhat-II block of Birbhum district formed themselves into 'Prarthana Swanirbhar Dal' (SHG). Over generations one of the skills acquired by the villagers there being silk processing, all ten of them started weaving pure silk. Block administration took the women through a 45-day long training programme after group formation and they started production of utensils using bell metal. Thus they are now adept at silk weaving as well as producing bell metal jewellery and are doing both at scale.

The SHG took three doses of loan so far, first Rs.1.5 lakh after six months of formation of the group, the second one of Rs.3.00 lakh followed by a third dose of Rs.2.00 lakh, which is still under repayment.

Bell metal, locally known as 'Kansa' used to be elites' choice in the 18th century Bengal. People often flaunted their utensils made of bell metal when the guests were served with meals. Bankura, Bardhaman, Murshidabad, Birbhum were famous in this craft.

Minati Das, an active member of the SHG was narrating her story. There was a time when she did not have a single piece of bell metal at her home, which speaks of the abject poverty that she was in. But now, due to livelihood generated through the SHG-based activities of producing jewellery and silk products she could generously spend in the marriages of her daughters out of her own income. One of the daughters is a community health worker and the other one is a CSP with the Rural Livelihood Mission and handles training of SHG members.

The group participated in several fairs in Kolkata - at Netaji Indoor Stadium, Salt Lake Central Park, New Town Eco Park, New Town Rabindra Tirtha. They have been attending State Sabala Mela with both of their products for the third time in a row. Sabala Mela always gave them good sales figures.

Thanks to the support provided by the district administration, they could set up permanent stalls at the Block headquarters, at Tarapith and at Bolpur Swayambhara in Netaji market.

When asked about her impression of the bell metal, Dipanwita Basu, one of the visitors to the stall was comparing the bell metal jewellery with 'city gold' jewellery. "The problem with city gold is that it loses its shine within a year of so", told Dipanwita, "whereas bell metal continues to shine year after year, no water damage, no loss in colour, no blackening of surface".

