The Banyan Tree, Kansaris and Raja Parasuram

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On the empty road from Jamalpur town to Islampur the wind is telling of liberation. In that open country the crop fields speak of struggle and overcoming. Three on a Honda: a little lawlessness, technically, but like everybody else we get by and make do. It's an enduring landscape that inspires. Let Bangladesh tell its own story.

Of the banyan tree, the *bat gach* of Battala, there is all the complexity of the movement of the market that has grown up alongside root and branch. That tree could've embarked upon a lengthy, winding monologue – does it remember from its sapling youth when Jamalpur was called Singhjani? Can it recall the arrival of the sufi saint, Shah Jamal, reportedly a younger brother of Sylhet's Shah Jalal, to spread the word of Islam and bequeath to the broader area a newer name? Such a history is at least spoken of.

Like in any small Bangladeshi community everybody seems to know everybody in Islampur and the banyan, centre stage in the middle of its self-created roundabout, sees all. The tree hears the disputes, gossip, discussions and confidences. It knows that tea comes with ceramic saucer and welcoming words for visitors. And it remembers a once thriving *kansa* or bell metal industry.

Of the legendary King Parasuram the banyan must also have heard. Although his capital at Bogra's Mahasthangarh lies distant – across the Jamuna and all too distant when a king's available transport would've been palanquin and boat rather than three-by-Honda; although in all likelihood he never reached Islampur the monarch is remembered there. It comes down to this: even a legendary royal has to eat.

Legend says that bell metal, that version of bronze used for making utensils in the subcontinent, first reached East Bengal from some Indian elsewhere – Assam, Odisha, Pashchimbanga – to serve at Parasuram's court. In this current age of melamine and steel, of easy glass and ceramic, it's a simple matter to forget that kansa cups and plates were once standard for any raja needing to make impressive devotional offerings at temples and wishing to dine in style.

From Mahasthangarh the kansa industry branched out like the banyan, so legend says, to a handful of other manufacturing centres: first to Dhaka's Dhamrai, from there to Kagmari, Kalipur, Mogra and Charibari in Tangail, also to Chapainawabganj and to Islampur. The later British conquerors encouraged the trade; kansa still meant luxury to them.



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Kansari Md Lal Mia, 32, demonstrates that with added silver, one can see their face in a kansa plate.

It's true that even a banyan mightn't have endured since the time of Parasuram. Of Islampur's kansa tradition, if the tree did not see the first of it, it knows at least the subsequent history. It saw – say, twenty-five years back – a thriving kansa industry employing up to 350 kansari artisans in Islampur. It heard the story of Jagat Chandra Kamakar, the local kansari whose kansa work is said to have taken first prize at a World Handicrafts Exhibition in Birmingham many years ago. Still now there are around twenty families with perhaps fifty kansaris in Islampur to carry on the ancient trade.

"For nearly one thousand years my family was in this industry," says Ankon Karmakar, secretary of the Islampur Bell Metal Society and one of Islampur's