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Team work. It takes two to shape a kansa plate.



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Metal shavings and tools, Kansaripara, Islampur, Jamalpur.

two principal kansa traders. "I know at least the name of Prashanna Kumar Karmakar, my ancestor from a hundred years back who did this work."

Ankon explains the kansa recipe: about 25% tin and 75% copper. The tin ingots arrive from Malaysia and Indonesia, the copper from Malaysia and supplies are bought from the Mitford market in Old Dhaka – although mainly recycled metal is used these days.

"Kansa is healthy and hygienic," he says, "No acid forms when it's used and it's attractive, nice designs are possible. But the work is laborious. It's an inhuman job and production is low. My son will not be involved in this trade and within a decade it will be gone from Islampur, just as some years ago it disappeared from parts of Tangail."

Indeed, up the road in Kansaripara, the labouring kansaris care little for the dining requirements of Parasuram. The workers, from both the Hindu and Muslim communities, barely have leisure time to visit the banyan tree.

"Many kansaris are leaving to go to Dhaka to drive rickshaws," says Sharifuddin, 30, taking a break from beating metal. "We start at 6 a.m.," he says, before describing the process by which mixed metal shavings are melted then poured onto a plate to cool into a metallic lump. With tools the items are then shaped, one kansari pulling a rope backwards and forwards to turn a wheel while another scrapes and pounds out a cup, plate, devotional pot, musical cymbal or other item.

"We mostly use recycled materials," he says, "copper from the motor coils of irrigation pumps, old copper wires or old kansa wares." The entrepreneurs provide the raw materials each morning and five labourers over ten hours can turn four kilograms of material into eight plates. At a profit of 150 taka per plate, the team can earn 1200 taka per day – 200 taka take home pay per day per kansari. "It's not enough to live on anymore," says Sharifuddin, "Shohijal left, Morgu Bhai left, many left..."

Kansari Md Lal Mia, 32, details the practice of adding one *bhori* – 11.664 grams – of silver to the mixture. "Without silver the plate is red and discoloured," he says, "With silver you can see your face in it. It's more glamorous." Besides, a kansa plate without silver will react to milk to make it taste sour and the shine will fade faster. But silver costs money: without it a finished plate sells for around 2200 taka; with it the sale price is around 4500 taka.

Yet Ankon Karmakar maintains there is good demand for the product. The difficulties he lists for the industry's future include a lack of capital to purchase modern equipment. A circle machine costs about one crore taka while a finishing machine is cheaper. In India the kansa manufacturers are using both, which reduces the metal required in each item by half and produces a lighter kansa ware. "If the government or an NGO does not offer assistance with logistics and loan facilities the industry has no future despite the demand. Without the equipment it's time consuming and very hard work."

Indeed, encouraged by the laboriousness of their trade, three years ago the kansaris of Kansaripara made a legend of their own: one night they all packed up and secretly ran away to Dhaka to ride rickshaws. After some days Islampur's kansa entrepreneurs found them and, following a word to the rickshaw renters, persuaded them to return. "They wouldn't rent rickshaws to us anymore," recalls Sharifuddin.

But 200 taka per day is not enough to run a family. Many of the kansaris have second jobs, riding rickshaws locally of an evening when they should be sleeping. In the days of their forefathers working as a kansari was beneficial but living costs have risen.

"So why do you do it?" the banyan tree might ask.

"Because our ancestors did," is the kansaris' answer – and they did, so legend says, from some time around the reign of Parasuram. ■