

Odors of Mochipore

Chapter 1

It is only at predawn that Mochipore is free from the stench of rotting entrails.

As night hands over the realm to day odors cease for an imperceptibly brief moment. They say you have to be born here to know when to capture that moment.

The odors never really leave Mochipore. They merely change their direction and intensity depending on the time of the day and how much sea breeze is blowing. By noon the summer sun has cooked the odors which are seasoned by the humid air so thoroughly that cases of people fainting in the middle of the town's main square are not altogether unheard of. Although it sits in the midst of hundreds of mango orchards Mochipore remains remarkably untouched by the heady fragrances of the fruit in various stages of ripening unlocked during the summer. Locals have a wistful saying here which goes: "Even decaying mangos inside my armpit smell better than perfumes of Mochipore."

Mochipore (the former name of Mochipur) literally means Cobblertown because it was founded as one by Warren Hastings Shoe Company (WHSC) in 1820. The company was formed in 1818 to commemorate the life of the first governor-general of Bengal who died that year. Its motto was "Why ride rough shod on the natives?" The accompanying watercolor depicted a ramrod straight Englishman in white breeches, red tunic and black boots standing hands akimbo with his one foot on the severely bent back of a cadaverous and practically naked Indian peasant. To many this may have been just one drawing. To me it was the emblem of the British Raj--cruel but efficient.

WHSC's founder James Yule (1763-1827) had made a deal with the Nawab of Junagadh under which the company acquired 30 acres of land along the coast of the Arabian Sea to "settle the State's low class mochi population" in a colony of "captive cobblers" whose sole purpose was to handcraft shoes for "the (East India) Company's upper echelons who were required to make a profound impression on the subaltern native servants." It was instructive to learn that Yule thought one way the "subaltern native servants" could be impressed was if the "upper echelons" wore knee length

boots whose untreated leather made a squeaky noise when the English officers perambulated. They never walked. They always perambulated with an authoritative gait. When an occasional Indian had the temerity to greet an English officer, he would have an ever so slight expression of acknowledgement on his face. The best that anyone ever received by way of a return greeting was when an officer would raise his index finger, which seemed more like a warning or an accusation than a greeting.

“I want the subalterns to be alerted to the presence of their superior officer. He can always harrumph but squeaky boots sound more authoritative,” he wrote in one of his diary entries. The practice of wearing boots made from untreated leather was discontinued soon enough in the face of mounting complaints among the Company officers that they left “bloody shoe bites on the delicate English skin.”

Several documents exist in the state archives, including a contract between WHSC and Mochipore for the monthly supply of 500 pairs of handcrafted buffalo hide shoes and 300 “mugger” or alligator skin handbags that the company shipped from the Veraval port and sold in fashionable stores in London. Yule first thought of creating a whole township full of mochis when once on his morning walk along the banks of the Jamna River in Delhi his shoe upper came unstuck from the sole after he tripped over a piece of rock on his path. Troubled by Yule’s plight a cobbler nearby took out his anvil, hammer, stitching needle and nails and fixed the shoe in 10 minutes. That shoe lasted Yule years. According to British archives, Mochipore became a thriving township within a couple of years after its founding with a population of 15,000 men, women and children. All men in Mochipore were haggard. All women were deprived and emaciated. And all children were unlettered and chronically hungry.

Among the documents found is a letter that Yule wrote to his wife Victoria but never sent. The letter is significant to the story of Firaq Husain Bhama because it makes a reference to the ancestors of the Muslim couple that adopted him in 1952, just five years after India became independent. “Of all the cobblers that I have come across in this strip of a town, Bilawal Husain Bhama is the only one who manages to raise his craft to the level of art. His shoes are like second skin to me,” said one of Yule’s entries.

Bilawal Husain and his wife Fatima had seven children, three sons and four daughters, of whom only three survived. One of the two sons to have survived was Liaqat who was born in 1915. By the time he was 16 Liaqat's nikah was announced with his second cousin Zahera, who was all of 13. Liaqat was keen to escape the family vocation and become a member of the Congress Party inspired by an attorney-at-law who had returned to India from South Africa in 1916 after earning a considerable reputation in Natal and London as an "agitator" of extraordinary political astuteness. That Mohandas K. Gandhi's hometown of Porbander was barely 90 kilometers from Junagadh made Liaqat feel a sense of proprietorship about the man and his message.