

Chhap-Chhap

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Top Image:Hattikatta in its resting place

Below Image: Hattikatta modified, September 2020. This Hattikatta was traditionally woven with gold thread, beads and blue velvet cloth backing. The circumference has hooks which formerly held woven threads of gold with the beads seen in the picture. Each of the little beads is crafted with lacquer and coated with gold. On restoration, the velvet and gold thread was removed and the hooks were attached to the beads instead.

Madras Aju (Grandfather from madras) got his name after the years he spent living in Chennai. He is my Father's chacha (paternal uncle) but with the relationship we have shared over the years, he is as close as my paternal grandfather, Bombay Aju. About fifteen years ago after his wife's passing, we began to live together in a huge joint family in Pune. I have felt like the luckiest person to have sat down and listened to his stories. The day I interviewed him, as part of the History@Home unit, was no different. We sat down and he launched into an account of his life peppered with his personal commentary on people and places. As the conversation progressed, among other things, he mentioned a piece of jewellery that had briefly come up before. A Hattikatta.

The very next day, I went to the bank locker where it was kept and brought it home with me in a little metal lock box lined with velvet. He was excited when I got home and asked me, "Oh did you get it?", he ran his fingers over it pointing out its craftsmanship. "Whenever I look at it, I remember the floods." The morning of July 12, 1961 was a regular morning. Despite the past few days of speculation about probable dam bursts, the newspaper that morning reported that everything was all right, so, the morning started as usual. Later that day, still early on, news of the incoming water spread. One of Pune's largest dams, Panshet had breached sending a massive flood Pune's way.

"One of my classmates in IIT, his younger brothers were in Pune at the time. His brothers moved away, to friends' and family's place. So, they were safe but their entire house was submerged. They were on the ground floor and the water reached the first floor. We were not really affected. Our house was far from the river so even when the water rose, it didn't reach us." On this day, Aju was in Mumbai studying at IIT Bombay, a place that I have heard endless tales about. His parents, however, were still at their home near Fergusson College in Pune. "My father had retired from teaching. Oh no, he was still teaching in commerce college then" he quickly corrects himself after some quick calculations in his mind. Aju's father was a Professor of English in Commerce college at the time. Over the years, he ensured that his children were fluent in English. "That morning he walked back from college because there was word going around of the imminent flood. But there was no way of knowing for sure." Despite alarm being raised about two hours before the waters hit the city, many didn't have enough time to gather their valuables.



Anand Murdeshwar's (Madras Aju's) Parents Shankar Murdeshwar (Father, left) and Shanta Bai Murdeshwar (mother, right) at their relative's home in Chennai in the months following the flood

"I heard of the flood over the radio, my parents didn't have a telephone so I couldn't get in touch with them." On asking if he was worried about them, he said, "um...no, not really. I knew that our area was safe. And soon after a day or two, they came to Bombay to stay with family because in Pune there was nothing. You couldn't buy vegetables or milk, there was no electricity. I think at times like this the administration gets scared of epidemic outbreak because of dead animals and fish and the sludge. So, they were appealing to people to leave the city and go away." For a long time after that, Pune remained closed. Aju's parents went to Madras to live with relatives. Colleges were closed and his father didn't have work. So, there was no reason to return. They were never really concerned about their belongings because the news of stealing and robberies in the city hadn't reached them. I was surprised to hear this. I was reminded that a calamity doesn't strike equally. At a time where majority of the city suffered and many people had lost everything, my family was alright, barely scathed.

"I don't know if our neighbours left. We lived on the ground floor with another family. The landlord definitely stayed back. He was the prince of Bhor, not the crown prince; he was a little soft in the head." he laughs to himself on remembering that little snippet from childhood. In the months of October or November, Aju, with his family, returned to Pune for Diwali but he doesn't remember seeing too much of a change in the city. "Pullachiwadi (A neighbourhood along the river) was completely inundated, so the government moved people into proper brick and mortar tenements in Parvati. But people quickly rented those places out and returned and rebuilt their shanties. So, when we go there, you'll think 'Ah! Pullachiwadi is back to all its glory.'" A big smile was plastered across his face. Continuing, he said, "You know where KFC is today? R-Deccan theatre? There used to be a Deccan Talkies. For a long time, they kept a mark painted on the exterior to show how high the water had risen. It was beyond first floor!"

Near deccan, hibernating in an underground bank locker on the corner of JM road, was the Hattikatta. It spent many months nestled in flood water and the sludge it brought with it. "At some point the bank cleaned up and called the customers to check their lockers. My father went there and had some documents that got completely destroyed, I don't know if he had duplicates made. The locker was full of muck. The gold, we removed and got polished but this one, being on velvet, the cloth was completely rotten. There was nothing we could do about it. I am not sentimental about inanimate objects. So, if I like something, ok. But if it gets spoilt, I'm not 'heartbroken'". He told me. "As a 17-year-old, I didn't care much that it had been damaged. And now, as a 70-year-old, I don't feel any more sentimental than I felt then. But now, it brings back memories. I have a good memory", he adds happily.

That is true. We often compare my grandfather to an unlimited memory hard disk.



Top Image: Madras Aju (Anand Murdeshwar) and Madras Ammu (Jayashree Murdeshwar) on their Wedding reception. Ammu wearing the Hattikatta. One of the only images with the Hattikatta but lack of colour photography and the picture being taken from a distance fails to capture the true beauty of the necklace.

Below Image: Madras Aju and the Hattikatta. September 2020

The hattikatta belonged to Aju's great grandmother. She came from a well-off family. The necklace was a living proof of that. "Today it costs a lot but then, it must have been an even bigger deal. She gave it to my grandmother and so on. When I was really young, my Grandmother was speaking about how she wanted to distribute her gold among her daughters in law. As soon as I saw the hattikatta, I said 'That, I want for my wife!'" He had said it in the way a child expresses liking for something. But since that day, his grandmother kept it aside and gave it to his mother for safekeeping until he got married. When she gave to his mother, she said "you can wear it, but remember, it is for Annu's wife". And that is exactly what happened. At the time of my grandparent's wedding, my Madras Ammu (grandmother from Madras), wore the gorgeous hattikatta, completing my grandfathers wish. But it was a modified hattikatta.

"My father was quite handsome" Aju laughs as he flips through old wedding and reception pictures. I notice how similar my grandmother looks to my aunt. We took a detour as he gives me brief bio data of everyone in the family album. I was in awe. I had heard these stories before but only when we see pictures do we realise just how vast our own histories are. They stretch to times even before our existence. It wasn't until 1976 that my family made a serious attempt to see if the hattikatta could be restored. "My cousin lived in Ttalmakkiwadi (a predominantly Konkani area in Mumbai). She would visit often and mentioned there was a goldsmith from Mangalore who may be able to fix it. He was impressed. And said. "I have not seen a hattikatta lately!" after a month, he struggled and threw up his hands. But we wanted it to still be wearable. All the beads had some loose. So, he said he could re-attach those beads to the hooks that held gold wire. Originally the beads were supposed to be on the gold wire. He tried hard. So much so that he even contacted people in Mangalore, but nobody could find an artisan who could restore it."

During this project, I couldn't find a single image of it, online or in my family albums. The jolly interview wound down for me on a solemn note and I was hit with the realisation, that after my grandfather's memory, it will be as though the original hattikatta had never existed. It was more than just a damaged family heirloom that couldn't be fixed. I felt an even more profound loss, one for my cultural heritage that could not be restored because it had already disappeared in the past. In that flood, it lost a part of its identity but gained the memory of the flood which it carries upon it every day. The original hattikatta exists only in Aju's memory. After a quiet moment, he said "it looked even greater with the gold wire. Bead, bead, bead, bead" he gestured punching his fingers in the air. "It still looks nice. But it's not the same"

Notes

~Chhap-chhap is an onomatopoeia of splashing water. It also sounds similar to cham-cham (glitter) for the necklace in the essay.