

A Walk Down Cobblers' Street

Through rain and sunshine, the cobblers of Kandy have stitched their way into the denizens' lives, helping them slip their shoes back on their feet.



Through seasons of change cobblers like Sundar stick to the job that they do best.

On a sidewalk in Kandy's city center sits Sundar. He was a man glued to his job. Mending a sports shoe, he was oblivious to the incessant jamboree of traffic, impatient horn toots, and jam-packed parking slots with vehicles racing to get in. It's a familiar spectacle in the heart of Kandy, a must-have background pep up for the cobblers running their trade on the pavements. Hardly encroaching on the daily caravan of people, the cobblers of Kandy aren't going anywhere anytime soon. Cobbling is often dubbed a dying trade. In Kandy, they are permanent fixtures. Cobblers are in-demand service providers as people stop by or come in search of shoe fixers' workstations whose gaze rests on their precious wares. They are their bosses cocooned in roadside workstations stripped of refined interiors. A rough counter for a workspace strewn with hammers, pliers, knives, cutters, shoe stands, awls, soles, nails, thread, and gum, and the ground for a

seat, it's a hard-knock life for these pavement cobblers.

These cobblers know the way to people's hearts too. Live and let live best describes their relationship with the shops around them...

When everything and everyone around them is in high drama mode, the cobblers are cool and focused. Chewing betel for stamina as they deftly practice the art of cobbling, shoe repairing is a male-dominated trade. And stitch they did from shoes to slippers, umbrellas to bags, with hardly any rest as inquiries poured in from people trying to pick their restored soles and darned shoes. Roadside cobblers are easygoing but serious service providers, ready to negotiate prices without much argument. Interestingly, the Kandy town's cobblers are connected by kinship or locality. Not necessarily the trade is passing from father to son. They're all from the same hovel in Mahaiyawa in Kandy. There's competition on the sidewalk, with several cobblers practicing their trade. They are placed in such a way that the people needing their services can procure them from wherever they enter the interconnected roads of Kandy city.

Now Sundar, Thangavelu, and Kumar are dirtying their hands daily to ensure that their home fires burn and their customers can save some money. They are among several cobblers sharing small roadside spaces for shoemaking. Having honed their skills under the mentorship of a seasoned cobbler, often a relative, before embarking on their own.

Now about the locality, Kotugodella Street's miscellany of shops is dizzying, whose potpourri of sign boards belies the charm of several old buildings. Eateries, hotels, mini shopping centers, stationery, clothing, footwear, retail, electronic and mobile stores, and financial institutions rule the roost. Wedged between a tourist hotel and a handicrafts shop, Sundar is the new kid on the block. He ventured to his current location around half a year ago, a space occupied by another cobbler. Father of two, 49-year-old Sundar, who had been employed at a shoe factory, had his cobbler beginnings near the Kandy Police station under the training of a "shoe Guru". He's lucky to be recommended to the hotel's guests and tourists by its security personnel. Sundar claims he doesn't overcharge foreigners, but they would graciously leave more than he asks.

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These cobblers know the way to people's hearts too. Live and let live best describes their relationship with the shops around them, their most important patrons. The sales assistant from the handicrafts shop stopped by to pick up a repaired umbrella from Sundar and had a kind word for him. He was one of the best cobblers in town. That flattery brought a twinkle to his eyes and a self-satisfied smirk. The familiarity these men have established begets a sense of trust, too, where kindness overrides money matters. So much so that to some customers, these men are "aiyya" or the big brother. Like the lady who asked him, "aiyya have you finished with the shoe I gave you at five o'clock yesterday." A clever cobbler who knows his shoes, Sundar knew it was a court shoe. Sundar, who didn't have change money for the lady's big note, graciously offered to be paid later as it was almost near sundown, and she was hurrying to get the bus back home.

46-year-old Thangavelu's two-decade run at an intersection is also quite a crowd-puller. There's so much surrounding rumpus that he deserves a prize for putting up with the mayhem near his work. He loves his job, starting every day in the afternoon after working elsewhere in the morning. Living on shoes alone is not an option, says Thangavelu, who manages two jobs. His trade is also pitted against the economic woes of rising prices, a ball of thread that was 80 rupees now costs 120, and a small bottle of gum that was 80 rupees is now 180. Thangavelu is ready to negotiate with the person stopping by to give his shoes for repair. He says that 600 rupees for stitching is too much and asks for a reduction. Thangavelu justifies his price based on increased thread prices. He can only sew three pairs of shoes with one ball of thread. A few months ago, he could have done the same job for 350 rupees when prices were lower. Meanwhile, Sundar has brought down the price from 750 rupees per pair to 450 rupees to accommodate the trends of the times so that he could continue in business.

People aren't willing to pay high prices anymore, claimed the cobblers. The minimum price to repair a pair of shoes costs 300 rupees. That will be to stitch them firmly to the soles. The price would vary according to the type of shoes, increasing to 600 rupees. The minimum cost of pasting shoes is 200 rupees, while a new umbrella cable would cost 150 rupees. The point is, said the men, the money they earn daily should be a fair wage for their labor. It should also be sufficient to feed their families and purchase inputs for their trade to continue and help them make a living.

Today, people are less inclined to declare their shoes redundant too quickly, explained the men. People want the cobblers to give their shoes a new lease on life rather than discard them. That's a bonanza for the shoemakers. However, the father of three says that it's not business as usual anymore, with people stopping to think twice and negotiating prices. Cobblers, too, are in a tight spot, with input material costs doubling lately. Their average daily income ranges between 1000 and 2000 rupees, so they can't afford to turn back or displease anyone. After all, word-of-mouth matters in thriving by the road. No wonder these cobblers can confidently leave their wares to grab a snack and a cup of tea with their camaraderie with the shops.

Kumar also learned the trade from his uncle working near the Kandy bus stand at the age of 30. At 42, he has his own shoe-repairing business by the road, which he has occupied for the past three years. His income doesn't suffice to care for a family of five children from ages 16 to one and a half and a wife who is a full-time homemaker. Hence, he has a morning job with the municipality and starts working at the cobbler station in the afternoon. His income is around 800 to 1000 rupees daily. Kumar says that some clients seek only him because he has a reputation for being reasonably priced. Looks like there are variations in prices, small they may be, which they don't share with each other. Doing the same business in one locality is survivable only through competitiveness, and their competitive pricing is the unique selling point. Customers flock to where they'd get the best deals, said the cobblers, because they know they're all excellent at their trade.

Their tools are like crown jewels, which they take with them daily, while the heavier stuff is kept in nearby shops, a relationship of mutual help and support. To stay rent-free in a magnificent commercial hub is a windfall. Hence there is a reciprocal partnership where their goal is to make a living decently. These men control cobbling in Kandy city. Despite transitioning to several tasks, shoe repairing is their trademark business. They enjoy their work, years of practice producing pleasure over discontent. They don't grumble and don't find working on the road among the furor even tiring. But they wouldn't want their children to follow suit, doing all they can to educate them and get them into better jobs someday. Until then, they will continue in their cobbling, an occupation in an age of space travel and cyber navigation, yet to become expendable.



Always with a smile, Thangavelu has had a long run at this spot in Kandy.



Cleaning and cobbling - Kumar wears two hats in a day to keep home fires burning.