



An unassuming workshop lies in the centre of Ness Baug, so quiet that no one might guess it is part of a metalworking tradition that predates Ness Baug itself. Established in 1939, Bolinjkar Metal Works supplies high-quality steel belt lacings and plate-type conveyor belt fasteners to various industries, including railways, mines, power stations, and electrical substations.

Bolinjkar started its journey in 1934, located near Diana Talkies in Tardeo, moving to its present location upon Captain Haddock's request. Before it belonged to the Parsi Punchayet, the area was a forested land where Captain Haddock's mansion lay in the midst of single-storey tenements he had developed and a garage which would eventually become Bolinjkar.

India's military industry at the time was inadequate. Captain Haddock approached his friend, Moreshwar Chaphekar, a young man living in Girgaon and a graduate of electrical, chemical and mechanical engineering from Mumbai University, instructing him to manufacture sheet metal products such as helmets, buckles and buttons that were a part of the British army's uniform. Moreshwar was initially uncertain about this request since he would have to import all the material, but Hadkok was relentless. Moreshwar acquiesced.

Moreshwar, a young man who lived near Bedekar Pickle Factory on Mugbhat Street, then began travelling across India to understand the chain of metal works production, gain access to different libraries and conduct intensive research. He realised that the items would be of no value if sold unmarked. He undertook the 18-day journey to London in 1933-34 to acquire the Queen's permission to stamp them with the King's image. The assistance of J. R. D. Tata and Walchand Hirachand proved invaluable in this matter. With the help of the documents provided by Captain Haddock, Moreshwar was able to acquire the Queen's permission.



Moreshwar then set out in search of artisans for his factory. Ashok Chaphekar, Moreshwar's son, recounts an incident when, upon finding a talented artisan engraving horses, Moreshwar asked him to recreate the King's insignia on buttons. The artisan then demanded that Moreshwar leave the insignia with him. Moreshwar hesitated, as he was responsible for the King's image, but the artisan had deftly recreated the image by the evening.



Moreshwar's work was so excellent that Hadkok relinquished his garage for Moreshwar to redesign into a workshop. Under the guidance of his father-in-law, Moreshwar established his factory. Initially, all the work was hard pressed, so the workshop was staffed with talented artisans from Madras, Tarapur, Chinchwad, Gujarat and Rajasthan. Moreshwar asked his skilled artisan father-in-law to join him, but he declined. Bolinjar then named the factory after himself. In 1942, he acquired a trademark for Bolinjar.

They started manufacturing military items in full steam with the help of Tata steel and raw materials imported from London. Earlier, the manufacturers would join industrial belts with screws which would come loose and be damaged. They would also sew them together with strong thread, but it would break five times a day on average. Bolinjar developed a unique belt lacing system using metal hinges that he fixed to the belts. It was a technique that required pin-point accuracy in its development but could be modified in many ways during use and extend up to two metres in length.

In 1934, the machines were imported from Japan and London and sent to Hedavkar Engineering in Dadar for repairs. Now that the machines are in-house, the team at Bolinjar manages all wear and tear. This was the revolution of automation that Ashok Chaphekar brought with him when he succeeded his father in 1984. Ashok might be more popularly known for his years of service as a journalist to Lok Satta and Maharashtra Times, but he is an accomplished engineer, having earned a degree and an associate membership in the Engineering Society. Initially, cutting the metal sheets into small strips that act as raw material was a process that used to take six people. With Ashok's guidance, the workshop brought in shearing machines, and it is no longer a labour-intensive task. Ashok standardised the products and increased their durability as well as increased the speed of production. His father manufactured 7,000 to 8,000 boxes annually, while Ashok increased the output to 3,50,000 a year.



Bolinjkar Metal Works has had its ups and downs through the years. The closure of Bombay's mills was a setback for them as they had always been a commissioner of the lacings. Taking help from other clients, such as fertiliser companies, cement plants and even food industries, they managed to mitigate the loss. Ashok says that they care little for the business aspect of their work, insisting that their work was a contribution to the development of the nation as they serve many crucial industries.

At Bolinjkar's peak, 300 people worked at the factory in three different shifts. They closed at night so that Jyoti Studios, which was filming nearby, would not be disrupted. The number has reduced to three workers after the COVID-19 pandemic. But Ashok Chaphekar seems unruffled by the change. "Earlier, we would hardly be able to talk over the machines," he says, looking at the workshop optimistically, "at least now, we can all appreciate the quiet" (Chaphekar 2023).

*References:*

*Chaphekar, Ashok. Interview. 16th December 2023.*

