

*22 June 1895*

*Musi River, Hyderabad*

When Soob first saw the body, he thought it was a child or a dog. In the sooty light of dusk, he'd glimpsed something wriggling on the rock ledge in the middle of the Musi River, leashed by streamers of green algae and ribbon weed.

He had been looking for a rare purple frog in the mudflat between Laik ud-Dowlah and Afzul bridges. One of his constables had seen it there the previous evening - a purplish water balloon with small arms and legs. It had drawn the naturalist in Soob to the riverside.

Finding the frog, Soob thought, would make up for a dismal week at work. He was fast regretting staying on in Hyderabad to set up the Nizam's Detective Force. The ruler's courtiers wanted it to groom their sons for their family's spy networks and kept sending him veiled threats if he did not hire them. And this week, the security arrangements for two Dukes visiting from England saw a flurry of contrary commands from the Nizam's lot and the British officials in the Residency. He had ignored them and done what was needed.

Soob hadn't realised how much his breath stuck in his throat inside the city walls until he got out. All those narrow streets, eyes watching wherever he turned, having to be alert and observing, noting every gesture and inflexion, the weight of expectations, of etiquette, of hierarchy. It was a relief to be by the river. It reminded

Soob of the Koovam River in his hometown of Madras, where he had often found himself after Rohini's death, watching the moonbeams bristle in the water.

The briny reek of algae and toilet clung to him as he plunged in. The water came up to his knees, soaking the top of his boots. A shorter man would sink up to the chest.

'Oi, what's wrong?' someone yelled in Deccani from the river edge, over the boom and crack of the water hitting the rocks.

Strong unexpected currents gripped his ankles, but Soob pushed on.

The algae snapped, and Soob dived to catch the object before it shot over the ledge. He was surprised to feel coir scrape his palms.

'Don't come, it is a gunny bag,' Soob yelled to the man behind him.

Then something soft and clammy slapped his wrist.

It was a hand jutting from the sack's mouth. The rope tie slithered into the foaming waters of the cataract.

Soob hauled the sack to his side and wedged it against the rocks with his body. The top gaped, and he saw a head tipping oddly to one side in the low light. The neck had been cut.

'Hai Ram,' said a voice.

A stocky man with a plump face peered over his shoulder. He was in a loincloth and identified himself as a washerman.

'Is he dead, Chief Inspector?'

Though Soob wasn't in the navy blue uniform of the City Police, the washerman had recognised him. Not a surprise since the local newspapers had carried his photograph on the front page last week, claiming him to be the saviour of the Deccan. The notoriety was galling for someone who liked being in the shadows and

whose real job as an officer in the Imperial Criminal Investigation Department demanded stealth and departing unsung and unrecognised.

The washerman splashed up and picked up the bottom end of the sack.

'The Residency bank is closer, Chief Inspector,' he said when Soob made for the city ramparts.

Soob didn't reply. The Nizam's City Police had no authority over the British Residency from where the Resident, the eyes and ears of Queen Victoria, watched the native ruler. The Nizam, for his part, loathed the scrutiny. The Musi drew the line dividing the warring sides.

The body's wheatish hue and callused hands pointed to a poor Deccani. The Residency Police wouldn't bother with a poor native's murder, but the Nizam's regime was no better. The city's wealthy nobles and merchants could escape prison by paying a small sum, blood money, to the victim's family.

The British and the rich nawabs had a stable of protectors; the whole apparatus worked for them. But the poor only had him, Soob. He would find the killer, and for that, he needed to take the body to the city side.

Three urchins gawked from the river bank as they picked their way through the rills crisscrossing the pebble-strewn riverbed and laid the sack on a dry patch.

Soob told them to fetch a constable from Afzul gate. 'Say the Acting Chief Inspector of the City Police wants them.'

After they left, he opened the folds and cradled the head. Despite the dark hair cropped close to the skull, he realised from the down on her cheeks that it was a

woman. Her throat was slit from ear to ear, the nose sliced off, and holes were where the eyes ought to have been. Muddy water trickled from the cavities.

He had seen mutilated corpses before in a case involving cult killings in Central India and in the photographs of Jack the Ripper's victims while at Scotland Yard. But the jolt of shock struck him every time.

'Do you recognise her?' he asked the washerman.

'Hai Ram! Even her own mother wouldn't know her, Chief Inspector. She must have betrayed her husband.'

Why was it the woman's fault for being murdered or injured? But that was a common reaction he had encountered here in India and in England too.

Dusk blinked out, and night's cool damp began rising from the waters. The banks were empty as if the elephants, buffaloes, waterbirds and people to-ing and fro-ing during the day had been rubbed out.

Not expecting to be here for so long, Soob hadn't brought a lamp. The washerman said he would get one from his hut and climbed up the rocky incline to where a dozen houses with mud walls and thatched roofs perched. The dwellers of these and other slums in-between the swathes of melon, cucumber and paddy crops on the riverbed would retreat to a field inside the city walls once the rains fattened the river.

Thunder clouds thickened the sky. Like the moon, the river waned and swelled between ten to twenty meters depending on the rainfall. Now closer to ten, the sluggish pace meant the sack didn't float long. And its position on the rock-ledge indicated it came from the Residency side.

He couldn't send constables to question the slum dwellers there until his superior, the Deputy Commissioner, asked the Resident for permission. Relations

were dismal at best, and now, with the British gunning for control over law and order in the Nizam's territory, there was little chance of getting approval.

The washerman returned, and in the light of the oil lamp, Soob saw the extent of the brutality. The killer had stripped her, and not only of her clothes. Soob gritted his teeth and slanted the light into the sack. Holes gaped in place of her heart, kidneys and lungs. Bone gleamed white on the ribcage, and the wounds on the stomach told a grisly tale of frenzied stabs. Though congealed and mixed with river water, the blood in the wounds was sticky to his touch. She must have been killed in the past couple of hours.

He eyed the feathery black shrubbery below Chaderghat-Oliphant Bridge, which would've hidden the killer's tread to the river's edge. The mutilations must have occurred elsewhere, the river being too noisy a thoroughfare between the city and the Residency during the day.

She wore no jewellery. Even the poorest women wore glass bangles. Bare wrists, it was thought, would bring misfortune to the husband. He ruled out a robbery, too; had the glass broken in the attack, there would be bruises on her wrist and shards inside the sack, but there were none.

Only Hindu widows were stripped of their necklaces and bangles and rings and made to shave off their hair, that is, if they were not burnt alive on their dead

husband's funeral pyre. Suttee was banned now but the barbaric practice carried on in secret. This woman was a widow.

His eye caught a tattoo on her inner elbow. It was the *Aum* symbol - the sacred sound of the universe, the divine breath of creation for Hindus. The poor customarily etched it to protect themselves against evil spirits.

*Aum* had not saved this Hindu widow. Soob would do everything in his power to make sure her death would not go unpunished.