



Story and photos by Athoob Al-Shuaibi

You are hit by the strong smell of leather and dyes and sounds of wiping, polishing and sewing machines all working at the same time when you enter the small shoe repair shop. Everyone there is busy working. The top shelves are loaded with numbered plastic bags. On one side of the shop, there's a long bench for customers to sit while they wait for quick service, while on the other, there's Kumar.

Kumar is a 27-year-old cobbler from India. Like most craftsmen, he took up his profession from his father, who's been in this trade for over 30 years. "I completed high school in India, and it's my tenth year in Kuwait mending shoes," he told Kuwait Times. He spends most of his day at work and doesn't do much to get some entertainment. "If I go out, I will spend money, but when I work, I make it. I watch a movie at night before bedtime though," he stated.

But making money from shoe mending isn't as easy as before. Fast fashion has dramatically affected people's choices when purchasing clothes and footwear. It's an era in which quantity matters more than quality. "Many people think that whether cheap or expensive, things will anyway get damaged with use, so why buy a high-priced bag or shoes?" Kumar said. "They prefer to throw shoes away or give them to charity rather than bring them to a cobbler. It's funny that even if they do bring them in, they never return to take them back," he exclaimed.

Kumar has made friendships with many loyal customers of various nationalities who frequent his shop. "Some customers stop by for a chat. Also, there's an old Kuwaiti lady who brings food. I have even tried chicken machboos (a Kuwaiti rice and chicken dish)," Kumar remarked.

"My clients trust me because before I start working, I tell them whether it's mendable or not. Sometimes, it's impossible to restore or clean some shoes, especially those made of fabric that has worn out," he explained. "I know everything about shoe repair, and I can make shoes too. However, I don't have the proper machine for this here."

Kumar is neatly dressed and groomed, which reflects his care for detail, leaving you with a good impression from your first visit to his shop. He said that he has never considered a different field of work. "I know a little electrical work, but I will always be a cobbler," he said resolutely.

