

**Abdul Latif Ansari and the Return of *Mahua Dabar* to History: A Citizen's Quest, an
Excavation's Proof, and a Town's Afterlife**

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Abstract

This essay analyses Mohammad Abdul Latif Ansari's role in rediscovering, documenting, and securing institutional recognition for Mahua Dabar, a nineteenth-century textile township near the Manorama River in present-day Basti, Uttar Pradesh, that was razed in June 1857 and subsequently disappeared from official records. Drawing on district gazetteers, nineteenth-century histories of 1857, established reportage, and archaeological summaries from a 2010 excavation conducted by a Lucknow University team, the paper reconstructs a fourteen-year citizen-led search guided by a hand-drawn family map and generational testimony that mobilized an archival investigation, surfaced an 1823 survey map, and enabled a targeted archaeological campaign that revealed textile-water infrastructure, burn layers, and domestic debris consistent with a craft township's violent destruction. The essay also situates Mahua Dabar within the historiography of 1857, the political economy of colonial textiles, and the ethics of public history, arguing that Latif Ansari's method exemplifies the way memory can be disciplined into evidence and the erased places can be responsibly restored to the record.

Keywords: *Mahua Dabar*, History, Excavation, Archival Investigation, Freedom struggle.

"Sometimes a place survives only as a story until someone insists on finding the ground beneath it." The story of *Mahua Dabar* is one such case—a town burned during the storm of 1857 and then banished from the official memory of the land, surviving for generations mostly in family accounts and scattered textual traces. For many in the Basti region, *Mahua Dabar* was either a rumour or a confusion with another village of the same name near Gaur (Nevill 158; "Lost Textile Village"). For one man, it was unfinished family business.

When Mohammad Abdul Latif Ansari first stepped onto the fields south of Basti on 8 Feb. 1994, he had two things: a "tattered, hand-drawn, two-century-old map" and the conviction that the stories told by elders were owed an answer beyond nostalgia ("Found: Raj-Razed Town"). "I began from zero," he later recalled, "but I was adamant. I had to verify what I had heard from family elders about the town that our ancestors had fled after the British razed it during the 1857 revolt" ("Found: Raj-Razed Town").

The fields were green, not yielding: wheat, peas, and *arhar* blanketed whatever lay beneath. There was nothing like a town—no walls, no streets—only the subtle topographies of mounded earth and the odd fragment of brick. To most people, that would have been the end of the search. For Ansari, it was the beginning.

***Mahua Dabar* Before 1857: Weaving, Water, and Work**

What was *Mahua Dabar*—and why did it matter enough to be annihilated and then erased? The town lay near the Manorama, a tributary of the Ghaghara, in a geography that has long sustained artisanal settlements linked to water—indigo vats, dyeing pits, washing ghats, printing workshops (Kumar; “Lost Textile Village”). By the early nineteenth century, *Mahua Dabar* reportedly had a population around 5,000, “a major centre of textile industry” where “the entire population... used to be engaged in weaving, dyeing and printing of cloth” (“Search for Mutiny City”). Its social fabric included weaving families who had migrated from Murshidabad and Nadia in Bengal, fleeing colonial disruptions and violence associated with British textiles’ ascent and the suppression of indigenous production. “Many of the first-generation weavers had already lost their hands, but they taught the craft to their sons and the small town of 5,000 people soon became a bustling handloom centre” (“Found: Raj-Razed Town”).

Materially, such a town leaves signatures: *Lakhori* bricks in domestic and workshop walls; wells with differentiated outlets; planned drains

carrying wastewater away from dwellings; residues of craft materials (mica flakes used in printing); and pottery scatter (Kumar; “Lost Textile Village”). That assemblage is precisely what archaeologists would later report. But long before the spade, *Mahua Dabar*’s identity as a textile township lived in textual residues—district gazetteers noting settlements and industries; nineteenth-century chronicles of the Indian mutiny referencing localities of disorder; and later narratives of 1857 that occasionally glinted at events along the Faizabad–Basti–Dinapur axis (Ball 398–401; Kaye and Malleeson 268–69; Nevill 158).

The June 1857 Shock: Attack, Retaliation, Erasure

The decisive week came in June 1857. As the uprising convulsed Faizabad, a party of British officers—variously reported as five lieutenants and one sergeant, among others—took to river routes toward Dinapur (near Patna), “board[ing] the four boats” to attempt an escape as orderly authority collapsed (Ball 399–401). Somewhere near *Mahua Dabar*’s approaches to the Manorama, six were killed (Kaye and Malleeson 269; “Found: Raj-Razed Town”). The act shattered more than bodies; it punctured the brittle confidence of a power already besieged by news of mutinous regiments and blocked roads. “The British were amazed and stunned,” one retrospective narrative frames it; they sensed the mutiny “had developed into a People’s War” that could “sweep away everything that comes in its way” (Discovery narrative summarized in the attached corpus; cf. Kaye and Malleeson 268–69).

Retaliation was swift and symbolic. On 20 June 1857, “the 12th Irregular Horse Cavalry surrounded the town, slaughtered hundreds and set all the houses on fire” (“Found: Raj-Razed Town”). The measures that followed transformed punishment into erasure: the land was marked *gair chiragi*—“non-revenue land,” effectively a ban on habitation—and *Mahua Dabar* began to disappear from maps after 1861 (“Lost Textile Village”; Nevill 158). The brutality, argued one archaeologist, carried an industrial subtext: “the vengeance with which a textile hub was destroyed might have had a lot to do with British interest in the same industry” (“Lost Textile Village”).

Administratively, the British also muddled the geography of memory by associating a different *Mahua Dabar*—near the Basti–Gonda border—with post-1857 documentation (Nevill 192). By the time early-twentieth-century gazetteers were compiled, the razed *Mahua Dabar*’s erasure had hardened into an administrative fact. What remained were whispered family chronicles and occasional mentions in regional 1857 accounts, too thin to contest the maps (Nevill 158; Kaye and Malleson 268–69).

Latif Ansari’s contribution is best understood as methodical persistence across three domains—landscape observation, archival retrieval, and institutional mobilization. First, he walked. He treated the fields as a text: mounds, brick scatter, orientations; the lay of the land near the Manorama; the distances between Kalwari and Mehsan (“Found: Raj-Razed Town”). He walked season after season, knowing that crops conceal

as much as they nourish. Second, he read. He searched district libraries and museum archives for any reference that could break the impasse: gazetteers, survey sketches, nineteenth-century histories (Ball 398–401; Kaye and Malleson 268–69), references to police station notations about habitation bans, and mentions of the label *gair chiragi* (Nevill 158; “Lost Textile Village”). Third, he asked. He kept approaching administrators and scholars with a modest but firm proposition: if the town existed before 1857, there must be pre-1857 cartography; if the town was burned and erased, the post-1857 absence from maps would be its own kind of evidence (“Found: Raj-Razed Town”).

“I began from zero,” he said—an admission not of ignorance but of humility about the distance between family lore and proof—but “I was adamant. I had to verify what I had heard from family elders” (“Found: Raj-Razed Town”). The combination is key: humility disciplined by stubbornness. It turned a private claim into a public case.

Institutional attention came when the district magistrate empanelled a committee of historians to test the claim. Years of steady work yielded a landmark find: a “survey map, drawn in 1823, that showed a *Mahua Dabar* in Basti tehsil of the then Gorakhpur district” (“Found: Raj-Razed Town”). The committee posed the obvious question: “When the place existed till 1823, how did it disappear from the sketches, maps, gazettes and other government papers published by the district administration after 1857?” (“Found: Raj-Razed Town”). The 1823 map did not tell the

whole story, but it did two crucial things: it proved *Mahua Dabar* was not a fantasy and it pointed to the location Ansari had triangulated on foot (“Found: Raj-Razed Town”).

The committee recommended excavation. The report—sent up to national ministries—made possible the next step: spades in the ground, but not in the middle of standing crops; beyond them, in carefully chosen trenches where sub-surface architecture might still be legible (“Search for Mutiny City”).



Figure 1: Excavations at Mahua Dabar: Source: Internet

The 2010 Excavation: Wells, Drains, Ash, and Mica

In June 2010, a team from Lucknow University led by Associate Professor Anil Kumar began a roughly three-week dig (“Search for Mutiny City”). Their findings mapped directly onto what one would expect at a textile township razed by fire. “Evidences from three trenches excavated there included charred soil, burnt items of private homes, discovery of a well ... and two outlets from the well.... These outlets were for getting fresh water from the well for dyeing and printing fabrics,” Kumar summarized (“Lost Textile Village”). The soil layer at the

outlet suggested it had been used to drain wastewater, meaning the well’s design specifically separated industrial water from drinking supplies: “The finding of the debris and the evidence of wastewater collection from the well show that water from the well was not used for drinking purposes” (“Lost Textile Village”).

Alongside the hydraulic system, the team found *Lakhori*-brick walls, multi-directional drains, ash, charred wood, pottery, tools, and mica—“used in those days for printing clothes,” often “to hide a part of the design,” as conference summaries put it (“Lost Textile Village”). A senior archaeologist who reviewed the evidence called it “a turbulent history which has great lessons for India in its march to industrialisation” (“Lost Textile Village”). The convergence of independent lines—text, map, and trench—rendered the picture of *Mahua Dabar* clear: a working craft town, violently burned, then ploughed into revenue land and stripped from official memory.

Contribution of Abdul Latif Ansari



Figure 2: former President A. P. J. Abdul Kalam with Latif Ansari, Source: Internet

Abdul Latif Ansari’s contribution can be summarized through five verbs:

Localized. He used the family map and oral histories to identify the likely ground—between Kalwari and Mehsan, near the Manorama, about 15 km south of Basti—where archaeologists later worked (“Found: Raj-Razed Town”; “Search for Mutiny City”).

Mobilized. He persuaded administrators to convene a historians’ committee, a step that conferred procedural legitimacy and ensured archival access (“Found: Raj-Razed Town”).

Bridged. He connected dispersed records—gazetteers, survey sketches, terms like *gair chiragi*—with physical observations, aligning metes and bounds, waterlines, and mounds (Nevill 158; “Found: Raj-Razed Town”).

Enabled. His dossier, built over fourteen years, was strong enough to warrant an excavation license and a targeted dig by a university team (“Search for Mutiny City”; “Lost Textile Village”).

Sustained. He maintained public attention—press, community events, memorial calls—so that discovery would not be followed by a second erasure. At a Basti event, former President A. P. J. Abdul Kalam presented a certificate recognizing his work, symbolically acknowledging a citizen historian’s achievement (regional reportage summarized in the attached corpus).

Mahua Dabar expands the geography of 1857 beyond cantonments and capitals. It brings into focus the artisanal town—wells, drains, blocks, dyes, and the discipline of water—as a site of

both insurgency and retaliation. The burning of such a town did double duty: it punished and it warned; it extinguished an economic competitor and it terrorized potential imitators. The subsequent restriction on habitation—*gair chiragi*—transformed the act into an enduring prohibition; the name’s removal from maps turned punishment into forgetting (“Lost Textile Village”; Nevill 158). But *Mahua Dabar* is not only a cautionary tale about colonial violence. It is an affirmative case for public history done right. A descendant confronted the limits of memory; a committee clarified the archive; archaeologists tested the ground; journalists reported, scholars debated, and the local community pressed for memorialization. The result is a template: begin with what you have, ask the right questions, welcome the checks and balances of institutions, and insist on dignity for the dead and protection for the living (“Search for Mutiny City”; “Lost Textile Village”).

To fully appreciate *Mahua Dabar*’s significance, one must situate it in the nineteenth-century political economy of textiles. The British industrial revolution’s gains in mechanized spinning and weaving relied not only on technological advances but also on colonial policy environments that distorted markets in favour of British cloth, tariffs, monopolies, the reorganization of production, and, in many localities, outright coercion (Kaye and Malleson 268–69; Ball 398–401). The story of weaving families from Bengal fleeing punitive control to settle in Awadh fits a broader pattern of artisanal displacement and reconstitution in the northern

plains (“Found: Raj-Razed Town”). *Mahua Dabar*’s concentration in weaving, dyeing, and printing suggests not a scattering of cottage looms but a more organized craft ecology with specialization and infrastructure—precisely the kind that colonial authorities viewed with suspicion in times of revolt (“Lost Textile Village”).

In this light, the observation that “the vengeance with which a textile hub was destroyed might have had a lot to do with British interest in the same industry” is not mere rhetoric (“Lost Textile Village”). It names the entanglement of industrial policy and counterinsurgency: annihilate not just rebels but the habitats of artisanal resilience; forbid not only gatherings but the means of craft livelihood; erase not only buildings but the very name that could anchor memory and claims.

Archaeology as Adjudication: Strengths and Limits

Archaeology, properly conducted, can arbitrate between competing narratives by recovering patterned material signatures that fit one story better than another. At *Mahua Dabar*, the confluence of a specialized well with dual outlets, planned drains for wastewater, mica fragments, and widespread burn layers supports the thesis of a craft township destroyed by fire (Kumar; “Lost Textile Village”). These are not the traces of a small agrarian hamlet or a purely domestic cluster; they belong to an organized production landscape. Yet archaeology has limits: it cannot, by itself, name 20 June 1857 or attribute agency; it cannot separate accident from arson without

contextual anchors. That is why the 1823 map and the gazetteer context matter—textual and cartographic evidence giving the spade a script to test (“Found: Raj-Razed Town”; Nevill 158).

Ethics of Recovery: Memorial, Dignity, and the Living Land

The ethics of recovering a razed town must balance knowledge and care. Fields feed families; digging, if indiscriminate, can harm livelihoods. The 2010 excavation’s placement beyond active crops respected this balance (“Search for Mutiny City”). So do calls for a memorial that is informative but not intrusive: interpretive signage, a small commemorative space, perhaps a digital exhibit integrating scans of the 1823 map, trench diagrams, and oral histories (“Lost Textile Village”). The dead deserve remembrance; the living deserve respect.

Public Recognition and the Work of Memory

Public recognition—press features, conferences, acknowledgments—matters because it counters erasure’s second life: neglect. “The excavations have unearthed a chapter of history that links directly to contemporary history,” a senior scholar observed, underscoring that such recoveries are not antiquarian curiosities but living correctives to how we narrate ourselves (“Lost Textile Village”). When a former President hands a certificate to a citizen researcher at a local gathering, the gesture says: this is not just your story; it is our story too (regional reportage summarized in the attached corpus).

Method as Model: Lessons from *Mahua Dabar*

From *Mahua Dabar*, one can distil practical lessons for other erased places:

- Treat family artifacts (maps, letters) as leads, not proofs; corroborate them (Kaye and Malleson 268–69; “Found: Raj-Razed Town”).
- Learn the land by walking; subtle elevation changes, brick scatters, and old tree lines can reveal street grids and structure footprints invisible on satellite images (“Found: Raj-Razed Town”).
- Ask institutions to help test the claim; a committee of historians provides both expertise and procedural trust (“Found: Raj-Razed Town”).
- Be precise in archival requests; seek pre-event maps and post-event absences; look for revenue labels (like *gair chiragi*) and police station notes (Nevill 158; “Lost Textile Village”).
- Use archaeology sparingly and purposefully; trench where probability is highest and disruption lowest; prioritize features (wells, drains) that answer key questions (“Search for Mutiny City”).
- Keep the story public; reports, talks, and exhibits prevent rediscovery from dying in a filing cabinet (“Lost Textile Village”).

Counterfactuals: Would *Mahua Dabar* Have Been Found Anyway?

Could *Mahua Dabar* have been “found” without Ansari? Perhaps, in the long sweep of time: a random construction might have cut into a wall; a scholar might have spotted the 1823 map unprompted. But the texture of the actual recovery—its care, its ethics, its anchoring in descendant memory—would have been different, and almost certainly later. There is value in who does the finding and how they do it. The tone of the recovered story is shaped by the hands that recover it (“Found: Raj-Razed Town”).

Remaining Questions and Research Avenues

Even with excavation and cartographic recovery, many questions remain:

- Urban Morphology: Can non-invasive survey (ground-penetrating radar, magnetometry) map street alignments, courtyard clusters, and potential market spaces?
- Social Composition: What were the community dynamics—guild-like groupings, apprenticeship traditions, intermarriage patterns—among weaving families and other residents?
- Trade Networks: Did *Mahua Dabar*’s textiles travel to Faizabad, Lucknow, or further? Merchant account books, if any survive among descendants, could reveal routes and buyers.
- Memory Geography: What toponyms linger in local speech—field names, mounds, “old well”—that correlate with trench findings?

- Memorial Design: What commemorative form best balances pedagogy and agricultural continuity—signage, a small, curated space, or a digital exhibit?

Conclusion: A Map, a Promise, a Town

In the end, what Abdul Latif Ansari did would sound simple if it had not taken so long and so much: he took a map, made a promise to his ancestors to seek the truth, and kept it. “I began from zero,” he said, which is another way of saying he was willing to learn what he did not know and to be corrected by what he found (“Found: Raj-Razed Town”). He asked officials to remember what their records had forgotten; he asked scholars to test what his family had told him; he asked the land to give up a few of its secrets. *Mahua Dabar* will not be rebuilt, but it has been re-sited—in maps, in words, and in care. Its wells have a voice again: the water was for dyes, not for drinking. Its ash says: *there was a fire here, not an accident but a warning sent. Its mica glints with the memory of printmakers hiding and revealing patterns in cloth. And its story, returned by a citizen’s insistence, tells what history sometimes needs most: someone to go back to the beginning and walk forward with patience.*

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