

THE SEA WITHIN



After his father's death in 1885, Mavji Dave, a family friend, told the young Gandhi that if he aspired his father's position as the diwan of the Porbandar state, he would have to go to England to train as a barrister. The idea captured his imagination. A matriculate who had found studies at a local college drab and boring, he made up his mind to cross the ocean. To overcome his mother's objection, he vowed to her that while living abroad he would not drink alcohol, nor would he *touch* women or meat. Driven by his English dream, Mohandas went to Bombay to make preparations for the journey. In that city, members of his caste ostracized him for daring to defy the community injunction against crossing the sea. Determined to realize his ambition, Gandhi went ahead and boarded SS Clyde on 4 September 1888. Going through many culture shocks on board – food, etiquette, language – the 18-year-old arrived at Southampton on 29 September to study law and jurisprudence at University College, London and be invited to enrol at the Inner Temple during the next three years, a period quite decisive in shaping the thought and personality of the future leader.

But this is more about the steamship that took more than three weeks to take the young student from Bombay to London. In the age of sail, i.e. until the invention of the compound steam engine, it would take a ship from England six months to reach India rounding the Cape of Good Hope. For the first time in 1814, a ship laden with the cargo of cotton yard goods left Lancashire for Calcutta firing up the prospects of a vast market for manufactured goods from Britain. Now two developments radically changed England's trade fortunes in the East – first the invention of the steam engine, and then the construction of the Suez Canal.

After years of protracted negotiation, Ferdinand de Lesseps, a French entrepreneur, finally obtained the permission from the Egyptian ruler for digging the canal across the desert to connect the Mediterranean to the Red Sea reducing the distance between England and India drastically. For a clearer idea, it's 6,330 nautical miles from London to Bombay through the Canal and around the Cape – 10,595 nautical miles. The almost 145-km Canal, constructed with French capital, boosted British trade with the East. December 7, 1825, the day SS Enterprise, the first steamship from England, anchored in Calcutta, marked the actual inauguration of Industrial Revolution for Her Majesty's Indian empire. Less than half a century down the line, when the Suez Canal was opened to navigation in late 1869, Europe came closer to India both economically and culturally.

Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company, in short P & O, started a regular steamer service between Southampton and Bombay. Until then a letter from India would take more than a year to reach England. And now prospective brides came to India aboard the steamship to hunt for husbands.

'The invention of the compound steam engine dramatically reduced the cost of shipping goods by sea, and, at the same time, the shortening of the sea route to India, coupled with

inauguration of submarine cable links, helped to accelerate the growth of commerce,' wrote Ian Marshall in *Passage East*.

Since the Second World War the balance of power has tilted in favour of the new nations at the cost of the old. Indian exports to the UK during 2017 was US\$6.69 billion, according to UN COMTRADE; among the items were nuclear reactors, boilers, motor vehicles and medical apparatus.

India accounted for about 55 per cent of the IT market share of US\$185-190 billion global services sourcing business in 2017-18. Indian IT & ITeS companies, according to India Brand Equity Foundation, have set up over 1000 delivery centres in 80-odd countries across the world. This was a long way off from the Scots who had set up the first jute mills on the banks of the Hooghly on the outskirts of Calcutta in the mid-19th century. If you happen to visit a place with a distinct Raj flavour, say, a hill station or an old garrison town, chances are you will come across a locker, still functioning, or an iron manhole cover still in place, brought from England about a century ago, the manufacturers' trademarks evoking another time.

Medical tourism, a rapidly growing sector in India, is estimated to be US\$9 billion by 2020. About half a million patients visited India for medical care in 2017. They were mostly from Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Iraq, Maldives, Oman, Yemen, Nigeria and Tanzania. The superspeciality hospitals in the Indian cities, comparable with similar facilities anywhere in the world, offer treatment at a much lower cost.

There was a time when India, in the Western imagination, was a land of snake charmers and rope-trick magicians. Now cars made in India are occupying more road space than before around the world. India's third-generation Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV) has so far triggered into the orbit 51 customer satellites from other countries. As a major space-faring nation, India aims to have a minimum 10 per cent share of global space commerce. It senses business from the Middle East hoping to cater to the need of the countries in the region by launching their satellites into the orbit.

Gandhi and others of his generation had gone to Europe only to come back after finishing their academic courses. For them the sea remained a constant and irrevocable barrier between the two worlds. Now you fly to London from Delhi or Mumbai in under 10 hours, and there are four direct flights every day from both cities. Those behind some of the most successful and durable global brands are Indian. About a hundred Indian companies have created in the recent years more than 1,13,000 jobs in the US with an investment of \$17.9 million, according to a study by the Confederation of Indian Industry.

Globally it has been an effervescent phase for Indian culture. Indian filmmakers, writers and artists make deep impressions on their audiences around the world. Filmmakers like Deepa Mehta,

Gurinder Chadha, Mira Nair and MN Shyamalan have made a mark often introducing India to the world through their works. Some of the Indian artists command prices at auctions that their Western counterparts are unable to. Atul Dodiya's 'Lodging in Somnath' fetched a whopping £3,57,000 in 2007. Bharti Kher's 'The Skin Speaks a Language Not Its Own' sold for £1.1 million at Sotheby's 2010 London auction. These are aspirational artists ready to meet the world

on their terms, not like the previous generation who had struggled and faced hardship before meeting with success. Think of MF Husain who as a young man had painted Bollywood stars on billboards standing on a scaffold.

Three critics – Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin – significantly called their book about postcolonial literature *The Empire Writes Back*. Many see this book as a pointer to the deep impact Salman Rushdie has made on contemporary English writing. Looking at India's economic might in the second decade of the 21st century one could reverse the steamship story with the title: *The Empire Sells Back*. Once, before a visit to India, writer Ian Jack called a friend in Delhi asking if he could get her something from London. Nothing, she said, for every brand we had craved was easily available in post-reform India. Writers like RK Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao had gone to Europe to seek literary fame. At this year's Jaipur Lit Fest Jeffrey Archer proudly proclaimed that *Cain and Abel* had sold more in India than anywhere else. He, therefore, makes it a point to come here to promote his new books. The picture has indeed changed more dramatically than one could grasp. Indian writers in Europe and the US routinely publish their big books to applause and critical acclaim. A Booker short list without an Indian writer is more an exception than the rule.

But this is not the entire Indian story, there's a darker side, too. A young couple in love is chillingly killed by their own clans, often with their parents' consent, for the crime of breaking the social taboo, their hearts reaching out to each other defying the caste line. The kangaroo court of the Khap Panchayat – a patriarchal mechanism to enforce the social stereotypes in the rural hinterland – dispenses brutalities in the name of justice.

Perhaps nowhere else childhood is as abominably abused as in India, particularly in the cities. For a girl child life often ends even before she comes out of her mother's womb. Shadowy clinics, quacks and midwives snuff out the life before it can see the world. The distressed rural sector, at the receiving end of the policymaker's apathy, is lapsing into an unsalvageable indebtedness. Deprived of livelihood, exploited by a feudal system that browbeats the democratic institutions, the marginalized people set out for the cities. Without access to healthcare, thousands of people die of different types of fever and water-borne diseases curable with a minimum of medical intervention.

Nothing manifests India's extremely poor administrative capability more than the horrendous stampedes at temples and river ghats where thousands of god-fearing people assemble on auspicious days. Some very minimum crowd-management measures could have averted the tragedies which have been occurring as regularly as monsoon floods. A more gnawing administrative flaw manifests itself in the impunity with which miscreants organize riots – between castes, religious communities, ethnic groups. They get away unpunished because of political interference. Neither the police nor the courts hold the offenders guilty and bring them to book. This India is very different from the corporate towers of Mumbai and Gurgaon, the distilled environment of conferences assessing India's future challenges in the cool hush of plush auditoria.

The real challenge of course is to go out meet the world upfront occupying as much space as our talent and capability permit, and also to restore and recover the backend from the abysmal chaos

and dysfunction. The P & O boats were a revolution in the context of their time. The 21st century India needs to navigate its anarchy and flaws to recover what has been already laid waste. The sea that acted as a barrier between the continents is now within us. ■

Bhaskar Roy