

# Lost at sea

Efforts by one Indian-origin family are bringing a massive maritime tragedy from 1942—tied to Mumbai's own history—to light. Stories of a hundred other tragedies are yet to be told

**GAUTAMS MENGLE**

PRESENT DAY Ballard Pier is a bustling south Mumbai hub, home to hotels, restaurants, office and government buildings; its lanes lined with street food theas of all sorts—putting the finishing touches to a quintessential Bumbaiya image. The Pier of yore was as bustling, a crucial part of the city's rich maritime history. But sadly, this is also the location of a forgotten story that has left no visible traces.

It was at this pier that a British steamer, carrying more than 650 exhausted passengers, dropped anchor over 80 years ago. Some of these passengers sustained injuries, but all of them were just grateful to be alive.

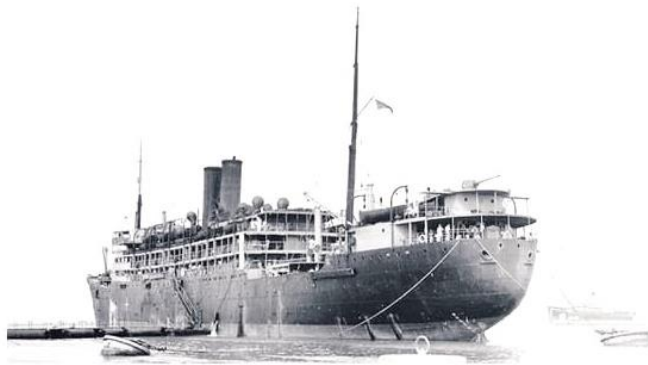
They were the survivors of SS Tilawa—a passenger cargo steamer that set sail for South Africa from

Fuelled by nothing other than a stubborn resolve to bring the forgotten story to light, the Solankis scoured through existing records—including a passenger list sourced from the Indian Transvaal Congress and the official documented history of the HMS Birmingham—and began tracking down the survivors' descendants.

Ballard Pier on November 20, 1942 and was hit by torpedoes from a Japanese submarine a mere three days later. A total of 732 passengers and crew were on board when the tragedy struck; 280 of them lost their lives. The survivors were rescued by HMS Birmingham and brought safely back to the Pier.

"The sad thing," says retired Admiral IC Rao, Indian Navy, "is that there are no records of this [incident] with the Indian establishment right now. This is because those were the days of the Second World War, and all news was heavily censored. Whatever we know about the Tilawa is only thanks to civilian-driven research conducted over the last two years."

Admiral Rao currently heads the Mumbai Maritime Museum Society (MMMS), a non-profit organisation that brings lost stories of India's maritime history to light. In 2021, Kash Kumar and his son Emile Solanki, Indian-origin Canadian citizens, approached the MMMS, and this led to a collaboration. Kash Kumar's father, Nachhlibhai Chibabhai, was one of the passengers on board who lost their lives in the tragedy. Fuelled by nothing other than a stubborn resolve to bring the forgotten story to light, the Solankis scoured through existing records—including a passenger list sourced from the Indian Transvaal Congress and the official



The SS Tilawa, which sank after being torpedoed by a Japanese submarine in November 1942, represents one of the many chapters of India's maritime history that are lost in time. **PICS COURTESY/ SSTILAWA.COM**



**KASH KUMAR SOLANKI**



**EMILE SOLANKI**



**ANITA YEWALE**



**SRIKANT KESNUR**

documented history of the HMS Birmingham—and began tracking down the survivors' descendants.

On November 23, 2022, the Solankis and the MMMS held a commemorative event at Ballard Estate's Grand Hotel. In attendance was Arvindbhai Jani—then a three-year-old aboard SS Tilawa accompanying his mother. All he remembers is his mother swaddling him in the pallu of her saree and jumping onto a lifeboat.

The Solankis also tracked down 90-year-old Tejprakash Kaur, who survived the Japanese attack with her father, but lost her mother and three brothers. A video of Kaur recounting her memories was played at the event.

"In India," says Commodore Srikanth Kesnur, "there is, unfortunately, little awareness of tragedies that happened at sea. Despite many Indians being involved in such tragedies, we are not sufficiently tuned to remembering or commemorating incidents at sea or learning lessons from them. As a nation, in some ways, it shows our

sea blindness. The circumstances surrounding the firing of torpedoes, for example, still remain a mystery. The Titanic tragedy has been made into a blockbuster movie, but there are hardly any such endeavours in India."

Admiral Rao concurs, saying that such tragedies are connected to India's relationship with other countries. "At one point," he says, "there was a massive presence of the Baniya community in East Africa. They ran the entire grocery and small trade business. So much so that when African majoritarianism rose, the Indians found themselves under attack and started fleeing to England. They sought British passports from the government, on the grounds that they had been serving the UK in its colonies for decades. This marked the migration of Indians to the UK, the origins of the now thriving diaspora community. They took up jobs that required them to work long hours, which no natives wanted to take."

Continued on page 19

Continued from page 18

Today, the 'SS Tilawa movement' is slowly gathering steam. In December 2022, UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak issued an official letter acknowledging the tragedy and commending the efforts being taken to retell its story. "It is important that citizens of the UK connected to the ill-fated SS Tilawa have the support of its Government, especially from a Prime Minister of Indian descent. We are facing challenges with access to archival material, having UK maritime museums dedicate an area to SS Tilawa, HMS Birmingham and SS Carthage. Also, getting a response from the Japanese government for their assistance. Therefore, receiving this letter from 10 Downing Street provides some hope," Emile had said in a statement, issued shortly after receiving Sunak's letter.

For Emile, who owns a travel agency and his father, a broadcaster, the journey has been an emotional one. "We never expected that so many families from around the world would respond, reach out, share their family connections, and express continuous gratitude for the work done so far in bringing the forgotten tragedy to the world," Emile tells mid-day over email. "The transition from a personal family project to a global initiative has been special and historic. It has been tiring at times, and emotionally exhausting. Many late nights, countless hours, and personal funds have been committed to this endeavour. I am now convinced it was well worth it. The comfort, encouragement, and closure expressed by families is heart-warming."

The intrigue around the Tilawa has further intensified by its cargo—2364 bars of silver, intended for the production of coinage in South Africa. In 2017, a British exploration firm found the wreck



The SS Birmingham, which rescued the over 650 survivors of the tragedy, brought them back to Ballard Pier in Mumbai a week after the Tilawa set sail

of the Tilawa deep in the sea and salvaged the bullion. It is now locked in a legal battle between the firm and the Republic of South Africa.

The MMMS meanwhile, is keen on bringing to light many more such stories. "Hundreds of commercial ships were sunk during the Second World War," says Vice President Anita Yewale. "We are not sure how many vessels have been traced. Whatever we know about the Tilawa is thanks to the efforts of one family, but even there, we are

facing some challenges. For example, we know that a Mumbai-based studio could be holding a large part related footage and photographs but they are unwilling to cooperate, as the studio is winding up its business and hence has opted to put their entire archival collection for sale instead."

Yewale mentions another ship, the SS Vaitarna, which was also lost at sea and is not widely discussed. It was seized by tragedy way before the Tilawa in 1942, or even the Titanic in 1912. It set sail in November 1888 for Porbandar but was unable to dock at its final destination owing to foul weather and came to Bombay instead. It is believed to have been hit by a cyclonic storm, leaving no survivors. The ship reportedly had over 700 passengers on board. There are also theories about wedding parties and students, set to appear for their matriculation exams in Bombay, being on board. But they remain theories in the absence of adequate historical records.

Admiral Rao chips in with another story that is very significant



Most of the Tilawa's history has been pieced together using archival documents and pictures, such as this one of a lifeboat rescuing the victims of the tragedy

to present-day Mumbai, and yet, surprisingly little known—the SS Ramdas. "The Ramdas was a passenger ship that operated between Bombay and Alibaug. Road connectivity in those days was very poor, and one had to take a very long and badly maintained route, as a result of which, most people preferred the ferry. On July 17, 1947, the Ramdas set sail from the ferry wharf at Bhaucha Dhakka and sank due to overcrowding while on its way to Alibaug. It led to improved road connectivity—the same roads used by public and private transport vehicles today," he tells us.

Why, then, do we know so little about our own maritime history? Captain Kapildev Bahl, Merchant Navy, says this is sad but hardly surprising.

"We have a rich maritime history and wonderful traditions. The Chola empire had a thriving maritime economy. Thereafter unfortunately, our focus shifted to invasions from the North, and we became increasingly sea-blind when it comes to safeguarding our coasts. Chhatrapati Shivaji Ma-

haraj was an exception, because he realised the significance of a strong navy. The Portuguese followed by the British had every reason to suppress our maritime history. After that, it was simply too late," he says.

The Solankis, meanwhile, soldier on. They held a second commemorative event at the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, UK and are planning a third in Durban this year. "We need to consider the possibility of getting further support from the Greenwich UK National Maritime Museum, track the results from the silver bullion salvage case, and the possibility of accessing files, footage, photographs of the SS Tilawa wreck site, and perhaps secure a silver bar donated to the museum. We hope Durban November 2024 will be a successful commemoration. It is the port the SS Tilawa was destined for, and it is fitting that we hold the third commemoration there—for the countless African families who have come forward," says Emile.

gautam.mengle@mid-day.com

The Portuguese followed by the British has every reason to suppress our maritime history. After that, it was simply too late  
Capt Kapildev Bahl  
Merchant Navy