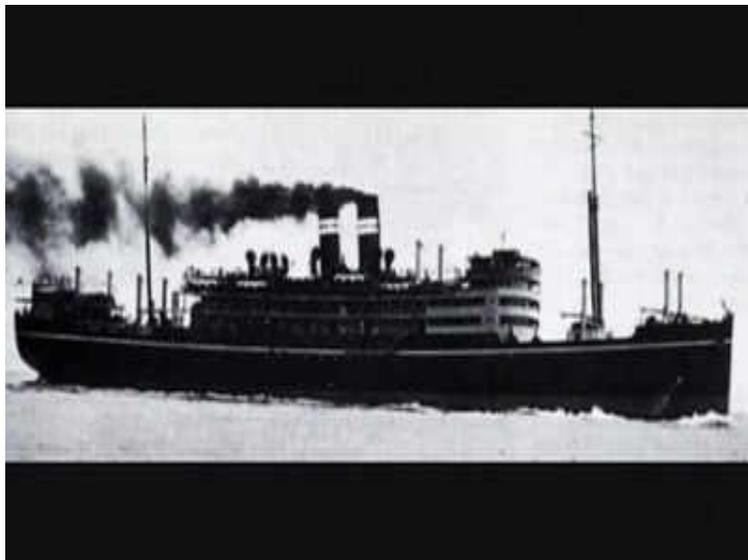


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Flashback to 1942: When Japan sank an Indian ship killing 280

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MUMBAI: On November 20, 1942, the SS Tilawa, a passenger-cum-cargo liner, owned by the British India Steam Navigation Company, set sail from the Mumbai docks en route to Mombasa, Maputo and Durban. On board were 958 passengers and crew, many of them Indian nationals, and a cargo of over 6,472 tonnes including 60 tonnes of silver bullion.

Three days later, the Tilawa was sailing near Seychelles when it was torpedoed by a Japanese submarine. In the early hours of November 23, 1942, the ship sank, killing 280 passengers and crew members while 678 others, who managed to jump on to lifeboats, were rescued by a passing British warship and brought back to Mumbai four days later.

The 80th anniversary of the little-known SS Tilawa tragedy will be commemorated next month at the Grand Hotel, Ballard Estate, by the father-son duo of Mukesh and Emile Solanki, descendants of Nichhabhai Chibabhai Solanki of Kachholi village in Gujarat, who died in the incident.

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“We in the Maritime Mumbai Museum Society are assisting the families (of the deceased and the survivors) who live in the UK and Canada to organise the commemoration on November 23, 2022,” vice admiral (retd) I C Rao told Mirror.

In his home in south London, Arvind Jani, now 83, the only survivor of the SS Tilawa, told this correspondent over a video call that he has no memories of the traumatic incident. “I was just three years old travelling with my mother on the ship. We were from Jodiya near Jamnagar,” he said.

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The mother, Vasantagauri, tied the little baby with her saree on her back, grabbed a rope and jumped into a lifeboat. “She was sleeping on the bedding with money placed under the pillow on the Tilawa when she suddenly saw water all around her,” said Jani’s wife, Aruna about her brave mother-in-law. “It was the last lifeboat to be lowered into the sea and she managed to jump

into it,” she added.

According to the story that the family later heard from survivors, the mother and child along with other passengers drifted on the lifeboat for 12-18 hours. “It was a full moon night and Vasantben later recalled seeing bodies floating like flowers in the sea,” said Aruna Jani.

The survivors, who had biscuits in tin boxes on the lifeboat, were rescued by a British ship, HMS Birmingham, which brought them back to Mumbai.

“I was very close to my mother who told me the story when I grew up. Over the years, I tried to ignore it,” said Arvind Jani.

UK-based Mervyn Maciel, 93, was a teenager studying in Belgaum along with his brothers when they heard about the incident. His father, Mathias Maciel, just 42, along with his wife and three step siblings perished.

“My father was returning to Kenya from Bombay. Travelling by sea was risky during the world war, but he thought no one would harm a passenger liner. But the ship was torpedoed by the Japanese late at night,” Mervyn told Mirror during a video call.

“On the ship, dad was trying to put my three-month-old stepsister to sleep when the boat was hit. All the lifeboats were occupied despite dad being a salon class passenger. He just waited. A Goan cabin boy asked him to jump into the sea. But dad could not with his young family. Early next morning the Japanese fired a second torpedo and the ship sank,” he said.

“What trauma they must have gone through. I hope they did not suffer and died instantly. It was shattering for us three brothers. We grew up as orphans. The world came to an end. It was our maternal grandfather, a pensioner living in Goa, who came forward and ensured he would look after us till we complete our education,” said Maciel, who was born in Kenya and migrated to the UK in 1966.

Toronto-based Emile Solanki, the great-grandson of Nichhabhai Chibabhai Solanki, a passenger on the Tilawa who died in the mishap, is working on a project with his father, Mukesh, called “Tilawa 1942 The Forgotten Tragedy”. “In 2007 my father, a radio broadcaster, first saw the S.S. Tilawa passenger list online, as well as photographs of the ship. When he located the name of my

great-grandfather as a missing person, it was an emotional moment. A deep and painful family loss could now start to receive some closure as more light is shed on this tragedy. Until that discovery it was a story the family never spoke about. I was inspired by my father's enthusiasm for the subject, and my grandfather's desire to know where the ship sank, and the location of his father's body. A campaign to highlight the tragedy, called Tilawa 1942 The Forgotten Tragedy, was created to put Tilawa back on the map, and ensure it is prominently featured in the history books," he told Mirror.

Solanki said the wreckage site is about 3,500 metres deep in the middle of the Indian Ocean. "Human matter is unable to survive the underwater pressure, and sadly it is likely that sea creatures consumed the remains. With the recent discovery of the wreck site in 2017, by Argentum Exploration Ltd of the UK, we hope eventually videos and photographs can be shared to see the condition of the ship," he said.

Solanki and his father are hosting the 80th commemoration at the Grand Hotel at Ballard Estate in Mumbai on November 23. He calls it a fitting venue as S.S. Tilawa had departed from Bombay, and all survivors were brought back to the Ballard Pier, thanks to the rescue mission of HMS Birmingham and S.S. Carthage. "This will be the first time a commemoration has been organized to officially acknowledge the incident and memorialize the loss of life. We are grateful to the Maritime Mumbai Museum Society (MMMS) for their kind support in assisting us," he said.