



WESTWARD HO! ANGLO-INDIAN (EURASIAN) MASS-MIGRATION  
AND THE ROLE OF INDIAN PORTS IN MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY  
PASSENGER AND STEAMER CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

In 2011, Michael Ondaatje, *The Cat's Table*, a memoir about his passage at age 11 from Sri Lanka to England in 1954. Ondaatje's account mirrored, to a vast extent, shipboard experiences of Anglo-Indian settlers who had voyaged from port cities in India, to take up residence in England.

As part of my ethnographic research on Britain's Anglo-Indians undertaken in Britain, I unearthed previously undisclosed information about conditions prevailing in Indian port cities as steamer-loads of Anglo-Indians left India.

This interdisciplinary paper combines literary evidence with first-hand immigrant narratives, uncovering information pertaining to Anglo-Indian trajectory from exit to integration. It emphasizes the environment prevailing at South Asian port cities in the lead-up to Independence and immediate aftermath. It comments on the development of a unique shipboard lifestyle and culture—a result of Westernized customs and Indian traditions—as well as their forays into port cities such as Mombasa and Aden en route to the UK.

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When, following the Independence of India in 1947, Great Britain gave Anglo-Indians the legal right to re-settle and re-locate through the terms of the British Nationality Act, 1948, the great Anglo-Indian exodus from India began. What I term the 'First Wave' of immigration occurred between the years 1948 and 1964 when the British Commonwealth Act put an end to the influx of Anglo-Indians into Britain. Although the national airline that is now known as Air-India had been launched by J.R.D. Tata as Tata Air Services and later Tata Airlines as early as 1932, even as late as the years of World War II, it had been used largely for troop movement, shipping of supplies, evacuation of refugees and other war-related purposes. ("Air-India") After Indian Independence, the indigenous government of India acquired 49% of it and rechristened it Air-India. However, global civilian traffic was still an expensive rarity and the majority of passenger traffic moving in and out of the Indian sub-continent relied exclusively on the steam-shipping industry—hence the name 'steamers' given to ships in such passenger fleets.

In the late 1940s, through the 1950s and into the early 1960s, thousands of Anglo-Indians left Indian shores and emigrated to the UK. Although the exact numbers are fuzzy, it is believed that no less than 50,000 Anglo-Indian departed from the land of their birth to take on immigrant lives in their new host nations. Nostalgia and the passage of time can blur memories and oral history is often embroidered, embellished or exaggerated when affected by a fondness for one's youth and a bygone past. Popular folk lore develops often from verbal accounts of participants in great heroic mass human movements. The exodus of Anglo-Indians from India to the UK has not been spared from the possibility of inaccuracy when it has involved recollections of younger, more innocent times. During the many interviews I conducted among immigrant Anglo-Indians in the UK from 2008 onwards, remembered accounts of the outward immigrant passage were plentiful and, in most cases, consistent. Most of the respondents to my field surveys, however, have never had the opportunity to publish their memoirs or to bring to the attention of later immigrants, the unique experiences they garnered on board ocean liners as a departing community seeking greener pastures.

The Sri Lankan novelist Michael Ondaatje, however, who made Canada his primary country of residence, has, over the years, alluded to his early upbringing in Sri Lanka

prior to his emigration to the West (2011). His writing often refers to experiences that find similarity with that of Anglo-Indians of the same generation. But it is his novel *The Cat's Table* (2011) that is of special interest to scholars of Anglo-India. For in it, the novelist reminisces fondly on his outbound passage to England—a voyage that bears immense similarity with the experiences encountered by those Anglo-Indians making their exit from neighboring India in the same era.

In *The Cat's Table* (2011, p. 6), Michael Ondaatje provides a semi-autobiographical account of a similar voyage. The novel gets its title from the custom of seating the most insignificant passengers at the least-privileged dining table on board a ship—the exact opposite of the prestigious Captain's Table. In her review of Ondaatje's book in *The New York Times*, Liesl Schillinger, informs us that the author takes “the reader on a journey through three deeply submerged weeks in his own memory — from the year 1954, when, at age 11, he traveled on the ocean liner *Oronsay* from Colombo, in what was then Ceylon, to England, a passage that would lead him from his past to his future self” (Schillinger). Indeed, if one goes by the real-life accounts of such voyages that lasted several weeks as they were recounted to me during field interviews with individual Anglo-Indian passengers, one finds very little fiction associated with Ondaatje's narrative. What emerged from the various accounts provided to me by elderly men and women, now in their 80s and 90s, who recalled their youthful experiences aboard those ships, was that a distinct shipboard culture developed among the Anglo-Indians—a result of their unique bi-racial heritage. Using Ondaatje's literary musing as a point of departure and comparing it with the real-life accounts shared during interviews carried out in the UK, I throw light on a unique sea-faring culture that pertained to Entertainment, Cuisine and Tourism—a direct consequence of the hybridized upbringing of the Anglo-Indians and their cultural *morés*.

#### OUTWARD BOUND:

To a very large extent, all sea-faring human traffic from India in that era relied on The British India Steam Navigation Company, known for short as BI, that had operated from the Indian sub-continent as early as 1856 when it had been formed out of Mackinnon Mackenzie and Company (“British India Steam Navigation Company”). The opening of the Suez Canal in 1867 had a massive impact on passenger traffic as it considerably shortened traveling distance and time between India and the West. In

1913, under the Chairmanship of Lord Inchcape, it merged with P & O (Peninsular and Oriental) group of companies and began running passenger shipping routes from India both westward and eastward mainly to service European colonial officials and their family-members on periodic home leaves. Among the company's better-known ships was the *S.S. Rajputana* built for the P&O company in Greenock, Scotland, in 1925. Named after the Rajputana region of Western India, she sailed on a regular route between England and British India ("S.S. Rajputana"). Best-known for carrying celebrity passengers Mohandas K. Gandhi and his entourage on his voyage to England upon invitation from the Viceroy to participate in the Second Round Table Conference of 1931 in London, the ship is mentioned in the feature film *Gandhi* (Attenborough, 1982). Archival photographic collections of the ship show Gandhi at work on its sun deck in 1931 and disembarking at Marseilles (Mahatma Gandhi Photo Gallery).

Needless to say, a majority of the Anglo-Indian passengers who boarded steamers for the outbound voyage to England were not celebrities. Their shipboard lifestyle was devoid of glamor or comfort. Obtaining travel documentation as basic as passports had caused them endless stress in the months prior to their departure. Formalities associated with the closing of their Indian bank accounts, transfer or withdrawal of meagre funds from their banks, paperwork connected with claiming of retirement benefits or Provident Funds from British-run institutions such as the Railways and the Post and Telegraphs for whom they had spent a lifetime working, had resulted in no end of mental and physical fatigue. So many were not even sure until the very last minute that they would be in possession of the required documentation that would permit departure from India. Many of the immigrants I interviewed revealed that they did not have the time to bid their relatives and neighbors goodbye. Others stated that they deliberately sneaked off to England without informing anyone. "We were so afraid that jealousy would cause someone or the other to make official trouble for us by reporting some fictitious wrong-doing on our parts that would impede our departure," said an 80-year old businessman from Essex who left India from Vishakapatnam as a Customs Officer in 1961. After spending about half a century in the UK, so many Anglo-Indians have never set foot in India again or seen the relatives they left behind.

However, when family members knew that they were emigrating to England, few expected to ever see their kith and kin on Indian soil again. Thus, large numbers of relatives and friends accompanied them to the point of departure from which their immigrant journeys began. Since many Anglo-Indians lived in small railway-towns scattered throughout the length and breadth of the Indian sub-continent, their departure from India as immigrants first involved arrival at the few Indian port cities such as Bombay that had developed as a result of human and cargo traffic throughout the nineteenth century via their deep-water harbors. Southerners embarked from small South Indian towns such as Quilon or Bangalore to get to Vishakapatnam or Madras to board larger ocean liners. If they were concentrated in north or eastern India, such as in Lucknow, Asansol or Kharagpur, they made their way to the port city of Calcutta to board their England-bound vessels. In the years immediately following Independence, such ports were packed with Anglo-Indian relatives sobbing into handkerchiefs, dispensing hugs to loved ones and waving until steamers became invisible beyond the horizon. Such outpourings of affection were very different from the low-key departure that Ondaatje experienced when he left Sri Lanka. He writes: “No mention was made that this (the voyage—parenthesis mine) might be an unusual experience or that it could be exciting or dangerous, so I did not approach it with any joy or fear” (Ondaatje, 2011, p. 6).

A 70-year old Anglo-Indian from Chesington who left Madras in 1958 to emigrate to Surrey (and who has since passed away), explained in 2008 that his journey to England was undertaken in stages—partly by sea, partly on land. He remembers:

I left Madras by train to reach Cochin. I got on to the boat at Cochin in order to sail to England. For those our age, it was nothing but excitement. I was so delighted that I could not get on that train from Madras to Cochin fast enough. Our parents were apprehensive but we were thrilled to be leaving India and starting new lives in swinging London. I got to Naples on the *Roma*, an Italian ship, then took the overland train to Rome. From Rome, I crossed Western Europe in another train as far as Paris. In Paris, I changed trains again to get to the coast at Calais. From Calais, I boarded another vessel to get to Dover. Everyone on deck began singing the famous Vera Lynn song, “There’ll be bluebirds over/The White Cliffs of Dover” when we first caught sight of them. It was moving to see the white cliffs of her song in person. From Dover, we took another train to London Victoria. I arrived in London on June 20, 1958.

Many Anglo-Indians made firm friends with fellow Anglo-Indians during endless weeks on the high seas. As the engineer said, “For the first few years, the only real friends I had in England were the Anglo-Indians with whom I had made friends on the voyage.” Others report how astounded they were by the size of the steamer. “Gosh!” said a 76-year old retired civil servant from Great Missenden who had emigrated from Kharagpur in 1956. “Our steamer was like a small city. It had several stories, what seemed like thousands of people on it and hundreds of cabins to house us all. I remember feeling awed upon embarking and I stayed that way for the entire voyage.” He said, “I can remember every detail of that ship as if it were yesterday. We were too filled with optimism to worry too much about our future. The ship fascinated us enough to take our minds away from the Great Unknown that lay ahead.” He sailed to England on the *Batory*—an ocean liner of the Polish merchant fleet named after Stefan Batory, the famous 16<sup>th</sup> century king of Poland (“M.S. Batory”). Ondaatje had similar first impressions of the *Oronsay*. He writes, “I was not forewarned that the ship would have seven levels, hold more than six hundred people including a captain, nine cooks, engineers, a veterinarian, and that it could contain a small jail and chlorinated pools that would actually sail with us over two oceans” (Ondaatje, 2011, p.6).

#### CARRYING PERSONAL CARGO:

Unlike modern-day passengers who routinely make similar journeys by air and are inhibited in the volume of accompanying baggage by airline regulations, rules were far more liberal with regards to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century personal cargo and India’s Anglo-Indians carried everything but the kitchen sink with them to the UK. “We actually brought our huge heavy granite spice grinding stone with us on the ship when we came here,” said a 75-year old retired business center manager from Croydon who emigrated to England from Asansol in 1962. “You might laugh,” she continued, “but we were terrified that without grinding masala for our curries, we’d be doomed to eating bland boiled English meat and vegetables for the rest of our lives.” The same woman went on to reveal that since strict foreign exchange control regulations did not permit the transfer of more than £3 each, they became extremely creative in smuggling assets to boost their financial resources in the UK. In the days before metal detectors, physical ‘frisking’ and security pat-downs, she said, “Anglo-Indian women hid gold bangles, rings and other wedding jewelry in their *bouffant* hair-dos.” She continues, “The

fashion at that time for highly teased hair, piled high on our heads allowed us to conceal a lot of valuables in our hair styles.”

Not many Anglo-Indians knew what to expect—either on the voyage or upon their arrival in England. “My life ahead presented itself to me as a great blank canvas,” said an accountant, originally from Nagpur, now based in Wembley. Like him, Anglo-Indians had no idea how endless the outbound voyage would be. They knew that they would spend several weeks on board but they had only a sketchy concept of the geographical magnitude of the journey upon which they had embarked. Ondaatje also had only the slightest sense of what awaited him. He writes, “...It was explained to me that after I’d crossed the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea and the Red Sea, and gone through the Suez Canal into the Mediterranean, I would arrive one morning on a small pier in England...”(Ondaatje, 2011, p. 7).

#### ON BOARD ENTERTAINMENT:

A long voyage could often appear boringly endless (as scores of European diarists have documented) through the years. However, the Western cultural orientation of India’s Anglo-Indians, through decades of affiliation with the British in India, had endowed them with a profound sense of merry-making. They took a deep delight in music, dancing, shipboard games and festivities and had no dearth of ways to amuse themselves as the voyage proceeded. Although most of them sailed steerage class and were not entitled to amusements conjured up for the entertainment pleasure of first class passengers, Anglo-Indians were resourceful enough to set up their own forms of diversion. Ondaatje’s account of his immigrant voyage includes “adult passengers who, during the evening celebrations, staggered around in giant animal heads, some of the women dancing with skirts barely there, as the ship’s orchestra...played on the bandstand all wearing outfits of exactly the same plum color” (Ondaatje, 2010. p. 13). India’s outgoing Anglo-Indians did not have the privilege of participation in masked balls as had invitees to the Captain’s Table. Hence, they created their own fun and frolics on the deck. “Put a guitar in an Anglo-Indian hand and you have a party!” said an Anglo-Indian writer from Bombay now based in Vancouver, Canada. “Why a guitar?” she continues. “Give one of them a simple mouth-organ, and you have the makings of a ball.” True to her opinion, the civil engineer from Great Missenden recalls “non-stop partying and dancing throughout

that voyage—there was ballroom dancing as well as the jive. Oldies and rock and roll”.

He says,

So many of our chaps had carried their guitars and their bongos. Others had violins and piano-accordions. Anglo-Indians love community singing and we got hoarse as we raised our voices in song as someone strummed a guitar. Those who could not sing, clapped their hands or drummed their feet on the deck.

Apart from swing and ballroom dancing which took place after dinner on deck, Anglo-Indians passed the day-time hours playing games. As the civil engineer recalls:

Except for when we were in our cabins fast asleep, we were involved in fun and games. There was housie (bingo—parenthesis mine), dominoes, card games, board games such as Monopoly and snakes and ladders—even carom for some people had brought their carom boards on board and full-scale tournaments developed.

A 76-year old retired sub-contracting engineer from Croydon who also emigrated from Asansol in 1961, said, “People had carried packs of cards and board games. In the days before video games, this was how we passed time.” Anglo-Indians are known to be sportive by nature and highly competitive on the playing field. In the legendary Anglo-Indian Clubs they had created in India, they had nurtured a tradition of indoor games such as darts, dominoes and carom. Drawing upon those customs, they merely changed location as they brought matches and tournaments to the ship’s decks. “It did not take us long to form teams and break out into competitions that grew in intensity as the weeks passed by. It was all done in a spirit of friendship, of course,” he said.

#### ON BOARD CUISINE:

The majority of the Anglo-Indians who made the decision to emigrate had stable jobs in British-run institutions in India and were assured of a decent monthly wage. While they were not an affluent community in India, they were never dirt-poor and, therefore, never starved. However, when it came to their cuisine, an interesting hybridized blend of Western dishes enlivened by Indian spices had characterized their daily food intake. Rice and curry with both vegetarian and non-vegetarian side dishes substantiated their menus. On the outbound steamers, however, they were, as the business center manager from Croydon described it, “fed like royalty.” She said, “Our menus were not unlike the kind we have recently found on leisure cruises to the Caribbean. We were completely awed by the amount and variety of food served and the vast choices we

could exert. We chose to eat food that was usually out of our reach in India. For example, I feasted on ham and other cold cuts—because we rarely ate those things in India. We also enjoyed roasts--chicken and beef and pork--thick soups and creamy salads. And the puddings! We were spoiled for choice: jellies, custards, cakes and fruit salads. I am sure that we put on at least ten pounds each by the time we disembarked.”

The engineer from Chesington says, “I remember eating nothing but bacon and eggs for breakfast every single day of that voyage. I had never eaten bacon in India—it was simply too expensive and too posh.” The woman from Croydon said, “I took a fancy to sardines. Tinned sardines. And I ate them by the bushel on that boat. Only when I began to live in the UK did I realize that tinned sardines were the cheapest food you could buy and were considered far from luxurious.”

Yet another Anglo-Indian passenger reported that his biggest guilty pleasure was condensed milk. “There were endless cans of condensed milk on board and my great joy was to have a can all to myself which I would suck throughout the day from a hole that I punctured in its lid,” he explained. In *The Cat’s Table*, Ondaatje reports that he and his friends Cassius and Ramadhin took a fancy to condensed milk and often ‘nicked’ it to enjoy in private. Ondaatje (2011) writes:

If we could last undetected for an hour, we had a chance to plunder the laid-out breakfast on the Sun Deck, heap food onto plates, and abscond with the silver bowl of condensed milk, its spoon standing up in the center of its thickness. Then we’d climb into the tent-like atmosphere of one of the raised lifeboats and consume our ill-gotten meal. (pp. 23-24)

However, some of the Anglo-Indians I interviewed said that it was not long before the novelty of European food wore thin. “We missed our spicy curries too much and the chef began concocting *daal* (lentil soup) for us and making our steaks extra peppery.” Behind all the over-eating that occurred on board the steamers, there was the unspoken awareness of frugal days that lay ahead. “We were fully conscious of the fact that we would need to economize when we arrived in England—at least until we found stable jobs and consistent incomes,” said a radio officer from the RAF. This would explain why the novelty of shipboard cuisine made them eat gluttonously.

In an article in *The New York Times*, journalist Kate Murphy reports on Herbert and Norma Beazley of Houston, Texas, whose unusual collection left them with “five lateral file cabinets crammed with thousands of vintage ocean-liner and cruise-ship menus he bought for her during their 30-year marriage” (Murphy, 2013). Murphy’s article continues, “Dating to the late 1800s and documenting more than a century of shipboard haute cuisine, the menu collection is probably the largest (and perhaps the only one) of its kind in the world” (Murphy, 2013). Upon Beazley’s death, his wife donated the entire collection to the Mariner’s Museum in Newport News, Virginia. Such memorabilia provide a lasting record of the sort of cuisine to which Anglo-Indian immigrants were treated on their journey to their new host nation. While it was never princely, it was better than the meals to which they were accustomed in India or could afford for their first frugal decade in the UK.

#### TOURISM EN ROUTE:

Most Anglo-Indian passengers also took every available opportunity to disembark from ships when the occasion presented itself and to make tourist stops for the sheer pleasure of it. Although they did not confuse their immigrant voyages with the glamorous leisure-activity of global tourism, the need to stretch their legs on stable ground was always tempting. The woman from Croydon recalls “the hustle and bustle of Mombassa and the fascination with which we looked upon thousands of Africans for the first time.” Yet others recall strolling along the port in Aden and taking in the exoticism of Arab culture. For Ondaatje too, the *Oronsay’s* arrival in Aden was a significant milestone on the voyage. Ondaatje (2011) writes:

Aden was to be the first port of call, and during the day before our arrival, there was a flurry of letter writing. It was a tradition to have one’s mail stamped in Aden, where it could be sent back to Australia and Ceylon or onward to England. (p. 101)

Shipboard activity, after the novelty of the first few days, usually lost its allure, and, as Ondaatje (2011) puts it,

All of us were longing for the sight of land, and as morning broke we lined up along the bow to watch the ancient city approach, mirage-like out of the arc of dusty hills...it had cisterns built out of volcanic rock, a falcon market, an oasis quarter, an aquarium, a section of town given over to sail makers, and stores that contained merchandise from every corner of the globe. It would be our last footstep in the East. After Aden,

there would be just a half-day's sailing before we entered the Red Sea.  
(p. 101)

Just past the Red Sea, there would be the excitement of cruising through one of the highlights of the voyage—the passage through the Suez Canal. The civil servant from Great Missenden, like Ondaatje in *The Cat's Table*, has vivid memories, as he put it, of “sailing through the Suez Canal and disembarking to walk around Port Said.” Ondaatje's version is far more detailed. Ondaatje (2011) writes:

We approached the canal in darkness, at the stroke of midnight. A few passengers camped on the decks to take in the experience were half asleep, barely conscious of the clangs and bells that guided our ship into the narrow eye of the needle that was El Suweis.” (p. 127)

At the Suez Canal, the *Oronsay* took on an Arab harbor pilot who climbed from his barge up a rope ladder. Ondaatje (2011) explains that “he would be the one to take us into even shallower waters and adjust the angle of the ship so we could slip into the narrower canal on which we would travel the 190 kilometers to Port Said” (p. 101). So important was the passage through the Suez that passengers on the *Oronsay* were given a tea-time lecture to prepare them for it. (Ondaatje, p. 101)

#### DISEMBARKATION IN ENGLAND:

About three to four weeks later, depending on the price they had paid for the voyage—cheaper fares meant longer, more uncomfortable sailings—members of the First Wave of Anglo-Indians arrived at Tilbury or Southampton docks in the UK. While most were happy and relieved to have reached their destination safely with no casualties or mishaps, they were filled with renewed trepidation for the uncertainty of the immigrant lives that lay ahead for them. But the unique shipboard culture that the earliest migrants created aboard those steamers survived for at least a decade and a half as thousands of their compatriots followed them to Blighty. As Ondaatje (2011) writes, “We slipped into England in the dark. After all our time at sea, we were unable to witness our entrance into the country.” (p. 262) For Ondaatje, unlike the engineer from Chesington, the first glimpse of British soil did not cause them to burst into popular song. He (2011) writes:

There was the sudden smell of land. When the dawn eventually lit whatever was around us, it seemed a humble place...Everything we were passing seemed like a remnant from another industrial time—jetties, saltings, the entrances to dredged channels. We passed tankers

and mooring buoys. We searched for the heraldic ruins we had learned about, thousands of miles away in a history class in Colombo. (p. 263)

Anglo-Indian immigrants setting eyes on England for the first time after weeks at sea had similar first impressions. “There was no fanfare”, recalls a 76-year old RAF officer from Maidenhead who emigrated from Madras in 1960. “We disembarked and were left to our own devices. Those who were lucky enough to have a relative precede them to the UK had a reception committee. Most of us walked out alone, nervous and bewildered, into our new lives as Englishmen and women. But we would remember our voyage forever. Scenes of it are embedded in my consciousness and when I look back at the success I have made of my life here, I remember those weeks of uncertainty and fear, masked by the merry-making of song, dance and indulgent eating.”

Ondaatje (2011) too ends his account of his immigrant voyage to England with these words: “Our ship gave four short blasts...and we began to angle gently against the dock at Tilbury. The *Oronsay*, which had been for weeks like a great order around us, finally rested. Further upriver, deeper inland from this eastern cut of the Thames, were Greenwich, Richmond, and Henley. But we stopped now, finished with engines” (p. 263).

Unlike Ondaatje, their arrival on English soil did not mean that Anglo-Indians were finished with engines. Indeed, for many males, it was engines that would provide them with their livelihood in their new nation for they were able to satisfy a demand for engineers that had been created by the human loss sustained by Britain in World War II. They were, however, finished with long-distance voyaging, for, in the case of hundreds of them, it would be many decades before they would be able to afford a return passage to India. And, at any case, by the time they were able to come up with the funds needed for a trip to the land of their birth, civilian airline traffic had shortened their journeys and robbed it of literary romance.

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