

SOUTH AFRICA-INDIA TIES WILL INCREASE SHIPPING OPPORTUNITIES

"*Send a gunboat!*" was a Victorian response to a foreign crisis. While that may still be the response in certain quarters, "*gunboat diplomacy*" now has a different and more peaceful form.

The call by the Indian destroyer **Mumbai** was a prelude to the recent visit to South Africa by the Indian prime minister. Trade and other agreements, we are told, will follow to boost economic ties with the sub-continent, especially as several million South Africans can trace Indian roots within a generation or two.

Already, India has considerable industrial capability with a capacity for further growth. An Indian mariner told me that his country's economy could expand with perhaps more vigor than that demonstrated by the Chinese economy in recent years.

The "*revolution*" that loosened communist shackles, swung China into the 21st century and catapulted its economic growth was as surprising as its rapidity.

Certainly that growth continues to propel shipping at a merry rate, despite maritime folks looking for any omen of a downturn. However, some observers believe that Indian industrial development will maintain the current remarkable shipping boom that has eclipsed even the post-war highs that saw phenomenal successes in shipping.

Given its western banking systems, existing ties with Europe, and the business acumen of its people, India could be a greater success story than China, enhanced perhaps by either cultural or religious changes within that country.

"*Imagine the impact,*" my Indian friend confided, "*that even a limited upliftment of the masses would have. If one percent of the lower end of the social spectrum could buy a radio or a bicycle, there would be a demand for millions of radios, bicycles...*" and he listed other examples of low-level products, the demand for which could unleash a tsunami of economic growth.

Although infrastructural inadequacies may be a handicap, shipping routes to India will become busier. Already 16 shipping lines link South Africa with Mumbai, although only four make direct calls, the rest using trans-shipment hubs at Singapore or in the Arabian Gulf. Stolt tankers with their striking yellow hulls also cross the Indian Ocean with cargoes of petro-chemical products.

Indian interests in steel and vehicle manufacturing in South Africa is very prominent, and further investment in the country is a certainty.

Ships on the Durban-India trade are not a new phenomenon, particularly as local Indian ex-patriates provided a significant demand for passenger berths. For years, **Andrew Weir Shipping** ran several vessels on that route, including **Gujarat**, **Luxmi** and **Kathiawar** – the latter vessel was wrecked on the Mozambique coast in 1937. From 1934, their **Isipingo**, **Incomati** and **Inchanga** also made the run across the Indian Ocean. Although **Incomati** was sunk by the German submarine U508 during World War 2, the other two continued on the trade until 1964 when the Indian stance against apartheid curtailed both cargo and passenger services, and the ships were scrapped.

British India Line (BI), an icon of British trade with the sub-continent, also ran services between India and South Africa. In the post-war years, their **Amra** – a wartime hospital ship - and **Aronda** ran to India from Durban where both ships were converted from coal to oil burners in 1951. The fine steam turbine vessels **Karanja** – the second vessel to bear the name of the island that shelters Mumbai from the south-west monsoon - and **Kampala** ran to India with 60 first class passengers, 180 in second class, 75 so-called "intermediate" passengers, and over 2000 on deck. Quite a crowd for a 145-metre vessel that needed 26 lifeboats of which 20 were double-stacked.

Political considerations and the resultant trade sanctions were not the only headaches for operators on the South Africa-India route. Cargo was usually in short supply, and Indian travelers found the voyage between Durban and Mumbai via Mozambique, Dar es Salaam and Mombasa too time-consuming when jet aircraft could convey them to their destination within hours.

Thus dwindling numbers of passengers as well as shrinking cargo manifests led to BI withdrawing **Kampala** in 1971, and the South Africa-India service ceased with **Karanja's** final sailing from Durban in May 1976.

Modern shipping links to India are different. You won't find passengers on the containerships, break-bulk vessels and bulkers that follow the course of the dhows, sailing before the south-west monsoon to Mumbai, or heading for the Bengali coast.

Perhaps larger ships on the trade to India or more frequent services will indicate that trade is flourishing.

A neighbour to my childhood home was a shipping man who won my undying respect as he often brought photographs, postcards or calendars of ships to the young ship fanatic across the road.

At Christmas one year, he gave me an **Ellerman Line** calendar, depicting paintings of twelve of their ships. A rather bland portrayal of ***City of Port Elizabeth*** sailing from London, and a garish image of another of the fleet off Gibraltar were among the images that folk would stare at for a month at a time. Of them all, a most evocative image remains with me - an Ellerman freighter of the City of Manchester class (I forget her name) lay in the Hooghli River at Kolkuta. Loaded with gunny bales, several bumboats were paddled by Indian boatmen towards the vessel; other boats lay alongside the freighter as cargo was hoisted aboard by the ship's derricks. Although the painting portrayed a hive of activity, there was a leisurely air about that scene.

Could any artist capture the same atmosphere as he paints today's containerships, dwarfed by huge gantries, discharging containers carrying cargoes generated by the visit of the Indian prime minister?
