

VOYAGE TO AFRICA DIARY

Gijubhai

Translated by Mamata Pandya

Original Gujarati *Rojnishi* Author Gijubhai

Shri Dakshinamurti Balsahitya *Chalo Pravase Granthmala* (Travel Series) Editors: Gijubhai and Taraben

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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Gijubhai set sail for Africa in 1907. He was a young man leaving his own home and country for a distant and unknown land. He had no fixed job waiting for him, nor any clear idea about what he would do there, except that he needed to earn money to support himself and his family. Later he would write about his initial thoughts and motivations that propelled him to explore unknown and uncharted territories—geographic as well as professional and personal, and also share some of his experiences and adventures in East Africa.

This is the diary of his twelve-day voyage from Indian shores towards a new continent. It describes his experiences on board the ship, his initial apprehensions, peppered with excitement, memorable events, and fellow passengers.

This translation of *Rojnishi* (diary) is based on the edition which was re-edited and republished in 1982. There seems to be some confusion about the dates of the entries which are given as 1-2-1928 to 12-2-1928. It is possible that these were rewritten later based on the original notes that Gijubhai may have kept. But when reading these notes one is, even today, transported on board the ship *Somali*, sharing each day of the voyage with Gijubhai.

1

1-2-28

It has been one hour since the boat departed.

There lies the edge of my country, the edge of Hindustan, the edge of a beloved land, Motherland! I bow to you—Namaskar, Namaskar, Namaskar—I bow to you!

My family and my friends must have all returned home. There were tears in their eyes. For such a long time/so long they were waving their hands and handkerchiefs. Parting is so hard. The tears still fall from my eyes.

2

2-2-28

When I wake up I see that there is water all around! Where did they go—the coast, the land and the buildings? The sky above and water below. Unending ocean. And on the water our steamer, like the daughter of the sea. She dances with the waves. Surrounded by the wondrous creation of nature—ocean and sky. And in the middle this amazing human creation—the goddess that rides the sea!

3-2-28

Lemon is useful to prevent seasickness. I have two or three lemons every day. I had brought these with me in ample quantity.

I did not like to eat for the first two days. This is my first sea voyage. But now I am eating *shaak* (vegetables) and *puri*. I get hungry three times a day. I am able to digest it. My companion is tucking in four times a day. Who knows, it may become six times in a few days! He is comfortable. He is a seasoned traveller. This is the third time he is going abroad.

*

Our steamer is called *Somali*. The one that crossed us yesterday was called *Uganda*. They say that tomorrow we will meet *Masai*. What strange names! But that is how they will be wont it? We are on our way to Africa. The Somali people, the country of Uganda, the Masai tribe, these are all from there. Had we been heading for Europe, we may have seen other names like Birkenhead, Iceland, Cumberland and Wilson.

Our steamboat is a cargo ship. It plies between India and Africa. Its first port of call will be Mombasa. From there, Zanzibar. Then on to Dar es salaam, Delgoabe, Durban and slowly all the way down to Cape Town. Some steamers go directly from Mumbai to Durban.

*

They say that the real fun of sea travel starts after five or six days. The appetite returns and the dizziness disappears so it becomes a pleasure to walk around. I have already become comfortable.

The steamer has a daily routine. Every morning the entire steamer is swept and then washed. Washing is important to prevent the spread of disease. The habits of our fellow Indians leave a lot to be cleaned up. They throw banana peels and left over food all over. They are not even ashamed to spit here and there.

4

4-2-28

There was a magnificent sunrise today. I have seen the sun rise from behind mountains; and also the sun coming up from behind the clouds; but today I witnessed the Sun God arising from the ocean. As if it was emerging freshly bathed and washed clean. It was as if the ocean was offering up a gift to creation: as if an ascetic had appeared from its depth— grand, brilliant, stupendous. From now on I will wake up early and go the deck to witness this awesome sight again and again. I will tell my friends to wake me up early.

*

Today is the 'birthday' of our steamer *Somali*. The ship had been decorated. All the ropes are aflutter with coloured buntings and a new flag is flying in the breeze. The crew of the ship is celebrating. *Somali* is entering her twelfth year today. *Somali* rides the waves with full steam.

5

5-2-28

Shantilal has not been feeling well for the last two days. He is rather soft; even a mild fever and headache can make him tearful. Despite his age, he calls out in distress for his father. Someone like him should not venture abroad!

The doctor says there is nothing to worry. It is seasickness. He will feel better in a couple of days.

But Shantilal says "I want to go back. Stop the steamer coming from the other side and put me on it."

How can a thirty-year-old man talk like this? But I have to keep his spirits up. I tell him "Ok I will talk to the Captain. We will make some arrangement." Just wait till we reach our destination. I will really tease him about this!

The Captain is a good family man. He mingles with us all. Yesterday he had invited me to tea with him.

I told him about Shantilal and his plight and he roared with laughter. He said, "You must show me this Shantilal!" I took him to our place and introduced him to Shantilal.

The Captain told him; "Look, whichever ship passes us now, I will put you on that."

By then Shantilal had come to his senses. He also started laughing and greeted the Captain: "Thank you Captain Sir. I am grateful."

*

In Africa the currency is cents; one anna equals six cents. Today one passenger showed me some cents. He drew my attention to a special feature; there is a hole at the centre of every coin. Maybe the local people keep the coins carefully by stringing them together!

*

Last night I was talking to an India passenger who was familiar with Africa. He told me that the dances of the local people are something to see. The dances are called Gomo. I am already eagerly looking forward to seeing these.

*

Today I am feeling low. I am missing home. Then I tell myself that if I feel like this in just a few days, how will I stay in Africa? I do not feel like doing anything. I did not even feel like eating

today. I am just lying down. Even reading does not distract me. I do not feel like making notes, nor even like shaving. The sea is choppy and the ship's horn hurts my ears.

*

I have made friends with Mr Trivedi. He has been a bit unwell the last two days. Today I gave him some *hingashtak* (digestive powder) and he is feeling better. He refuses to take the doctor's medicine.

*

I feel sorry for one of the lady passengers. Her washerman husband has called her to join him. The person who was to accompany her missed the boat and she had to travel alone. But we have decided that from tomorrow we will keep her with us and look after her food, and help her in any other way. How can we leave her without support?

*

I found out today that there is a snake charmer with us. Imagine that! Our people are amazing. Going to Africa to catch snakes! He started his snake show on the ship today, but the Captain stopped him.

Our afternoon routine is interesting these days. I have made a lot of friends. They are all so different. But we come together to play chess or Bizique.

Some still go around with a long face and do not join the games. That's all right. They are all good people.

But how much time can one spend on games? I am glad that I brought with me a couple of novels. These are good companions on travels.

*

Our carpenter companions eat the food they are carrying with them and even drink the water that they have brought in large cans. I wonder why such people are undertaking the travails of going to foreign places. But I think that soon they will also start eating the sailor's fare.

Lavji mistry has had an upset stomach. The ship's doctor has been giving him medicines for two days. The simple man has accepted that he should start eating the food on the ship.

It is surprising to find that there are separate sections on the ship for different nationalities, regions and classes of passengers. Some even avoid the areas which they suspect are cleaned by the sweepers, for fear of being contaminated. How can they assume who is cleaning the ship?

Most of the passengers on the ship are traders, workers and clerks. One is a teacher, one a landowner and others have

varied trades. There are also a lot of labourers. There are a lot of our people in Africa, but most of them are from the working or middle class. I feel that the higher classes should also go and settle there.

*

Every night now we have a *bhajan* session. There is sadhu with us. Our sadhus are also venturing abroad: not to earn a living, but to sing *bhajans* and beg for alms. So be it. We are getting to hear a lot of *bhajans*. The singing goes on till two past midnight. We almost forget whether we are on board a ship or on land, whether we are at home or on our way to foreign lands.

6

6-2-28

The electricity machine was out of order so yesterday there was no light at all on the entire steamer. All the work came to a halt in the pitch darkness.

I went to take a look at the ship's engine. At home the engines in mills and other places are horizontally placed. Here the cylinders and engines of the steamship are placed vertically. They are right at the bottom of the ship. There are large funnels for ventilation from the air above.

Last night the *Gengis Khan* crossed us. I awoke suddenly when the horn sounded. The *Gengis Khan* was approaching from afar. I stood there looking at it as it neared. I thought that it looked like a goddess upon the sea. It was lit up with so many lights. Like a goddess out to play the *garba*.

When the two steamships crossed both of them sounded their horns, in greeting to each other.

The passengers on *Gengis Khan* had gathered on the deck, as we also had. The ship was too far for them to hear us, yet we called out loudly to them: "Give our greetings to Hindustan." "Bow on our behalf to our Mother Bharat." "We are all well. Ram Ram!"

The *Gengis Khan* grew more distant. For a long time we all stayed up, watching the receding lights, and then we slept.

I did not sleep well that night. I was missing my family and friends. What must they be saying as they thought about me? Would they be missing me too?

*

Today another steamship crossed us. As it was daylight it was fun to look at it through the binoculars. Binoculars are very handy on a ship. They make it fun to scan far and wide.

*

Yesterday and today were very busy. A carpenter whose berth is next to mine has fallen ill. He suddenly developed high fever. He was young and strong but this was his first sea voyage. As his fever rose, he must have panicked. In his delirium he kept saying "Now what will happen to me? Now what will happen to me? Please someone take me home, take me back to my country."

Ten or twelve of us Indians have been with him constantly for the last two days. At first the ship's doctor had given up hope for his recovery, but now here seems to be some hope.

I have finally got a little time to myself today. I have the leisure to write a few lines.

*

There was another incident in the last two days. The elderly wife of one of the sailors died. I found out for the first time what happens when someone dies on a ship. The sailor was a Hindu. After the ritual of touching her right toe with some embers, the body of the deceased was immersed in the sea.

The ship's crew had gathered. The black flag of mourning was hoisted for a while. All stood in silence as the crane gradually lowered the old lady's body into the water. We all chanted the name of Ram.

The mortal remains of the lady disappeared into the deep water, even as the steamship sailed on and away.

The sky is overcast today. Everyone is saying that it may rain heavily. I have written a few letters to my friends. They will be posted when the ship docks at Lamu.

The postage stamps will be bought once we reach Lamu.

*

This is the first time that I am writing letters like this. I never seem to tire of writing. My eyes have tears when I write to my mother. As I write to Harjivanbhai, I can't stop laughing. For Ramjee my letters are full of descriptions. He likes those a lot.

Yesterday there was a quarrel among the Punjabis. They disturbed the entire ship and as per the ship's rules they were also punished. I wrote about this to Kanji.

To my friend Shankarlal I wrote about how our cooking stoves are next to each other, and how everyone gets together to cook and eat. He will be disgusted at this.

*

It has been foggy since this morning. We cannot see the sun, nor the blue sky and light clouds. We cannot even see the water of the ocean. On the ship also, the funnels and ropes are hidden from sight. We can just about see the person standing close by. The steamer ploughs on. Hat's off to the Captain to be able to make way in this situation.

But it is fun to see the fog. When could one see something like this back home? It is an amazing sight.

The fog lifted after eight hours. The air is fresh, the sun is out. The sea seems to be leaping. Everyone moves with agility. Everything looks good.

*

My pen had run out of ink. I can get a new bottle only when I get ashore. None of my friends have any ink. Now I will have to write my diary with pencil.

7

8-2-28

Yesterday was a terrible day. Even my diary could have been left incomplete!

As we had feared, the clouds gathered ominously and it grew quite dark. Suddenly there was thunder and the rain starting pouring down. The wind grew wild. Huge waves smashed everywhere and *Somali* started rocking. It was heaving so hard that it was impossible to stand. Even while sitting one was pushed from one's seat. Things were rolling around crazily. Even the trunks needed to be tied down.

The rain grew heavier and the storm raged. It was a serious situation. The Captain was brave; he controlled the ship even in this severe storm, and continued onwards. What a storm it was. The beautiful sunrise and sunset, the clear blue skies, the

warming sunshine, the vast ocean, as immense as the sky, it was as if all this just disappeared. The steamer was flung up and down on the mountainous waves.

The passengers had their hearts in their mouths. Everyone clung with all their might to their seats. Who could even think of eating or drinking?

It seemed as if the cyclonic wind and rain would never abate. Even the seasoned travellers said that they had never before seen a storm such as this. What a storm!

Once in a while there came such a gigantic wave that it seemed as if the ship would overturn. The spray from the waves was strong.

We were all confined to the lower storage holds of the ship. Only the sailors and the crew were permitted to move on the upper levels. Ten or fifteen of us obtained permission to go to the deck on condition that we would help with the tasks. The lower areas rang with the cries of the "Dear God" "He Allah" and other cries of fear. No one would eat or drink. Our heads were spinning and our life was on the edge.

But since this morning, the clouds have started scattering, the wind has dropped to a breeze and the turbulent sea has calmed. Around two o'clock this afternoon the sun appeared. It is four o'clock now, our steamer is playfully dancing along the ocean waves. We are all full of joy. Today is feast day. The officers are having a dance tonight. And we are going to have a *Satyanarayan katha*.

The air is pleasant. The Seychelle Island is seen from afar. The sea is somewhat rough again. The steamer is rocking and somewhat unsteady. The waters in this part are difficult. The passengers call it Sicotoro. But having gone through the storm just recently, this turbulence seems minor.

Today while bathing with the sea water, when I soaped myself, my hair got stuck and completely entangled. It needed a little fresh water to set them straight.

The sky two nights ago was unforgettable. The diamond studded sky looked incredible. The stars sparkled like the Diwali lights of heaven. After many days of cloud-shrouded skies, the sight was even more special. I spent most of last night lying on the deck and observing the stars and constellations.

*

There is an Indian barber on the ship. I wondered how he could keep a steady hand amidst the rolling of the ship. I was afraid that a slip of his hand could cause cuts. But yesterday I really needed a shave, so I went to him. He was amazing. It was as if he was shaving on solid ground! The barber was brave and skilled.

*

I have made friends with a Eurasian passenger in second class. Today I spent a lot of time in his cabin. I have borrowed an English novel from him. He is a very good man.

*

Today I have written a lot in my diary. There is still a lot more to write. But this is enough for now. I want to go and see my Eurasian friend. He will go on and on about the dirty habits, superstitions and quarrels of my Indian brothers. There is some truth in what he says, but he does exaggerate, and that I do not like.

8

9-2-28

Today the vegetable got burned, so I had to make do with only *puri* and tea for my morning meal.

These days our meals plan is as under:

Morning snack: Tea, *puri* and vegetable

Afternoon meal: *Khichdi* and vegetable, or *sheero* and vegetable; sometimes *bhajiya*.

Evening snack: Tea, *mamra*, sometimes cooked *sev* and *papad*.

Night meal: Tea, *puri* and vegetable.

Despite having four meals a day, one is hungry the next morning. Four of us friends cook together. We have set up our own little kitchen. A fifth friend spends the whole day making chutney, which we finish off in four meals, so fresh chutney is made every day.

*

Lamu port is visible in the distance. They say that there is an old firm of a trader from Bhavnagar there.

*

Yesterday I weighed myself. I have gained five pounds in just the days I have been on the ship. I think by the time I disembark, I would have gained fifteen pounds! I will transform from being a mouse to a bandicoot!

*

I have learned to shave myself. I take the razor and practice when I can. My friend who used to laugh at my unshaven appearance does not laugh any more.

I spend the afternoon playing chess with him. Evenings I stroll on the deck. And knit my neckerchief. I remain there from sunset until the stars come out.

*

For the last two days we have been seeing flying fish. Just in front of our ship, there are thousands of them leap high in the air and fall back into the water. Some of them even land on the deck. The sailors are happy to collect them. When the sailors cook fish the whole ship smells. It gives me a headache.

*

I have made two Punjabi friends. They make *parathas* on a big stove. They give us one every day; when give them some *sheero*.

*

We have started seeing some shore birds flying over the water. We should be reaching the shore in a couple of days.

*

I thought that as I was going to Africa, I should try and learn a bit of their language. I have this afternoon started to learn some words. I think I can remember a few.

Lete=bring *Hinjo*=come *Maji*=water *Hapa*=here
Khilele=confusion

Chukuva=take it away *Bana*=boss *Upesi*=quick

I like learning words of a new language. I think that when we go ashore I will buy a grammar book and learn the language properly.

There are also some young children on the ship. One man has a six-month-old daughter. Ramshanker Mehtaji has with him three boys and a girl. I have made friends with them. Sometimes I play cards with them.

These children know the Swahili language. They are going to Africa for the second time. I am learning some Swahili from them. I tell them stories and they teach me new words. Yesterday I learned these words from them.

Shamba=farm *Simba*=lion *Ngmiya*=camel *Kunda*=donkey

*

Tomorrow we reach Mombasa. Today some of the Indian brothers will have a *Satyanarayan puja*: for the safe landing of all. We have found a priest, who fortunately has the book of the *katha*. He is going to Africa to earn a livelihood as a performer of religious ceremonies. It takes all kinds!

*

Eighteen hours to go before we see the port. Time to start packing. Everyone on the steamer has been packed and ready for the last two days. Some are already in the clothes that they will go ashore in.

*

We had heard of people who travel on trains without a ticket. Today when the tickets were being checked it was discovered that there were two people who did not have a ticket. Amazing! They could hardly have been thrown into the water. Now they will be dropped at Mombasa. There is talk that they will be tried in court there.

9

10-2-28

There is a joyous atmosphere on the ship today. We will see the port today. The sailors are running around. The passengers are getting their luggage ready. There is excitement all round that soon we will step ashore.

It is afternoon. Far, far away one can see the shore. The excitement mounts. I am eager to pay my respects to mother earth again.

The ship is slowly nearing the shore. The shore of Africa is verdant like a green garden. The ship passes by the coast lined with coconut trees. The rays of the setting sun fall on the water. Mombasa nears

People have gathered on the shore to meet the incoming passengers. I will stop writing now. I have to take my luggage up. More notes after we touch the shore.

10

12-2-28

We have reached the shore. Everyone is speaking the nasal but sweet sounding Swahili. The local boys have come on board. They have carried our luggage and put it in smaller boats.

We have undergone our medical test, and have been given permission to disembark.

Some of us got off with the passengers for Mombasa. Those who were going on stayed on the ship. Parting was difficult. We parted after many good byes. We waved our handkerchiefs till we reached the shore.

Such happiness to step on land at last. It was like returning to our mother's lap again!

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