

# Introduction

We are thrilled to present this humble volume of writings on the Indians in Shanghai, a city that shimmers with a multi-faceted history, and can be considered the crucible of modern China. Tracing the tales of how Indians of all stripes and communities were—and are—entangled with Shanghai has been an extraordinary journey. Like all the best voyages, this one is complex, nuanced, crammed with astonishing discoveries, and has no ending.

To bring you these stories, our team and our contributors have collectively worked as hard as we know how. We have drawn deeply on the knowledge of experts. We have transcribed hours of our own lengthy interviews with people who once lived in Shanghai and are now flung all over the globe—Sausalito, Ann Arbor, Mumbai, Washington D.C., Hong Kong, San Francisco, to name a few. We have collated data from Shanghai's newspapers of that time; we have travelled to neighbouring Yiwu and Keqiao, where large Indian communities presently reside. We have trawled Shanghai's antique markets looking for old postcards, we have chased files, books, photographs, and old diaries in libraries and archives in Shanghai, Mumbai, Hong Kong, Palo Alto, Ottawa, and New Delhi. We have gotten lucky, with people contacting us out of the blue bearing family photos they have dug out, photos stashed all these years in their deceased parents' boxes. We have cornered elderly uncles and asked them about their ancestors' Shanghai past.

This book is a pathbreaking collaboration between our Chinese and Indian editors: Mishi Saran, who wrote a Silk Road travelogue following in the footsteps of the great Chinese Buddhist monk Xuanzang, and who lived in Shanghai from 2006-2014, and Dr. Zhang Ke of Shanghai's Fudan University, who is working on a book on China-India cultural relations in modern times. Both editors are passionate about the city of Shanghai. We have taken a conscious decision to work in a bilingual medium, with a highly

regarded publisher from Shanghai, for these stories belong in this city.

Once we started looking, it seemed there were Shanghai connections to India everywhere. Even the word 'Bund' comes from the Hindi word *bundh*, which means 'embankment.' Such meshing was evident too in old street names. Between 1843-1915, there were ten streets in Shanghai named after Indian cities, all located in the northeast part of the International Settlement.

The connections ranged far and wide, whether they were related to an insalubrious war or literature. On June 17, 1842, the second Madras Native Infantry joined troops sent on eight transports as reinforcements to the British forces gathered at Woosong harbour. Two ships were to sail up the 'then little known Wangpoo river' to ascertain if they might meet with resistance from Chinese forces. The British custom of importing Indians to do their heavy military lifting or police work found its zenith in Shanghai.

India's Nobel laureate, the poet Rabindranath Tagore, travelled to Shanghai no less than three times. The multifarious links even snaked down generations, as we see from the history of the old Mumbai/Hong Kong firm of Abdoolally Ebrahim and Co. and that of the South Indian diplomats, the Menon family.

We examine how Shanghai's robust contingent of Sikh garrisons and policemen patrolling the streets of Shanghai became a micro-arena for world politics. Among their ranks, the tensions played out between men whose loyalties lay with the British rulers of India and those who sought freedom from colonial rule. The heart-stirring story of the murder of Buddha Singh, told by Dr. Cao Yin, perfectly illustrates this conflict.

Nirmola Sharma's article on the presence of the Indian National Army in Shanghai shows how a

portion of the upheavals that were independent India's labour pains unfolded in Shanghai, making this city a stage for the creation of two of the world's biggest modern nations: Both India and China were fighting for the same thing—the right to define their own national identities, free of any foreign subjugation.

In parallel, Indians living in Shanghai were affected by modern China's own political waves, with the worker strikes and the burgeoning communist movement rippling through Shanghai. One of the cotton mills connected to the Tata family in our chapter on Parsis saw several strikes. Sam Tata, a Shanghai-born Parsi photographer, actually captured through his lens aspects of the city as the Communists entered Shanghai. It would be safe to say that most Indians here at that time had some direct experience of the creation of a new China. Taken all together, what we have in Shanghai are strands of two ancient civilisations that were accidental witnesses to the birth of each other's modernity.

It is no coincidence, after all, that the Communist Party was founded in 1921 in Shanghai, and from the very beginning the CCP held high an anti-imperial and an anti-feudal mandate. The seeds for the workers strikes that flared through Shanghai's factories were at least partly sown by the foreigners themselves.

Over the past 200 years, Indians have put down roots in Shanghai, bought land, built houses, created cemeteries to bury their dead. They have made Chinese friends, married into the Chinese community, and suffered through a Japanese occupation, along with the rest of the city's inhabitants.

Shanghai became part of the psyche of all those who passed through the city. For many who were born here, it was the first home they ever knew and for some of them, a home they yearned for all their lives, like the elderly Parsi women in Mumbai in their eighties who still meet and talk about their youth

in Shanghai. Shanghai gifted many Indians their very life, their wives, their fortunes, and their careers, whether it was the young Parsi boy Dady Mehta who met and studied intricate piano techniques with his beloved Hungarian teacher, or Jehangir Bejan Tata who met his Russian wife while singing opera.

Most foreigners had to leave Shanghai in the years leading up to, and following the Communist victory over the Guomindang in 1949, but many came streaming back to China as soon as they were able to. Not least was the official visit of the Indian People's Theatre Association who were behind the efforts to hold a massive Indian Film Week in 1955. Raj Kapoor's film *Awara* was first screened in China in 1955 as part of that effort, writes Dr. Krista Van Fleit, and she shows how China remains addicted to Indian film.

The Indians who were born in Shanghai, or spent happy childhoods here, also came back as soon as they were able: They walked through the streets of Shanghai, looked for their old houses, their old haunts, their old playgrounds.

Plenty of Indians with no previous connection have also flooded back into Shanghai in droves, for many of the old reasons: for the market, for the money, to make a life, spurred by a taste for adventure. This time, we meet as equals: We come from an independent, ascending India, into a China that is firmly in charge of its own destiny.

Just like before, fortunes are made and lost and made again. Indians have returned to Shanghai, bought houses, married locals, found a calling and stayed. And so the great cycle continues. We could argue that Indians are merely reverting to an old habit of coming to Shanghai. Shanghai, in turn, is discovering anew how much Indians are a part of the city's bones.

Let us not forget that the evolution of the mesmerising, modern city of Shanghai, with all her layers and ghosts, is a story that is soaked in blood and wreathed in the smoke of gunpowder; a story that was

first floated on the Opium War of 1839-1842, the direct result of a lucrative opium trade that fuelled the addiction and suffering of millions of Chinese in Shanghai and elsewhere. When Commissioner Lin Zexu confiscated 20,000 chests of opium from foreign traders in Canton in 1839, in an attempt to finally extinguish an illegal market, we must understand that a full 7,000 of these chests belonged to Indian traders.

Any account of India-China trade connections would be incomplete without the Sassoons—a name so entwined with present-day Mumbai that it seems native to that city.

Even as we present in our book an intricate profile of Victor Sassoon as a daring entrepreneur, we must remember that to the Chinese, Sassoon was often an extortionist thug, a "crafty old scoundrel," a landowner who laid down stringent conditions to his less prosperous renters, a canny speculator who diversified into interior decoration and insurance and carpentry and banking.

The original Sassoon House plot of land on the Bund was bought in 1877, and in 1925 on the same plot, the Cathay Hotel, with its signature gleaming copper spire, went up. It was to the Chinese—some of them alive even today—a bitter symbol of foreign oppression, exploitation, and economic aggression.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the great trading firms with a foot in India had shifted away from opium, into real estate; they returned to cotton and other markets. Still, we must acknowledge the role Indians have played in prolonging the suffering of Shanghai's local citizens, even as we rightly exalt in the great adventure Indians have been privileged to join, thronging the streets of China's most enchanting city.

We hope our book represents a small step in that clarified direction. Thank you, Shanghai!