

# Chapter 1

## The Day It Rained Gold

*April 14, 1944*

On the morning of the fourteenth of April, the SS Imperial River suddenly caught fire at the Victoria Docks. Except for a few people at the docks, the residents of the city had known nothing about the ship's arrival, for it was neither glamorous nor carried any important visitor. It was just an ordinary cargo ship like many that plied the seas daily. The fire spread quickly because of flammable materials that hadn't yet been unloaded, which included raw cotton bales, resins, and cooking oils. When the fire reached the ammunition, the flames were already visible from afar, and a loud explosion alerted people on the shore, who rushed to try to extinguish the fire. However, fires spread rapidly when combustible materials are near and burn with greater intensity as they reach high temperatures. Within minutes, the fire became so intense that anyone attempting to approach it was severely burned. Then the repeated explosions began, which disrupted the busy docks.

Soon, after the inferno on the SS Imperial River, fire and explosions erupted on multiple ships. Sparks flew across the entire dock, looking like fireworks from a distance. Some of these sparks and burning fragments landed on nearby buildings, causing people to run helter-skelter. Offices and warehouses emptied out as many moved to a safer spot from where they watched the fire and explosions, wondering what unusual event was unfolding. Soon, right in front of their eyes, the SS Imperial River split in two. Other boats followed—they tilted, broke apart, and sank. The noise was deafening; the periodic explosions made the docks look like a war zone. Debris and embers projected from various ships flew about in the air.

The SS Imperial River carried a cargo of gold bars, torpedoes, and other goods. The gold bars were stored in multiple crates, stacked

on the torpedoes. When the torpedoes exploded, the bars were ejected into the air as well, and they reached as far as Colaba, Fountain, and across the docks. A significant number of gold bars were shot out for over an hour, all beautiful, Swiss-marked bars. The markings were familiar to Indians, as India has long had a fondness for Swiss-marked gold, and a considerable portion of the world's gold was in private hands in India.

The explosions spread to thirteen ships. Most were cargo ships, while a few were landing craft of the Royal Navy. As these vessels caught fire, they released smoke and noise, and debris flew everywhere. Among the burning boats were four ships loaded with grain, which had been docked for quite some time. Another ship had recently been loaded with large logs of prized Burmese teak, considered the hardest teak in the world, resistant to insects and water. In anticipation of a counterattack against the Japanese, the forested regions along the India-Burma border had been cleared, and a few trees with massive trunks, over six feet in girth, that had been growing for hundreds of years had been cut down. Their logs had been loaded as shipments to England. The explosions sent some of these heavy logs hurtling across the city, injuring many and causing the instant deaths of three persons, in addition to extensive damage to some houses when they landed with force.

The area near the docks trembled due to the explosions, causing a few structures to collapse. Glass windows shattered in many buildings. Godowns and offices on the dock premises also caught fire. Records and materials were burned.

The fire was finally brought under control after two days of effort, because there were no ships left to burn. Some of the captains who were still on their vessels or could reach them had moved their boats away as quickly as they could.

Since the fire spread instantly, filling the docks and ships with smoke, many sailors suffocated to their deaths, and only a few managed to jump to safety. Along with the deaths, numerous sailors, loaders, and support staff were injured and incapacitated. City residents who were slow to evacuate from collapsing buildings suffered injuries from flying debris and glass shards.

Jayant Patil, who had come to work early that day, just as he did on many occasions, was a bit late to vacate his office. By that time, the fire was burning at multiple points on the ships, and in a few of the shore establishments, the explosions were deafening. He found Badell-Smith, the port's harbormaster, standing on the shore, giving frantic directions to the scurrying crowd. When he saw Jayant, he instructed, "Patil, you guide the Bombay City Fire Brigade and do not carry out your normal work today." Patil, therefore, obediently set out to guide the fire tenders and assist them in setting up their stations.

## 2

Bombay became a part of British India in 1661 when King Charles I received it as part of a dowry after his marriage to the Portuguese princess, Catherine Braganza. The king quickly sold it to the East India Company. The Company established a busy trading city and moved most of its offices from Surat, then India's largest port, to this new city. As a result, Bombay was one of the first regions of India to come under exclusive British control. Soon, a cathedral and a prosperous British colony were built here, along with the expansion of the port and the construction of warehouses.

In the nineteenth century, Bombay evolved into a major textile manufacturing hub. It also handled most cargo, both incoming and outgoing. Soon, it became the financial center of India.

The city has a series of small hills along its coast, which were the abode of dangerous pirates who operated along the sea route from Surat to Malabar in southern India, and frequently targeted the Maratha and Portuguese ships in the area. After the British settled in Bombay and took control, they fought naval battles against the Portuguese and the Marathas and became the dominant force in these sea routes. Subsequently, they also successfully ended the rampant piracy. The name of the place where the pirates operated, however, remained. These hills, which still offer a panoramic view of the Indian Ocean, are known as the Malabar Hills.

The Malabar Hills region developed into a wealthy neighborhood with large estates and luxury bungalows. British officials, including

the British Governor, lived here, along with some of the wealthiest Indian business families, and many native princes who owned estates.

Bombay, a lively city that grew into its current shape by the merger of multiple islands, is a sprawling, linear metropolis. Busy docks are situated in North Bombay, where the sounds of cargo and trade fill the air. The quiet, primarily residential, Malabar Hills are located in the south, running parallel to the docks. Several corporate and banking headquarters, with their striking architecture, are primarily located in the southernmost part of the city, which offer a grand display of the city's financial strength.

Nestled between these two distinct areas, there are large cotton mills and factories standing alongside slums and ghettos, which are symbols of the city's industrial strength.

The western suburbs bustle with activity. They form the center of the thriving Hindi film industry and are home to many movie studios and lively residential neighborhoods. The eastern suburbs comprise large residential areas for Bombay's middle-class, support major industries, and have extensive industrial zones on their outskirts.

To connect the various parts of the city with each other, two separate suburban rail services operate smoothly—one from East Bombay to the South, and the other from West Bombay to the South. Together, they enable quick travel across the city. Along with this, a reliable bus network operates at a high frequency through all other areas. The famous red Bombay buses, many of which are charming double-decker models, are recognized as India's most efficient public transportation system. They represent the city's spirit and energy.

Because of the location of the offices, many employees would commute to the south in the morning and the north in the evening, creating rush-hour traffic. Additionally, because the cotton mills operated in shifts round the clock with different schedules of trains, and buses, the area remained generally busy.

That same day, as this was taking place, a historic event was unfolding in Moirang Kangla, Manipur, which lies in eastern India, approximately 1,400 miles away from Victoria Docks as the crow flies. This event would soon shake India and the British rule. Around midday, as ships burned in Bombay and gold was flying everywhere, Colonel Shaukat A. Malik of the Indian National Army raised the flag of Arzi-Hukumat, the Provisional Government of Free India, for the first time on the Indian mainland and in the presence of a large crowd of cheering people. Large-scale celebrations followed.

At that time, the Indian National Army was fighting alongside the Japanese on the eastern border of India to liberate India from British rule. Earlier, on October 21, 1943, Subhas Chandra Bose had announced the Provisional Government of Free India and declared war as a sovereign nation against the British Empire via its armed forces, the Indian National Army.

Radio Azad Hind broadcasted in multiple languages from Rangoon, Singapore, and other stations. The 7 p.m. evening broadcast started with the news above but also played the song *Door Hato ai Duniyawaalon, Hindustan Hamara Hai*<sup>1</sup> on loop for about sixty minutes, with the news flash being announced at the end of each playing every few minutes. Listeners shed tears of joy as they heard the song alongside the news of the flag hoisting. This song featured in the 1943 movie *Kismet* and was written by songwriter Pradeep and composed by musician Anil Biswas. It addressed Japan and Germany as foreigners, which allowed it to evade British censorship, but everyone understood that it was the British who were being targeted. The movie was a hit in India.

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<sup>1</sup> Translates as ‘Move away, foreigners; India belongs to us.’