The story of how the book that brought India its first Nobel went missing is a thrilling adventure set in the London Underground

Since the 1830s, well-to-do Indians had been travelling to England, for diplomacy, entrepreneurship, leisure, and education. From Raja Rammohun Roy to Ardaseer Cursetjee Wadia to Dwarkanath Tagore and Keshub Chandra Sen, to a panoply of law students and civil service aspirants — they all headed to the capital of the British Empire with burning curiosity. However, Indian travelogues from the city really took flight only after the London Underground came of age.

Inaugurated at Paddington in 1863, what is today the London Tube was an elegant companion in most Indian perambulations in the city, taking them faithfully to famous landmarks: the British Museum, Parliament House, Westminster Abbey, Crystal Palace, Madame Tussauds and so on. For early travellers, London also meant a throbbing commercial metropolis. Krishnabhabini Das, an early woman traveller, described the London of 1885 as a “mammoth theatre of shops”: a city highlighted by blazing advertisements for everything from textiles to teas to carbolic smoke balls to curry powder. And although the advertisers promoted their wares in magazines and newspapers such as The Illustrated London News, The Pall Mall Gazette, The Times, and later, The Strand, soon their most preferred space became the London Underground network.

Puffing and whistling

The visitors were awed by the underground stations. St. Pancras and Victoria, with their gigantic façades and gothic interiors, inspired much admiration. T.N. Mukharji (or
Trailokyanath Mukhopadhyay, the famous writer of ghost stories) was appointed as supervisor by the Government of India to the Colonial and Indian Exhibition in London in 1886, and he returned, captivated by the city’s railway system, which to him was “one of the wonders of the world.”

“The trains ran every three minutes,” wrote Mukharji, “from 7-30 a.m. to 12-30 or 1 p.m. and every one is thronged with passengers... Engines puffing and whistling, passengers running in and out, guards shutting doors, faint hum of voices, all combined to create a grandeur of busy life which must be seen to be realised.”

Others like Sivanath Sastri found the railways to be traffickers of easy virtue and eccentric outcasts. “At ten thirty in the night I came to King’s Cross from Waterloo Station by bus... As the night grew everyone around appeared drunk. Even the booking clerk at the station was in a particularly jocular mood. He asked me with a smile, ‘Are you alone?’ A woman came up enquiring, ‘Are you coming my way, dear?’ Getting no reply, she realised that this was not the right place to look for business. Another lady had drunk so much that she had lost her ability to move. The workers on the station were similarly out of their senses. When the tram came at twelve in the night I found that almost no passenger could stand up properly,” wrote Sastri disapprovingly.

**Roaring giant**

A few years later, in 1888, M.K. Gandhi would spend his 19th birthday, alone, at a Victorian room in Richmond, haunted by memories of his home and by reports of the Whitechapel murders by Jack the Ripper, while the melancholy engines of the London Underground trains trundled past the rows of Tudor houses behind him. He later moved to West Kensington to live as a paying guest with a widow and her two daughters, in a four-storey house that stood in a row past which “roared London’s District Line Trains.”

Besides his long solitary walks, the Tube led Gandhi to numerous explorations, the most notable being that of a vegetarian restaurant off Farringdon Street. Here, armed with a copy of Henry Salt’s *A Plea for Vegetarianism and Other Essays*, Gandhi devoured his “first hearty meal” since his arrival in London. With that serendipitous find, the Mahatma would go on to wage a minor dietary revolution in the heart of Albion before being called to the Bar.

In 1912, Rabindranath Tagore visited London for the second time. He had gone there first in 1878, but wasn’t very impressed. This time, he wanted to show the English translation of his book *Gitanjali* to the English painter and art critic, William Rothenstein, hoping he could urge William Butler Yeats to write an introduction. Tagore’s son and daughter-in-law, and probably Soumendra Deb Burman from the Tripura royal family, accompanied Tagore on this journey.
In mid-June, Tagore and his party travelled from Dover to London, from where they were to take the Tube to Rothenstein’s Hampstead residence the following day. On the way, they discovered that the attaché case in which Tagore had been carrying the manuscript had disappeared. After several anxious hours, the poet asked his son, Rathindranath, to inquire with the London Tube authorities.

The case was found and returned safely to Tagore, uncannily enough, by the office of ‘lost property’ at the Baker Street station. Sherlock Holmes, the most famous fictional tenant of the neighbourhood, had just solved ‘The Adventure of the Devil’s Foot’ and was in probability involved at this point in ‘The Adventure of the Dying Detective.’ But he almost certainly had no hand in the retrieval of Tagore’s case.

**Happy accident**

Tagore did meet Rothenstein, but only the next day. Needless to say, he carried the manuscript this time, which was later read and reviewed by Yeats, who also wrote the famous introduction. In November that year, a limited edition of an anthology of 103 poems by Tagore was published by the London India Society. *Gitanjali* was published in March next year by Macmillan. By the time Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in November 1913, he was a global phenomenon.

The greatest conceit of Western technology and civilisation, the railways, had inadvertently left its footprints on the book of Eastern spiritual wisdom that would comfort a whole generation of Europeans during the turbulent years of the Great War. In 1932, Tagore wrote to Rothenstein that he had found a place in the history of English literature by virtue of “an accident”, a happy accident if ever there was one.

In 2004, Tagore’s Nobel medal was stolen. With neither Sherlock Holmes nor the Baker Street station office being anywhere at hand to intervene, it has been missing ever since.

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