

## The Port Hole

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In 1974 as a young lad when I decided to join the Marine Academy I was not much aware of what I was embarking upon. There was a sense of adventure, excitement and a feeling of freedom from a financial point of view. Things were pretty uncertain immediately after the independence of Bangladesh. On a personal note having lost my father in the Liberation War, it was time to take on responsibility.



My first voyage was from Chittagong to Madras (Chennai) in 1979 on the passenger ship. We were carrying passengers from Madras to Port Blair, Andaman. As an Engineer the main job of a junior was to trace pipe lines so that one is well versed with the different ship-board piping systems. There was no access to pipe line drawings and the seniors took great pleasure in seeing you crawling on the tank top, tracing pipe lines. As I came out from the bilge floor the boiler suit was pretty unsightly from an aesthetic point of view and one was a nuisance to the stewards for staining bed sheets and duty mess room chairs.

As I reflect, I would say the Industry has gone through major changes both technologically, socially and last but not the least driven by the giant wheel of globalisation. Technology has allowed us to build much larger ships, where their dimensions are now more limited by physical constraints (depth of water, size of lock gates). The engines can generate over 100,000 Brake Horse Power and a single propeller can be as large as a double decker bus.

Supremacy of shipping nations from ship building and manning perspective has gradually shifted from Europe to Asia. Different players have moved in and what was once traditionally seen as total owner ship of the value chain by a single entity has diversified and have created separate spectrum of interest groups -Owner, Manager, Charterer etc.

As fate of traditional ship building nation waned so has the lay out, art decoration and chemistry of people mingling in the officers' smoke room has changed. Those idle hours spent after "Watch" in the Saloon or on the Bridge, gave way to mariners who are glued to the lap top or I Pad and happily enjoying their "virtual" world.

When port stays were long and exciting time spent in Anchorage fishing, it seems the present shipping world accepts "Act of God", dry-docking or port stay as per cargo schedule the only reason to stop or lay off either hot or cold when dictated by the economic recession.

My first glimpse of Singapore was in 1979 when Hizbul Bahar anchored after dry-docking in Pasir Gudang for bunkering and lifting provisions and stores. As I landed at Clifford Pier after a short boat ride I could sense excitement in the air. The Change Alley was across the street and those days prior to "Mustafa Centre", Tanjong Pagar and Peoples Park Complex was the destination to buy typical Radio and Cassette player. As I walked around the Tanjong Pagar Shopping complex I remember the exchange rate was 1 USD to 2.20 SGD. As a 5th Engineer my foreign allowance was about USD 40 per month. Nevertheless, I could buy a Minolta Pocket Camera and decided to buy something special for my nephews and nieces. The shop keeper suggested me some chocolates unique to Singapore which I happily purchased. I recall the feedback my mother gave, "None of the kids liked the chocolate you brought". Well, I realized it was "Durian" flavoured and till to date could not reconcile my taste bud to accept this delicacy.

The next time I visited Singapore was during the maiden voyage of Banglar Kallol after delivery from Shimonoseki shipyard in January 1980. Banglar Kallol was a general cargo vessel – having UMS capability; quiet a buzz word those days. During this port of call I met Mr. VK Lingam who came to visit the vessel from Port of Singapore Authority for on board “Fire Arms/Explosives” inspection. I enquired about the direction of Singapore Polytechnic from him. Incidentally he was a Sri Lankan Tamil and told me Sri Lankan Marine Engineers were staying at his place to sit for the Class II Engineers Examination. Mr. & Mrs. Lingam were very gracious to let out a room for me to stay and help with Immigration matters. On a personal note I am very indebted to this family. Their HDB apartment at Telok Blangah Heights became a Bangladeshi Centre for Engineers coming to sit for the Competency examinations. I remember when I applied for a job in Timur Carriers, Mr. IM Yusuf, General Manager of Timur Carriers when he saw my resume noted my local address and he told me during the interview Mrs. Lingam was the nurse who managed the birth of his daughter. I am sure such a coincidence also played some role in getting the job in Timur Carriers. The pioneer batch to sit for the Class II Marine Engineering Certificate of Competency was from 10th batch comprising of Mr. Khorshed Alam, Mr. Mahamudul Hoque, Mr. AKM Siddiquallah and Mr. Golam Sarwar. A group from the 10th batch also ventured in to the shores of Hong Kong.

There was a very good preparatory course at the Singapore Polytechnic for Class II Marine Engineering examination preparation. Mr. Sheikh Shahabuddin (2nd Batch, Marine Academy) was teaching at the Singapore Polytechnic Marine Engineering Department, Mr. Zafrul Alam (6th Batch Marine Academy) was Examiner of Engineers and Capt. Zahurul Alam (3rd Batch Marine Academy) was Principal of TS Singapore.

When I was preparing for the Class II Marine Engineers Certificate of Competency on 1st of January 1982 Singapore moved half an hour forward to be 8 hours ahead of GMT to synchronize with Malaysia, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Beijing citing business and travel schedule as the key driver of change. In January 1982 after I passed the Class II Certificate of Competency I joined Pacific International Lines. The ships were old but the food was good and it was the 1st vessel PIL recruited complete Bangladeshi Crew and mixed officers. The pay was always on time. Today, PIL is a success story and a big player as container ship operator. Around first quarter of 1982 the Singapore Government took the decision to build the MRT. As I look back the MRT was not just an investment in Transport System as a spin off it led to the enhancement of the intrinsic value of Singapore's Real Estate.

The decision to sit for my Class I Certificate of Competency was motivated by the brand image of the UK Department of Transport Certification and also staying relevant with STCW convention which entered in to force in 1984. After I cleared the examination in Hull, UK in November 1984 I requested my Certificate to be delivered to Singapore Marine Department for self- collection. I was then looking forward to my marriage in December of 1984. During my stay in South Shields UK the miners' strike which was a major industrial action affecting the British coal industry was going on.

It was a defining moment in British industrial relations, and its defeat significantly weakened the British trade union movement. It was also seen as a major political victory for Margaret Thatcher and the Conservative Party. I strongly felt it was time to look at the Far East. It may be worth mentioning that there were opportunities to work with some Companies like Gulf East, Ocean Tramping, IRISL to name a few. In all cases, those who worked beyond national shipping line did survive through their individual effort and hard work.

With a Class I Certificate of Competency I was working as 2nd Engineer in Timur Carriers Pte Ltd exposed to the cyclical shipping recession and bore the brunt of pay freeze for the first time. The vessels were on long time charter to TFL which was a subsidiary of the Australian TNT group. TFL got in to financial trouble around 1986 due to heavy competition on the transatlantic trades when the service (but not the

ships) was taken over by OCL/P&O Containers. All the vessels were sold to Greek interest around end 1987. I did sign off just prior to the sale of the vessels at Philadelphia as we were eagerly expecting and preparing for our first child's birth in Chittagong.

During this recession something interesting was happening that would change the manning profile for the future. As 2nd Engineer in Timur Carriers I did see some excellent local cadets coming out from the Marine Engineering Diploma program conducted by Singapore Polytechnic. These cadets were sponsored by local shipping companies regrettably their "bonds" were released in most cases and they were left to pursue their own interest. The pay difference between ship and shore were also not very exciting to pursue sea career.

Around late seventies and early eighties Bangladeshi ship Owners were emerging. This opened opportunities for some to go back and work in Bangladeshi Shipping Companies. The possibility to stay in touch with family and home was a key factor for Mariners in deciding to work for Bangladeshi companies. I briefly worked from early 1988 to mid- 1990 in local Shipping companies. I fondly remember my days spent in Atlas Shipping Lines. It was a challenge to run old ships but the experience was worth it and the overall working environment was good.

Around 1990 when the shipping tide changed I moved to Neptune Ship Management Services Pte Ltd, the Ship management arm of NOL. This was the start of the influx of mariners once again venturing out in Singapore. The local Bangladeshimanning Agents also played a role in promoting our Mariners in overseas market specially to Japanese ownership interest.

Around mid 90's there were more opportunities on ship board jobs but the shore jobs were not really opening up. But relentlessly we tried, I moved to Sembawang Shipyard in 1995 and took a "shore job" and worked in Ship Repair and conversion. The pay was not attractive but nevertheless with all the challenges of housing and settling down with a family it was an exciting time and had great satisfaction in working as a Construction Manager with Commissioning responsibility for FPSO Units. I call this time my "2nd apprenticeship" the first being the pre- requisite for going to sea. In 1999 I went to work for Exxon in the Marine Lubricant Business and witnessed the merger of two great companies Exxon and Mobil. I pursued an MBA to understand business jargon.

Slowly we saw our mariners entering in Technical Management, Classification Societies, Shipping service related business and even ship-owning. With bank interest rate that has moved dramatically south and remains flat and attractive compared to 1990 Mariners are able to invest well in properties in Singapore. With a deep sense of pleasure I see the Marine Community grow.

Singapore's Strategic location as a Maritime Hub and its aspiration to excel will always attract talent in to the Maritime Industry. The question remains whether are we ready to rise to the occasion. Continuous learning is the key to survive..

As a community we need to focus externally, venture in to the commercial aspects of shipping, stay connected with International Marine Professional bodies and nurture that bondage of brother hood that we can be proud of and draw strength from.

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