

Captains of the sea

by MANOHAR SINGH GILL

PUNJAB is a dusty plain a thousand miles from the sea. The only water it knows of are the five sluggish meandering rivers that sustain its people. Even these are valued only for their irrigation potential.

The Punjabi does not sport with them as do the Europeans with their waterways. Few Punjabis, in fact, care for swimming, fishing and other water sports. One would hardly expect to see Punjabis as sailors.

The other day I fell in with two young men on the Chandigarh golf course. While we struggled with our bunker shots, I discovered to my surprise that they were both sea captains home on leave.

Although they had the sailor beards, they certainly were not bow-legged and, in fact, might have been Punjab University students. As we played, the talk was about ships and sailors, ports and distant girl friends.

Both had served as captains on massive oil tankers with foreign companies and had

sailed the seas of the world. They lived in a jet set world. A phone call from London, and the next morning they would be winging their way to Holland, Sweden or Hong Kong to take charge of a ship.

NEW OFFERS

They sail for a period till they are bored and feel they have made enough money. Then they take a plane home and settle down to improving their golf handicaps. London keeps calling with new offers, but they go back only when they please.

I had always imagined that there was only one local naval Admiral ploughing through the rough Chandigarh golf course fairways. I used to feel sorry for him, for the course was always crowded with Army top brass.

But it seems that if the merchant navy could be counted in, Chandigarh has enough naval Captains to take on the Army. I was told there might be some 30 in residence in Chandigarh. The number of merchant navy officers hailing

from Chandigarh might be as high as 300.

But Punjab does not supply only officers to the merchant marine of the world. A large number of village boys are now going out as sailors.

I once found a friend of mine being pestered by two boys from his village wanting to be sent out on cattle ships plying between Australia and the Gulf.

I asked: "What on earth are cattle ships?"

I was told: "These are ships which transport cattle and sheep from Australia to the vast rich meat market of the Gulf. Our Punjabi village boys are taken on as herdsmen on the ships. Their job is to look after the animals and, of course, they get paid very handsomely."

HOT MONTHS

I have seen our Punjabi boys grazing cattle in the hot months of May and June. There is not a blade of grass for the animals nor an inch

of the shade for the poor herdsmen.

On ship, therefore, our boys find the job just too easy. Throw in some fodder now and there and hose down the area where the cattle are kept every morning with sea water. For the rest of the day one can relax on the ship's beer. No wonder every village lad in Punjab wants to now become a sailor.

There was a time when Punjabis returning from East Africa pushed up land and house prices in Chandigarh. Now the guilty ones are the rich sea captains. Therefore, to mamas with nymphets to marry off I would say: "Do not waste your time on the Foreign Service, civil servants or engineers and doctors. Look for a handsome sailor with a rakish cap on his head and a fat purse on his hip."

To the nymphets, I would say: "What better husband can you get than an absent sailor who writes long and loving letters accompanied by handsome cheques from distant ports?"