

MOHAMED EBRAHIM SERANG MARG (FORMERLY OLD NAGPADA ROAD)

In a shop on this road, India's first sailors' union was born

SRINTAH RAO
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WITH THE exception of blue and green street signs at both ends, there is nothing today to suggest that a narrow lane deep in Dongri is the birthplace of India's first and largest union of sailors.

Formerly Old Nagpada Road, it was renamed Mohamed Ebrahim Serang Marg in 1975, 12 years after the powerful trade union leader and elected member of the municipal corporation passed away.

Serang, who was born in Kerala's Malabar coast in 1879, moved to Mumbai, then called Bombay, in search of employment at just 13 years of age. He soon found work as a sailor in the merchant navy. Quickly rising through the ranks, he became a serang (foreman) in

charge of the crew.

A tough and well-built Malabari man, he would first protest for a raise in crew salaries in 1915, when Britain was fighting the First World War. His agitation on board the Anchor Line ship Elysia led the British government to raise salaries by 5 per cent.

Known as a powerful orator, he also led the first ever strike by Indian sailors on board the Kaiser-e-Hind, docked in Bombay, demanding that basic pay of lower-rung sailors be raised to Rs 30 per month and that of serangs to Rs 60 per month.

In the 1920s, Serang led an agitation demanding that the British government pay war compensation to families of several thousand Indian sailors who had participated in the war. Throughout that decade, as he led seafarers towards an organised union, he held regular



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meetings in Dongri.

"The men would assemble at a cigarette shop in Old Nagpada Road. That is where they would discuss the course of action," said Serang's great grandson, Abdu Ghani Serang, the present secretary general of National Union of Seafarers of India (NUSI).

The union was registered in 1926 and moved later to its present premises at Goa Street in Ballard Pier. The union was also successful in petitioning the gov-

ernment to build the Indian Sailors' Home and the Indian Seaman's Hostel — transit facilities for sailors to stay in the city before they signed on and after they signed off from ships in Bombay.

With Indian sailors again heavily involved in the Second World War, Serang and the union insisted that the government increase wages of sailors by a 100 per cent and also pay a war compensation of Rs 25 lakh.

Serang was an elected member of the then Bombay Municipal Corporation between 1929 and 1948 and served in its Improvements Committee and Markets and Garden Committee in that duration.

The British government also appointed him a member of the board of trustees of the then Bombay Port Trust.

Old Nagpada Road was re-named 12 years after his death

in 1963 at the age of 89. The road, which branches off the arterial Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel Road, is lined with shops and houses and retains a strong presence of the Malabari Muslim community, which runs several hostels in the locality.

The cigarette shop where the meetings were held shut down long ago and is now hidden behind a black shutter.

"The union has matured from agitation and protest to collective bargaining. The shipping industry knows what we are capable of. Yet we are a responsible trade union. That is his legacy," said Serang, the present secretary general.

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