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Workers in the World

Indian Seafarers, c. 1870s–1940s¹

If the employment of foreign-domiciled seafarers in international shipping is any indication, the global off-shoring of employment is almost as old (or new) as the modern world economy. With its vessels preponderant in world shipping, this phenomenon was particularly marked in British shipping. After 1850, when Britain repealed navigation laws restricting their employment, there was a steady rise in the proportion of foreign nationals working on British ships to over 20 % by 1891 and nearly one-third by 1904.² Crews of British ships now comprised every conceivable nationality: American, Swede, Norwegian, Russian, Danish, Dutch, Belgian, French, German, Austrian, Italian, Greek, Spaniard, Turk, Portuguese, Indian, Maldivian, Malay, Sinhala, Chinese, Arab, Somali, Maltese and Cypriot, Kru men from West Africa, and men from the Caribbean islands. Britannia may have ruled the waves. But the workers of the world rode them for her.

From the 1870s a growing number of Indian seafarers went to work on foreign vessels, the large majority (over two-thirds) on British ships. In 1886 there were reportedly 16,600 ‘lascars’ on British vessels.³ By 1891 there were 24,000 Indian seafarers on British ships (10 % of the workforce), and by 1914 52,000 (20 %).⁴ The slump in world trade and British shipping drove numbers down. Yet in 1937 44,000 sub-continental seafarers made up a third of Britain’s maritime workforce. During the war this number rose to over 60,000 (about 40 %).⁵

These figures exclude Indian seafarers who were ashore between engagements, and crews of other foreign-owned vessels such as those of the German Hansa line. Before 1914 the Hansa line was Bombay’s second largest maritime

1 This article was first published in French under the title “Les marins indiens et leurs univers, 1870–1949 in *La Découverte* 2012/4, pp. 65–84 © 2012 Éditions La Découverte, www.editions-la-decouverte.fr

2 Conrad Dixon, ‘Lascars: The Forgotten Seamen’, in Rosemary Ommer and Gerald Panting (eds), *The Working Men Who Got Wet*, St Johns’, Newfoundland, 1980, p. 281; Ronald Hope, *A New History of British Shipping*, London, 1990, pp. 383, 392.

3 UK National Archives (hereafter PRO), MT 9/506, note 16 Feb. 1894.

4 Dixon, ‘Lascars’, p. 281; Hope, *New History*, pp. 383, 392; V.C. Burton, ‘Counting Seafarers: The Published Records of the Registry of Merchant Seamen’, *Mariner’s Mirror* (71: 3, 1985) p. 318.

5 *Daily Herald*, 24 May 1939; British Library, Oriental and India Office Collections (OIOC), L/E/R/300, ‘Lascar seafarers’, undated wartime memorandum; OIOC, Hope, *New History*, pp. 383, 392.

employer after the Peninsular & Oriental Steam Navigation Company (or P&O). The Austrian Lloyds were another large employer, as were American cargo liners and American and Scandinavian tramps in the Asian trade. During World War II Australian and Dutch vessels also employed hundreds of Indian seamen.

In all there were said to be some 235,000 Indian seafarers at its major ports. However this figure excluded crews of the innumerable small, sailing and steam-powered vessels that bustled around the dozens of smaller ports along the Indian coast and the waters abutting them, carrying people and cargoes to ports in the Indian Ocean region, China, West Africa, or even to Pacific islands such as Fiji.⁶ Besides Indian merchants, these vessels were owned by Arab and other Asian merchants based in the ports of the Indian Ocean littoral; so that there was, in addition to the maritime labour market catering to large, Western-owned steam, and later oil-fired ships, another continent-wide market catering to indigenous and indigenously-owned seagoing craft and vessels.

Indian seafarers who sailed the Western world's merchant shipping fleets were mostly engaged in Bombay or Calcutta. Arriving here from their mainly village homes, they ended one journey in preparation for the next. Down, round, and up India's peninsular coast from Calcutta, or directly into the Arabian Sea from Bombay, up the Red Sea through the Suez Canal into the Mediterranean, they headed east and north towards Brindisi and Trieste, or bore west and north to Marseilles whence, after depositing the wealthier passengers and express mails for transfer to the faster 'boat train', they rounded Gibraltar to navigate the rough seas of the Bay of Biscay en route to northerly European ports. From there, or directly across the Atlantic from Gibraltar, they sailed further west to ports along the US east coast, sometimes then heading south to Brazil and the River Plate, or after its opening, westwards through the Panama Canal to ports on the US west coast.

Less frequented routes took them directly southwards from Bombay and Calcutta towards the African coast, rounding the Cape into western Africa or towards South America. They might sail rather more regularly to Colombo and Singapore; then further south to Australia or Fiji; or north from Singapore towards Hong Kong and Shanghai and further north to Japan. From the 1920s Indian crews also spent the summer working in the emerging North European pleasure cruise industry and on British tramps to Russia.

⁶ A.C. Staples, 'Indian Maritime Transport in 1840', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* (6: 1, 1970) pp. 61–90; Douglas McLean, 'Maritime Trucking: India's Coastal Sailing Shipping on the Eve of the Great War', South Asia Research Unit, Curtin University of Technology, Bentley (W.A), undated.

Indian seafarers manned decks on the world's ships, and crewed engine rooms, saloons, cabins, and galleys. They inhabited a world deeply marked by race which determined what they would do, how much they would be paid, and how they could be treated. Virtually until World War II barring the odd Parsi doctor, officers on European ships were almost all white. Sometimes on deck, Indian crews were supplemented by a few Europeans, mainly carpenters (who could also be Chinese), sail-makers, and able-bodied seamen (or ABs). The racial divide ran deeper than rank, yet nowhere was it more complete than the engine room where the engineers were all European, as were those recognized to possess any skill, such as boiler-makers. Indian crews did the hot and heavy work of heaving coal and stoking the fires.

On deck Indian crews dropped and heaved anchor, kept watch, steered the vessel, sounded lead, tended to the ropes, and scrubbed, washed, and painted decks to produce the emblems of apparent order that frenzied officers found reassuring. Below decks in the sweltering heat of the engine room, where temperatures especially in the Red Sea could exceed 60°C, the frenzy was driven by the ceaseless need to keep the steam up by heaving vast quantities of coal into giant boilers with unending appetites for the fuel; while other men prepared, moved, and sized the fuel, and cleaned and greased engines, valves, pipes, and boilers. In the cabins, saloons, and galleys above, crews cooked, baked, served, and cleaned, and carried out the innumerable routines of shipboard life.

In times of peace Indian seafarers helped keep British shipping competitive especially in the eastern trades.⁷ Shipping, in turn, was a vital strategic and symbolic resource for Britain's expansive yet rapidly integrating trading empire.

Take for example the P&O, the largest employer of Indian crews during our period. The P&O received generous mail subsidies from imperial and colonial governments. It moreover held effective monopoly of the Bombay end of the signature trade of the 19th century British Empire, viz. opium exports to China; and commanded the rock solid custom of imperial and colonial public officials. P&O steamers have rightly been called the 'flagships of imperialism'.⁸ Assembled reassuringly each morning on deck for drills in their *faux*-oriental costumes, lined up in 'picturesque costumes' for *tableaux vivants* to relieve the 'monotony of the

⁷ On margins in Asian shipping see Chih-lung Liu, 'British Shipping in the Orient, 1933–39: Reasons for its failure to compete', *International Journal of Maritime History* (20: 1, June 2008) pp. 153–172.

⁸ Freda Harcourt, 'The P&O Company: Flagships of Imperialism', in Sarah Palmer and Glyndwr Williams, eds, *Chartered and Uncharted Waters: Proceedings of a Conference on the Study of British Maritime History* (London: National Maritime Museum and Queen Mary College, 1981), epigraph, p. 6; and p. 21.

Red Sea', or assembled to play the pipe for visiting dignitaries, Indian crews on P&O boats served also as exotic trophies of imperial conquest.⁹ Equally they were set-piece accessories in the formulaic instruction of wide-eyed, yet swaggering apprentice colonialists for whom sea passage offered a stage to rehearse their pomp, bearing, and manner in anticipation of the life awaiting them in India.¹⁰ As Britain's grip over India began to loosen, summer cruise vessels carrying native crews offered nostalgic imperial hands and others, the vicarious thrill of the empire as an enclosed theme park in the familiar waters of the North Sea. At other times, as during the world wars when they died in the thousands and suffered imprisonment by the hundreds to keep its merchant fleet sailing, Indian seafarers made a difference for Britain between life and death, survival and starvation, victory and defeat.

The footprints of Indian seafarers may be found on every continent. Despite being relatively small in number, they appear to have been nearly everywhere in the steamship era, i.e. the late-19th century through World War II: attending political meetings in Britain, working in Detroit car factories and California farms, and featuring in Hollywood films. Some ended up destitute, in hospitals, workhouses, and jails. Others opened shops, restaurants, cafés, and lodging houses overseas. Some never returned to India, striking relationships and roots, marrying and raising families abroad. In their travels and sojourns Indian seafarers encountered employers and public officials, missionaries and trade unions, local communities, and other travellers and sojourners like themselves in distant lands. In short they were India's earliest global workers and among the earliest such workers anywhere in the world, pioneers and precursors of India's overseas presence today, and forbears as it were of the Indian or south Asian 'diaspora'. Prising open doors of insular societies long before 'multiculturalism' became fashionable, they were also the earliest mass carriers of south Asian cuisines and cultures to Europe.

Their employment on European vessels implicated Indian seafarers in conflicts between ship-owners and seafarers in other countries, notably Britain where seafarers' unions derided them as cheap coolies who had stolen jobs rightfully belonging to white seafarers.

Marginalized and isolated, seafarers from the sub-continent were also silent, selectively mobilized, and dispensable accoutrements of political ambition and public visibility for struggling Indian politicians and middle class figures in Britain: filling up auditoria seats and crowding political meetings where too, as

⁹ National Maritime Museum, Greenwich (NMM), P&O 16/8, reports from passenger voyage diaries; also see 21/1 and 89/6.

¹⁰ Rajeshwar Dayal, *A Life of our Times* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1998), p. 32.

on P&O vessels and later in Hollywood films such as *Calcutta*, they were useful for ‘creating atmosphere’; acting as carriers (only sporadically as objects or emissaries) of radical, subversive propaganda; and as the collective cover and mask for radical Indian activists eluding agents of the imperial state as they made their ways across the world to Weimar Germany or the Soviet Union. Indian seamen became objects of visible concern (and overt repression) when they struck work in 1939–1940 shortly after World War II began, and again in 1942 when the imperial state was at pains to retain their loyalties during the Quit India movement.¹¹

The majority of Indian seafarers came from the regions that became Pakistan in 1947 and viewed the prospect of Partition with trepidation. When it came Partition disrupted their itineraries of work and movement and conscripted them into rival nationalist projects.¹²

Footprints on water

Yet until recently Indian seafarers have languished as a historically invisible underclass.

For a start, the colonial state did everything possible to render their everyday presence invisible. It regulated nearly every detail of the engagement of Indian seafarers on oceanic shipping to minimize the danger of political and cultural contact, and channel potential conflicts through routine bureaucratic agency. Besides aggressive paternalism, this agency was premised on the belief which in turn it helped realize, that Indian seafarers were undependable peasants who turned to the sea for temporary employment. Hence the paradox that despite the regulated nature of their employment, the maritime labour market was often indistinguishable from casual labour markets at Indian ports.

Nationalist accounts of India’s past maritime prowess also disdained to acknowledge Indian maritime workers as heirs to this tradition. Echoing the *swadeshi* spirit of the day Radha Kumud Mookerji’s 1912 account of Indian shipping, for example, dutifully extolled India’s past as a great trading and ship-building nation.¹³ But the book was silent on the people who sailed the vessels, or

11 OIOC, L/PJ/12/46, intelligence reports, 13 Sept., 30 Sept., 9 Oct. 1922, and 28 Feb. 1923; 12/47, report, 16 Jan. 1923; PRO, HO 344/32, A.P. Godfrey’s letter to Waldron Smithers, 16 Dec. 1924; Maharashtra State Archives (MSA), Special Branch, 543(4)A, notes, 8 and 9 Oct. 1923.

12 G. Balachandran, *Globalizing Labour? Indian Seafarers and World Shipping, c. 1870–1945* (Delhi and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), Epilogue.

13 *Indian Shipping: A History of the Sea-Borne Trade and Maritime Activity of the Indians from the Earliest Times* (London: Longmans Green, 1912).

even their navigational skills and practices. On the other hand a 1902 British mercantile marine committee defending the employment of Indian crews on British ships underlined the traditional importance of maritime employment for India's coastal communities. Only, unlike the nationalists who in seeking to cleanse Indian maritime entrepreneurship of any taint of labour or marginality stressed commerce and ship-building, the British committee, being loathe to acknowledge the capacity of the colonized for entrepreneurship and keen to affirm emerging spatial patterns of accumulation and specialization, emphasized India's role as a supplier of wage-labour for British-owned ships.¹⁴

In appearing not to display unqualified allegiance to either nation in the subcontinent after its 1947 Partition, Indian seafarers also came somewhat to resemble Partition's women, physically claimed by both states yet trusted by neither to uphold the new political and moral certitudes required to normalize their separate existence. Yet unlike Partition's women whose stories are now being told, seafarers from the subcontinent do not figure in the histories of the two nations or of the processes of their modern creation.

Until rather recently, Indian seafarers have also suffered relative neglect in historical studies of labour and the working class. One explanation could be that, neither peasants nor proletarians, and palpably committed neither to ship nor harbour, sea nor land, port nor hinterland, Asia nor Europe, town nor village, urban nor rural, industry nor agriculture, 'modern' nor 'traditional', they appear as distant stragglers after the neat categories that still frame our social imaginations. Freely relativizing and interrogating boundaries by crossing them repeatedly, Indian seafarers have also eluded the attention of scholars whose purported object has been to critique and move beyond such markers.

Fluid meanings, cosmopolitan spaces

'Lascar' carried many meanings varying with context and usage. The term is believed to have been first used in the maritime context by the Portuguese and Dutch to describe seafarers from India and the Indian Ocean region. It endured thereafter in Indian and British maritime laws. British laws had special clauses for 'lascars' down to 1963. Informally the term remained in use until more recently to describe seafarers from the subcontinent.

¹⁴ G. Balachandran, 'Sovereignty, Subjectivities, Narrations: Nations and Other Stories from the Sea', *International Journal of Maritime History* (vol. 21: 2, December 2009), pp. 5–7.

According to Hobson-Jobson, ‘lascar’ originated from the Persian *lashkar*, meaning ‘an army’ or ‘a camp’, similar to the Arabic *al’askar*. Lascar was apparently a corruption introduced into European maritime usage by the Portuguese, in the form of *lasquarin*, *lascari*, etc., and taken over by the Dutch (*lascarein*) and the British. Even in its maritime usage, ‘lascar’ may have had military origins. Portuguese vessels defending forts and other possessions along the coast carried a large number of fighting men from Abyssinia, the Omani coast, as well as Malabar. The term’s maritime associations and meanings may have arisen from the Portuguese, and later the Dutch and English, training ‘gun-lascars’ to man the artillery on trading vessels. In the 18th century, as vessels became more specialized, ‘lascar’ also began to denote a sailor rather than merely an indigenous soldier on a trading vessel.

Despite figuring in British and Indian merchant shipping laws and procedures from the early 19th century, the maritime meaning of ‘lascar’ remained malleable till after World War I. The overwhelming majority of Indian seafarers employed on deep-sea British vessels contracted under ‘lascar agreements’ or ‘lascar articles’ which, unlike the single voyage agreements more typical for European and American seafarers, represented in its main variant a contract of extended duration (of one to two years) covering several voyages criss-crossing the world.

Until the 20th century, ‘lascar’ continued to be used in British India to describe porters and ‘unskilled’ workers employed in the army, railways, and public works departments. Hence the term lent itself easily to generic or conflated meanings. For instance a colonial official appearing as an ‘expert witness’ at a wreck inquiry into the loss of the steamship *Roumania* could assert without fear of contradiction that he had ‘considerable experience of these lascars in India ... up on the hills’, and found them ‘absolutely useless in cold weather’¹⁵

In this last usage the lascar was a ‘common coolie’. ‘Coolie’ is a familiar 19th century figure in accounts of indentured labour migration to plantation colonies from India, China, and other parts of Asia. The ships outfitted to carry them were also called ‘coolie ships’. Thanks to colonial prejudice, business strategies, and the dispositions of language, the Indian worker was for long represented as a ‘coolie’. The coolie was as much a figure in the jute mills of Calcutta and the cotton mills of Bombay and Kanpur as he was on board a merchant vessel. From deploying ‘lascar’ as a generic term for all types of ‘unskilled’ workers, the de-skilling of maritime work, and the institution of steeper, racialized work hierarchies on steam ships, it was a small step to constructing the maritime ‘lascar’ also in the image of a ‘coolie’. Indeed, ‘lascar’ quickly became a marker of coolie

15 PRO, BT, MT9/469B M 4354/1894, note, 8 March 1893.

status, with even British trade unionists routinely describing Indian seamen as ‘coolie labour’, or using the terms ‘lascar’ and ‘coolie’ interchangeably.¹⁶

‘Lascar’ had however a very specific meaning on board a steam ship. Each department of a steam vessel was in charge of a serang, or in the case of the saloon a chief steward or butler, assisted by one or more deputies, called tindals. The deck serang was akin to a boatswain, and was often the highest ranking Indian on a foreign-owned vessel. Apart from the three departments, Indian quartermasters or helmsmen (whom the British insisted on describing as *sukhanis* or *seacunies*) were hired separately from the other crew and occupied a strategic position on board a vessel.

Ordinary Indian crews in the engine-room could be *aagwalas*, *paniwalas*, *cassabs*, etc, and those in the saloon stewards, bakers, cooks, pantry-keepers, saloon-boy, cabin-boy, officers’ boy, etc. On board the ship itself, ‘lascar’ referred exclusively to an ordinary *deck* hand. It excluded even the deck serang and deck tindals, let alone crews of other departments.

However in official, employer, and popular usage ashore in Britain, all Indian seafarers irrespective of the nature of their work they did on a vessel, were lumped together as *lascars*.

Between the 16th and early-20th centuries ‘lascar’, ‘Indian’, ‘native’, and ‘Asiatic’ were also interchangeable terms for seafarers of non-European origin from the vast Indian Ocean region sailing (or earlier fighting) on European vessels. Identities were consequently fluid: as British merchant vessels began to engage more Asian and African crews from the 1850s, ‘lascar’ was used to describe seafarers from the Indian subcontinent as well as Chinese, Malay, Sinhalese, Arab, and East African seafarers. Some sources even referred to Turkish seafarers as ‘lascars’. Though by the 1920s ‘lascars’ came only to index seafarers from the subcontinent, their genealogies and stories nevertheless shed light on the complex, cosmopolitan working environments in mid-19th century shipping, particularly in the Asian and Indian Ocean trade. No less resilient for being complex, the cosmopolitanism remained resistant to metropolitan efforts to cleanse or discipline it through at least the early 20th century.¹⁷

Take for instance the *Indus*, which sailed from Bombay to a Thames port in 1881. Though mainly from Surat, the deck crew included men from Bombay,

16 On the political and discursive construction of the ‘coolie’ and Indian seafarers’ efforts to claim their identity workers, see G. Balachandran, ‘Making Coolies, (Un)making Workers: “Globalizing” Labour in the Late-19th and Early-20th Centuries’, *Journal of Historical Sociology* (vol. 24: 3, September 2011).

17 See here G. Balachandran, ‘Subaltern Cosmopolitanism, Racial Governance and Multiculturalism: Britain, c. 1900–45’, *Social History* (vol. 39: 4, December 2014).

Gogha, Mangalore and Tellicherry. The serang of its 36-strong engine room crew was from Bombay. His tindal came from Punjab. The rest of the crew included a contingent of Zanzibaris, a handful of men from Bombay, and a few from Surat, Sylhet, Kutch, Karachi, Muscat, Bahrain, Aden, and Mozambique.¹⁸

Not only crews. Life experiences of individual seafarers on board and ashore might also be quite diverse. The *Ellora* docked in London in 1881 after a voyage from Calcutta with a serang from Madras. The two tindals belonged to Calcutta and Jeddah. The other members of the 23-member crew included half a dozen from Jeddah, four each from Calcutta and Muscat, two each from Madras and Aden, as well as men from Zanzibar, Hyderabad, Ghazipur, and Cannanore. One of the men from Madras on this ship was Ram Samy, said to be 45 years of age in 1881, who is recorded in the local parish's baptism register as living since 1861 at Horseferry Road in West London, with his wife Julia Ormond and two children Sam and Mary.¹⁹

Two examples from the other end of the world suffice to underline the point. The *Coromandel* of Liverpool that arrived at Sydney at the end of a voyage from London in 1854 had a serang from Penang. Two of his three tindals came from Calcutta, the third from Bombay. The rest of the crew comprised seven men from Calcutta, five men from Jeddah, four each from Madras and Visakhapatnam, and one member each from Aden, Penang, Manila, and Patna.²⁰ The deck crew of the *Sun Foo* of London, also on a voyage from London to Sydney in 1873 was led by a serang from Calcutta. His two tindals were Goriah and Poortes, who along with one Balajee, belonged to Visakhapatnam on the Coromondal coast. Alongside them lived and worked two men each from Calcutta and Hainan (China), and three men each from Jeddah and Manila. The engine room crew of *Sun Foo* had a serang from Jeddah and a tindal from Muscat, and was made up of five men from Zanzibar, three from Aden/Port Said, two each from Muscat and Dalmatia (on the Adriatic coast), and one each from Calcutta and Cape Verde. The crew's Chinese cook was from Hainan.²¹

18 Crews of the *Indus* and *Ellora* below were enumerated in the 1881 UK census. See <http://www.censusuk.co.uk/1881new.htm> (last seen 23 October 2012).

19 Westminster City Council Library and Archives, Black Presence exhibition, online at <http://www.westminster.gov.uk/archives/blackpresence/22.cfm> (last seen 23 October 2012).

20 State Records Authority of New South Wales SRNSW: Shipping Master's Office; Passengers Arriving 1855–1922; SRNSW, NRS 13278, [X91] Reel 400 at <http://mariners.records.nsw.gov.au/1854/10/5410.htm> (last seen 23 October 2012).

21 SRNSW, Shipping Master's Office; CGS 13278, Passengers Arriving 1855–1922; X129–130, SR Reel 429, 1873 at <http://mariners.records.nsw.gov.au/1873/12/055sun.htm> (last seen 23 October 2012).

Crews reflected the diversity of the maritime labour milieu at the main hiring ports, viz. Calcutta and Bombay. Under the impetus of speedier voyages and heavier sea-borne traffic, Calcutta and Bombay had transformed by the 1860s into cosmopolitan sites for the working poor from many parts of the world including thousands of European seafarers looking for work. Fearful of European destitution and crime eroding British racial authority in India, the colonial government intervened to racialize destitution by hiring policemen and jail officials from the ranks of unemployed British seafarers. It also took steps to stop ships discharging European seafarers at Indian ports and forcibly shipping home those already present.²²

In the absence of an Anglo-US treaty to apprehend deserters, Bombay and Calcutta became a haven for American seafarers.²³ Calcutta was home to hundreds of Chinese seafarers many of whom ended up in the city's general labouring population. Some early P&O engine-room crews comprised slaves captured by British vessels and landed in Bombay where sizeable communities of East African and Arab seafarers endured until the 1920s.²⁴

The fluidity, though not yet the cosmopolitanism, began partly to harden from the early 20th century. The growth of seafarers' unions crystallized British working class opposition to foreign seafarers. The opposition was partly racial: 'we may tolerate Germans, Scandinavians, and Dutch', a Salford union official declared, but not 'Greeks, Italians, Spaniards, Arabs, etc'.²⁵ Debate over the merits of engaging 'lascars' grew muted after a 1902 parliamentary committee endorsed their employment. However, it prompted prolonged legal and political wrangling over who could be classified as 'lascars and other native seafarers', and as 'natives of India'. This continued till the 1920s.²⁶

22 Harald Fischer-Tiné, 'Flotsam and Jetsam of the Empire?', in Ashwini Tambe and Harald Fischer-Tiné, eds, *The Limits of British Colonial Control in South Asia* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008).

23 West Bengal State Archives (WBSA), Bengal judicial proceedings, 13 Jan. 1859, No. 65, Police commissioner's letter, 30 Dec. 1858.

24 National Archives of India (NAI), CI-SR/MS, Nov. 1880, 2022A, acting shipping master's letter, 27 Oct. 1879.

25 PRO, MT 9/698/165/1902, f. 1118, union's letter to the Board of Trade, 18 Jan. 1902; also see Parthasarathi Gupta, *Imperialism and the British Labour Movement, 1914–1964* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2002), p. 52.

26 Balachandran, *Globalizing Labour*, pp. 30–34.

‘All give way to the Asiatic’?

Several factors explain the rapid growth in employment of Indian crews on British ships. First, as already noted, was the nature of the industry itself: after the navigation laws were repealed British ship-owners lost no time in exploiting the mobility of their fixed capital.

Technological changes no doubt played a role. The ascendancy of steam transformed seafaring, with some ship-board work split into separate departments requiring skills quite removed from the world of sail and closer to those on land. Engine rooms of steam vessels resembled industrial boiler rooms more than anything on sailing vessels, and work in the saloon department that in the emerging hotel industry. Technological changes, the rapid expansion of shipping, speedier and thanks to canals, shorter, voyages, and access to new labour markets also contributed to stratifying skills and de-skilling maritime employment. Together these factors also plausibly increased the impetus for the shift from sail to steam.

‘Deskilling’ was discursive and political more than technological let alone occupational. Many of the new sub-continental engine-room crews came from Punjab, Mirpur, and other parts of the north-west. Catching their first glimpse of the deep sea probably from their foc’stle portholes, their first days at sea tended often to be traumatic.²⁷ Yet over time these crews gained notable mastery in the engine room, including the ability to undertake engineering repairs. But employers did not regard such skills seriously, it appears partly because they were themselves confounded by the great variety of ships’ engine designs and did not believe self-taught engine-room crews possessed any portable skills.²⁸ Steam ships still demanded traditional seamanship skills on deck. Yet in general, ‘de-skilling’, the enforced invisibility of some skills, and an environment marked by steep and racial skill hierarchies made steam vessels with Indian crews a highly stratified work environment.

With low and irregular wages, frequent absences from home, and arbitrary discharges at foreign ports, seafaring became increasingly an unattractive occupation in late-19th century Britain. Tight-fisted ship-owners went to further lengths to achieve small wage economies, for instance by paying off British crews

²⁷ As a result a new fireman’s first days at sea were nothing short of traumatic: Gabor Korvin, ed., *Memoirs of Khawajah Muhammad Bux, Australian Businessman* (translated from Urdu by Syed Haider Hassan), Rawalpindi, 2006, pp. 19–20.

²⁸ For some idea of negotiations about skill in different engine-room environments, see Hassan N. Gardezi, ed., *Chains to Lose: Life and Struggles of a Revolutionary – Memoirs of Dada Amir Haider Khan* (New Delhi: Patriot Publishers, 1989), especially ch. 3.

at Indian ports with depreciating rupees in the 1880s and replacing them with cheaper local crews.²⁹

Wages rose in line with labour productivity in most parts of the industrializing West and Japan before World War I. But in Britain seafarers' real wages declined according to one estimate by 5 % between 1890 and 1905 at a time when Britain's per capita real national product rose by eight per cent.³⁰ Low relative wages were a further blow at the occupational status of seafaring in Britain.

Owners and officers also claimed British seafarers were unruly and violent. 'British seafarers drink, fight, quarrel and are insubordinate', a former P&O commander intoned. His company had ceased employing British crews because they 'were turbulent and half ... were constantly in jail'³¹

Complaints of this nature coincided with the growth of unions. British ship-owners were notoriously against trade unions, and set up the Shipping Federation expressly to break strikes. In the authoritarian environment of a merchant ship it was easy to damn any sign of shop floor activity as insubordination. Consequently the morale of British seamen declined as rapidly as their alleged reputation.³² Nor did contemporary observers miss the connection between growing unionism in Britain and the employment of colonial and foreign seafarers.³³

Some blamed the behaviour of British crews on the effects of tropical heat. As late as the 1970s the National Union of Seamen (NUS) accepted 'heat problems in [the] accommodation' as a valid reason to employ Asian seafarers.³⁴ Stereotypes about the vulnerability of European crews to heat complemented prejudices about the vulnerability of Indian crews to cold. The latter served to justify geographical restrictions on their employment until World War II.³⁵

Officers' fears of unruly British crews grew worse east and south of the Suez Canal.

These fears deserve also to be viewed in the light of officers' insecurities over the changes sweeping through merchant shipping at this time. The growth of shipping and steam propulsion created new opportunities for engineers, many

²⁹ Balachandran, *Globalizing Labour*, p. 38.

³⁰ C.H. Dixon, 'Seafarers and the Law: An Examination of Legislation on the British Merchant seamen's Lot, 1580–1918', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University College, London, 1981, pp. 233–234.

³¹ NAI, FC, SC, March 1901, 135–42A, enclosures to A.M.'s note, 8 Oct. 1900.

³² Luke Trainor, 'The Historians and Maritime Labour, c. 1850–1930', *Research in Maritime History* (no. 9, December 1995), pp. 277–294.

³³ NAI, SC, 1275–80B–July 1890, Bombay shipping master's report.

³⁴ Modern Records Centre, Warwick (MRC), MSS 175A/126, NMB, WP10 memorandum, 'UK Ships Manning Agreements: Non-domiciled Ratings', undated.

³⁵ Balachandran, *Globalizing Labour*, pp. 126–135.

from struggling middle-class families with no tradition or experience of the sea. Even on deck younger officers may have felt challenged to face down older sailors who had spent much of their lives on sailing vessels.

There were unsettling professional changes as well. Shipping companies with heavy new investments in steam sought crewing economies at the expense of officers and engineers who were felt to be 'much too expensive for the changed maritime environment'.³⁶ The 1894 British merchant shipping act threatened further changes, notably by stipulating more formal norms for promotions and punishments which included suspending certificates for professional and personal offences. The telegraph made masters more directly accountable to ship-owners, enhanced the role of shipping agents relative to the master and his mates, and spurred early attempts to centralize the management of tramp shipping. The telegraph also enabled shorter halts at ports and more complex tramp itineraries which in turn meant longer absences from home.³⁷ For masters, diminished responsibility for the business side of shipping entailed lower commissions on cargoes and profits, and diminished authority.³⁸

The apparent amenability of Indian crews hence represented a welcome affirmation of masters' and officers' status and authority. As a former P&O master boasted, Indian seafarers were 'contented with their lot ..., amenable to ordinary discipline', and generally inclined to 'do their work as they should'. They 'harmonize[d] more freely than Europeans ... and shift[ed] around to help each other' when one of them fell out from illness or exhaustion. Indian seafarers did not regulate their work by the clock and were willing to work long hours. Therefore, employing Indian crews ensured officers kept watch instead of taking their coats 'off ... and bustl[ing] about like a bo'sn's mate' Indian seafarers were consequently 'more completely the servants of the ship-owner ... than any other group of men'.³⁹ European crews could not 'compete with, endure and thrive in the same healthy manner' as Indian crews. 'All give way to the Asiatic'⁴⁰

However officers felt, ultimately crewing decisions were dictated by ship-owners for whom employing Indian seafarers meant major cost advantages. There

36 J. Forbes Munro, *Maritime Enterprise and Empire: Sir William Mackinnon and his Business Network, 1823–93* (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2003), p. 125.

37 Byron Lew and Bruce Cater, 'The Telegraph, Coordination of Tramp Shipping, and Growth in World Trade, 1870–1910', *European Review of Economic History* (10: 1, 2006), pp. 147–173.

38 Munro, *Maritime Enterprise*, p. 125.

39 W.H. Hood, *The Blight of Insubordination: The Lascar Question and Rights and Wrongs of the British Shipmaster. Including the Mercantile Marine Committee Report* (London: Spottiswoode and Co., 1903), pp. 42–50; also L.G. W. White, *Ships, Coolies, and Rice* (London: Sampson Low & Co., 1936), pp. 62–63.

40 Hood, *Blight of Insubordination*, pp. 7–13.

were three major components to crew cost: wages, accommodation on board, and provisioning. Indian crews were cheaper than other crews in all three respects. Employing them also led indirectly to other economies.

Direct wage comparisons are difficult because Indian crew ranks and wages were more stratified than among European crews. This said, on a rough average Indian seafarers were paid a fifth to a quarter of a British seaman's wage. They were also paid less than Chinese, Malay, or other Asian seafarers.

Nor did wages increase much before World War II. The monthly wage of a serang on a British vessel was about Rs 35 in 1884, while that of a tindal varied between Rs 25 and 28. Wages of lascars and firemen averaged about Rs 18 on a well run ship. While by 1925 a serang's wages had risen to nearly Rs 60 per month, wages of tindals, cassabs, donkeymen, oilmen, greasers, and lascars ranged between Rs. 26 to 30, and those of ordinary lascars and firemen between Rs 18 to 24.⁴¹ In contrast, British seafarers' monthly wages doubled from £ 4/10 in 1914 to £ 9 in 1939.

Not much is known about Chinese and Malay wages which seem to have varied with port and time of engagement. Malay deck crews commanded a premium in Calcutta in the winter thanks to seasonal restrictions on employing Indian crews in North Atlantic waters. Chinese seafarers in Hong Kong and Shanghai were paid less than their compatriots in Singapore. In Singapore in 1939 a Chinese sailor received about two and half times an Indian sailor's wage, and a Malay sailor about twice. But Chinese seafarers in Hong Kong and Shanghai were paid only fractionally more than Indian seafarers, while those engaged in Calcutta were paid slightly less than Malay seafarers.⁴²

These wage differences did not translate into proportional cost differentials because of manning levels. Believing safety to lie in numbers when they were affordable, ship-owners hired three to four Indian seafarers for jobs for which they would only have hired two British seafarers even if that meant, as unions justifiably complained, going to sea in undermanned vessels. Yet given the wage differentials, even replacing a barely sufficient British crew with a much more adequate Indian crew meant a substantial reduction in the wage bill. By inhibiting exertion and preventing improvements to efficiency, low wages may have led to over-manning. Employers' insistence, when Indian crews became eligible for overtime compensation in the late-1930s, that this should take the form of time

⁴¹ OIOC, L/R/5/300, 'Lascar seafarers', p. 5; Royal Commission on Labour in India (hereafter RCL), vol. V, part 1, *Written Evidence*, 'Memorandum of the Indian Seamen's Union', section XII, pp. 249–250.

⁴² NAI, CD, MMII, 11MII (2)/31, May 1936, 1–41A.

off, rather than monetary payments, suggests they were aware of the over-manning but were unable or unwilling to do anything about it.

Overall wage cost differentials between Chinese, Malay, and Indian crews were much smaller. Hence crewing decisions across these choices depended on voyage schedules and crew logistics. In the 1920s and 1930s the MV *Oakbank* engaged Indian, Chinese, and Malay crews at Calcutta.⁴³ Its Chinese, Malay, and Indian deck crews comprised 15, 18, and 20 men respectively. The monthly wage cost of a Malay crew came to Rs 940. The Indian crew cost the least (Rs 732) and the Chinese crew cost slightly more (Rs 740). The vessel engaged Indian or Chinese crews in the saloon and engine room. With seven members each in the engine room and saloon, the Chinese crews cost Rs 400 and Rs 370 respectively. The 12-member Indian engine room crew cost Rs 360 and the seven-strong saloon crew, Rs 330.

Larger crews could have meant setting aside more space for accommodation. But Indian shipping laws ensured ship-owners would not find this a burden.

In 1860 Indian crews had bunks measuring four ‘superficial feet’ (or 24 cubic feet) and British crews, bunks of nine ‘superficial feet’ or 54 cubic feet to each. In 1876 these bunk sizes were increased to six superficial feet (36 cubic feet) and 10 superficial feet (60 cubic feet) respectively. By 1894 British crew bunk-sizes had increased to 12 square feet (72 cubic feet), and by 2006 to 15 square feet (or 120 cubic feet now with deck heights rising to eight feet).

Since the 19th century, Indian merchant shipping regulations specified diets for Indian seafarers. Until 1906 ship-owners employing British crews were under no similar obligation. Yet the diets of Indian seafarers were inferior to the diets to which British seafarers were accustomed, as well as cheaper. Indian seafarers also cost significantly less to provision than Arab or Chinese seafarers.

Once statutory scales were introduced the quantity, quality, and variety of British seafarers’ diets improved rapidly. Indian seafarers’ diets contained little or no variety. Attempts to introduce variety were as stoutly resisted as new conceptions of selves and social relationships. As an ignorant official remarked disdainfully about Bombay seafarers’ demands for including coffee, a substance they brought on board and already consumed at their own expense, in their official diets, ‘This has probably been demanded because it is included in the European scale. Coffee does not form part of the lascars’ ordinary diet and there appears to be no good reason for its inclusion.’⁴⁴

Longer agreements covering multiple voyages also meant lower employer outlays on shipping office, brokerage, and fees for crew engagement and dis-

⁴³ NAI, CD, MMII, 11MII (2)/31, May 1936, 1–41A.

⁴⁴ NAI, CD, MMII, Nov. 1931, 1–23 A, J.A. Woodhead’s minute, 27 June 1930.

charge, besides greater flexibility to plan ships' voyages and itineraries. Indian seafarers also worked longer hours – 72 to 84 hour weeks were not unknown – and even after regulated working hours were introduced in the 1930s overtime work by Indian crews was compensated by time off rather than additional wages.

Indian seafarers could not obtain discharges outside the subcontinent. The overt intention was to protect them from being stranded and left destitute at foreign ports. Yet given prevalent wage differentials few ship-owners cavilled at a restriction that enhanced their control over Indian crews. They also opposed timid attempts to relax this restriction, yet in 1931 wrested the right to discharge Indian seafarers at foreign ports.⁴⁵

Indian seamen were less prone to desert than seamen of other nationalities.⁴⁶ Consequently they formed a smaller and less visible presence even at British ports, than their Arab and Chinese counterparts. They were also not feared as vehicles of oriental subversion of western values, morals, and womanhood in the same way as Chinese seafarers with their presumed proclivity for trafficking in opium and operating 'dens of oriental vice'. These differences are reflected in popular fiction where the 'lascar' was a less ubiquitous and more ambivalent figure (for example in Arthur Conan Doyle) than Chinese seamen. The latter were more frequently vilified, most notoriously in the novels of the pseudonymous Sax Rohmer but also at the hands of otherwise sympathetic observers such as Stan Hugill, for criminal vices, and as sources of 'Oriental contagion' and corruption particularly of women – Canton Kitty being a popular name for a white woman with a Chinese companion, or worse for someone who had 'opium-smoked herself into a strange likeness of a Chinaman'.⁴⁷ Therefore, despite enduring union opposition, Indian seamen were on the whole a less controversial presence in the British merchant marine than Arab or Chinese seamen.

British Trade Unions and Indian seafarers

Almost immediately after they came into existence in the 1880s, British seafarers' unions began campaigning against Asian crews. This opposition varied in

⁴⁵ See NAI, CD, MMII, 11 MII(9)/31, Nov. 1933, 1–19A.

⁴⁶ Balachandran, *Globalizing Labour?*, pp. 177–184.

⁴⁷ Stan Hugill, *Sailortown* (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1967), pp. 123–124; Joseph Salter, *The East in the West or Work among the Asiatics and Africans in London* (London: Partridge and Co., c. 1896), chs 3–4; on sexualized fears of moral contagion, see Barry Milligan, *Pleasures and Pains: Opium and the Orient in 19th Century British Culture* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1995), ch. 5.

scope and intensity, peaking round the turn of the century and in the 1930s when the Labour party also came out in explicit support of a British-only employment policy, yet with the exception of the two world wars remained unremitting until the 1970s. By the 1900s and more perceptibly from the 1920s, this opposition spread to port officials, missionaries, the local police, as well as the Home Office. In 1911 ship-owners agreed to make additional contributions to the British seamen's pension fund in proportion to the number of Indian crews they employed. Meant to protect the benefits of fund's current members, this agreement proved a durable safeguard from the employers' point of view. Needless to add, Indian seafarers were not admitted to the fund. In the 1970s the NUS took this to a logical conclusion when it began charging owners a 'union levy' for hiring Indian crews.⁴⁸

British unions' efforts to check the employment of Indian seafarers took many forms. In the 1890s the National Sailors' and Firemen's Union (NSFU) demanded equal bunk spaces for Indian and British crews. However the NSFU's most prominent leader J. Havelock Wilson thought nothing of demanding larger spaces for 'cheap "Coolie" firemen' in the same breath as protesting their 'preferential employment'. Nor did he attempt to hide his true intent, viz. reduce or eliminate Indian crews on British ships.⁴⁹

Health officials at British ports also complained about crowded spaces and insanitary conditions. But they encountered resistance from shipping companies led by the P&O to whom larger crew spaces were a particular threat. Seafarers from the subcontinent made up an overwhelming proportion of P&O crews. Its existing vessels were specially outfitted to carry them, and new space regulations would have meant expensive modifications to. The P&O consequently mobilized along a wide front, swapping cultural claims about Asian 'living and sleeping habits', the flavour of 'ghee and condiments', and the odours of 'Indian marine cooking' and political claims about the sovereignty of colonial Indian law; and orchestrating petitions on behalf of Indian seamen protesting being made victims of the 'benevolent intentions' and 'fatal philanthropy' of individuals intent on sacrificing their livelihoods for comfortable lodgings on board.⁵⁰ A 'native lascar' was only half as capable as a European seaman, one of these petitions read, and no employer could afford to treat them on par. Besides 'the vessels we sail are like palaces, and our quarters there are far and away superior to what we can

⁴⁸ Hope, *New History*, p. 455; on the 'levy', see MRC, MSS 175A/Box 125, in particular 'Non-European Manning', memorandum, 18 Sept. 1974.

⁴⁹ PRO, MT 23/92, letter, 9 Dec. 1895.

⁵⁰ NAI, LD, Oct. 1895, prog. 265, app. 79, J. Playfair's speech.

ever hope to obtain ourselves on land.⁵¹ The high point of the P&O's intervention came in 1900 when Alexander Mackay (later Baron Inchcape) arrived in Calcutta where in the course of a single meeting he converted key colonial officials to his company's view.⁵²

The NSFU demanded equal pay and working conditions for crews of all nationalities. This was empty rhetoric. In reality the union's opposition to Indian seafarers on grounds of presumed ability repudiated any notion of equality. Its routine tactic of deriding Indian seamen as 'lascars' or 'coolies' was calculated to deny them admission to the mystical fraternity of the sea and the modern working class, and reflected/reinforced this inequality. In practice too, by the 1930s the NUS, deeply implicated since 1919 in a corporatist alliance with British ship-owners, had grown intent on sustaining and reproducing this inequality. For instance it rejected the 1936 ILO working hours' convention and negotiated a longer working week for Indian crews in opposition to the wishes of the latter's unions which, in contrast to the NUS, had actively championed and voted for the 1936 convention.⁵³

The NSFU (and later the NUS) claimed Indian seafarers put British lives at risk. Such claims struck a chord especially following accidents at sea. Another tactic was to protest the use of Indian crews on ships carrying British women and children.⁵⁴

It was frequently claimed that Indian seafarers were incapable of working in the cold and were useless in a storm. Partisan and polarized, 'expert opinion' only helped relay and reproduce such prejudices because of which Indian crews worked and lived under the close, unflinching scrutiny of officers and passengers which, oddly enough, intensified rather than diminished during times of danger or emergency.⁵⁵

The charge that Indian deck crews were useless in the cold spoke directly to racial prejudices. Fear and fatalism were other familiar tropes in accounts relaying vivid images of Indian seafarers huddled against the cold and cowering in fear

51 NAI, LD, Oct. 1895, proceeding 262A, app. 78 and 267A, app. 81; on the P&O role in this campaign, see OIOC, L/E/7/696, A. Challis to Board of Trade, 13 Jan. 1911.

52 NAI, LD, Jan. 1893, nos. 51–153, J.E. O'Connor's note, 12 Jan. 1901. In 1900 the British courts ruled that British ships had to follow British law in British waters. This left the P&O and other companies free to allocate crew spaces as per Indian law south of the Suez and on Indian Ocean voyages: see NAI, FC-SC, 231–44A.

53 For more details, see Balachandran, *Globalizing Labour*, ch. 7.

54 PRO, MT9/469B M 4354/1894, note, 8 March 1893; OIOC, L/E/9/970, parliamentary replies, 17 Oct. 1940.

55 For example, see London Metropolitan Archives (LMA), PS/TH/W/01/014, record of the inquiry into the sinking of the *Oceana*, 1912.

when their ship ran into trouble. As a reporter for the *Hull Daily Mail* described his voyage from Bombay to Aden on a ‘dirty monsoon night’ when the ship’s wheel chains broke in the small hours of the morning,

half a dozen ‘coolies’ were called in to assist in the repairs, the vessel was making bad weather of it, and in the pitch darkness not a lascar was to be found on the deck They were on the deck, oh, yes! Two were hiding inside ventilators, one at the fore part of the engine-room skylight, and the others under the main barrels of the winch like half-drowned rats! They were essentially lacking in ‘two o’clock morning courage’, which is the great trait of the British sailor’s character.⁵⁶

Or in Prime Minister Lloyd George’s words spoken in the middle of a war in which nearly 4000 Indian seafarers paid with their lives, ‘lascars’ lacked the ‘grit of the white men’.⁵⁷

Rhetorical claims for the ‘true British seaman’ were, as Isaac Land notes, composed of ‘two mutually reinforcing parts’, viz., ‘a racial identity inflected by gender, and a masculinity that was ... an expression of inborn ethnic traits.’ General discourses about race and adaptability to extreme climatic conditions also echoed with hidden resonances of class and claims to rule.⁵⁸

Public and parliamentary concern over the effects of employing foreign merchant seamen on Britain’s wartime naval reserve led to an inquiry in 1902.⁵⁹ Insisting they were indispensable to British shipping, shipowners said Indian seafarers made such capable all-weather crews that many masters would never hire European crews when Indian crews were available. Despite Havelock Wilson’s overt hostility the 1902 committee endorsed the employment of ‘lascars’ who were as a rule ‘temperate’, and made ‘amenable and contented crews’. Besides they were British subjects with a justified claim to employment on British ships which had also displaced ‘native trading vessels’ along the Indian coast.⁶⁰

The committee’s report helped blunt opposition to Indian seafarers for the next two decades. Union anger was thereafter directed mainly at Chinese and Arab seafarers until the 1920s.

⁵⁶ 16 Jan. 1902.

⁵⁷ PRO, MT 9/1087 M. 5189/17, speech to trade unionists, 31 Jan. 1917.

⁵⁸ Isaac Land, ‘Customs Of The Sea: Flogging, Empire, and the “True British Seaman”, 1770 to 1870’, *Interventions* (3: 2, 2001) p. 172.

⁵⁹ British Parliamentary Papers (BPP), vol. 62, 1903, Cd. 1608.

⁶⁰ BPP, vol. 62, 1903, Cd. 1607, paras. 14–16.

‘Muscles of Empire’

It is commonplace that the British Empire was glued together by railways, the navy, and the telegraph. As Ian Kerr notes in the context of the railways, colonial labour was an invisible ingredient in this glue.⁶¹ Though the employment of colonial workers in its merchant fleet evoked protests in Britain, it is debatable whether the supply of native (i.e. white British) labour would have kept pace with the rapid growth of Britain’s merchant navy at a time when the Royal Navy too, was expanding rapidly. As a NUS memorandum acknowledged in 1977, Indian crews proved indispensable to British shipping only partly on account of low relative wages in the industry. Even had wages been higher, it was a ‘matter for speculation’ whether enough British seafarers would have come forward, or whether ‘reliance on high cost British labour would have proved an impediment to ... [the] growth [of the British merchant navy].’⁶²

The 1902 committee cited Britain’s monopoly of Indian shipping to justify the employment of Indian seafarers on British ships. The committee could not have been expected to recognize that this monopoly was also sustained by subsidies from Indian revenues. But by the 1930s Indian nationalists protesting wage and employment discrimination against sub-continental seafarers on British vessels argued that without the subsidized access it commanded to India, China, Africa, and the Arab coast, employment in British shipping would shrink to 30,000 low-paid ratings.⁶³

The imperial state had a direct interest in employing cheap colonial maritime labour. In 1870 the P&O received a mail subsidy of £ 450,000 for India and China. By 1900 imperial shipping subsidies totalled nearly £ 2 million, of which a third came from colonial budgets.⁶⁴ Widely considered extravagant, this subsidy amounted to 17 pence (or 17d) per pound of mail for India, compared to 11 d for the US, and 14 d for South Africa and Australia. According to Freda Harcourt, mail subsidies exceeded a third of the P&O’s total receipts in the 1870s and averaged a fifth over 1840–1914.⁶⁵ Contemporaries believed these subsidies, which also exceeded the company’s dividends, enabled P&O’s anti-competitive practices.

⁶¹ Ian Kerr, *Building the Railways of the Raj, 1850–1900* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁶² MRC, MSS 175A, Box 127, ‘Legislature and the Lascars’, January 1977.

⁶³ NAI, CD, MMII, Nov. 1935, 24 MM-II/35, 1C, Mehta to Lansbury, 1 April 1935; Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML), Master Papers, MA 25/1, David Erulkar’s letter, 2 Feb. 1934.

⁶⁴ Daniel Headrick, *Tools of Empire: Technological Transfer in the Age of Imperialism, 1850–1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 36–37.

⁶⁵ Freda Harcourt, ‘British Oceanic Mail Contracts in the Age of Steam, 1838–1914’, *Journal of Transport History* (9: 1, 1988), p. 6.

It is moot how much larger the subsidy would have been had the P&O not had access to cheap Indian crews.

Mail subsidies are a good example of the mutually beneficially nexus between state and the principal shipping companies in the British Empire, and between imperial power and commercial profit. Sometimes this nexus verged on cronyism or corruption. Thus for example in 1925 the India Office persistently ignored the P&O breaking rules to employ Indian crews for its summer North sea cruises whose passengers included its own very senior officials!⁶⁶ Often imperial interest and private profit had to be reconciled at the public expense. To the extent cheap Indian crews reduced the burden of such reconciliation on government revenues, they were an imperial asset deserving of protection.

Indian maritime workers became an indispensable asset when the empire went to war. In the world wars, besides merchant vessels, Indian seamen crewed troopships, hospital ships, supply ships, and other admiralty charters. About 3500 Indian seafarers were killed in World War I, about 5000 in World War II. 1200 Indian seamen were taken prisoner in each war. At the end of World War II British ship-owners declared that ‘the Indian seaman ... [had] a record in Peace and War second to none’.⁶⁷ This was partly self-interested bombast.⁶⁸ Yet more than ever during the two world wars, Indian seafarers became, in Frank Broeze’s apt description, ‘muscles of the empire’.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ OIOC, L/E/9/956, especially Kershaw’s note, 27 July 1925.

⁶⁷ PRO, MT/4266, F. 101812, ‘Report of sub-committee’, 11 Oct. 1945, p. 5.

⁶⁸ For the context, see Balachandran, *Globalizing Labour?*, ch. 7.

⁶⁹ Frank Broeze, ‘The Muscles of Empire: Indian Seamen and the Raj, 1919–1939’, *Indian Economic and Social History Review* (18: 1, 1981) pp. 43–67.