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**‘To Shake Hands Across the Ocean’:  
The Political Worlds of South Asian Seamen,  
c.1918-1946**

Naina Manjrekar

Department of History  
School of Oriental and African Studies  
University of London

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation explores the ways in which the mobility of South Asian seafarers informed their political ideas and, more specifically, their ideas of the anti-colonial movement in the first half of the twentieth century. In so doing, it integrates the approaches of subaltern, maritime and global history.

It begins with looking at the remarkable geographical scale of mobility of twentieth-century *lascar* seamen and considers the transformative impact of this mobility on their worldviews. It explores their experiences of diverse port worlds, their contact with working-class men and women on ships and ashore, and their eyewitness experiences of war, revolution, fascism and anti-colonial movements. It also studies the intertwining of lascars' routes with networks of political activists and organisations that were distant from South Asian shores. It explores how these encounters and contacts informed their imagination of the anti-colonial movement and of a decolonised future. To understand this imagination, it examines the mutiny of twenty thousand Royal Indian Navy seamen at the end of the Second World War and the cusp of South Asian decolonisation, which was opposed by the nationalist leadership. The dissertation argues that in order to understand their politics, we must piece together a longer history of resistance, looking at everyday resistance on ships and in ports as well as moments of largescale rebellion.

The thesis challenges the preponderant assumption that mobility produced cosmopolitan elites and segregated subalterns. It alters this picture by showing that lascars' geographical, phenomenological and political worlds extended beyond South Asia, arguing that their mobility shaped their anti-colonialism, making it distinct from the territorially bounded nationalism of the Congress and Muslim League. It proposes that 'flattening' out their political views to the catch-all label of nationalism misses many of the wider inflections of their political worldviews.

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‘I used to imagine the wide blue sea, how a ship goes across the seas to other countries, how sailors met strange people in distant lands.’

Anjob Ali

‘With four *annas* and the clothes on my back as my only worldly possession, I embarked on the uncharted ocean of life experience, breaking away from my past and plunging into a strange and fascinating new world.’

Dada Amir Haider Khan

‘If peasants and seamen were past masters of storytelling, the artisan class was its university. In it was combined the lore of faraway places, such as a much-traveled man brings home, with the lore of the past, as it best reveals itself to natives of a place.’

Walter Benjamin



# Introduction

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The relation of subaltern politics to the anti-colonial movement in South Asia is generally framed by the borders of British India in histories of labour and decolonisation.<sup>1</sup> Within this geographical frame, scholarship has focused on workers' relationships with mainstream nationalist parties, understanding their politics as variants of 'nationalism'.<sup>2</sup> Through a study of colonial seafarers, or *lascars*, this thesis makes the argument that the politics of these mobile subalterns assimilated a range of political ideas and projects that was broader than mainstream South Asian nationalism. I argue that lascars' imaginations of a decolonised future were not delimited by the borders of British India but encompassed large swathes of the colonial world, from the Caribbean to Sierra Leone to Somalia, China and Indonesia. Moreover, these imaginations envisioned an active role for geographically-stretched networks of colonial subalterns in the creation of this future. As such, they can be understood as a kind of maritime subaltern internationalism.

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<sup>1</sup> Chitra Joshi, *Lost Worlds: Indian Labour and Its Forgotten Histories* (London: Anthem Press, 2005); Janaki Nair, *Miners and Millhands: Work, Culture and Politics in Princely Mysore* (New Delhi: Sage, 1998); Dilip Simeon, *The Politics of Labour Under Late Colonialism: Workers, Unions, and the State in Chota Nagpur, 1928-1939* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1995); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History: Bengal 1890-1940* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, *Imperial Power and Popular Politics: Class, Resistance and the State in India, c. 1850-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, 'Workers' Politics and the Mill Districts in Bombay between the Wars,' *Modern Asian Studies* 15, no. 3 (1981): 603–47; Samita Sen, *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India: The Bengal Jute Industry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Nandini Gooptu, *The Politics of the Urban Poor in Early Twentieth-Century India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Shashi Bhushan Upadhyay, *Existence, Identity, and Mobilization: The Cotton Millworkers of Bombay, 1890-1919* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2004); Richard Newman, *Workers and Unions in Bombay, 1918-1929: A Study of Organisation in the Cotton Mills* (Bombay: South Asian History Section, Australian National University, 1981); Subho Basu, *Does Class Matter?: Colonial Capital and Workers' Resistance in Bengal, 1890-1937* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004); Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, 'Swaraj and the Kamgar: The Indian National Congress and the Bombay Working Class, 1919-1931,' in *Congress and Nationalism: The Pre-Independence Phase*, ed. Richard Sisson and Stanley A. Wolpert (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 223–49.

<sup>2</sup> Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Kapil Kumar, *Congress and Classes: Nationalism, Workers and Peasants* (Delhi: Manohar, 1988); Bhattacharya, 'Swaraj and the Kamgar'.

Lascars' working lives on ships took them along routes that wove through a string of international ports, from Calcutta to Canton and Cardiff, and Bombay to Batavia and Brindisi.<sup>3</sup> I argue that lascars' mobility afforded them a more 'wide angle', yet at the same time more intimate, view of the world compared to most South Asians. Their mobility also informed their understanding of political ideas. Their voyages traversed political events and movements and encountered ideas spanning wide geographical regions against a background of growing mass political mobilisations after the First World War in Europe and Asia. Thus, the working lives of lascars not only expanded their experiential worlds, but made them first-hand witnesses to war, revolution, fascism and anti-colonial uprisings. Their seaborne mobility also put them at the vortex of swirling political cross-currents, from pan-Asianism and pan-Islamism to communism, anarchism and a wider pan-colonial internationalism. While all of these political visions and projects were avowedly anti-colonial, none of them could be reduced to a nationalism congruent with the borders of any one postcolonial nation-state. In this sense, they were also non-statist visions. Thus, their conception of the anti-colonial movement differed from that of the nationalist leaderships whose aim in the anti-colonial movement was to establish a nation-state under their own control. Or, to borrow Heather Streets-Salter's words about international anti-colonial movements, lascars imagined 'a postcolonial world whose boundaries did not fit neatly with those set by the former colonial power, and indeed went beyond the nation-state altogether' and aimed to 'not only disrupt colonial rule in one colony, but to attack colonialism everywhere as a systemic, worldwide problem in need of eradication.'<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The shipping newspapers *Lloyds List and Shipping Gazette*, *Syren and Shipping*, *Journal of Commerce and Shipping Telegraph* gave detailed weekly and bi-weekly updates on the movement of ships, cargo and tonnage of nearly five hundred ports around the world. The *International Mercantile Diary and Yearbook* (London: The Syren and Shipping, Ltd: 1925) gives regular sailing times from every port around the world, along with imports, exports and currency and time conversions.

<sup>4</sup> Heather Streets-Salter, "International and Global Anti-Colonial Movements," in *World History from Below: Disruption and Dissent, 1750 to the Present*, ed. Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton (London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 47-48.

My interest in this project was sparked by a spectacular political mobilisation of Indian seamen on the eve of decolonisation. In February 1946, twenty thousand sailors on Royal Indian Navy (RIN) battleships across the Indian Ocean mutinied, igniting what was perhaps the last mass anti-colonial movement before the subcontinent was plunged into inter-religious violence between Hindus and Muslims after August 1946, which culminated in Partition a year later. The ‘mutineers’ elected a strike committee which replaced the admiralty as the centre of command. The strike committee issued a list of demands which, interestingly, included an end to British military assistance to Dutch repression of the Indonesian anti-colonial movement unfolding over four and a half thousand kilometres away. The mutiny galvanised popular mobilisations of workers in Bombay, Calcutta, Karachi and Madras, which were met with military violence. Despite their avowedly anti-colonial aims, however, these mobilisations were opposed by both the Congress and Muslim League, which abjured them as ‘hooliganism’ and ‘anarchy’, an opposition which finally led to the defeat and closure of this historical moment.<sup>5</sup> This was an intensely poignant moment which calls for reflection: these nationalist parties and their leaders, who are conventionally accorded the central role in the process of decolonisation – and whose differences over the form of the postcolonial nation-state were to result in the sundering of the subcontinent – were united with the colonial state in opposing an anticolonial movement which was, by all accounts, marked by communal unity.

This episode, all but forgotten, raises a number of intriguing questions: why of all the forms of protest that the mutineers could have chosen, did they decide to form a strike committee? Why did they raise the demand supporting the Indonesian anti-colonial movement? Why did the Congress and Muslim League oppose the RIN mutiny? Momentous as it was in its own time, why has the mutiny been treated to what E.P. Thompson called ‘the

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<sup>5</sup> Dipak Kumar Das, *Revisiting Talwar: A Study in the Royal Indian Navy Uprising of February 1946* (New Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1993).

enormous condescension of posterity’?<sup>6</sup> The mutiny also raises questions about historiographical treatment of the form that decolonisation ultimately took, which verges on the teleological.<sup>7</sup> The vehement opposition of the Congress and League to the mutiny seemed to show that the anti-colonialism of the nationalists and mutineers were not only different but also oppositional. In what did the opposition consist? Had the subaltern anti-colonialism on the cusp of decolonisation portended a different postcolonial future from the eventual Partition and creation of two hostile nation states?

The amnesia surrounding this episode raises questions not only about decolonisation and the imaginations which informed it, but also about historical memory and memorialisation. In fact, the word ‘amnesia’ has a rather passive connotation of passing into oblivion. Ann Laura Stoler draws attention to the active and deliberate aspect of these omissions, arguing that they are not the products of ignorance, neglect or forgetting, but active acts of what she calls colonial ‘occlusion’ and ‘aphasia’.<sup>8</sup> These lasting occlusions, she argues, are produced by ‘geopolitical locations’ of colonial power, and reproduced by the ‘conceptual grammars’ they create, which ‘render different objects observable and thereby construe... what count as the salient ‘historical facts.’<sup>9</sup> Against the singularity of narratives based on these ‘facts’, she alerts us to the ‘unrealised possibilities, arrested and failed experiments that commonly remain unmarked as ‘proper’ historical events because they were never fully realised and thus were not understood to have been possible or to have ‘happened.’<sup>10</sup> The creation of seemingly self-evident ‘facts’ and narratives is, however, occasionally disrupted by certain events which are

moments in which what is taken as common sense no longer works, in which clarity gives way to doubt, in which epistemic habits fail to do their work, in which, even for

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<sup>6</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1966).

<sup>7</sup> Bipan Chandra et al., *India’s Struggle for Independence* (New Delhi: Penguin, 1989).

<sup>8</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 23.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 36.

a brief moment, what once seemed ‘normal’ and ‘obvious’ is open to reflection and no longer looks the same.<sup>11</sup>

The mutiny, with its contending vision of decolonisation and the alternative genealogies of internationalist imaginations which informed it, was not forgotten but occluded by the conceptual grammars of postcolonial historiography. The process of occlusion to which the mutiny was treated was not only the product of colonial power but also that of a new geopolitical formation, the nation state, which produced its own aphasia. At the same time, it radically disrupts these grammars. To untangle this event and its many pasts, therefore, is to disrupt the nationalist (and statist) occlusions at work, but also to illuminate them and at the same time open up other trajectories and imaginations which were neither nationalist nor statist.

Of the few historical studies of the event, nearly all attribute the mutiny to the ‘nationalism’ of the naval ratings, and even to their ‘patriotism’.<sup>12</sup> These accounts focus on the racial abuse faced by the Indian ratings from the overwhelmingly – but not exclusively – white officers.<sup>13</sup> None of these studies, however, addresses the mutineers’ demand for the withdrawal of British forces from Indonesia. Having applied the catch-all label of ‘nationalist’ to the mutineers as well as the Congress and Muslim League leaderships, they also find it difficult to explain why the nationalist leaders would oppose a putatively

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<sup>11</sup> Stoler, *Duress*, 22.

<sup>12</sup> Rear Admiral Satyindra Singh, *Under Two Ensigns: The Indian Navy, 1945-1950* (New Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta: Oxford and IBH Publishing, 1985); Balai Chandra Dutt, *Mutiny of the Innocents* (Bombay: Sindhu Publications, 1971); Vasant Marotirao Bhagwatkar, *Royal Indian Navy Uprising and Indian Freedom Struggle* (Amravati: Charvak Prakashan, 1989); Subrata Banerjee, *The RIN Strike* (New Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1981); Anirudh Deshpande, *Hope and Despair: Mutiny, Rebellion and Death in India* (Delhi: Primus Books, 2016). The same point on patriotism is made in memoirs by participants in the mutiny. Dutt, *Mutiny of the Innocents*; Biswanath Bose, *RIN Mutiny, 1946: Reference and Guide for All* (New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, 1988). Andrew Davies argues that ‘mobility of the sailors of the RIN. was important in shaping their political outlook’, but ultimately still understands this political outlook within the rubric of nationalism. Andrew Davies, ‘Learning ‘Large Ideas’ Overseas: Discipline, (Im)Mobility and Political Lives in the Royal Indian Navy Mutiny,’ *Mobilities* 9, no. 3 (2014): 385.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

nationalist mass mobilisation, except in terms of the ‘masses’ being the ‘true patriots’.<sup>14</sup> This seemed a rather thin reading of a rich political event which could tell us a good deal more about subaltern ideas and aspirations of the anti-colonial movement. Moreover, the thinness of these interpretations derived from the fact that they saw the mutiny as an isolated incident which gave it the character of a flash in the pan, appearing *ex nihilo* and disappearing without a trace. Within this narrow temporal framing, which began at earliest with the start of the war, these narratives were unable to explain the mutiny except as either a blind, atavistic reaction to oppression or as the work of ‘conspirators’, ‘ring-leaders’ and ‘instigators’ who were the ‘staunch patriots’.<sup>15</sup> On the contrary, I surmised that reading this event as a manifestation of longer-term trends might provide a fuller understanding of the ideas that informed the seamen’s mutiny. However, since the Royal Indian Navy itself had only been formed at the start of the Second World War in 1939 out of a core of lascars, a longer-term exploration took the project into a history of lascars’ ideas and contestations of authority. This thesis, then, explores the colonial seafarers’ routes of circulation, their experience of different port worlds around these routes, their encounters with the societies, events, ideas and people in these ports and their forms of contestation of shipboard and state authority in quotidian as well as large, public and spectacular ways through the interwar period.

This longer history of mobile subalterns changes our understanding of subaltern politics and decolonisation. In such a view, subaltern politics appear as neither nationally circumscribed, nor axiomatically nationalist, but as also shaped by global currents of political ideas and movements. Such a widening of frames challenges the limits of the term

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<sup>14</sup> Dutt, *Mutiny of the Innocents*; Bose, *RIN Mutiny, 1946*.

<sup>15</sup> The memoirs of two participants attribute to themselves the role of ‘conspirators’ and ‘staunch patriots’. Dutt, *Mutiny of the Innocents*; Bose, *RIN Mutiny, 1946: Reference and Guide for All*. Deshpande, *Hope and Despair: Mutiny, Rebellion and Death in India*. The Commission of Inquiry instituted in March to examine the ‘causes and origins’ of the mutiny attributed the mutiny in part to ‘ring leaders’, which it had to single out for exemplary punishment, as well as to the prevailing anti-colonial unrest across the colonial world. Report of the Commission of Inquiry 1946 (3 Vols). Royal Indian Navy Mutiny Papers, Serial Number 6. National Archives of India, New Delhi.

‘nationalist’, which flattens out the complexity of these larger influences.<sup>16</sup> It is, I suggest, more useful to use the concept of ‘anti-colonialism’ instead, which can accommodate multiple visions of the movement and its future. A focus on non-nationalist subaltern politics also changes our understanding of decolonisation and Partition. Most histories of 1947 focus on the negotiations of the Cabinet Mission which arrived in India on 23 March 1946, exactly a month after the defeat of the mutiny.<sup>17</sup> These accounts describe the competing claims of the Congress and Muslim League over the shape of a post-colonial India and treat the riots of Direct Action day in August 1946 as a fateful milestone leading to Partition.<sup>18</sup> Yet, the vision of decolonisation that emerged during the Cabinet Mission talks from March 1946 came to fruition only because of the closure of the vision crystallised in February 1946, which was characterised by communal unity of the ratings which contrasted with the unity of the Congress and League in opposition to the mass movement. Thus, seen in light of February 1946, August 1947 appears as one outcome out of several possible trajectories, and in this sense, contingent on the foreclosure of these other, contesting visions.

## Methodology

In this thesis, I treat two aspects of lascars’ existences: their mobility and their subalternity. While the first theme deals with their geographical movement and its impact on their political worldviews, the second deals with their relation to their labour, forms of authority and their contestation of authority in everyday, ‘small’ ways on the one hand, and more public, larger

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<sup>16</sup> Manu Goswami similarly cautions against the ‘flattening of all anti-imperial politics to nationalism’, which she attributes to a ‘methodological nationalism’. Manu Goswami, ‘Imaginary Futures and Colonial Internationalisms’, *The American Historical Review* 117, no. 5 (2012): 1431–60.

<sup>17</sup> Joya Chatterjee, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947–1967* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism and History in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Urvashi Butalia, ‘An Introduction,’ in *Partition: The Long Shadow*, ed. Urvashi Butalia (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2014), 97–133; Chandra et al., *India’s Struggle for Independence*.

<sup>18</sup> Chatterjee, *The Spoils of Partition*; Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition*; Urvashi Butalia, ‘An Introduction,’.

ways on the other. In exploring the relation of sea-going subalterns to the international circulation of political ideas and movements, this dissertation lies at the confluence of subaltern, global and maritime history. The following sections will discuss the contribution that this thesis makes in each of these fields.

## **Mobility**

The effects of mobility on subaltern politics are remarkably understudied. While the Subaltern Studies Collective in the 1980s examined subaltern politics in locally framed histories which did not accommodate mobility, the subsequent global turn in the 1990s left subalterns behind while looking at mobility and international exchange of ideas between literate elites. In terms of political histories, this implied a narrowness of subaltern vision, while the ideas of elites were treated in global, and even cosmopolitan, terms. Thus, when Subaltern Studies narrowed in from national histories of political leaders to local histories of peasants and tribals, they generally framed these in terms of an ‘autonomous’ nationalism. Ranajit Guha argued for ‘the need to acknowledge... the contribution made by the people... to the making and development of this nationalism’.<sup>19</sup>

This narrow geographical framing became a blind spot for many otherwise excellent studies of subaltern politics. In Shahid Amin’s study of the burning of a police *chowki* in Chauri Chaura in 1922, which led Gandhi famously to suspend the non-cooperation movement, for instance, Amin noted *en passant*, that in Chauri Chaura,

the experience of war in the trenches of Flanders and Mesopotamia was instrumental in loosening the bonds of deference in north Indian villages during 1920-2...it had a novel political impact on the peasantry .... Demobilized soldiers in uniform, flaunting their war ribbons, figured prominently in many anti-police and anti-landlord battles during the course of a prolonged peasant movement in the nearby Awadh districts.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ranajit Guha, “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India” in *Subaltern Studies: Volume I* ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), 2-3.

<sup>20</sup> Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura 1922-1992* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 39.



Yet, the ‘political impact’ of their wartime experiences does not figure as a significant factor in explaining the imaginations that impelled this ‘event’. Even where the subalterns were themselves mobile, studies maintained implicit assumptions that their worldviews remained circumscribed by a local which was rural, static and unchanging. The ways in which their itinerant lives could change their political imaginations were left unexplored. For instance in Dipesh Chakrabarty’s study of Calcutta’s jute mill workers, he maintains that the workers’ migration from the village to the city had no discernible effect on their ‘pre-bourgeois’ attitudes to authority, resistance and community.<sup>21</sup> This portrayal betrays certain colonial assumptions of the unchanging permanence of rural institutions.

Even studies of migrant labour borrow these implicit assumptions of immobility and unchanging worldviews. They focus predominantly on the economic factors and state policies controlling mobility, but not on the effects of mobility on subaltern ideas. Studies of slave, convict, indentured and coolie labour are overwhelmingly framed in terms of the ‘free’ and ‘unfree’ labour debate which focuses, firstly, on debt relationships and traditional authority through which coolies were first contracted and then controlled as plantation labour, for instance through the *kangani* system in Malaya, *maistry* in Burma and *tundu* in Ceylon. Secondly, they look at the legal means of control which kept the labourers in a state of ‘unfreedom’.<sup>22</sup> These could be laws binding the labourer to the employer, such as master-servant and workmen’s breach of contract laws, or legal controls on free movement, such as passport controls, medical checks and other such measures.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History*0.

<sup>22</sup> Prabhu Mohapatra, ‘Eurocentrism, Forced Labour, and Global Migration: A Critical Assessment’, *International Review of Social History*, 52 (2007), 110–115, Sunil Amrith, *Migration and Diaspora in Modern Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Hugh Tinker, *A New System of Slavery: The Export of Indian Labour Overseas, 1830–1920*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).

<sup>23</sup> Jan Breman, *Labour, Migration and Rural Transformation in Colonial Asia* (Amsterdam: Free University Press, 1990); Radhika V. Mongia, ‘Race, Nationality, Mobility: A History of the Passport’, *Public culture*, 11, no. 3 (1999), 527-556; John Torpey, *The Invention Of The Passport: Surveillance, Citizenship And The State*

The existing literature on Indian Ocean seafarers is also shaped by the same parameters of constraint, focusing overwhelmingly on the structural controls on labour. For instance, Ravi Ahuja and Gopalan Balachandran have studied the ways in which forms of indebtedness tied lascars into networks of subordination to labour recruiters and boarding house keepers in port, and foremen (*serangs*) on the ship.<sup>24</sup> Ahuja and Laura Tabili have also looked at the legal constraints which bound lascars to their inferior position within the international labour market.<sup>25</sup> On one hand, Ahuja has studied the ways in which their contracts, called ‘Asiatic articles’, not only determined their lower wages, but also constrained their mobility by ensuring that they were discharged in a South Asian port and were thus unable to seek employment on more remunerative contracts in Europe.<sup>26</sup> Tabili has looked at the ways in which exclusionary laws such as the Coloured Alien Seamen’s Order rendered the presence of lascars who had settled in Britain far more precarious in the interwar years by placing them on the blurred boundary between ‘subjects’ and ‘aliens’.<sup>27</sup> In arguing against a characterisation of wage labour as ‘free’, the picture that emerges is that of complete control, constraint and segregation. The ship appears as an enclosed maritime entity with no interaction with the ports at which it called and insulated from the larger political developments that were taking place around it.<sup>28</sup>

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(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Michael Christopher Low, ‘Empire and The Hajj: Pilgrims, Plagues, and Pan-Islam Under British Surveillance, 1865–1908’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 40, No. 2 (2008), 269–290.

<sup>24</sup> Ravi Ahuja, ‘Networks of Subordination – Networks of the Subordinated: The Ordered Spaces of South Asian Maritime Labour in an Age of Imperialism (c.1890-1947),’ in *The Limits of British Colonial Control in India: Spaces of Disorder in the Indian Ocean Region*, ed. Ashwini Tambe and Harald Fischer-Tiné (New York: Routledge, 2009); Gopalan Balachandran, ‘Conflicts in the International Maritime Labour Market: British and Indian Seamen, Employers and the State, 1890-1939,’ *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 39, no. 1 (2002): 71–100.

<sup>25</sup> Ravi Ahuja, ‘Mobility and Containment: The Voyages of South Asian Seamen, c.1900–1960,’ *International Review of Social History* 51 (2006): 111–41; Laura Tabili, *We Ask for British Justice: Workers and Racial Difference in Late Imperial Britain* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

<sup>26</sup> Ahuja, ‘Mobility and Containment’.

<sup>27</sup> Tabili, *We Ask for British Justice*, 1

<sup>28</sup> Ravi Ahuja, ‘Capital at Sea, Shaitan below Decks? A Note on Global Narratives, Narrow Spaces, and the Limits of Experience,’ *History of the Present* 2, no. 1 (2012): 78–85.

While it is crucial to understand factors that kept colonial workers in a more exploited sector of the labour force, we also need to begin looking at the effects of mobility on their worlds and worldviews. As Sunil Amrith points out,

Asian migrants made sense of their journeys, sought to shape more secure futures for themselves and their families, and asserted claims to public respect and to specific rights.... They could and did participate in the public sphere of print and performance; they mobilised politically; they asserted, in the smallest ways in everyday life, their autonomy and their identity.<sup>29</sup>

He argues further that ‘migrants have been central to enduring and significant changes... to economic and environmental transformations, the spread of political ideas and religious practices; to social and demographic change.’<sup>30</sup> Thus, while the colonial state, recruiters and employers sought to constrain migrant workers’ mobility, migrants were not merely passive and inert objects in circulation. There is, therefore, a need to incorporate an understanding of the ways in which they negotiated their mobility and how it reconfigured their worlds. This study looks at the effects of mobility on lascars’ political worlds, asking: how did working on ships that were involved in trade and war impact their worldviews and their understandings of race, colonialism, capitalism, class and gender? How did lascars experience and shape South Asia’s relation to the rest of the world as well as the anti-colonial movement?

Global history has the potential to address the effects of mobility on subaltern politics. Its methodological questioning of the nation-state as the framing device for history writing has allowed for a quest for interactions across modern borders. It has challenged the assumption of the naturalness of nation-states and borders and the consequent representation of border-crossings as exceptional – ‘as though’, David Ludden points out – ‘borders came

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<sup>29</sup> Sunil Amrith, *Migration and Diaspora in Modern South Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 10; Anderson, *Subaltern Lives*.

<sup>30</sup> Amrith, *Migration and Diaspora*, 1.

first, and mobility, second'.<sup>31</sup> As a result of these discussions, a rich literature on migration has developed, on the movements of traders and scholars, pilgrims and preachers, administrators and envoys, refugees and exiles, slaves, convicts and soldiers and sailors to write 'connected histories'.<sup>32</sup> Transnational and global histories of twentieth century political movements have broadened the conventional frameworks of studying colonialism and anti-colonial movements from the borders of post-colonial nation-states to broader networks exchange, support and intellectual cross-pollination.<sup>33</sup> This scholarship has generated a

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<sup>31</sup> David Ludden, 'Presidential Address: Maps in the Mind and the Mobility of Asia', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 62, 4 (2003), 1057-1078: 1062. Patrick Manning provides a corrective to geographically settled histories by beginning with the earliest human migrations from Africa, to understand the human species as fundamentally migratory rather than sedentary. Patrick Manning, *Migration in World History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013). The fact that, in Bangladesh today, which has undergone border changes from colonial India to East Pakistan and then Bangladesh, areas of Sylhet which have migrant networks which started with colonial lascars are often referred to as 'Londoni', demonstrating the enduring immediacy of migration on geographically distant loci. Katy Gardner, *Global Migrants, Local Lives: Travel and Transformation in Rural Bangladesh* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

<sup>32</sup> Robin Cohen (ed.), *The Cambridge Survey of World Migration*, 1995 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). See for instance Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Explorations in Connected History: From the Tagus to the Ganges* (Oxford University Press, 2005); Claude Markovits, *The Global World of Indian Merchants, 1750-1947: Traders of Sind from Bukhara to Panama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).; Michael H. Fisher, *Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian Travellers and Settlers in Britain, 1600-1857* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004); Clare Anderson, *Subaltern Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Kenneth McPherson, *The Indian Ocean: A History of People and the Sea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Aaron Jaffer, *Lascars and Indian Ocean Seafaring, 1780-1860: Shipboard Life, Unrest and Mutiny* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2015); M.N. Pearson, *The Indian Ocean* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003); Matthias van Rossum, 'A 'Moorish World' within the Company: The VOC, Maritime Logistics and Subaltern Networks of Asian Sailors', *Itinerario*, 36, no. 3: 39-60.

<sup>33</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination* (London: Verso, 2005); Harald Fischer-Tiné, 'Indian Nationalism and the 'World Forces': Transnational and Diasporic Dimensions of the Indian Freedom Movement on the Eve of the First World War,' *Journal of Global History*, 2 (2007): 325-44; Harald Fischer-Tiné, *Shyamji Krishnavarma: Sanskrit, Sociology and Anti-Imperialism* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2014); Harald Fischer-Tiné, 'The Other Side of Internationalism: Switzerland as a Hub of Militant Anti-Colonialism, c. 1910-1920,' in *Colonial Switzerland: Rethinking Colonialism from the Margins*, ed. Harald Fischer-Tiné and Patricia Purtschert (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Kris Manjappa, *The Age of Entanglement: German and Indian Intellectuals Across Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014); Kris Manjappa, *M.N. Roy: Marxism and Colonial Cosmopolitanism* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2010); Manu Goswami, 'Imaginary Futures and Colonial Internationalisms'; Kris Manjappa and Sugata Bose, eds., *Cosmopolitan Thought Zones: South Asia and the Global Circulation of Ideas* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Ali Raza, Benjamin Zachariah, and Franziska Roy, eds., *The Internationalist Moment: South Asia, Worlds and World Views, 1917-1939* (New Delhi: Sage, 2015); Michele L. Luoro, 'India and the League Against Imperialism: A Special 'Blend' of Nationalism and Internationalism,' in *The Internationalist Moment*, 22-55; Carolien Stolte, 'Uniting the Oppressed Peoples of the East,' in *The Internationalist Moment*, 56-85; Carolien Stolte, 'Trade Unions on Trial: The Meerut Conspiracy Case and Trade Union Internationalism, 1929-32,' *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 33, no.

debate on ideas of cosmopolitanism and internationalism, which sometimes coincided with, but were not identical to, nationalist ideas.<sup>34</sup>

Yet, histories of mobility enabled by the global turn have largely left behind the subaltern. Temporally, a major part of the literature on movement and ‘connected histories’ tends to concentrate on the early modern period.<sup>35</sup> In the modern period, by contrast there is a distinct division between studies on mobile elites and subalterns. Mobile elites have been studied in terms of exchanges of international and cosmopolitan ideas.<sup>36</sup> Subalterns, by contrast, are studied in terms of state schemes and social infrastructures of transportation and resettlement on plantations or penal settlements – in other words, in terms of the structural determinants of labour migration.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, in the case of seafarers, Balachandran argues that while cosmopolitanism was the defining feature of seafarers’ worlds until the late nineteenth century, the twentieth century marked a turning point of increasing state

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3 (2013): 345–59; Carolien Stolte and Harald Fischer-Tiné, ‘Imagining Asia in India: Nationalism and Internationalism (ca. 1905-1940),’ *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54, no. 1 (2012): 65–92.

<sup>34</sup> Goswami, ‘Imaginary Futures and Colonial Internationalisms’; Manjapra, *M.N. Roy: Marxism and Colonial Cosmopolitanism*.

<sup>35</sup> This early modern period became the focus of the debate around ‘globalisation’ in the 1990s. The questioning of the putative newness of this phenomenon (and even the relevance of the term itself) led to an exploration of longer connections in history. See for instance, G. Balachandran and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, ‘On The History Of Globalization And India: Concepts, Measures And Debates’ in J. Assayag, and C. Fuller (eds.), *Globalizing India: Perspectives from Below* (London: Anthem Press, 2005), 17-46. Frederick Cooper, “What is the Concept of Globalisation Good For? An African Historian’s Perspective”, *African Affairs*, 100, 399 (2001), 189–213. Sanjay Subrahmanyam wrote most prolifically on the early modern period. See for instance Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Explorations in Connected History: From the Tagus to the Ganges; Three Ways to be Alien: Travails and Encounters in the Early Modern World* (Waltham, Mass: Brandeis University Press, 2011); *Courtly Encounters: Translating Courtliness and Violence in Early Modern Eurasia* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2012).

<sup>36</sup> See Kris Manjapra, *The Age of Entanglement: German and Indian Intellectuals Across Empire* (London and Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014) and Mario Dover, ‘Creative India and the World: Bengali Internationalism and Italy in the Interwar Period’ in Bose and Manjapra (eds.) *Cosmopolitan Thought Zones*; Manu Goswami, ‘Imaginary Futures and Colonial Internationalisms’; Dilip Menon, ‘A Local Cosmopolitan: ‘Kesari’ Balakrishna Pillai and the Invention of Europe for a Modern Kerala’, in Bose and Manjapra (eds.) *Cosmopolitan Thought Zones*; Mark Ravinder Frost, ‘Asia’s Maritime Networks and the Colonial Public Sphere, 1840-1920’. *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 6, 2 (December, 2004); Ali Raza, Franziska Roy and Benjamin Zachariah (eds.) *The Internationalist Moment*.

<sup>37</sup> Anderson, *Subaltern Lives*, Radhika Singha, “Front Lines and Status Lines: Sepoy and ‘Menial’ in the Great War 1916-1920” in Liebau et al (eds.), *World in Wars: Experiences, Perceptions and Perspectives from Africa and Asia* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010), 55-107.

segregation resulting in the complete erosion of cosmopolitanism.<sup>38</sup> Amrith notes that, ‘unsurprisingly, works on cosmopolitanism have focused on the literate elites of port cities’, while work on segregation has focused on the labouring classes.<sup>39</sup> As a result, the old division between a putative narrowness of subaltern vision and the breadth of elite vision persists. This division then carries over into the study of the movement of political ideas; the study of cosmopolitan ideas focuses entirely on the networks and exchanges of political and cultural elites.<sup>40</sup>

This preponderant focus on elites is despite the fact that quantitatively, subalterns make up the great mass of ‘movers’ in the modern world. The sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries saw the great waves of movement of slaves, convict and indentured labourers, and of soldiers and sailors. In the first wave, approximately ten to twelve million African slaves were brought to the Americas, not counting about the same number who did not survive the middle passage.<sup>41</sup> With the abolition of slavery in the early nineteenth century, this wave was gradually replaced by first convict and then indentured labour from Asia. British penal settlements received at least 300,000 convicts in the nineteenth century.<sup>42</sup> Over the nineteenth and early twentieth century, eighty million labourers had migrated to different parts of the Indian Ocean, fifty million from mainland China, and another thirty million from the Indian subcontinent.<sup>43</sup> By the time the system of indentured labour ended at the end of the First World War, it had produced settlements of diasporic Indians around the Indian and

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<sup>38</sup> G. Balachandran, “Subaltern Cosmopolitanism, Racial Governance and Multiculturalism: Britain, c. 1900-1945.,” *Social History* 39, no. 4 (2014): 528–46.

<sup>39</sup> Amrith, *Migration and Diaspora*, 11-12.

<sup>40</sup> Vinayak Chaturvedi makes this critique of the work on cosmopolitanism. See Vinayak Chaturvedi, ‘Review of Sugata Bose and Kris Manjappa (Eds) *Cosmopolitan Thought Zones: South Asia and the Global Circulation of Ideas*,’ *Journal of Global History* 6, no. 3 (2011); Goswami, ‘Imaginary Futures and Colonial Internationalisms’; See also Kris Manjappa and Sugata Bose (eds.), *Cosmopolitan Thought Zones*. See for instance in this edited volume, essays by Dilip Menon, ‘A Local Cosmopolitan: ‘Kesari’ Balakrishna Pillai and the Invention of Europe for a Modern Kerala,’; Nico Slate, ‘Creative India and the World: Bengali Internationalism and Italy in the Inter-War Period.’

<sup>41</sup> Patrick Manning, *Migration in World History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 139.

<sup>42</sup> Clare Anderson, *Subaltern Lives*, 1.

<sup>43</sup> Manning, *Migration*, 154.

Caribbean oceans. In the first half of the twentieth century, 'free' labour migration, mainly to colonial tea, coffee and rubber plantations, as well as that of colonial sailors, made up the majority of itinerants. The end of organised transportation slowed long-distance labour migration from South Asia, but was replaced from the First World War by the mobilisation of hundreds of thousands of soldiers and sailors. While soldiers were mobilised overseas episodically during the two World Wars, lascars were employed continuously throughout the late colonial period, plying trade routes. Given the sheer volume of these movements, our lack of understanding of their effect on the transmission of ideas leaves a significant lacuna in global history and histories of cosmopolitanism.

To my mind, there are two reasons for this lack of conversation between subaltern and global history. One is the nature of sources: while literate elites left traces of their own ideas, the study of subaltern migration relies overwhelmingly on records of state policies of control. Often, scholars assume that policies of control and segregation translated unproblematically into the lives of labourers. The second factor has to do with larger trends in history-writing. The development of the field of transnational and global histories in the early 1990s was coterminous with the displacement of the categories of class and labour by those of identity, culture and community. As a result of the rise of the politics of multiculturalism in western societies and identity politics in South Asia, labour and subaltern histories were displaced by cultural studies and postcolonialism. Consequently, the questions raised by the Subaltern Studies collective about subaltern politics have never been applied seriously to itinerant labourers.

At the same time, labour and subaltern histories have not, by and large, incorporated the innovations made by the global turn and have therefore tended not to engage with the question of the relation of itinerant workers to ideas outside South Asia. Yet, this relation was not negligible through the first half of the twentieth century. The mobilisation of millions of

colonial soldiers during the two World Wars alone resulted in large-scale encounters between Asians, Africans and Europeans.<sup>44</sup> Apart from these wartime mobilisations, migrant labourers and sailors formed the biggest sections of mobile subalterns. By 1910, there were already a hundred thousand lascars in employment across Bombay, Calcutta and Karachi.<sup>45</sup> While the political interactions of individual elites in this period have been studied, the effect of these mass movements on South Asian politics has been largely neglected. This lacuna has begun to be addressed in recent work on the ways in which subaltern involvement in the World Wars impacted their experiences and perceptions of empire and colonialism.<sup>46</sup> With respect to lascars, Marika Sherwood and Rozina Visram have studied their contacts with political activists in British ports, while Ali Raza and Benjamin Zachariah have studied the same in German ports.<sup>47</sup> Josephine Fowler does this by linking up cities on both sides of the Pacific.<sup>48</sup> She studies the links between Canton and Hong Kong on one side of the Pacific and New York and San Francisco on the other through the movement of Chinese and Japanese seamen and immigrant Communists who boarded ships to North American ports on which these seamen worked. Together, she says, they formed the ‘conductors of the [pan-Pacific] revolutionary movement’.<sup>49</sup> In so doing, her approach conceives of the port cities as sharing a historical commonality which affects the politics of the Chinese and Japanese hinterland.

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<sup>44</sup> Hieke Liebau et al., eds., *The World in Wars*; David Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War: Soldiers’ Letters, 1914-18* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire and London: Macmillan Press, 1999); Claude Markovits, ‘Indian Soldiers’ Experiences in France during World War I: Seeing Europe from the Rear of the Front,’ in *The World in Wars: Experiences, Perceptions and Perspectives from Africa and Asia*, ed. Hieke Liebau et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

<sup>45</sup> ‘Statistic Information – Employment of Lascars – Rates of Pay’, February 1935-September 1939, Oriental and India Office Records, Economic and Overseas Department, IOR/L/E/8/673.

<sup>46</sup> Liebau et al., *The World in Wars: Experiences, Perceptions and Perspectives from Africa and Asia*.

<sup>47</sup> Marika Sherwood, ‘Lascar Struggles against Discrimination in Britain, 1923–45: The Work of N.J. Upadhyaya and Surat Alley,’ *The Mariner’s Mirror* 90, no. 4 (2004): 438–55; Ali Raza and Benjamin Zachariah, ‘To Take Arms Across a Sea of Trouble: The ‘Lascar System,’ Politics, and Agency in the 1920s,’ *Itinerario* 36, no. 3 (2012): 19–38.

<sup>48</sup> Josephine Fowler, ‘From East to West and West to East: Ties of Solidarity in the Pan-Pacific Revolutionary Trade Union Movement, 1923-34’, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 66, New Approaches to Global Labor History (Fall, 2004): 99-117.

<sup>49</sup> Fowler, ‘From East to West’.



This dissertation contributes to expanding this literature by bringing together subaltern and global histories, placing the labour and lives of maritime subalterns within the larger framework of the movement and exchange of ideas.

In bringing a global dimension to subaltern history and a subaltern dimension to global history, this work aligns with what Antoinette Burton and Tony Ballantyne have called ‘world history from below’.<sup>50</sup> Burton and Ballantyne place this project at the intersection of a Thompsonian social history of subaltern protest and a global approach which discards the old national modality that these earlier social histories had adopted.<sup>51</sup> At the same time, challenging global histories which attribute uncontested hegemony to global capital and the colonising west, their book appeals for ‘a world history narrative in which agitators, rebels, strikers, insurgents and unorthodox visionaries of all kinds are at the centre.’<sup>52</sup> In so doing, they argue that this hegemony was constantly contested by subalterns, often also at a global level. In adopting this global perspective, they draw a force field comprising horizontal networks of connection and solidarity on the one hand, and vertical networks of power which reacted on each other. They argue that subalterns ‘on the move’ provide the ideal subjects for this new body of work, and whose ‘rootless energy made them cosmopolitan in their repertoires and ready to appropriate forms and images across a range of movements and causes.’<sup>53</sup>

In developing this global history of subaltern mobility and resistance, the present study also engages with Marcel van der Linden’s proposal to outline a new field of ‘global labour history’ which focuses on ‘the transnational – indeed the transcontinental – study of labour relations and workers’ social movements.... by means of comparison with processes

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<sup>50</sup> Antoinette Burton and Tony Ballantyne, eds., *World Histories From Below: Disruption and Dissent, 1750 to the Present* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016).

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

elsewhere, the study of international interactions, or a combination of the two.’<sup>54</sup> The international maritime workforce provides the ideal subject not only for the comparisons of seafarers from different parts of the world, but also for their interaction and involvement in political movements in different regions. As Janet Ewald suggests in her work on nineteenth century African slavery and maritime labour, ‘attention to ocean basins and maritime life yields new perspectives of global labour history.’<sup>55</sup>

Bringing together subaltern and global histories also changes the existing understanding of the relation of nationalist to internationalist ideas. The existing studies emphasise the complementarity of nationalism and cosmopolitanism in the ideas of mobile literate elites, many of whom, like Dadabhai Naoroji, Bhikaji Cama, Shyamji Krishnavarma, Jawaharlal Nehru and Krishna Menon travelled as emissaries of the Congress to garner international support for their project.<sup>56</sup> I propose that the cosmopolitanism of mobile subalterns differed in many respects from that of these elite figures. I suggest that lascars’ appropriations of internationalist messages, informed by their own first-hand experiences of the geographical sweep of the colonial world and of anti-colonial movements, made their anti-colonialism more contradictory to the project of elite nationalists in terms of the scale of the anti-colonial movement and of their imagined futures of a post-colonial world. This does not imply that they necessarily saw their ideas as irreconcilable with the message of the

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<sup>54</sup> Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World: Essays Toward a Global Labor History* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 7.

<sup>55</sup> Janet J. Ewald, “Crossers of the Sea: Slaves, Freedmen, and Other Migrants in the Northwestern Indian Ocean, c. 1750-1914,” *The American Historical Review* 105, no. 1 (February 2000): 69–91.

<sup>56</sup> Sugata Bose, ‘Different Universalisms, Colourful Cosmopolitanisms: The Global Imagination of the Colonized,’ in *Cosmopolitan Thought Zones*; Fischer-Tiné, *Shyamji Krishnavarma*; Stolte, ‘Uniting the Oppressed Peoples of the East’; Ian Hall, ‘Mephistopheles in a Saville Row Suit’: V. K. Krishna Menon and the West,’ in *Radicals and Reactionaries in Twentieth-Century International Thought*, ed. Ian Hall (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Paul M. McGarr, ‘A Serious Menace to Security’: British Intelligence, V. K. Krishna Menon and the Indian High Commission in London, 1947–52,’ *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 38, no. 3 (2010): 441–69; Sumita Mukherjee, ‘“Narrow-Majority” and “Bow-and-Agree”: Public Attitudes Towards the Elections of the First Asian MPs in Britain, Dadabhai Naoroji and Mancherjee Merwanjee Bhownaggee, 1885-1906,’ *Journal of the Oxford University History Society* 2004 (n.d.).

nationalists. In understanding this seeming paradox, I draw on the subaltern studies project's theorisation of the autonomous appropriations of political concepts by subalterns.<sup>57</sup>

As a history of maritime subalterns, this study is also naturally placed at the intersection of maritime and subaltern history. In studying movements across oceans, maritime historians have developed their own methodological critique of 'national histories' by shifting focus from land to the sea.<sup>58</sup> It is perhaps not surprising that maritime historians and historical geographers have been among the first to critique the limiting lens of postcolonial geographical borders as frames of enquiry. For instance, a focus on the sea led one of the early Indian maritime historians, Ashin Das Gupta, to his aphorism that 'without going out of India, we cannot explain India.'<sup>59</sup> It also led to the same conclusion for historians of the Atlantic where, for instance, Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker in their study of the multi-ethnic Atlantic proletariat of the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, argue that history 'has long been the captive of the nation-state, which remains in most studies the largely unquestioned framework of analysis.'<sup>60</sup> Maritime history is, thus, another mode of writing global history. Niklas Frykman, Clare Anderson, Lex Heerma van Ross and Marcus Rediker argue that the age of European revolutions opened an era of world trade and world wars and thus, of the global circulation of ideas and movements.

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<sup>57</sup> Shahid Amin, "Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur District, Eastern UP, 1921-2," in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura 1922-1992* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>58</sup> David Lambert, Luciana Martins and Miles Ogborn, 'Currents, visions and voyages: historical geographies of the sea', *Journal of Historical Geography* 32 (2006), 479-493; Miles Ogborn, 'Atlantic Geographies', *Social and Cultural Geography*, 6, No. 3 (2005), 379-385; Uma Das Gupta (eds.), *The world of the Indian Ocean Merchant, 1500-1800: Collected Essays of Ashin Das Gupta* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001); Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, And The Hidden History Of The Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 7.

<sup>59</sup> Uma Das Gupta, *The World of the Indian Ocean Merchant*.

<sup>60</sup> Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh, *The Many Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).

The sea as a space of historical enquiry also allows for a focus on the circulation of ideas with the currents of the ocean.<sup>61</sup> Frykman et. al. have pointed out the problem with ‘terracentrism’ - ‘the pervasive unconscious assumption or belief that history is made exclusively on land’, while oceans are seen as

anti-spaces, as blanks that lie in between, and which are somehow unreal in comparison to the landed, national spaces that surround them. If maritime space is, to a considerable extent, ‘unthinkable’, it therefore follows that radical action taken at sea would be rendered invisible.<sup>62</sup>

Emphasising the place of the ocean in the spread of modern political ideas, studies of the Atlantic, for instance, have looked at the ways in which the ocean became the medium of transmission of abolitionist, egalitarian and revolutionary ideas as well as the space in which black identity was forged during the slave trade.<sup>63</sup> As with the above-mentioned historians, the present study also places maritime subalterns at the centre of the seaborne transmission of political ideas.

While the maritime-subaltern histories that have been discussed focus largely on separate oceans, this dissertation integrates all the oceans within a single frame. This is because the histories written by Frykman, Anderson, Jaffer, Rediker and van Rossum focus on the early modern period, during which seafarers were relatively less mobile across oceans despite the common global forces that were beginning to shape movement.<sup>64</sup> The nineteenth and twentieth centuries, by contrast, saw an unprecedented increase of long-distance movement of seafarers in large numbers owing to the development of steamships and the opening of the Suez, and later the Panama, Canal. ‘Travelling’ on twentieth century ships

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<sup>61</sup> See, for instance, Kenneth McPherson, *The Indian Ocean World: A History of People and the Sea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>62</sup> Niklas Frykman, Clare Anderson, Lex Heerma van Voss And Marcus Rediker, ‘Mutiny and Maritime Radicalism in the Age of Revolution: An Introduction’, *International Review of Social History*, 58 (2013), Special Issue, 1–14.

<sup>63</sup> Rediker and Linebaugh, *The Many-Headed Hydra*.

<sup>64</sup> Niklas Frykman et al., “Mutiny and Maritime Radicalism in the Age of Revolution: An Introduction,” *International Review of Social History* 58, no. Special Issue (2013): 1–14.

with these seafarers allows us to study the movement of political ideas over much larger expanses of space.

### **Seafaring resistance**

At the heart of this thesis is an investigation into lascars' contestations of shipboard and state authority. The study of subaltern agency is roughly divided between the study of what I call 'large' and 'small' contestations. 'Large' moments of strikes, rebellion, insurrection and revolution make up the majority of conventional histories.<sup>65</sup> These were moments in which subaltern agency confronted the state frontally, thus entering the official record. These histories were subsequently critiqued for presenting moments of subaltern resistance as exceptional. What happened outside these moments of violent resistance was unclear, the implication being that subalterns were subject to the hegemony of the dominant class.<sup>66</sup> These critiques argued for the need to study 'everyday resistance' to show how the impulse to subvert authority existed even in times of 'normalcy'.<sup>67</sup> This changed the understanding of subaltern resistance from being an exception, to being a 'hidden transcript' which only breaks out into momentary open challenges.<sup>68</sup> In looking at everyday resistance on board ship, I argue that experiences of shipboard contestation carried on even in times when there were no 'large' moments of strike or mutiny.

While the focus on everyday resistance has provided a useful corrective to the exceptionalism with which 'large' moments of strike or mutiny had been treated, however, it tends to obscure the importance of subaltern action in the shaping of larger historical

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<sup>65</sup> Subaltern Studies histories focused on moments of open peasant and tribal rebellions which left clear archival traces in the official record. Guha and Spivak, *Selected Subaltern Studies*.

<sup>66</sup> Douglas E. Haynes and Gyan Prakash (eds.) *Contesting Power: Everyday Social Relations in South Asia* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991).

<sup>67</sup> James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985).

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

processes like decolonisation. Thus, it tends to paint a picture of ‘the masses’ outside the realm of history-making, an endeavour which is left to the elites. This shift accompanied the purported decline of the analytic category of labour, coming as it did against a background of the big defeats in the labour movement in mid 1980s in many parts of the world and the subsequent fall of the Soviet Union. At the same time, the growing nationalism from the 1990s onwards in South Asia and elsewhere led to a great increase in scholarship on nationalism.<sup>69</sup> Yet, while this new scholarship traced the phenomenon of nationalism in history, in the case of South Asia both before and after 1947, subalterns remained sequestered in the conceptual cloisters of the ‘everyday’, with little relation to larger political movements and nationalist parties. By treating both everyday contestation and larger forms of resistance such as the RIN mutiny within a single study, I show how these forms were constitutive of each other and of these larger historical processes.

The thesis also engages with the relation of political ideas to subaltern resistance. Jacques Ranciere has shown through his study of diaries of skilled workers in France that aspirations for a better world ran as a subterranean current in their writings even outside of the 1848 revolutions.<sup>70</sup> It is more difficult to glean the ideas that informed maritime resistance owing to the degree of illiteracy among lascars. Nevertheless, Frykman, Anderson, van Voss and Rediker have argued that the markedly higher incidence of collective rebellions in the age of European revolutions from the mid-eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries can be understood as an impact of revolutionary ideas on the seamen who carried them from

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<sup>69</sup> Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1991); Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); James G. Kellas, *The Politics of Nationalism and Ethnicity* (New York: Macmillan Education, 1991); John Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993); Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>70</sup> Jacques Ranciere, *Proletarian Nights: The Workers’ Dream in Nineteenth Century France* (London: Verso, 2011).

shore to shore.<sup>71</sup> They have found that at least one-third of European warships experienced some form of collective rebellion during the 1790s.<sup>72</sup> I argue that a similar correlation can be made for the maritime radicalism seen during the anti-colonial uprisings at the end of the Second World War. Although in the case of lascars, it is difficult to discern the ideas that informed their everyday resistances, except for the insight that a few oral histories and the rare memoir of a lascar can provide, we see a correlation between moments of anti-colonial unrest and maritime radicalism. Far clearer and well-documented by participants, state and political figures, however, were large collective resistances like the RIN mutiny, which was a public testament of their imaginations of the anticolonial movement.

### **Chapterisation**

The chapters weave together the strands of subaltern mobility and resistance, contrasting the political ideas of the lascars to those of the nationalists regarding the anti-colonial movement. To illustrate their mobility, the chapters narratively ‘travel’ with lascars on ships from South Asia outward to a number of international ports and then back to South Asia. The first three chapters focus on seafarers’ international mobility, political ideas and resistance. Chapter Four examines the relationship of nationalists to lascars, lascar resistance, and the role of labour in the anti-colonial movement. Chapter Five is a study of the R.I.N. mutiny which contrasts the views of the nationalists and seafarers on the eve of decolonisation.

Chapter One traces the international scale of lascar mobility and explores the effects of this mobility on their worldviews. In drawing the geographical contours of their mobility across international shipping routes, it explores the constraints to which lascars are assumed to have been subjected. Firstly, it shows how, even where these constraints were exercised,

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<sup>71</sup> Frykman et al., “Mutiny and Maritime Radicalism in the Age of Revolution: An Introduction.”, ‘Mutiny and Maritime Radicalism’, 4.

<sup>72</sup> Frykman et al., ‘Mutiny and Maritime Radicalism’.

lascars encountered a wide range of ports even as part of their 'routine' seafaring lives. It examines the ways in which this exposure may have shaped their ideas. Secondly, it shows how these constraints were often ignored by shipping authorities in favour of expediency and a demand for cheap maritime labour. It argues that their experience of mobility shaped their views of race, gender, class, colonialism and capitalism in important ways.

Chapter Two places lascars' international mobility against a background of the international movement of political ideas to argue that they were exposed to ideas of anti-colonialism beyond those of mainstream South Asian nationalism, such as pan-Islamism, pan-Asianism, communism and a pan-colonial internationalism. It shows how these internationalist ideas posited an imagination of the anti-colonial movement that encompassed large swathes of the colonial world, and that envisioned an active role for labour in the movement.

Chapter Three looks at forms of lascar resistance to structures of authority on board ship and on land, from everyday resistance to moments of large-scale collective action. It explores how everyday resistance carried on outside moments of strikes and produced a cumulative experience that fed into the larger moments. In these larger, public moments of contestation, I look at the ways in which political ideas and organisations of various persuasions sought to intervene in these actions.

Chapter Four turns to the nationalists' relation to lascars, arguing that they sought influence among lascar unions in order to exercise limited state power in the two decades before decolonisation. While vying to 'capture' labour as a base, however, I argue that they saw it as a potentially fissiparous 'separate interest' in the anti-colonial movement, which should have no independent role except as a mass base for nationalist politicians, and had to be carefully controlled. Religious nationalists such as the Muslim League and the Krishak Praja Party in Bengal also tried to mobilise lascars behind religious agendas.



Chapter Five contrasts the lascars and the nationalist visions of anti-colonialism during the R.I.N. mutiny. It argues that this antinomy makes the framework of ‘nationalism’ unsuitable to understand the relationship of the subaltern movement to decolonisation. It shows how lascars’ conception of the anti-colonial movement envisioned an active role for labour and a vision of a larger decolonised world, while the conception of the Congress and Muslim League was one bounded by the borders of British India and did not accommodate an active role for labour in the process of decolonisation. These nationalist leaders espoused a more statist conception of a decolonised future in which they were at the proverbial helm. The chapter ends with an epilogue on the ways in which the foreclosure of the lascars’ vision of anti-colonialism determined the ultimate outcome of South Asian decolonisation, accompanied by Partition.

## Sources

To look at subaltern views and consciousness through the archive is a treacherous and fraught enterprise. The current study, however, deals with a section of subalterns among whom some were literate and recorded their life stories. The period with which the study is concerned is also close enough to our present for oral histories to have been recorded. Thus, it benefits from first person accounts by seafarers themselves. One of them is Dada Amir Khan’s memoir of being a lascar in the First World War, and another two by B.C. Dutt and Biswanath Bose from the Second World War.<sup>73</sup> All three underline the politically transformative impact of mobility and war on their personal lives<sup>74</sup>. The bookends of the two World Wars are filled in by oral histories of twenty-six Sylheti lascars which cover the

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<sup>73</sup> Hasan Gardezi, ed., *Chains to Lose: Life and Struggles of a Revolutionary: Memoirs of Dada Amir Haider Khan* (Karachi: Pakistan Study Centre, University of Karachi, 2007); Bose, *RIN Mutiny, 1946: Reference and Guide for All*; Dutt, *Mutiny of the Innocents*.

<sup>74</sup> Hasan Gardezi (ed.), *Chains to Lose: Life and Struggles of a Revolutionary: Memoirs of Dada Amir Haider Khan* (Karachi: Pakistan Study Centre, University of Karachi, 2007); Balai Chandra Dutt, *Mutiny of the Innocents* (Bombay: Sindhu Publications, 1971); Biswanath Bose, *RIN Mutiny: 1946* (New Delhi: Northern Book Centre, 1988).

interwar period, filling out the picture with stories of extensive travel, experiences of port cities around the world, and encounters with dockside inhabitants and shipmates from various parts of the world.<sup>75</sup> Limited though they are, these sources have been precious in understanding the effects of mobility on seamen's worldviews. Nonetheless, their limited number raises questions about their representativeness and run the risk of becoming individualised and anecdotal. I have attempted to address this imbalance by using Home Office and police estimates on the statistical scale of desertions in non-South Asian ports, or the numbers attending political meetings, for instance. To understand how South Asian seamen's experience of travel and transformation may have compared with those of other seamen, it also uses some other accounts, such as the diary of a twenty-one-year old British seaman, the biography of a Caribbean mariner as well as of two American seamen, which testify to the ways in which 'the world was [their] university'.<sup>76</sup> There are probably similar accounts of Chinese, Japanese, Indonesian, Sierra Leonian and Argentinian seamen that I did not have the benefit of consulting, which would have helped to understand the differences and commonalities of the experience of seafaring mobility.

Apart from these first-person sources, seafarers' voices appear in highly mediated official and semi-official sources. They appear in ships' logs in altercations with officers or replying to charges of insubordination. They appear as 'typical' lascars in officers' handbooks to maintaining shipboard discipline. They appear in newspaper reports as causing law and order 'disturbances' in ports. They appear in the dock as mutinous radicals in police reports or as witnesses before commissions of enquiry. In all these sources, they appear as liminal and threatening. Nonetheless, their speech can sometimes be read against the grain. In

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<sup>75</sup> Yousuf Choudhury, *Sons of the Empire: Oral History from the Bangladeshi Seamen Who Served on British Ships During the 1939-45 War* (Birmingham: Sylheti Social History Group, 1995); Caroline Adams, *Across Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers: Life Stories of Pioneer Sylheti Settlers in Britain* (London: Eastside Books, 1987).

<sup>76</sup> Christian Høgsbjerg, *Mariner, Renegade and Castaway: Chris Braithwaite: Seamen's Organiser, Socialist and Militant Pan-Africanist* (London: Redwords, 2014).

the Commission of Inquiry into the RIN mutiny, for instance, many participants in the mutiny openly speak of their political influences and convictions. In this particular instance, the depth of public sympathy and the imminence of independence probably reduced the fear of retribution in the perceptions of these witnesses, enabling them to speak with less protective dissimulation.

To understand the political ideas outside South Asia to which itinerant seamen were exposed, the thesis has drawn extensively on political intelligence files which closely tracked the activities of political activists aimed at lascars. While invaluable for the detail such as the pamphlets they published, the content of the meetings they held and their involvement with lascars' strikes in European ports, this source is inevitably coloured by the anxieties of the colonial state regarding subversion, sedition and challenges to the imperial order. As a result, reports often used lurid formulaic expressions about violent and seditious plots or subversive fifth columnists. Consequently, the historian using these archives to uncover the activities of anti-colonial and revolutionary groups must be wary of taking these anxiety-infused reports at face value in order to avoid producing accounts which exaggerate the omnipotence of what were in reality often improvised and heterogeneous organisations. One must be careful to discern fact from fantasy, at very least by distinguishing what purports to be factual reportage from exegetical comment. The factual reportage must itself not be given total credence but where possible, cross-referenced with a few other sources. Given these precautions, however, surveillance records provide rich detail. Often relying on inside informants (with a suggestion even of M.N. Roy's wife being one such), they provide details which, even to be useful to the police, had to be accurate. For instance, the files describe which consignment of literature was to pass through which hands to reach India, how 'sympathetic' lascars were to be found in ports to assist in the movement of proscribed literature, fake passports and even of the revolutionaries themselves.

To look at lascar resistance, the thesis has used ship logs to develop a picture of everyday resistance. For larger moments of contestation it has employed port records in India and Britain, such as the Mercantile Marine Department files in India and the Board of Trade papers in Britain, as well as the ILO's maritime conference proceedings. It also uses accounts by trade unionists such as A. Colaco and Dinkar Desai. The question of the nationalists' relation to lascars, their unions and resistance, as well as their relation to the anti-colonial movement is addressed through Home Political files in India. For their views on labour and decolonisation, it used the writings and speeches of C.R. Das, M.K. Gandhi and N.M. Joshi.

A final word on the language of the sources I have used. The official sources on which the thesis is based all come from the British colonial archive in India and England. Apart from the ILO archives in Geneva, I have not accessed archives in other important ports cities in Europe, the Americas and East Asia where lascars sojourned. The use of sources covering the French, Dutch and Belgian colonial empires would have undoubtedly brought out a richer and probably more complex global story of circulation, encounter and transformation. Within these limitations, however, English language sources do tell a larger part of the story than any other language of a maritime power, whether German or Japanese. As subjects of a British colony, the majority of lascars – two-thirds – were employed on British ships. For the remaining one-third, British consuls stationed in each of these ports relayed matters of importance back to the Foreign and Colonial Offices in Britain. In Indian ports, shipping masters carried out correspondence with the local managing agents of German, French, Dutch and Japanese shipping lines regarding the recruitment, pay, provisioning and other claims of lascars regarding injury or bonuses.

If the use of official sources in French, Japanese and German would add to the global breadth of a history of seafaring itinerancy, the use of unofficial sources in the colonial vernaculars, as well as shipboard argot used by the seamen, would add to the local depth of

their lived worlds. They have the potential to show how, while global mobility extended the worlds of colonial seamen, the local and global dimensions of their worlds continued to interact in complex, mutually constitutive ways. Here again, the source base of this thesis is modest. While a truly comprehensive history at the scale of the colonial world would draw on Malay, Javanese, Cantonese, Sylheti, Konkani, Gujarati, Arabic and Kru sources, the source base of my present study deals with these questions only the South Asian among these languages. To recover the pidgin argot used on board ship, it uses a 'lascari'-English dictionary. To understand the lived worlds of lascars worlds straddling the villages and towns in India from which they came and the international ports in which many of them sojourned and settled, it uses the oral histories of Sylheti lascars. Besides this, I have also looked at letters from lascars' families in Gujarati claiming pensions after their sons were killed at sea. And finally, to capture the popular memory of the period of maritime radicalism following the Second World War in the context of the anti-colonial movements in Asia and Africa, I have used poetry and plays in Marathi, Bengali and Urdu.

### **Prologue: The long history of lascar mobility**

The history of lascar mobility does not begin in the twentieth century. The movement of seafarers across millennia is linked to the fortunes of trade. Maritime trade had connected the rims of the Indian Ocean from as early as the third millennium.<sup>77</sup> Over the next two millennia, the Indian Ocean became the medium for a rich exchange in material goods as well as ideas of religion, philosophy and science, from east Africa to the Malabar Coast, and around the Indian peninsula to the Bay of Bengal, China and the south-east Asian

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<sup>77</sup> Kenneth McPherson, *The Indian Ocean: A History of People and the Sea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Das Gupta, *The World of the Indian Ocean Merchant, 1500-1800: Collected Essays of Ashin Das Gupta*; Michael N. Pearson, *The Indian Ocean* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003); Edward Simpson and Kai Kresse, *Struggling with History: Islam and Cosmopolitanism in the Western Indian Ocean* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

archipelago.<sup>78</sup> The ships that criss-crossed the Ocean carried merchants and missionaries, envoys and armies. Where the ships went, so did the seafarers. The circuits, contents and volume of maritime circulation depended on the rise and decline of empires in the region.

The early modern period saw the beginnings of an alteration of these circuits. The Portuguese entered the Indian Ocean in the fifteenth century, followed by the Dutch, English and French in the sixteenth century.<sup>79</sup> Setting up trading missions at entrepôts like Goa, Melaka, Philippines, Batavia, Surat and Muscat, they mapped onto existing maritime networks, including for the recruitment of sailors. Their ships plying in the Indian Ocean usually carried a European captain and an Asian crew.<sup>80</sup> It was at this point that Europeans coined phrases which they applied to all Asian crew. The Dutch called them ‘moors’ for ‘Muslim’, but behind this singular nomenclature was an Indian Ocean plurality: their sailors came from regions as distant from each other as Surat, Cochin, Bengal, China, Java and Malaya and included sailors from Hindu and early Christian communities.<sup>81</sup> The English called them ‘lascars’, which derived from the Persian word ‘*lashkar*’, meaning soldier, a word that the British used to denote any military orderly.<sup>82</sup> In the maritime context, the term came to apply to sailors from Zanzibar, Daman, the Konkan coast of the Western Indian peninsula, Chittagong, Noakhali and the Arakan coast in the Bay of Bengal and the Malay archipelago, China, Philippines and Java, and later, Aden.<sup>83</sup> These formed so many nodes from which lascars were put into circuits of circulation. Until the early nineteenth century, most of them were employed on so-called ‘country’ ships, privately owned by Asian and

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<sup>78</sup> McPherson, *The Indian Ocean: A History of People and the Sea*.

<sup>79</sup> Matthias van Rossum, “A ‘Moorish World’ within the Company: The VOC, Maritime Logistics and Subaltern Networks of Asian Sailors,” *Itinerario* 36, no. 3 (2012): 39–60; McPherson, *The Indian Ocean: A History of People and the Sea*; Michael H. Fisher, *Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian Travellers and Settlers in Britain, 1600-1857* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004).

<sup>80</sup> Anne Bulley, *The Bombay Country Ships, 1790-1833* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000), 5–6.

<sup>81</sup> van Rossum, ‘A ‘Moorish World’ within the Company: The VOC, Maritime Logistics and Subaltern Networks of Asian Sailors,’ *Itinerario* 36, no. 3 (2012): 46–47.

<sup>82</sup> Ravi Ahuja, “The Age of the ‘Lascar’: South Asian Seafarers in the Times of Imperial Shipping,” in *Routledge Handbook of the South Asian Diaspora*, ed. Joya Chatterjee and David Washbrook (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 111.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

European merchants and engaged in coastal and intra-Asian trade.<sup>84</sup> While the country ships were engaged in the intra-Asian trade, the Company ships carried the long-distance trade from Asia to their respective European metropolises.<sup>85</sup> In the 1770s, 70 British ships carrying 27,000 tons of shipping were manned by 4,000 lascars in the Indian Ocean, carrying raw cotton and opium from Bombay and Calcutta to China.<sup>86</sup>

Soon, however, these intra-Asian circuits would extend to Europe, owing to the impetuses of trade and war. The high mortality rate among European sailors on the Company ships meant that Asian sailors had had to be engaged for the return voyage to replace those who had died, caught disease or deserted *en route*.<sup>87</sup> The Dutch East India Company had also begun to allow ‘moors’ to serve on voyages to the Netherlands after 1781.<sup>88</sup> For the first time, the circuits of circulation of Asian sailors were extended well beyond the Indian Ocean. Between 1685 and 1714 each British ship returning from the east carried between 2 and 20 lascars.<sup>89</sup> Their numbers along this circuit increased sharply during the Napoleonic Wars as replacements for British sailors being pressed into the Royal Navy. In 1813 alone, 1,336 lascars came to Britain, many on country ships which, though not normally allowed to ply west of the Cape of Good Hope, were granted permission to carry cargo to Britain.<sup>90</sup> By this time, Britain had become the predominant maritime power in the Indian Ocean, having displaced the majority of Asian merchants, and defeated their French rivals in the Deccan Wars and the Marathas shortly after. Henceforth, they became the main employers of Indian Ocean seafarers; the futures of lascars were now bound to British ships and their routes.

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<sup>84</sup> Bulley, *The Bombay Country Ships, 1790-1833*; Fisher, *Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian Travellers and Settlers in Britain, 1600-1857*.

<sup>85</sup> Bulley, *The Bombay Country Ships*.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Fisher, *Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian Travellers and Settlers in Britain, 1600-1857*.

<sup>88</sup> van Rossum, ‘A ‘Moorish World’’, 8.

<sup>89</sup> Rozina Visram, *Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 14–15.

<sup>90</sup> Visram, *Asians in Britain*, 16.

The numbers of lascars moving along these long-distance circuits increased steadily over the nineteenth century. First, the end of the Company's monopoly increased the number of ships plying between European and Asian ports. Of the private shipping companies, the Peninsular and Oriental (P&O) became the dominant shipping interest.<sup>91</sup> Owing to the entrance of private shipping companies, the number of lascars arriving in British ports increased to between ten and twelve thousand by 1855.<sup>92</sup> The real increase, however, came with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the concomitant development of steam-shipping, which cut the voyage to Bombay by half, drastically increased the pace and volume of trade and effectively 'fused' the Indian Ocean and Atlantic circuits of maritime circulation.<sup>93</sup> By 1886, the number of lascars coming to Britain was 16,673, and by 1900, 36,023.<sup>94</sup> At the same time, steam-shipping opened up new regions of recruitment in South Asia: Aden and Punjab in the West and Sylhet in the east provided crews for the stokeholds. The next big increase in numbers came with another war: by 1914 their number stood at 52,000, or 17.5% of the British maritime workforce.<sup>95</sup> By the eve of the Second World War, at 50,700, they made up 26%. The twentieth century, thus, came at the end of a long history of lascars' movement along circuits of oceanic circulation, whose direction and volume depended on trade and war.

Deck crews in South Asia continued, in part, to be drawn from areas of sailing ship recruitment. They came from littorals of the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal. In the Arabian Sea, Gujarati deck lascars, called *khalasis*, came from all along the coastline, from the Gulf of Kutch – with its millennia-old trade with East Africa and its more recent merchant

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<sup>91</sup> Freda Harcourt, *Flagships of Imperialism: The P&O Company and the Politics of Empire From Its Origins to 1867* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006). Ravi Ahuja points out that after the merger between British India and P&O in 1914, this corporation 'alone accounted for up to 30 percent of the steam shipping in Indian ports. Ahuja, "The Age of the 'Lascar': South Asian Seafarers in the Times of Imperial Shipping," 110.

<sup>92</sup> Visram, *Asians in Britain*, 16.

<sup>93</sup> Ahuja, "The Age of the 'Lascar': South Asian Seafarers in the Times of Imperial Shipping," 111.

<sup>94</sup> Conrad Dixon, 'Lascars: The Forgotten Seamen', in R. Ommer and G. Panting, eds., *The Working Men who Got Wet*, (St. Johns', Newfoundland, 1980).

<sup>95</sup> Heather Goodall, 'Port Politics: Indian Seamen, Australian Unions and Indonesian Independence, 1945-47,' *Labour History* 94 (2008): 46.



and indentured populations in South Africa – as well as from the region around the once-bustling Gulf of Cambay (today Khambhat), from where the Dutch East India Company had entered to set up their factory at Surat. Of Kutch, the *Imperial Gazetteer* noted that ‘the seafaring population, once notorious for its piracy, now furnishes numerous lascars to ocean-going steamers.’<sup>96</sup> The seafarers were a mix of Muslims and Hindus of the Kharwa caste. They came from Mandvi, Vavaniya, Salaya, Jodiya, Bedi, Salaya, Porbandar (where that other twentieth-century emigrant, Mohandas Gandhi, was born).<sup>97</sup> (See Map 1). Along the ‘jaw-like’ coast-line of Gujarat, they were recruited from the ports of Mangrol, Veraval, Navabandar, Jafarabad, and Mahuva.<sup>98</sup> Portuguese-controlled Diu and Daman were also well-known for their sailors. Along the Gulf of Cambay, lascars came from Bhavnagar, Gogo and Dholera. The Gulf of Cambay and the town of Jafarabad were controlled by the princely state of Sachin, ruled by a Sidi dynasty, a Sunni Muslim community originally brought to western India in 7 AD from East Africa as slaves.

South of Gujarat, the Konkan coast continued to send deck sailors to work on ocean-going steamships from other coastal and riparian regions. One survey of lascars’ boarding houses in Bombay in 1928 noted that most of them came from the Kolaba and Ratnagiri districts along the western coast of the Indian peninsula: there were ‘men from Alibag, Mahad, Goregaon, etc in Kolaba district, and from Dapoli, Harnai and Dabhol in Ratnagiri District and also from Murud and other villages in the Janjira state.’<sup>99</sup> (See Map 2). Ravi Ahuja points to the role of the land tenure system as one factor in inducing men from these districts to seek supplementary employment in the ports.<sup>100</sup> Another explanation may have

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<sup>96</sup> *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, Vol. 15, 177.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid*, 171.

<sup>98</sup> *Imperial Gazetteer*, Vol 15, 171; P.G. Kanekar, *Seamen in Bombay: Report of an Enquiry into the Conditions of their Life and Work* (Bombay: Servants of India Society, 1928).

<sup>99</sup> Kanekar, *Seamen in Bombay*, 12.

<sup>100</sup> Ravi Ahuja, ‘Networks of Subordination – Networks of the Subordinated: The Ordered Spaces of South Asian Maritime Labour in an Age of Imperialism (c.1890-1947),’ in *The Limits of British Colonial Control in India: Spaces of Disorder in the Indian Ocean Region*, ed. Ashwini Tambe and Harald Fischer-Tiné (New York: Routledge, 2009), 21.

been that many of the towns in Ratnagiri district which served as sources of lascars recruitment were also military bases and cantonments, many dating back to the Anglo-Maratha wars (1775-1819). They lay along the Bankot creek which led to – and encircled – the fortified Maratha capital of Raigad: the town of Bankot at the mouth of the creek, and Mahad and Mangangad further inland. South of the Savitri river along the Konkan coast lay the British cantonments of Harnai, Dapoli and Dabhol, from where, too, lascars came to Bombay to work on ships.<sup>101</sup> All the sailors from these regions were Konkani-speaking, belonging to the minority Muslim population that constituted less than ten percent of the population. Still further south along the western coast of the Indian peninsula, some sailors came from the Malabar coast and North Canara, mainly from the traditional fishing caste of *gabits*, who, according to one anthropological survey published in 1909, were ‘hardworking and bold sailors... well-behaved except they are somewhat given to pilfering their cargoes.’<sup>102</sup> While most of them were involved in coastal fishing expeditions of a few days, some sought employment on longer Indian Ocean or Atlantic journeys from Bombay.<sup>103</sup>

On the eastern side of the Indian peninsula, deck hands came from the Bengal delta where the Ganges and the Brahmaputra rivers emptied into the Bay of Bengal, and along the eastern rim of the Bay in a line leading down the Arakan coast of Burma to the Malay peninsula. (See Map 3). These regions were connected by short-distance *sampans* and steamers which ran between Noakhali, Barisal, Chittagong and Rangoon, mostly engaged in the coastal rice trade. Seamen often began working on these short-distance steamers, the larger of which were owned by the British India Steam Navigation Company, and then went to work in the ocean-going steamers from Calcutta.<sup>104</sup> Unlike on the western coast, they were drawn from a Muslim-majority population of the Chittagong administrative division.

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<sup>101</sup> *Imperial Gazetteer*, Vol. 13, 57.

<sup>102</sup> *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency*.

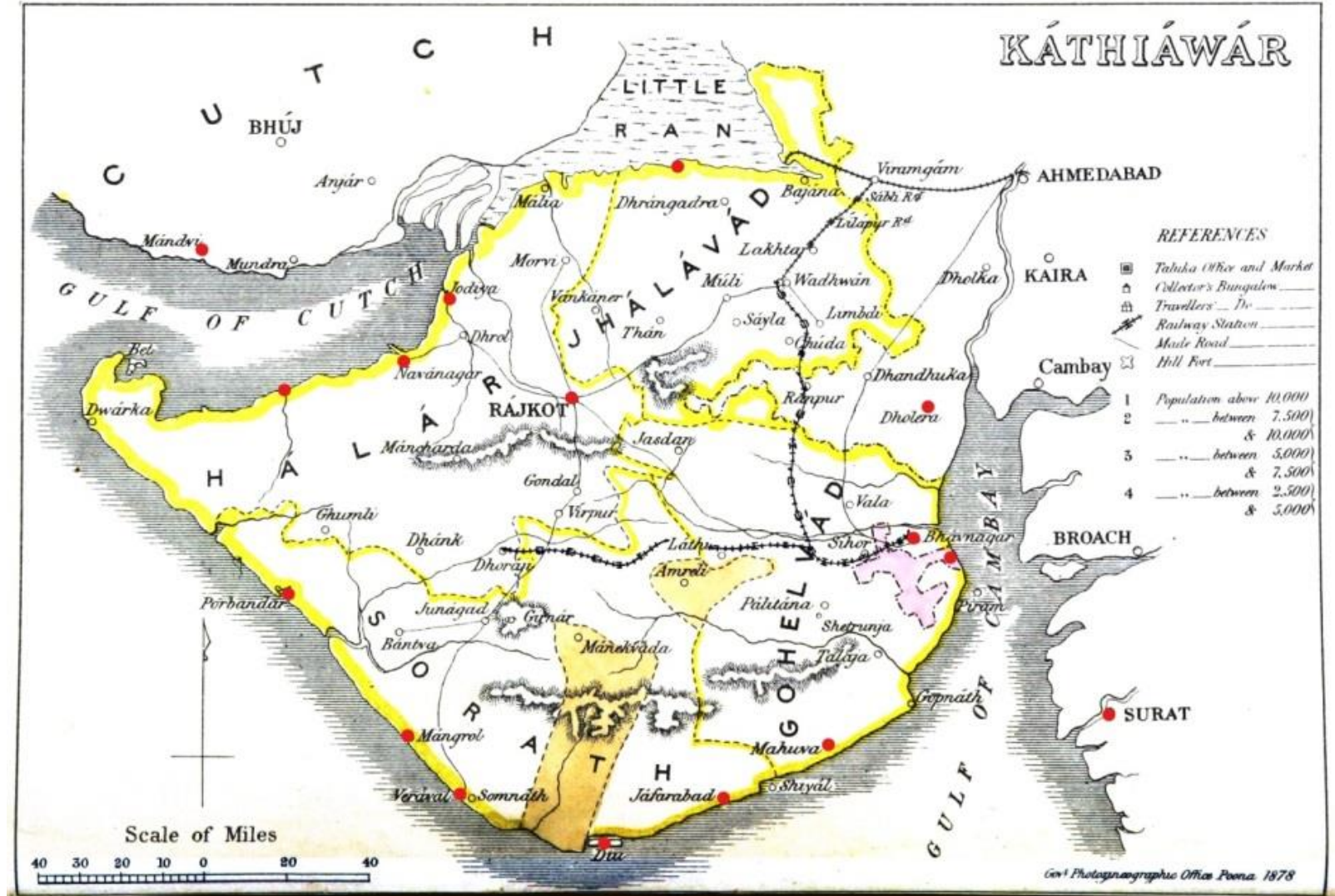
<sup>103</sup> Edgar Thurston and K. Rangachari, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India* (Madras: Government Press, 1909).

<sup>104</sup> *Imperial Gazetteer*, Vol. 5, 197.

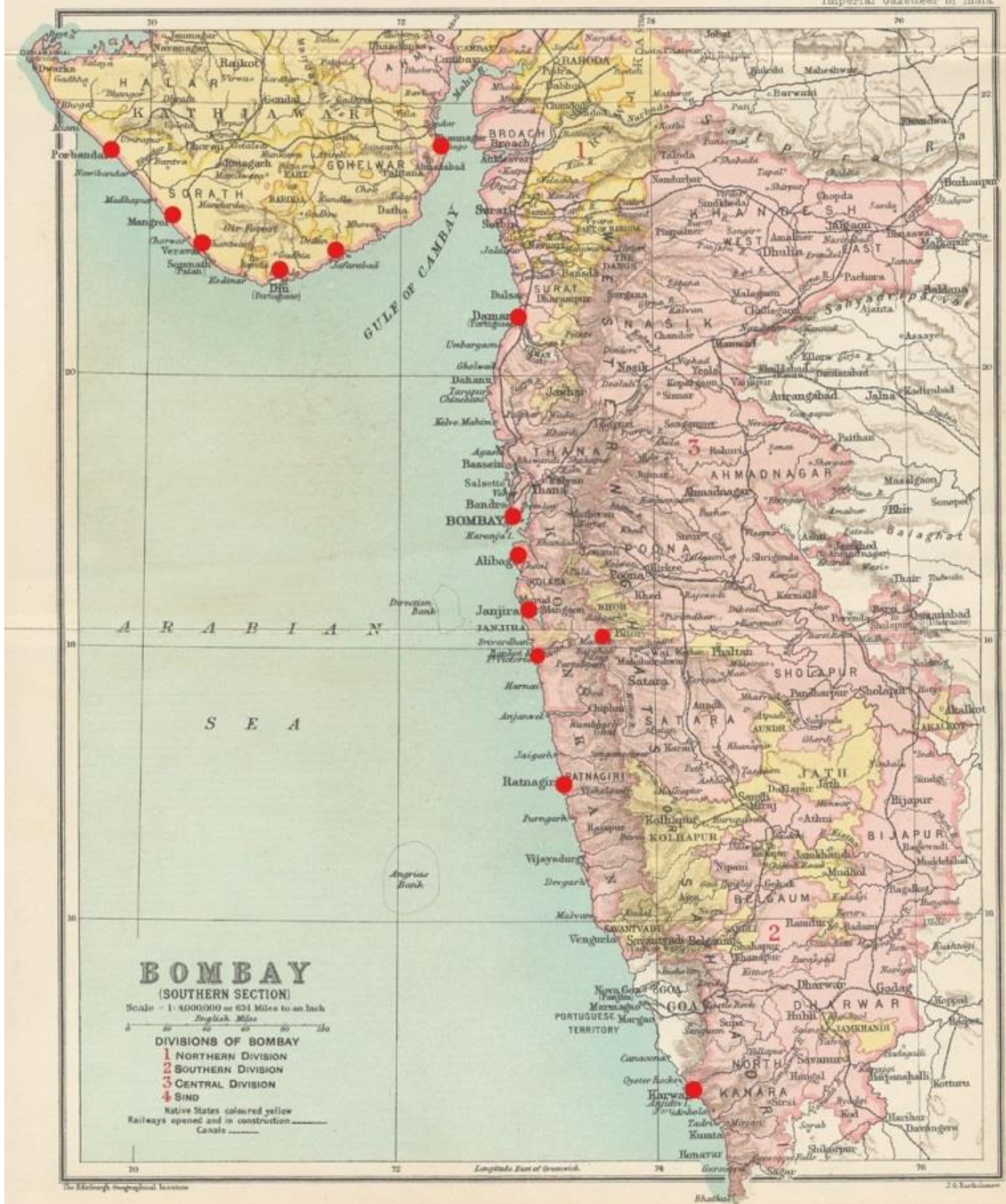
Bordering Chittagong to the south was the Akyab district of Burma from where Arakanese seamen came to work on ships. Nearly a third of the population of the district was Muslim, the other two-thirds being Arakanese, and some Chinese and Bengali residents.<sup>105</sup> Further south from Akyab, seamen from the adjoining British Malaya (and Singapore) were also engaged on British ships, although at least until 1932, whether they were to be counted as 'lascars' for the purposes of pay, mobility and entry into Britain remained ambiguous.

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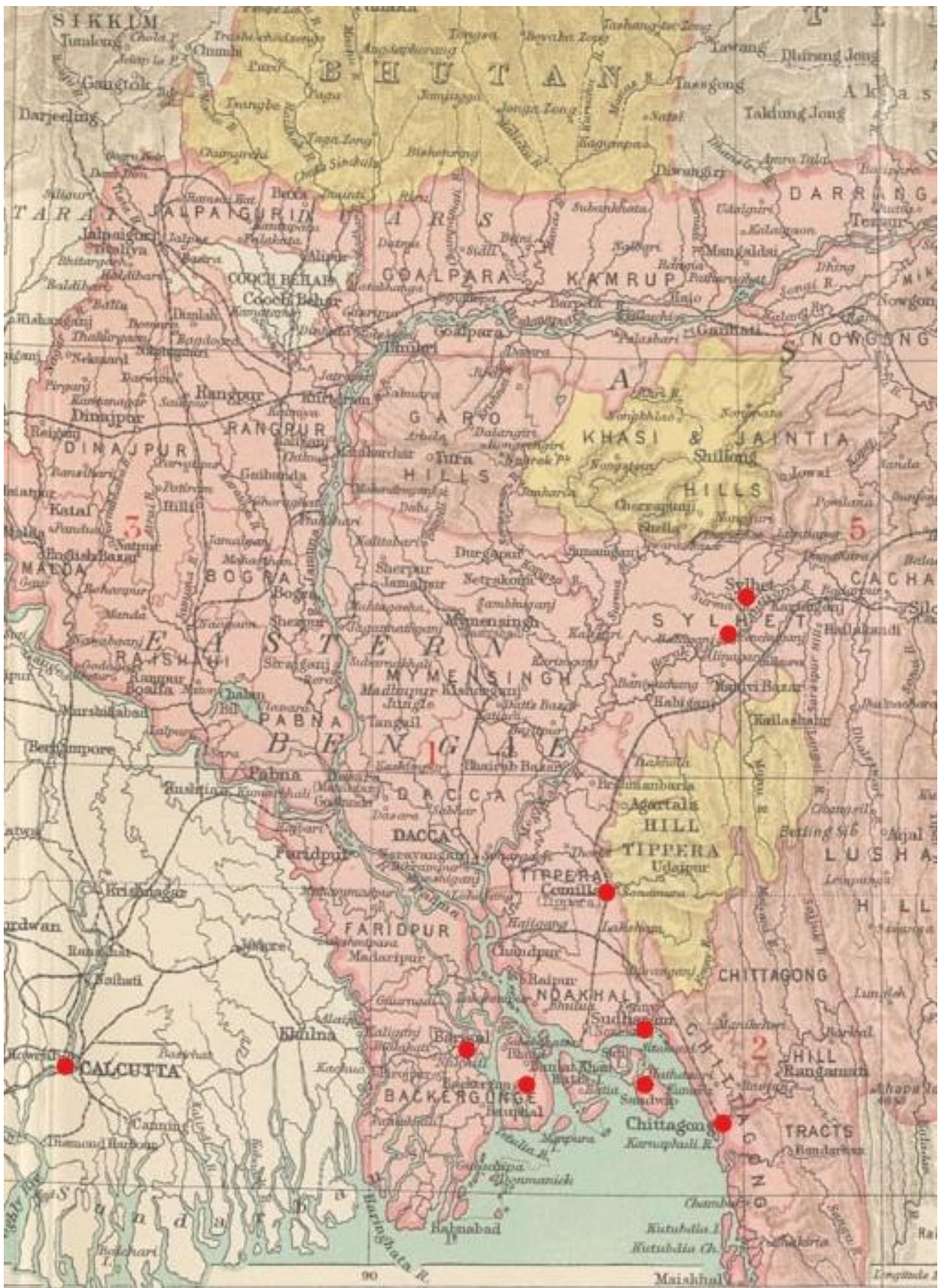
<sup>105</sup> *Imperial Gazetteer*, Vol. 5, 193.



Map 1 Recruitment Areas: Gujarat Coastline (Source: Government Photozincographic Office, Poona, 1878)



Map 2 Recruitment Areas: Western Indian coast (Source: Imperial Gazetteer of India, 1909)



Map 3 Recruitment Areas: The Bay of Bengal (Source: Imperial Gazetteer of India, 1909)

The development of steam technology opened up areas for recruitment beyond the regions from which sailing ship crews had traditionally been drawn, creating new nodes in the routes of their circulation. Compared with the histories of traditional seafaring recruitment areas for deck crews, the regions of engine room crew recruitment mapped onto modern developments such as the railways, canals and military cantonments. Workers in the engine room came from areas as dispersed as Somalia, Aden and Punjab on the Arabian Sea ‘side’ and Sylhet on the Bay of Bengal ‘side’ of the Indian subcontinent. Although Aden had a natural harbour, Yemenis who took to steamships were not from traditional seafaring communities. Its once-bustling harbour had fallen into disuse by the seventeenth century with the rise of the port of Mocha, so that by 1839, when it came under British occupation, Aden had only two thousand inhabitants.<sup>106</sup> With its establishment as an important coaling station after the opening of the Suez canal, the town was re-populated with newcomers from the hinterland, but also from India and the horn of Africa, from where traditional seafarers – also called ‘seedies’ by the British (after Siddis) – came. By the last two decades of the nineteenth century, the proportion coming from the Yemeni highlands, called *jabalis*, rose sharply owing to a series of droughts and famines.<sup>107</sup> This disparate group recruited in Aden were collectively labelled ‘Adenese’, and worked in the engine rooms of steam ships. By the late 1860s, the British P&O shipping company ran two weekly mail services calling at Aden *en route* to Calcutta and Australia, and the French Service des Imperiales (the predecessor of the Messageries Maritimes company) ran a fortnightly steamer service from Aden to French Indochina. Many ‘Adenese’ went on to work on ‘tramp’ steamers which ran irregular services between European ports.

Engine room workers recruited in Bombay came overwhelmingly from Punjab, from the districts of Rawalpindi, Jullunder, Amritsar, Ferozepur, Ludhiana and Campbellpore,

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<sup>106</sup> Richard I. Lawless, *From Ta'izz to Tyneside: An Arab Community in the North-East of England during the Early Twentieth Century* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1995), 29.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid*, 31.

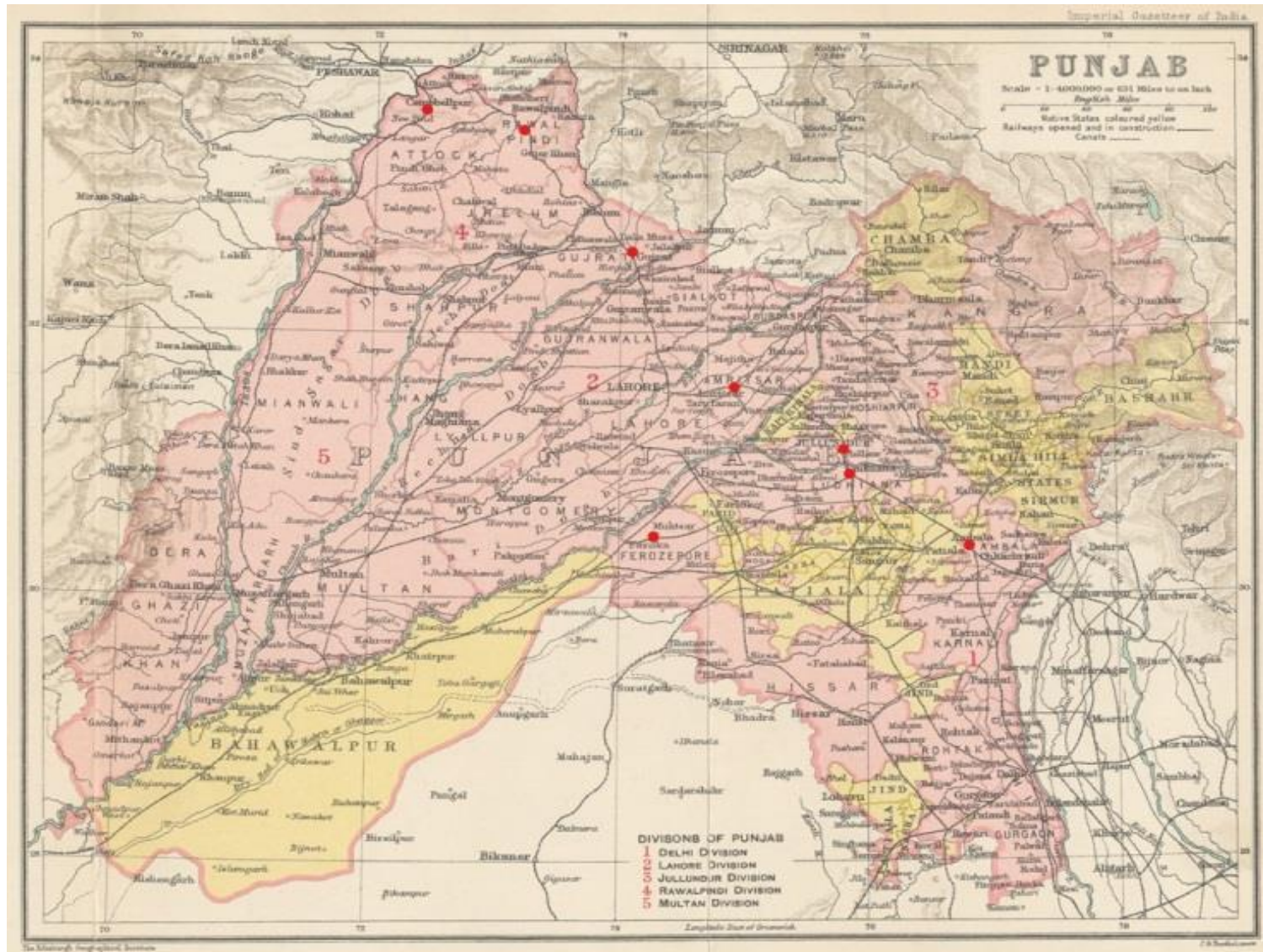
Quetta, Ambala, and Mirpur in Kashmir.<sup>108</sup> (See Map 4) As in Ratnagiri, these districts all lay along important riverine arteries and were all districts with important British military cantonments. The cantonments here had been established during the frontier manoeuvres between Britain and Russia along the Afghan border starting from the 1830s, and including the Anglo-Sikh wars in the 1840s. Ahuja points out that many demobilised Punjabi soldiers from the First World War found work as sailors.<sup>109</sup> As can be seen from the map below (Map 4), these also lay along railway routes, which were laid concomitantly with the Anglo-Sikh wars and the transition to steam technology in shipping in the mid-nineteenth century. This raises the possibility that the work of stoking ships' furnaces overlapped with the existing pool of skilled labour of working with trains' steam engines.

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<sup>108</sup> Kanekar, *Seamen in Bombay*, 16.

<sup>109</sup> Ahuja, 'Networks of subordination', 23.





Map 4 Recruitment Areas: Punjab (Source: Imperial Gazetteer of India, 1909)

In the east, Sylhet became an important recruitment area for engine room lascars, for some of the same reasons as Punjab: it was irrigated by the Surma river, along which boats had plied for at least three millennia. In the colonial period, limestone, tea and jute were carried along the river from Sylhet to Calcutta.<sup>110</sup> The town of Fenchuganj in Sylhet had become the headquarters of the India General Steam Navigation Company and an important steamer station.<sup>111</sup> The Bengal-Assam railway also crisscrossed this region.

With the development of steamships came greater speed and predictability, which led to growing passenger travel. Apart from the stokehold, passenger ships also developed sophisticated kitchens and dining saloons. Many of the workers in this department were Roman Catholics recruited in the Portuguese colony of Goa on the west coast, and from Chittagong in the east, where there had been a history of Portuguese proselytisation.<sup>112</sup> From the claims of the dependants of these lascars killed in the First World War, we know that Goan saloon lascars came from the towns of Cuncolim, Chinchinim Deusua in Salsette district, Santa Cruz in Ilhas district, Raia Siroda in Novas Conquistas, and from the districts of Bardez and Sanguem in Goa.<sup>113</sup> Thus, the worlds of the twentieth century lascar stretched from the eastern to the western rims of the Indian Ocean, variously shaped by networks of traditional seafaring, military recruitment and technological factors such as the existence of railway and steamship routes. Although lascars came from these rural 'labour catchment areas', these were not their only worlds. The following chapter will draw out the impact of mobility on their worlds, first in moving to the port city, and subsequently of circulating across a web of international port cities.

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<sup>110</sup> Ashfaque Hossain, 'Historical Globalization and Its Effects: A Study of Sylhet and Its People, 1874-1971' (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Nottingham, 2009).

<sup>111</sup> *Imperial Gazetteer*, Vol. 12, 87.

<sup>112</sup> Colonial Cooks' Certificates, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich.

<sup>113</sup> 'Foreigners: Proposed deportation of certain persons connected with the Indian Seamen's Union, Bombay', 1925. Maharashtra State Archives (MSA), Government of Bombay Political Department, Special Branch. File No. S43/23.

## Chapter One: International Worlds

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This chapter argues that lascars' worlds cannot be understood within provincially or nationally bounded frameworks. Histories of labour and subalterns have tended to argue that subaltern worlds are unchanging. In contrast, this chapter focuses on subalterns on the move, looking at the extent of their mobility and arguing that this mobility had a profound impact on their worldviews. It also challenges histories of mobile subalterns that have focused overwhelmingly on the constraints to their mobility as well as their ethnic segregation by employers and the state, thus representing their voyages as strictly controlled and insulated from external influences.<sup>1</sup> Such focus on constraint and segregation precludes an enquiry into the effects of mobility on the migrant subalterns, thereby representing subaltern worldviews as blinkered and impermeable to transformation. Yet, despite constraints, lascars' mobility along international shipping routes was quite unprecedented even as compared with other migrant workers, who usually moved to a single plantation or battlefield for an extended period of time. The focus on constraints, moreover, has passed by an appreciation of the degree of mobility and the questions that this opens up. Was it possible that lascars did not wonder about the places, people and events that they encountered, that all these experiences made no impression on their worldviews, and that they simply returned to their home ports at their end of their voyages unchanged by their experiences?

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<sup>1</sup> Ravi Ahuja, 'Mobility and Containment: The Voyages of South Asian Seamen, c.1900–1960,' *International Review of Social History* Vol. 51 (2006): 111–41; Ravi Ahuja, 'Networks of Subordination – Networks of the Subordinated: The Ordered Spaces of South Asian Maritime Labour in an Age of Imperialism (c.1890-1947),' in *The Limits of British Colonial Control in India: Spaces of Disorder in the Indian Ocean Region*, ed. Ashwini Tambe and Harald Fischer-Tiné (New York: Routledge, 2009); Ravi Ahuja, 'Capital at Sea, Shaitan below Decks? A Note on Global Narratives, Narrow Spaces, and the Limits of Experience,' *History of the Present* Vol. 2, no. 1 (2012): 78–85; Gopalan Balachandran, 'Conflicts in the International Maritime Labour Market: British and Indian Seamen, Employers and the State, 1890-1939,' *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 39, no. 1 (2002): 71–100.

To probe the assumptions of boundedness, constraint and segregation of mobile subalterns, this chapter employs a different set of sources from existing studies. Instead of looking solely at official policy, it employs oral narratives to draw out the effects of mobility and interaction through the lived reality of seafarers' own experiences. The use of first-person accounts foregrounds a qualitatively different picture of their mobility from the picture generated by studying law and policy. The regulatory intent of policy gives us a rather sterile picture of lascars being engaged at Indian ports and returning in an uninterrupted, insulated circuit back to these ports. In contrast, memoirs and oral histories open a window on to the lived reality of their voyages which involved waits in port, dockside encounters in grimy coffee shops, months spent recuperating in hospitals or awaiting transshipment to India after being torpedoed. Working on ships that carried cargo between ports, lascars were witness to political developments at the different ports at which they called. Part of their 'cargo' in wartime was also men and materiel in different theatres of war. By shifting focus from the constraints on mobility to its effects, this chapter will explore the impact that these encounters and interactions had on lascars' worldviews.

Despite segregative and restrictive legislation, lascars' worlds were nonetheless expanded by the very process of travel. They formed their own ideas of the societies with which they came into contact, engaged with them and carried some of these ideas back to the ports at which they were engaged. This chapter argues, as Sunil Amrith has elsewhere, that 'mobility...widened people's social networks and their imaginative worlds.'<sup>2</sup> It is these transformations which make up the subject of this chapter. How did lascars' sojourns in port cities shape their views of the world and of the subcontinent within it? Starting from lascars' lived experiences of different

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<sup>2</sup> Amrith, *Migration and Diaspora in Modern Asia*, 2.

worlds, I suggest that their experiences phenomenologically altered their consciousness of the worlds of South Asia.

This chapter is divided into two broad sections: the first focuses on the extent of lascars' mobility and the second on the impact of this mobility on lascars' worldviews. The first section lays out the international contours of lascars' worlds, arguing that despite the constraints, their range of mobility still exposed them to a wide spectrum of experiences in international ports. It also argues that these constraints were not constant through the first half of the twentieth century but were contingent on the changing needs of shipping depending on the state of trade and war. It shows that at certain moments and on particular routes, these constraints were relaxed, thus allowing for greater mobility and interaction. The second part of the chapter goes on to look at the impact that this mobility had on lascars' own worldviews. It argues that contact and interaction with other societies broadened lascars' horizons, exposed them to political events that were distant to most other South Asians and allowed them to compare different colonial contexts. It argues further that the prevalence of structures of class and gender in international ports helped to undercut the idea of a ruling race in the colony.

## **Mobility**

The existing scholarship on lascar mobility emphasises the controls imposed by colonialism in the interest of maintaining a pool of cheap labour within an international maritime workforce. Lascars cost their employers less because shipping companies provided them a fraction of the wages, accommodation and food rations of

a European seaman.<sup>3</sup> Ravi Ahuja has shown how control over their mobility was institutionalised through lascars' contracts of employment, the so-called 'Asiatic articles', which stipulated that they must be discharged at a port in British India, thereby returning them to the same pool of labour from which they were drawn and preventing them from terminating their contracts in ports in which wages were more favourable.<sup>4</sup> Laura Tabili has studied controls on lascar mobility through an exclusionary law in Britain, the Coloured Alien Seamen's Order (1925), which was primarily designed to prevent 'Arab' seamen from deserting and settling in Britain but was also often used against lascars, despite the fact that, as British subjects, they were not officially classified as 'aliens'.<sup>5</sup> The picture that emerges out of these studies of the controls on mobility is that once lascar crews were engaged on British ships, they made an uninterrupted return passage back to their port of engagement, with no contact or interaction along the route.

Scholarship on lascars also emphasises the ethnic segregation within this international workforce owing to their recruitment through discrete traditional kinship and debt networks. Contrary to Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh's study of the Atlantic maritime workforce of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which argues that seamen on sailing ships comprised an egalitarian and inclusive body, studies of the steam ship depict a completely divided and segmented workforce.<sup>6</sup> Ahuja argues

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<sup>3</sup> Frank Broeze, 'The Muscles of Empire': Indian Seamen and the Raj, 1919-1939,' *International Economic and Social History Review* Vol. 18, no. 1 (1981): 43-67; Ahuja, 'Networks of Subordination'; Gopalan Balachandran, *Globalising Labour? Indian Seafarers and World Shipping, c. 1870-1945* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Ahuja, 'Networks of Subordination', Balachandran, "Conflicts in the International Maritime Labour Market: British and Indian Seamen, Employers and the State, 1890-1939".

<sup>5</sup> Laura Tabili, 'The Construction of Racial Difference in Twentieth-Century Britain: The Special Restriction (Coloured Alien Seamen) Order, 1925,' *Journal of British Studies* Vol. 33, no. 1 (1994): 54-98; 'Lascar Deserters'. 1931-1938. The National Archives, Kew. Metropolitan Police files. Metropolitan Police, Office of the Commissioner: Correspondence and Papers – Aliens Registration Office. MEPO 2/5064.

<sup>6</sup> Ahuja, "Networks of Subordination – Networks of the Subordinated: The Ordered Spaces of South Asian Maritime Labour in an Age of Imperialism (c.1890-1947)"; Balachandran, "Conflicts in the

that the system of recruitment of separate crews along regional, linguistic and ethnic lines even within the Indian Ocean meant that while ‘lascars from the districts of Sylhet, Chittagong and Noakhali in Eastern Bengal’ could only ‘communicate [with each other] with some difficulty’, this was a near impossibility in the case of Bombay crews, as they were ‘far more segregated in religious, linguistic and ethnic terms: Punjabi Muslim ‘*ag-wallahs*’ of the engine department would have found it difficult to make themselves understood with the Christian Goanese stewards who would in turn have had little in common with Hindu *khalasis* from Gujarat.’<sup>7</sup> Thus, not only did these networks preclude contact and communication between lascars and other seafarers in a ‘highly exclusive and segmented’ labour market, but also among lascars from different regions of South Asia.<sup>8</sup> The structure of recruitment and control is so all-pervasive in Ahuja’s account that even resistance to maritime authority is seen predominantly expressed along these same networks through the recruiter or *serang*, thereby transforming from ‘networks of subordination’ into ‘networks of the subordinated’.<sup>9</sup> Thus, in citing structural inequalities to caution against assumptions that the existence of a mobile and international workforce necessarily implied hybridity or solidarity, Ahuja depicts a picture in which lascars are almost ghettoised within this workforce, and their contact is limited only to their village kinsmen. This picture leads Ahuja’s study from the port to the hinterland, to look at rural ‘labour catchment areas’.<sup>10</sup> In his argument, these rural areas and their networks of kinship and authority appear as the structurally-determined limits of their worlds while the impact of mobility is negligible.

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International Maritime Labour Market: British and Indian Seamen, Employers and the State, 1890-1939”; Balachandran, *Globalising Labour? Indian Seafarers and World Shipping, c. 1870–1945*.

<sup>7</sup> Ahuja, ‘Networks of subordination’, 20.

<sup>8</sup> Ahuja, ‘Networks of subordination’.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

While understanding the foregoing constraints on mobility and the structure of the international maritime labour market is indispensable, a focus on overwhelming constraint and control often translates into assumptions about the narrowness of lascars' worldviews. I do not suggest that their mobility was unconstrained and free-floating but rather that even their constrained mobility exposed them to a rather remarkable range of geographical movement as part of their routine working lives. It is important to understand this range in order to challenge the division between what Amrith has pointed out as an assumed elite cosmopolitanism on the one hand and subaltern segregation on the other.<sup>11</sup> This range of mobility is reflected in lascars' oral histories.<sup>12</sup> One lascar, Sunah Miah, recalled of his first two voyages: 'first time going to Colombo, Australia, England, Calcutta... Next ship I got the Clan Line, going to Africa, Aden, England, back to Calcutta.'<sup>13</sup> Another lascar, Haji Konah Miah, counted off the places to which a seafaring life had taken him:

I have been all over the world... Holland, Germany, Sweden, Norway, Poland, Italy, South Africa, North Africa, East Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Sydney, Melbourne, Newcastle, Fiji Islands, Malaysia, Japan, China, Panama Canal, Vancouver, Argentina, Kiel Canal, Suez Canal, Montreal, America, Mexico, San Francisco... What do you want more? I enjoyed it all, every place I went ashore.<sup>14</sup>

As part of their working lives, lascars' phenomenological worlds expanded to encompass shipping routes and international ports. The routes of seamen from different colonies were shaped by the competition between large monopolistic shipping companies, between whom different routes were divided at an international cartel called the Imperial Conference. Among British companies, the Blue Funnel

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<sup>11</sup> Amrith, *Migration and Diaspora*, 11-12.

<sup>12</sup> Choudhury, *Sons of the Empire: Oral History from the Bangladeshi Seamen Who Served on British Ships During the 1939-45 War*; Adams, *Across Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers: Life Stories of Pioneer Sylheti Settlers in Britain*.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Suna Miah. In Adams, *Across Seven Seas*, 137.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Haji Kona Miah. *Ibid*, 136.



Line came to dominate the Chinese tea trade, Elder Dempster the West African trade and Peninsular and Oriental (P&O) the Indian and Far Eastern trade, thus also dominating the employment of seamen from these colonies.<sup>15</sup> The companies whose ships stopped in Indian ports were the British India Steam Navigation Company (BI), Clan, the Ellerman company's City, Hall and Wilson lines, Bibby, Anchor-Brocklebank, Harrisson, Henderson, Strick, Well, Glen and Natal lines, all British, as well as the Japanese Nippon Yusen Kaisha and, until the First World War, the German Hansa Line.<sup>16</sup> The most successful of these by far, however, was the P&O, which merged with BI in 1914 to dominate India's coastal and overseas trade.<sup>17</sup> To understand their routes of mobility and circulation, it is useful to picture them as a complex global web of lines emanating from each port and reaching across oceans to their destinations.

To look at these 'webs' emanating from South Asian ports along which lascars circulated, we can leaf through the sailing schedules in an *International Mercantile Diary and Yearbook*.<sup>18</sup> P&O ships sailed weekly from Bombay, Calcutta, Madras and Rangoon eastward for Chinese and Japanese ports, and fortnightly to Australia.<sup>19</sup> These were usually ships that had begun their voyage in British ports and stopped at South Asian ports *en route* to South East Asia, but might discharge one lascar crew whose contract was expiring and engage another. Another weekly P&O service sailed

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<sup>15</sup> *International Mercantile Diary and Yearbook* (London: The Syren and Shipping, Ltd.: 1925); Tony Lane, *The Merchant Seamen's War* (Liverpool: Bluecoat Press, 1990); Marika Sherwood, "Strikes! African Seamen, Elder Dempster and the Government 1940–42," *Historical Studies in Ethnicity, Migration and Diaspora* 13, no. 2–3 (1994): 130–45.

<sup>16</sup> *International Mercantile Diary and Yearbook*; Boyd Cable, *A Hundred Year History of the P&O* (London: Ivor Nicholson and Watson, 1937); Stephen Rabson, *P&O: A Fleet History* (Kendal: World Ship Society, 1988); David Howarth and Stephen Howarth, *The Story of P&O: The Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1994).

<sup>17</sup> Howarth and Stephen Howarth, *The Story of P&O: The Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company*; Rabson, *P&O: A Fleet History*; Harcourt, *Flagships of Imperialism*.

<sup>18</sup> *International Mercantile Diary and Yearbook*.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

westward from these ports to London, Middlesborough and Immingham.<sup>20</sup> Besides P&O, there were fortnightly sailings of the other companies. From Calcutta and Bombay, BI ships sailed to London and Middlesborough. Anchor, City and Clan lines ran to Glasgow and Birkenhead.<sup>21</sup> Wilson line ships went directly from Bombay to Middlesborough, Hull and Immingham and Harrison's ships from Calcutta to Liverpool.<sup>22</sup> Starting from Rangoon, Henderson line ships steamed to Glasgow and Liverpool and Bibby ships to London, Birkenhead and Middlesborough.<sup>23</sup> Hall ships hugged the Indian peninsular coast southward from Bombay to Madras, Calicut, Mangalore, Cochin and Allepey before going west to end at Liverpool.<sup>24</sup> Temperley ships started from Calcutta, rounding the peninsula for Cochin and Bombay, then setting off for London.<sup>25</sup> Well ships did Calcutta-Madras-London runs and Strick did Madras-London-Middlesborough-Hamburg-Antwerp-Rotterdam.<sup>26</sup> Along with the ports of departure and arrival of a vessel, shipping routes also connected a string of ports *en route* at which ships called to load or unload cargo, mail, passengers, food rations or to refuel. Depending on their routes, for instance, lascar-crewed ships going westward also called at Port Said, Malta, Brindisi, Gibraltar, Marseilles, and Dieppe in the Mediterranean, or Durban if the ship was rounding the Cape of Good Hope rather than the shorter route through the Suez Canal.<sup>27</sup> From the South Asian ports at which they engaged, thus, lascars' geographical worlds expanded along shipping routes to include the ports at which they called.

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<sup>20</sup> *International Mercantile Diary and Yearbook*.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

To understand movement between ports and their mutual influence on each other, Frank Broeze used the image of ‘a dense and sophisticated network’ of seaborne interactions, while Tony Ballantyne uses the metaphor of a web, constructed of vertical networks of power and horizontal connections of commonality.<sup>28</sup> Broeze has argued that port cities had ‘much more in common than their hinterlands.’<sup>29</sup> Indeed, within this international network connected by sea-routes, ports formed nodes in the circulation of people (traders, soldiers, shipping agents, immigrants, seamen and prostitutes), goods, ideas and meanings.<sup>30</sup> In the twentieth century, they also became frontiers for state mechanisms of control over the movement of passengers and cargo through systems of passports, customs and surveillance.

The docksides of ports also had certain common elements: they were spaces of contrast between the wealth of empire, with their formidable customs houses and trading firms on the one hand and the squalor of the ‘sailortowns’ with their seamen’s lodging houses, brothels, indebtedness, drug trafficking and crime.<sup>31</sup> As such, they were liminal spaces that were always just out of reach of state control and surveillance.<sup>32</sup> In some respects, these ports were each other’s counterparts: whether in New York, Shanghai or Alexandria, there were institutions to service the needs of

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<sup>28</sup> Tony Ballantyne, *Webs of Empire: Locating New Zealand’s Colonial Past* (Vancouver and Toronto: UBC Press, 2012), 45-47.

<sup>29</sup> Frank Broeze, *Brides of the Sea: port cities of Asia from the 16<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries* (Kensington: New South Wales Press, 1989), 3.

<sup>30</sup> See, for instance, Michael Christopher Low, ‘Empire and the Hajj: Pilgrims, Plagues and Pan-Islamism under British Surveillance’, *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 40, no. 2 (2008): 269–290; Kenneth McPherson, *The Indian Ocean: A History of People and the Sea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Harold Fischer-Tiné, ‘“White women degrading themselves to the lowest depths”: European networks of prostitution and colonial anxieties in British India and Ceylon ca. 1880-1914’, *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 40, no. 163 (2003): 163-190; Philip E. Steinberg, *The Social Construction of the Ocean* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Edward Simpson and Kai Kresse (eds.), *Struggling with History: Islam and Cosmopolitanism in the Western Indian Ocean* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

<sup>31</sup> On the cocaine trade in this period reaching from the ports into the hinterland, cf. James Mills, ‘Decolonising Drugs in Asia: The Case of Cocaine in Colonial India,’ *Third World Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (2018): 218–31.

<sup>32</sup> Brad Beaven, Karl Bell and Robert James (eds.), *Port Towns and Urban Cultures: International Histories of the Waterfront, 1700-2000* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

transient sailors, whether residential (boarding houses), financial (lending and remitting), social (coffee shops) and sexual (brothels). In each, a patchwork of ethnicities and languages was to be found, and the services often adapted to suit particular ethnic or religious needs. As such, Calcutta's Kidderpore or Bombay's Mazgaon docks were variations on the same theme as London's Poplar or Hamburg's Sankt Pauli. From lascars' oral narratives, there appears to be a certain simultaneity of the different ports, which appear almost superimposed on each other. The lascar Sunah Miah, for instances, gave this telegraphic description of life in ports which evokes a vivid montage of sights from around the world:

I like the sea life – America, New York City, Baltimore, Washington, Australia, Shanghai, Hong Kong... Communist countries, nobody talking, only in seamen's clubs. In Russia I seen girls working in the docks. Australia, big farms...fruit...everything. America very good. Shanghai, before the war too many girls, after war, no fun any more. Alexandria...Basra...business girls all dirty, all seamen going to them!<sup>33</sup>

In the production of maritime space, all these port towns acquired a simultaneity and commonality in lascars' experiences, while preserving their idiosyncratic particularities.

Along with the expansion of their geographical worlds through their seaborne mobility, lascars' phenomenological worlds also expanded through their first-hand experiences in these different ports. Some of the ports of call afforded lascars opportunities to become acquainted with the docksides of ports. At short stops, lascars would be busy on ship, hauling cargo, operating cranes and slings on the different decks, or carrying out cleaning and maintenance works. When the ship was berthed in port for longer, however, they were given shore leave, during which they wandered

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<sup>33</sup> Interview with Sunah Miah. In Adams, *Across Seven Seas*, 137.

the docksides, visiting markets, seamen's clubs and brothels.<sup>34</sup> Here, they sometimes conducted small side businesses to supplement their earnings: buying curios in eastern ports to re-sell in western ones or, as during the First World War, selling fruits to Indian soldiers in Mesopotamia.<sup>35</sup> On passenger cruises, lascars were given shore leave while passengers were ashore. When the P&O passenger liner *SS Vectis* called at Venice as part of a Mediterranean cruise in 1913, for instance, a young woman passenger, Elsie Watkins Grubb, wrote in her diary about their brief sojourn that '...our (sic) Lascars, with bared heads, were looking round with most intelligent interest. They looked sweet.'<sup>36</sup> Again at Fiume, she wrote, 'we saw some of our Lascars walking on shore with lovely clean white clothes and brilliant red turbans. They are most interesting people and I like them.'<sup>37</sup>

There were occasionally even more protracted stays in port. When the ships reached their destination ports, there was often a longer wait for the lascar crews either for structural repairs to their ship or for transfer to another ship returning to a port in British India. In wartime, ships waited to sail in convoys escorted by armed naval ships.<sup>38</sup> In these cases, lascars would lodge in one of the numerous seamen's boarding houses in the docksides of international ports awaiting their sailing date. Other circumstances that were more accidental but nonetheless not unusual in lascars' seafaring lives caused them to spend periods in ports that seem remarkable, even counter-intuitive, to a point of view that focuses solely on constraints. This could happen through lascars being injured, taken ill, being torpedoed or taken prisoner of war. For the lascar Mothosir Ali, for instance, it came through a broken hand after

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<sup>34</sup> Gardezi, *Chains to Lose: Life and Struggles of a Revolutionary: Memoirs of Dada Amir Haider Khan*.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> 'Travel journal of Elsie Watkins Grubb, 1913', National Maritime Museum, Journals and Diaries, JOD/139.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. Fiume is today's Rijeka in Croatia.

<sup>38</sup> Lane, *The Merchant Seamen's War*.

falling 40 feet from the deck to the hold.<sup>39</sup> Their next port of call was in Argentina, where he was sent to a hospital in Buenos Aires. Recuperating there for one and a half months, he had to learn Spanish to be able to communicate with his doctors and fellow patients. He recalls, ‘I could not understand (sic) Spanish. So I bought a book, ‘English to Spanish’, which helped me.’<sup>40</sup> Others spent time in seemingly unlikely ports by deserting their ships on short stays, as did Syed Ali, who deserted the *SS McLeith* in Cape Town in 1943. He said,

The ship stopped... there for a few hours. The crew were allowed to go out for a short visit. I disliked the serang, so I took my chance. I went out and deliberately stayed too long ashore. When the time was up and the ship had already left, I returned to the port. The port police took me to a seamen’s boarding house, where...there were a few more Sylheti seamen.<sup>41</sup>

During the two World Wars, lascars who were rescued after their ships were attacked and sunk found themselves either awaiting trans-shipment or as prisoners of war for long durations. For instance, when a Clan Line ship carrying eighty lascars was torpedoed in the Southern Atlantic during the Second World War, a Greek ship rescued the survivors, who had been adrift at sea for eight days, and delivered them to Trinidad. One of the lascars of this crew, Fazol Karim, remembered, ‘we spent nearly a year in Trinidad. Then we went to America by ship. We stayed in America for five months, then we went back to Calcutta.’<sup>42</sup> Other crews who were lucky to escape death but not to be rescued by an Allied ship were taken as prisoners of war. Among the 1,217 lascars taken prisoner of war in the Second World War were Chand Miah’s brother Attor Ali and his crew mates Ulfoth Miah and Sazid Ali, who were

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<sup>39</sup> Interview with Mothosir Ali. In Choudhury, *Sons of the Empire*, 7.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Syed Ali. Ibid, 92.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Fazol Karim. In Choudhury, *Sons of the Empire*, 24.

imprisoned in Japan for four years until the end of the war.<sup>43</sup> Chand Miah recalled that ‘people thought they had died but after the war they were released and came back.’<sup>44</sup> Ships that were seized intact by ‘enemy’ forces in the war were what became ‘prize ships’, and the crew kept on board to work them. The German East Africa Line’s *SS Markgraf*, for instance, sailed from Bombay on 24 July 1914 with a Goan saloon crew on board. When they arrived at Mombasa in August, they were informed that Britain was at war with Germany, and that they were now German subjects. All these periods spent in port as part of their routine voyages, with all the structural constraints in force, shows that their mobility did in fact expose them to world beyond the village labour catchment area and that their journeys were not closed and insulated circuits back to their home ports.

These constraints, moreover, were not static throughout the first half of the twentieth century, but were contingent on the changing needs of shipping. The outbreak of the First World War saw significant relaxations to the rules of containment and segregation of lascars crews owing to wartime labour shortages. With the majority of British seamen drafted into the Royal Navy, colonial seafarers were recruited to make up the severe manpower shortage in merchant shipping. In South Asia, lascar employment expanded to the point that by 1916, recruiters were complaining that the paucity of lascars was holding up ships in port.<sup>45</sup> Whereas in 1891, 24,000 lascars had made up 10 percent of the British maritime workforce, by 1914, their numbers had more than doubled to nearly 52,000, making up 17.5 percent

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<sup>43</sup> Georgie Wemyss, “Littoral Struggles, Liminal Lives: Indian Merchant Seafarers’ Resistances,” in *South Asian Resistances in Britain, 1858-1947*, ed. Rehana Ahmed and Sumita Mukherjee (London and New York: Continuum, 2012), 35.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with Fazol Karim. Ibid, 56.

<sup>45</sup> ‘Particulars of Seamen’. 1923. Maharashtra State Archives (MSA), Marine Department (MD). File No. 669-I.

of the whole.<sup>46</sup> While in times of high unemployment recruiters were in a position to pick their crew, they now had to settle for anyone who would sign on at the shipping masters' office, thereby weakening the sway of traditional recruiters and their networks. Recruiters now competed for a limited pool of lascars, and they complained that Indian seamen were being 'tempted away' by the promise of higher wages to join other – potentially less dangerous – services, such as the labour corps in Mesopotamia, the posts and telegraph department and the railways. Skilled Indian firemen and coal trimmers who were available were refusing to go on ships in the danger zone.<sup>47</sup>

In this context of a labour shortage and brisk shipping, significant exceptions to rules contained in the Asiatic articles were, perforce, allowed in practice, including the dreaded employment of lascars on European contracts which diluted the racial segmentation of the maritime workforce. For instance, when a ship with a European crew stopped *en route* in an Indian port 'and [was] badly in need of a seaman to replace one who was on the sick list and no European seaman [was] readily available', an Indian would be signed on to join the European crew on a European 'standard agreement' rather than the inferior Asiatic articles.<sup>48</sup> Finding this practice undesirable, the authorities debated whether it could be deemed illegal, finally settling on penalising the masters of the ships to deter them from engaging lascars on European terms.<sup>49</sup> Interestingly, the master himself only recruited lascars on European wages under pressure from the European seamen of the crew. A Marine Department note reported that

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<sup>46</sup> Heather Goodall, 'Port Politics: Indian Seamen, Australian Unions and Indonesian Independence, 1945-47', *Labour History*, no. 94 (May 2008): 43-68.

<sup>47</sup> 'Particulars of Seamen', 1923. MSA, MD, File No. 669-I.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*



the European seamen themselves insist that the new recruit should be engaged on the same terms as themselves, for fear that if the agents or owners of their ships...begin to recruit Indian seamen at cheaper rates, their own existence as seamen may be threatened, and the masters of such ships engage Indian seamen on European articles in order to avoid trouble with the European seamen on board.<sup>50</sup>

It was thus that Abdulla 'King', who at one time lived as Abdulla Karim in Oomerkhadi, Dongri in Bombay and then with his sister at Malwali House, Mastan Talao, was signed on in 1915 on British articles. Discharged in London, he reported that he had lost his discharge papers (which were a seaman's employment and identity papers), and was issued a British Identity Service Certificate. A decade later, the Bombay shipping master noted that,

the entries in [his discharge] book show that [he] has been engaged and discharged many times at ports in the UK as also at Indian ports, since July 1915. All or most of the vessels mentioned in the book carried European or mixed crews, on the European scale of wages, food, etc.<sup>51</sup>

It was on these ships that 'he was called 'King' by the European seamen with whom he worked' and 'was accustomed to' European food.<sup>52</sup> King's was by no means an isolated case. The same file noted that he was

one of a number of Indians, Arabs, Somalis, etc. who have lived in the UK and have been used to working in vessels with European and mixed crews, on the European scale of wages. They prefer such vessels and do not ordinarily engage with Indian crews... [and] a number of vessels carry Indian seamen on British articles.<sup>53</sup>

Thus, the rules of segregated crews and constraints on mobility were relaxed to suit the needs of wartime shipping. During the interludes of the First and Second World

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<sup>50</sup> 'Particulars of Seamen', 1923. MSA, MD, File No. 669-I.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

Wars, the ‘motley crew’ of the sailing ship era described by Rediker and Linebaugh, re-emerged on the twentieth century steamship.<sup>54</sup>

After the war, a number of these lascars continued to engage at British ports on European contracts. They formed the first seeds of a growing presence of Sylhetis, Punjabis, Yemenis, Malays, and Chinese in Britain’s port and industrial towns. The largest centres of lascar settlement were London, South Shields, Cardiff and Glasgow. By 1926, for instance, there were said to be 40-45 Indians in Glasgow hailing from Jullundur, North West Frontier Province, Mirpur (Kashmir) and Bengal.<sup>55</sup> By 1940, their number in Glasgow had risen to about 400.<sup>56</sup> Thus, while most lascars’ presence in international ports was transient, the wartime years of brisk shipping led to the settlement of the first South Asian working class diasporic communities in Europe. Although, as Ravi Ahuja points out, the number of permanent settlers always remained a quantitatively small proportion of the total seafaring population from the colonies, I will show in the next section how they were, nonetheless, crucial conduits for the transmission of political and cultural encounter for the majority of non-settlers.

While the First World War saw a tendency to relax the official constraints on mobility and segregation, the period immediately following it saw a contrary trend of the tightening up of these constraints. In the context of a post-war trade slump which made lascars’ labour more dispensable to shipping interests, forces of segregation returned, both ideological, in terms of a growing racism against ‘cheaper’ workers, as well as legal in terms of restrictions on citizenship and employment. It was in this context that the exclusionary 1925 Coloured Alien Seamen’s Order was enacted, which provided for deportation from Britain of seamen who were not from the British

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<sup>54</sup> Rediker and Linebaugh, *The Many Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*.

<sup>55</sup> Bashir Maan, *The New Scots: The Story of Asians in Scotland*. (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1992), 120.

<sup>56</sup> Humayun Ansari, *The Infidel Within: Muslims in Britain since 1800* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2004), 28.

empire.<sup>57</sup> It was aimed primarily at ‘Arab’ seamen – Yemeni, Somali and Egyptian.<sup>58</sup> According to the letter of the law, subjects of the British empire, including lascars, were not considered ‘aliens’.<sup>59</sup> But for the local police authorities who were charged with registering these seamen, ‘coloured’ and ‘alien’ became synonymous, and a common justification for apprehending and threatening them with deportation.<sup>60</sup> The onus of proving their ‘Britishness’ was on the seamen. In the initial months, this led in practice to the repatriation of seamen who *were* British subjects.<sup>61</sup> In response to protestations from lascars, it was agreed that they had to apply to the Indian High Commissioner for a ‘British Indian Seamen’s Certificate’ (BISC) to document their right to stay, which was granted upon verification of their place of birth. These applications are revealing in terms of the numbers who applied, their origins in South Asia, parents’ occupation and their new addresses and next of kin in Britain. For men like Abdulla King and the other ‘Indians, Arabs and Somalis’ who had been serving on British articles for nearly a decade, this application stood between continuing on these conditions, and being refused and repatriated as aliens.

Along with legal restrictions on settlement, the worsening economic situation in these years contributed to a decline in the numbers of lascars in circulation. Unlike during the war years, work in the ports of Calcutta and Bombay was now increasingly hard to find because of slackened shipping. Unemployment rose dramatically with the Wall Street Crash, which caused a fifth of the world’s seaborne trade to lie idle. By 1929, only 53,000 contracts were signed in Calcutta (and if the same seamen were re-engaged, this corresponded to a smaller number of seamen), out of 140,000 registered

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<sup>57</sup> Tabili, *We Ask for British Justice*.

<sup>58</sup> Tabili, “The Construction of Racial Difference.”

<sup>59</sup> Visram, *Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History*; Tabili, “The Construction of Racial Difference.”

<sup>60</sup> ‘Lascar Deserters’. 1931-1938. The National Archives, Kew. Metropolitan Police files. Metropolitan Police, Office of the Commissioner: Correspondence and Papers – Aliens Registration Office. MEPO 2/5064.

<sup>61</sup> ‘Lascar Deserters’. 1931-1938. TNA. MEPO 2/5064.

seamen.<sup>62</sup> The corresponding numbers in Bombay were 23,000 out 70,000.<sup>63</sup> By 1931, there were 235,000 seamen in the principal ports, of whom 113,000 – or half – were unemployed.<sup>64</sup> Since the numbers employed by ocean-going liners was less than 40,000, the majority were likely to have been engaged on coastal or riverine steamers on lower wages. Some stayed in the city for a few weeks, others returned to their villages. In 1931, it was estimated that there were 20,000 lascars in Calcutta and 10,000 in Bombay seeking work at any given time, while the rest returned to their villages, unable to sustain the cost of living in the city.<sup>65</sup> As a result, the outward flow of lascars from South Asian ports slowed down throughout the 1920s and the movement reversed from these ports back to the villages. For those who were unable to secure a seafaring job through these years, their worlds shrank back from these shipping routes to the boundaries of their villages or local towns.

For many lascars who did find employment, however, their geographical worlds expanded even further from international ports to their hinterlands. Desertions continued in international ports, the majority probably in British ports from where they could not be legally deported as they were British subjects. The levels of desertion were causing alarm to the High Commissioner of India, who noted that

towards the close of 1929 the number of desertions from Asiatic agreements seems to have shown a decided increase...in the majority of the desertion cases that have come to the notice of this office the men have come from the Sylhet district of Assam (probably as many as 75%) and from the Punjab and the North West Frontier Province.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> *Royal Commission on Labour in India (RCLI)*, Bengal Oral Evidence, 81.

<sup>63</sup> *RCLI*, Bombay Oral Evidence, 222-223. Statement of Ibrahim Serang of the Indian Seamen's Union.

<sup>64</sup> 'Employment of Lascars and Rates of Pay - Statistical Information'. 1935-1939. Economic and Overseas Department. IOR/L/E/8/673.

<sup>65</sup> *RCLI*, Bengal, 81 and Desai, *Maritime Labour in India*, 120.

<sup>66</sup> 'Methods of stopping lascar desertions'. 1929-1932. India Office Records, London. Economic and Overseas Department, IOR/L/E/9/962.

At his suggestion, warning notices were posted in the post offices and public offices of these districts in India, stating,

Seamen are warned that any idea that there is ample opportunity of obtaining employment in the UK is wholly erroneous...Owing to the prevailing unemployment in the UK, Indian seamen have little prospect of obtaining employment in that country, particularly... on European articles... Seamen are also warned that special measures are now being adopted... for the detection of deserters and that prompt action is taken against those found guilty.<sup>67</sup>

The deterrent proved ineffective. In 1929 alone, eighty-three desertions were reported to the High Commissioner, but since many companies admitted to not filing reports, one company judged that 'by our own experience [this] must be very much under the mark.'<sup>68</sup> Within a year starting at the end of 1929, twenty-seven applications for British Indian Seamen's Certificates were made in Liverpool alone.<sup>69</sup> In 1930, of the lascars who deserted their ships, forty-five made applications for British nationality.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, many lascars who were offered repatriation refused it. A police report noted that the shipping company Messrs T. and J. Harrison offered to take Mazamil Mia and Sharif Ali Khan, both deserters from the *SS Huntsman* at Birkenhead in August 1929, out of the country if they were destitute.<sup>71</sup> Mia, however, maintained that 'he is not destitute and declines to return home. He is selling toffee in the streets of Liverpool.'<sup>72</sup> In a context of scarce employment, many of the deserting lascars took to peddling goods, a means of livelihood established by some lascars and demobilised First World War Punjabi soldiers who came to the UK in the early 1920s, peddling petty wares in hard times and working in construction and factories in 'good' times. Lascars deserting in the late 1920s peddled while looking for seafaring work.

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<sup>67</sup> 'Methods of stopping lascar desertions', 1929-1932. IOR/L/E/9/962.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> 'Lascar Deserters', 1931-1938. TNA, MEPO 2/5064.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

Peddling expanded lascars' networks across the British isles. It was noted that they 'travel extensively even to the remotest districts all over the country vending their wares.'<sup>73</sup> Some were reported to be peddling their wares in Scotland and Ireland, others in Bolton and Huddersfield. Joffer Shah, a lascar who had deserted the SS *Maidan* in Liverpool, lived for some time in Glasgow, was seen 'selling scarves in the vicinity of St. Helen's market' and the police reported that 'for the past four weeks he has not been heard of in Liverpool and is believed to be peddling in the northern counties.'<sup>74</sup> Thus, seemingly counterintuitively, even in a period of growing restrictions on lascar mobility, the contours of their worlds continued to expand, this time further into the hinterlands of the ports through which they normally circulated.

Faced with these new constraints, lascars in Britain set up networks to assist new deserters with information and the means to navigate the bureaucratic maze of paperwork in order to settle there. One such network operated out of the Shah Jalal Restaurant cafe on Commercial Street in East London in the 1920s.<sup>75</sup> It was set up by Ayub Ali Master, himself a Sylheti seaman who had deserted in the U.S. in 1919 and made his way to England. There were four other such addresses in London in the 1920s.<sup>76</sup> Having heard about these networks or made contact with them on previous voyages, lascars would desert just before sailing, often at night, and scale the dock walls to arrive at one of these addresses.<sup>77</sup> Desertion had been decriminalised in 1850, and made into a civil breach of contract between the lascar and the ship's master, so they could not be forcibly repatriated. For this reason, England was the best choice for desertion over any other European port which offered relatively high wages. Although desiring to avoid the costs the companies almost never pressed charges, most lascars

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<sup>73</sup> 'Lascar Deserters', 1931-1938. TNA, MEPO 2/5064.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Adams, *Across Seven Seas*, 40.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

took the precaution of ‘go[ing] to ground for two years, until the shipping company’s warrant had expired.’<sup>78</sup> They then went to India House to register and to the police station to get their ‘identity card’ – as British citizens, they had no need for a passport. ‘It was safe to tell the police the truth about their arrival, though most people took the precaution of giving a different name.’<sup>79</sup> Over the next three years from 1925 to 1928, 330 certificates of British nationality were granted to lascars.<sup>80</sup> In peddling too, systems to ‘work’ the bureaucratic system were established. One Fazal Ali living in London’s Shoreditch area, had made eight applications since 1924 for pedlar’s certificates, and an anonymous letter to the police stated that ‘he encourages Indians to desert their ships’ and that ‘he has bluff (sic) the police at Old Street Station by telling them they have been there in England 3 years and they have only been here 3 months.’<sup>81</sup> The Metropolitan Police noted that lascars had found easier ways to evade investigation by ‘obtaining pedlar’s certificates from the Provinces [rather] than in the dock areas, where they are beginning to realise that stringent enquiries are made owing to the realisation by police that they are probably deserters.’<sup>82</sup>

Kinship networks also facilitated their desertion, settlement and employment in a new country. For instance, Abdul Monaf, a Sylheti lascar, had deserted before the Second World War and settled in Bradford, where he worked in a ‘Boltons’ wool mill.<sup>83</sup> When his younger brother Chand Miah’s ship arrived in London’s Tilbury docks, he persuaded him to give up his seaman’s job and go to Bradford. There, Chand lived with a Sylheti landlord, his white wife and four children, and began to work at the same mill as his brother where ‘quite a few other Sylheti men were

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<sup>78</sup> Adams, *Across Seven Seas*, 42.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> ‘Methods of stopping lascar desertions’. IOR/L/E/9/962.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Interview with Chand Miah in Choudhury, *Sons of the Empire*, 56.

employed.’<sup>84</sup> Lascars also mobilised their social networks across these cities to find work. Chand Miah moved with his brother to Coventry, living with a ‘fellow-villager’, Gobru Miah. Chand got a job in a foundry, but finding that ‘the job was very hard,’ he went to Birmingham.<sup>85</sup> There, he met another Sylheti, Ajmoth Ulla, who was working at the Wilmot-Breeden factory which produced metal car parts, and with his help he got a job there. ‘As time went by’, he recalled, ‘more Sylheti seamen began to move into the area.’<sup>86</sup>

With the post-Depression recovery from the early 1930s, employment in shipping and industrial production began to rise again. By July 1935, there were 43,000 lascars employed in South Asia on British ocean-going ships, a number which recovered to 50,000 by the eve of the Second World War.<sup>87</sup> Now, an intelligence file noted,

[H]undreds of Indian seamen who had abandoned their maritime calling and were living precariously in the East End of London and in other big ports...found themselves in a position to earn good money in some industrial capacity. The result was an aggregation of Indians into groups, at Glasgow, Newcastle, Manchester, Sheffield, Bradford, Birmingham, Coventry and other industrial centres. The largest of these groups was at Birmingham, where the Indian community is believed to number some six or seven hundred. Many of these Indians have already married or set up house with English women... No exact figures are available for other centres such as Bradford, Huddersfield, Nottingham, Glasgow, Southampton, Newcastle, etc, but an estimate of the total number of Indians in industry might be put at something over 3,000.<sup>88</sup>

These communities overwhelmingly comprised ‘Bengali-Muhammadans and Punjabis... Bengali and Assamese ex-seamen make up the majority of Indians in the

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<sup>84</sup> Interview with Chand Miah in Choudhury, *Sons of the Empire*, 56-57.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> *ILO Maritime Statistical Handbook* (London: King and Son, 1936).

<sup>88</sup> ‘Indian Workers’ Union or Association: reports on members and activities’. IOR, Public and Judicial Department. IOR/L/P&J/12/645.



Birmingham area.’<sup>89</sup> By the Second World War, restrictions to lascar mobility and settlement were relaxed again.<sup>90</sup>

While constraints on lascar mobility thus contracted and expanded depending on the needs of shipping, so did the restrictions on their segregation. Apart from the World Wars, during which Abdulla King and others work in mixed crews, there were other important exceptions to the norm of lascar segregation, which allowed for greater interaction between seamen. The first of these exceptions was the Pacific route from England to the Americas. The leader of the British seamen’s union Havelock Wilson had objected to the employment of lascars on this route on the grounds that it should be reserved for British sailors, while also marshalling the argument that as tropical inhabitants, lascars would be unable to withstand the cold climate.<sup>91</sup> During the First World War, an exception was built into this clause, allowing for ships’ masters to get lascars’ consent before sailing for these ports, with the additional provision of warmer clothing.<sup>92</sup> This ‘exception’ was never repealed after the First World War, and it became common practice for masters to sail with lascar crews unless the latter explicitly objected, which they occasionally did.<sup>93</sup> While some sailed in all-lascar crews, others went in mixed crews which were much more heterogeneous on this route. Typically, most ships’ crews to North America were made up of a combination of white English, Irish and Scandinavian deck sailors and black engine room crew with members from Barbados, Antigua and Jamaica in the Caribbean, Lagos and Sierra Leone in West Africa as well as Aden in the Arabian peninsula.<sup>94</sup> In

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<sup>89</sup> ‘Indian Workers’ Union or Association: reports on members and activities’. IOR, Public and Judicial Department. IOR/L/P&J/12/645.

<sup>90</sup> Visram, *Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History*.

<sup>91</sup> Gopalan Balachandran, ‘South Asian Seafarers and their Worlds: c. 1870-1930s’ in Bentley, J.H. *et al.* (eds.), *Seascapes, Maritime Histories, Littoral Cultures and Transoceanic Exchanges* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2006).

<sup>92</sup> Balachandran, *Globalising Labour? Indian Seafarers and World Shipping, c. 1870–1945*.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> Ship Logs. The National Archives, Kew (TNA). Board of Trade Papers (BT). BT 99.

addition to this composition, ships voyaging to Southern America often also carried Mexican, Argentinian and Peruvian sailors in all three departments.<sup>95</sup> Some ships carried all-lascar crews to North America, such as the *SS Ixion*, which sailed from Liverpool to New York in 1917, with a crew of 75 lascars (25 in the deck department, 42 in the engine room and 8 in the saloon).<sup>96</sup> The next year, the troop ship *City of Marseilles* also sailed with 101 Calcutta lascars from Liverpool to New York. Their names are recorded by dint of a cruel twist of fate, as an influenza epidemic claimed the lives of 18 of them, along with one Serbian soldier, and their bodies had to be ‘committed to the deep’, under attack from a submarine.<sup>97</sup> Other lascars signed onto these America-going vessels as individuals rather than as part of a whole lascar crew. Ships’ logs list individual lascars alongside Argentinian, Barbadian and English sailors.

A second exception to the rule of segregated crews was that of shorter-distance tramp steamers operated by smaller companies, which unlike the lascar contracts, signed on crews for a one-way voyage, and on higher wages. As Janet Ewald describes it,

Yemeni, Egyptian, and Somali men appeared more prominently [in the engine rooms]. [They] probably first entered tramps at coal ports such as Aden, Port Said, or Djibouti. Serving under standard (European) articles, they could leave the ship at a British port. There, they joined the crews of other tramp steamers, where they worked alongside men from Europe and other parts of Africa and Asia: the British Isles and continental Europe, as well as Turkey, Sierra Leone, Cape Verde, the West Indies, India, and the Philippines. The ethnically diverse crews travelled throughout the world, including North American ports, where Africans and Asians sometimes deserted with their European shipmates, attracted by the relatively high wages of American port cities.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> ‘Ship log of the *SS Chihuahua* from Portsmouth in England to Mazatlan in Mexico’, 1921. TNA, BT. BT 99/3626.

<sup>96</sup> ‘Ship log of the *SS Ixion*, from Liverpool to New York’, 1918. TNA, BT. BT 165/1861.

<sup>97</sup> ‘Ship log of the *SS City of Marseilles*, from Liverpool to New York’, 1918. TNA, BT. BT 165/1861.

<sup>98</sup> Janet Ewald, ‘Crossers of the sea: Slaves, freedmen, and other migrants in the North-western Indian Ocean, c. 1750-1914’, *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 105, No. 1 (2000), 86.

Tramp ships along the American coast were even more diverse, with crews comprising individuals from across the Pacific, from Japan and China to the Pacific Islands of Kiribati (or Gilbert) Islands, Irish, Scandinavians and Latin Americans, and black and white American sailors.<sup>99</sup>

American ocean-going ships were the third exception to the segregation of crews. When Amir Haider Khan found work on the American ship *SS Philadelphia* in 1917, among his crewmates were Mexicans, Spanish, English, Scots and Americans, and a majority were of Irish extraction.<sup>100</sup> While Khan describes these voyages himself, there is another mysterious Indian purser on the *MS Doris Crane*, which sailed from San Francisco to South America and back again, whose name is written in an unintelligible scrawl in the crew list, next to two Japanese stewardesses and sailors from the USA and the Kiribati Islands.<sup>101</sup> Intriguingly, the crew list notes that this was the Indian purser's first ship, leading to a number of tantalising possibilities of how he had arrived in San Francisco in the first place, and why he was now working as a sailor. Was he a deserting soldier from the First World War? This was less likely, as a purser's job would have required him to be literate. Was he perhaps an intellectual fallen on hard times? Or a fugitive émigré activist? This was a possibility, since San Francisco was a base for the émigré Ghadar Party which espoused anti-colonial rebellion, primarily in the British army.<sup>102</sup>

To conclude, the rules on constraint and segregation were neither as unqualifiedly static nor as absolute as is sometimes portrayed in the existing literature. Rather, I propose that the scale and scope of seaborne mobility and interaction were

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<sup>99</sup> 'Ship logs', TNA BT. BT 165/1861.

<sup>100</sup> Gardezi (ed), *Chains to Lose*, 147.

<sup>101</sup> Ship log of the *MS Doris Crane* from Portsmouth in England to Mazatlan in Mexico, 1921. TNA, BT. BT 99/3626.

<sup>102</sup> Maia Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia: How the Ghadr Movement Charted Global Radicalism and Attempted to Overthrow the British Empire* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011).

shaped by a productive tension between the law that worked in the long term interests of British shipping to maintain a low-paid segment within the international labour market on the one hand, and the implementation of the law, which was more flexible to suit the short-term needs of shipping, on the other. At the same time, the tightening constraints also led to the movement of some lascars further inland in Britain in search of land-bound work, thereby bringing them into contact with other working class men and women. The next section turns to the impact of this mobility and interaction on lascars' worldviews.

### **The impact of mobility on lascars' worldviews**

How did the contact and interactions outside South Asia change lascars' worldviews? Studies of the effects of migration have argued that 'mobility...widened people's social networks and their imaginative worlds.'<sup>103</sup> The widespread common sense consensus, however, tends to be that the worlds of mobile elites were marked by cosmopolitanism, and those of subalterns by segregation. Recent studies on subaltern mobility have begun to challenge this picture. In the case of Indian soldiers during the First World War, Claude Markovits has argued that the views they formed of their stay in France formed a sort of 'occidentalism from below', as opposed to the views of elite Indians of the west.<sup>104</sup> Characteristic of this subaltern occidentalism, he argues, was their class affinity as well as their affective and sexual relations with French women, which changed their understanding of gender, as women played important public roles while the men were fighting.<sup>105</sup> On their class affinity, Markovits' notes that 'their sharing the lives of peasant households in Northern

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<sup>103</sup> Amrith, *Migration and Diaspora*, 2.

<sup>104</sup> Markovits, "Indian Soldiers' Experiences in France during World War I: Seeing Europe from the Rear of the Front."

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

France brought out to the soldiers, themselves of rural background, a certain commonality of experience in rural lives across a cultural and political divide.’<sup>106</sup>

Lascars who passed through Europe or settled there also formed ideas on class, race and gender, as well as social and political institutions such as trade unions and political democracy. In this respect, ports were extraordinary zones of contact. Those who settled in these ports or their hinterlands formed more sustained views on these forms and engaged with them more intimately, starting families with white women and joining trade unions.

Lascars’ interactions with the working poor of European ports undermined notions of a ruling race in the colonies. As a young lascar, Amir Haider Khan mused,

[Earlier] I thought all white-skinned men who wore collars and suits were Sahibs, and all the women who wore skirts, blouses and awry (sic) hats were Memsaahibs, the people of the ruling class as in India... Now I could see indications of war-weariness... of the poor, toiling men and women and the differences between rich and poor. ... I saw with my own eyes how differently the workers lived in England from the way British officials lived in India... London, the cornerstone of the British Empire, was a rather gloomy place to live during the winter of 1917-18.<sup>107</sup>

Thus, their encounter with the white poor brought with it the realisation that class existed even at the heart of empire. One contemporary observer, George Wyman Bury, explicitly linked this change in lascars’ perceptions of the European ‘ruling class in India’ to the growing appeal of Pan-Islamist ideas during the First World War and the challenges to colonial control, particularly in the context of wartime manifestations of Indian soldiers’ pan-Islamist sentiments in refusing to embark on ships taking them to fight the Ottoman empire.<sup>108</sup> Bury wrote in 1919 – just when the pan-Islamist Khilafat movement was taking off in India – that ‘the social life of London operates more widely for good or ill on Christian prestige among Moslems

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<sup>106</sup> Markovits, ‘Indian soldiers experiences in France’

<sup>107</sup> Gardezi (ed), *Chains to Lose*, 133.

<sup>108</sup> Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War*

than Londoners can possibly imagine’, whether for ‘the young princeling of some native state’, ‘the lascar off a P&O boat’ or ‘the middle-class Muhammadan student.’<sup>109</sup>

Conflating anxieties of class and race, the India Office was concerned about the potentially unfavourable effects that the ‘mixing’ of white and colonial sailors might produce. The interaction between sailors of different ethnicities was most pronounced in dockside seamen’s boarding houses which catered to ethnically mixed clientele. Ever watchful of such effects after the birth of mass politics in India with the non-cooperation movement, the India Office carried out a joint investigation with the London County Council in 1922 into the twin themes of hygiene and racial mixing in these houses. It concluded that the ‘principal objection’ to these houses, even those that were ‘clean, well-kept and sanitary,’ was that the clientele was ‘mixed...they take all nationalities, Europeans, Asiatics, everyone. One of our points is it is not desirable to mix up Europeans and Asiatics.’<sup>110</sup> For one, this was objectionable because it was ‘not good in the interests of the Empire that seamen coming to this country from India, perhaps for the first time, should be put in these poor surroundings.’<sup>111</sup> The India Office thus put forward suggestions for government-supervised segregated housing at the Strangers Home for Asiatics in London’s Limehouse area. This arrangement, however, did not suit the ship owners as the Home was not close enough to the docks for lascars to be put to work; a representative of the P&O argued that seamen ‘in the Asiatic Home...are on full pay and are entirely useless. We cannot work them’, arguing that they would rather house them near the docks in private lodging houses.<sup>112</sup> The other option in the management of Britain’s image was that

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<sup>109</sup> George Wyman Bury, *Pan-Islam* (London: Macmillan, 1919), 113.

<sup>110</sup> Tabili, *We Ask for British Justice*, 62.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid*, 63.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid*, 64.

adopted by the Missions to Seamen. 'Left to themselves,' The Glasgow Mission to Lascars noted, 'they can only take home unfavourable impressions. This Mission, by introducing them to beautiful sights and kind friends, aims to foster friendliness between Indians and Britons.'<sup>113</sup> In these efforts, there was a tension between maintaining the image of racial superiority and fostering a feeling of fraternity (note the emphasis on 'kind friends' and fostering 'friendliness') within the empire.

The second objectionable effect that the authorities anticipated from contact was that the difference in the standard of living between lascars and Europeans might give them some dangerous ideas. As Captain Brett of the Shipping Federation – the powerful organisation of shipping employers – put it: 'the more they mix with the Europeans, the more ambitious they become to obtain European wages and conditions.'<sup>114</sup> Indeed, many lascars who continued to serve on European terms after the war joined British trade unions, an oft-overlooked fact. In 1918, the National Sailor and Firemen's Union (NSFU) was awarded the right, in recognition of the complete and absolute support of its leadership for the war, to supply crews jointly with the companies and Shipping Master. This move virtually forced any seaman who wished to get employment to join the NSFU rather than any of the other, smaller unions which did not have a say in the supply of crews. Indian seamen on British contracts too, had to join the union for this reason, if not for any other. Indeed, men like Azim Ulla, who was born in Sylhet in 1902, and lived in Cardiff with his wife Evelyn, was a member, as was Meahdhone Ali, also from Sylhet, who lived with his

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<sup>113</sup> Quoted in R.G.W. Prescott, 'Lascar Seamen on the Clyde' in Smout (ed.) *Scotland and the Sea*, 206.

<sup>114</sup> Tabili, *We Ask for British Justice*, 63.

wife Rose Ullah at Stepney in London.<sup>115</sup> It is perhaps no coincidence that lascars unions were among the first to be formed in India at the end of the war.<sup>116</sup>

Besides class, another factor that could potentially destabilise racial barriers when large numbers of Asians and Africans arrived in Europe, as during the First World War, were the relations between colonial men and European women. As with the case of white prostitutes in India, as Kenneth Ballhatchet and Harald Fisher-Tiné have argued, sexual relations between colonised men and white women were seen as eroding the racial prestige of the ruling class.<sup>117</sup> The majority of lascars who settled in Britain after the First World War lived with white women. Apart from *ayahs*, women from South Asia only began to arrive to Britain in significant numbers after the Second World War. Rays Ali, born in Calcutta in 1900, began working on British ships in 1917 as a Donkeyman (in charge of the donkey engine on the ship). He married a British woman and had two daughters, Isabella and Frances Ali, who lived in South Shields.<sup>118</sup> Missionaries and middle-class moralisers alternated between painting the lascars as sexual predators and the working-class women with whom they lived as ‘abandoned women.’ Some of these women helped lascars to navigate the bureaucratic maze for registration. Some lascars who married in Britain also had a wife in Sylhet or Punjab, and for them, unorthodox family structures straddled the end-nodes of international trade routes. One lascar, Nawab Ali, even fathered children along this route: he kept track of his progeny Australia, Bangladesh, Egypt, Italy and

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<sup>115</sup> ‘Azim Ulla’s British Indian Seaman’s Identity Papers’, 1944. TNA, BT, Registry of Shipping and Seamen: Central Register of Seamen – Seamen’s Records (‘Pouches’). (RSS-CRS-SR) BT 372/6/66. ‘Meadhorne Ullah British Indian Seaman’s Identity Papers’. TNA. BT, RSS-CRS-SR. BT 372/497/6.

<sup>116</sup> R. R. Bakhale, *The Directory of Trade Unions* (Bombay: All India Trade Union Congress, 1925). Chapter Four of this thesis examined the formation of lascar unions in Calcutta and Bombay in greater detail.

<sup>117</sup> Harald Fischer-Tiné, ‘White women degrading themselves to the lowest depths’: European networks of prostitution and colonial anxieties in British India and Ceylon ca. 1880-1914,’ *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 40, no. 163 (2003): 163-190. Kenneth Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex, and Class Under the Raj: Imperial Attitudes and Policies and Their Critics, 1793-1905* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1980).

<sup>118</sup> ‘Rays Ali’s British Indian Seaman’s Identity Papers’, 1943. TNA, BT, RSS-CRS-SR. BT 372/1/97.



England.<sup>119</sup> Thus, the cultural encounters with working class men and women borne of lascars' mobility undermined Britain's projected image of empire: through their intimate contact with the working poor, the officially-projected image of a masculine ruling race was qualified by the existence of class and gender.

In some instances, imperial anxieties regarding cultural contact were reversed: it was feared that the presence of lascars in Britain might foster sympathy for the anticolonial cause. In 1931, against the backdrop of the civil disobedience movement in India and Gandhi's planned three-month stay in England for the Round Table Conference, police reports circulated that lascars were beginning to discuss Indian politics and hold meetings. In the words of one CID officer, 'these coloured pedlars [are] going from door to door, and some of them are rampant propagandists on the Indian question, both by the remarks they make to the people on whom they call with their wares, and occasionally by taking part in meetings at which they are allowed to 'speak for India.''<sup>120</sup> British newspapers picked up on this fact and elevated it to the level of hysteria. One newspaper interviewed 'a Lancashire man', a 'director and manager of a Blackburn mill [who had] spent 13 years as weaving master of the Muir Mills, Cawnpore'.<sup>121</sup> This man suggested that 'there might be Indians...who, posing as pedlars, are emissaries of the Swarajists, and who might be carrying on a legitimate, but no less insidious, campaign... to arouse sympathy in Britain for Indian independence.'<sup>122</sup> A *Manchester Guardian* article indulged in similar conspiracy theories, and went into a flight of wild fantasy:

Lancashire in her present plight has every reason to resent the intrusion of foreign merchants carrying goods which she herself produces. In the same way Indian nationalists resent the sale of Lancashire goods in Bombay. Can Mr.

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<sup>119</sup> Interview with Nawab Ali in Adams, *Across Seven Seas*.

<sup>120</sup> 'Lascar Deserters', 1931-1938. TNA, MEPO 2/5064.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

Gandhi have ...dispatch[ed] these Indian merchants on their way? Can he intend them to illustrate a principle that mere words have proved inadequate to explain? It is possible. He is a wily mahatma, fond of exposition by parable. Or it may be that India, in her first flush of nationhood, is emulating our own great Empire. These inconsiderable peddlars, like the Elizabethan traders who after many perils and difficulties were able to buy and sell in India to their own great enrichment, may be called by future historians merchant adventurers, founders of an empire.<sup>123</sup>

Despite the fantastical hyperbole of articles such as this and the anxieties of the British intelligence services, the fact of political meetings being held by lascars and other South Asian settlers in Britain was not a figment of their imagination. The next chapter will deal with the political activities of lascars in Britain, including some of these meetings ‘on the Indian question’.<sup>124</sup>

While lascars were confronted with issues of race, class, gender and colonialism ashore, the ships on which they laboured were also spaces of transformative experiences, contact, interaction and intellectual cross-pollination, contrary to representations of complete ethnic segregation and isolation. In existing scholarship, the relations between seamen of different ethnicities are generally studied through the prism of conflict. If contact within an international workforce of workers of vastly differing wages, conditions and cultures undeniably produced instances of hostility, however, it also produced instances of exchange and solidarity which are often glossed over.<sup>125</sup> As Amrith points out, these aspects of interaction are generally represented as the preserve of elite travellers and settlers.<sup>126</sup> Yet, interactions between subalterns in an international workforce also contained elements of such transformative exchanges. For instance, a sixteen-year old Amir Haider Khan, joined the poignantly-named *Franz Ferdinand* on the outbreak of the First World War in

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<sup>123</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 21 Mar, 1931. Quoted in MEPO 2/5064.

<sup>124</sup> The next chapter looks at the political organisations of Indian seamen in Britain.

<sup>125</sup> Balachandran, “Conflicts in the International Maritime Labour Market: British and Indian Seamen, Employers and the State, 1890-1939”; Tabili, “The Construction of Racial Difference.”

<sup>126</sup> Amrith, *Migration and Diaspora*, 11-12.

1914. Khan's every point of political transformation was marked by his seafaring life. His first source of questioning was at the age of 15, when he shipped on an army vessel carrying men, materiel and horses to Mesopotamia, and in a glimmer of pan-Islam (to which his brother, who was a sepoy, introduced him), asked himself why they were being sent to fight against the Turks as 'Muslim brothers'.<sup>127</sup> As an eighteen year old, Amir Haider Khan was on the *SS Applease* in the Atlantic port of Saint Nazaire in 1919, when the Versailles Treaty was about to be signed. He recalls that 'there were all sorts of speculations in the air that created a vague interest in the politically minded members of the crew, particularly among the engine room staff who used to discuss these events among themselves.'<sup>128</sup> Since most of his engine room workmates spoke Spanish, he could not follow their conversations, but struck up a friendship with his Irish workmate Joseph Mulkane, with whom he shared his sleeping cabin. 'Being the son of an Irish revolutionary', Khan recalled, 'He would frequently relate to me the various tactics by which a small country like England was able to dominate so many races and nationalities in different parts of the world...It was through Joe that my anti-British, pro-Indian sentiment began to grow.'<sup>129</sup> Thus, learning about British colonialism in Ireland developed Amir's understanding of colonialism in South Asia. Lascars sailed with seafarers from many other colonies: Sierra Leone, Jamaica, Malaya and Hong Kong. As Balachandran points out, 'by the turn of the century, crews of British ships 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

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<sup>127</sup> Gardezi (ed), *Chains to Lose*, 74-88

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid*, 169.

Gardezi (ed), *Chains to Lose*, 169.

men from the Caribbean islands.’<sup>130</sup> The opportunities for comparison between the political forms of colonialism were many.

Their international mobility also exposed lascars to political ideas in different parts of the world. For instance, Amir Haider Khan jumped ship in New York to work on American contracts instead of the exploitative lascar contracts. His American years were a series of encounters with political ideas – after discussing with his Irish republican shipmate, when his anti-British feeling was first roused, he met Punjabi Ghadar Party circles in New York where he was educated about the political conditions prevailing in India. In the post-war years of unemployment, like many other lascars in British cities like Birmingham and Coventry, he worked ashore in factories.<sup>131</sup> Here, he came in contact with local political traditions. First, he befriended another unemployed seaman Frank Gordon, who was a revolutionary syndicalist belonging to Industrial Workers of the World, which was closely allied with the Ghadar Party. While working in a car factory in Detroit, he met activists of the Communist Party of the USA who sent him to Moscow. After a few years, he came back to India a trained political activist.<sup>132</sup>

Within the international maritime workforce in this historical moment, these transformations were not unique to South Asian seafarers – there are many similar accounts of transformation through ‘seeing the world.’ Chris Jones was a Barbadian seaman who also went to sea at an early age. As his Trinidadian friend George Padmore, who went through the same political trajectory first as a communist and then a pan-Africanist, later recalled, ‘as a seaman, he [Chris] had the opportunity to

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<sup>130</sup> Gopalan Balachandran, ‘Conflicts in the International Maritime Labour Market: British and Indian seamen, employers and the state, 1890-1939’, *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 39, no. 1 (2002): 76.

<sup>131</sup> Vivek Bald discusses similar conglomerations of Indians ashore in the United States of America. Vivek Bald, *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2013).

<sup>132</sup> Gardezi (ed.), *Chains to Lose*.

travel round the world. The world was thus his university, and what an education it provided him!’<sup>133</sup> Padmore himself was also sent to Moscow by the American communist William Z. Foster, who himself had also worked as a seaman until the end of the First World War. Foster once said that ‘seamen probably know more about imperialism than any other group of workers... They sail the ships that carry the fruits of imperialist exploitation...[and] the guns and men that are needed to subjugate other peoples.’<sup>134</sup> Essential to the functioning of an imperial world system of trade and war, seamen formed their own ideas of empire, conquest, war and poverty. The next chapter will look at how the exposure of lascars to world events intersected with internationalist ideas in the interwar period.

Lascars were also eye-witnesses to political developments in regions distant from South Asia. Their worlds were intrinsically tied to the state of global politics and economics as their ships participated in trade and wars. Working on board these ships, they became witnesses and participants in events which the rest of the South Asian population only read about in newspapers or heard about on the radio. Like soldiers, they formed opinions about the wars which they were fighting and of political movements and revolts. For instance, during the Russian revolution in 1917, which saw a British counter-offensive which backed up generals of the Tsarist army, British ships steamed into the Russian ports of Murmansk and Archangel carrying weapons, troops and provisions, while others carried away Russians ‘of the better classes’ to safety – but also penury – in Paris or London. They also carried nameless lascar crews. One of these ships was the *SS City of Marseilles*, carrying 101 lascars, eighteen of whom were killed in an outbreak of the epidemic. In New York, the captain had

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<sup>133</sup> Christian Høgsbjerg, *Mariner, Renegade and Castaway; Chris Braithwaite: Seamen's Organiser, Socialist and Militant Pan-Africanist* (London: Redwords, 2014).

<sup>134</sup> Gerald Home, *Red Seas: Ferdinand Smith and Radical Black Sailors in the United States and Caribbean* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2005).

hurriedly signed on a complement of firemen to compensate for the ones killed by influenza and sailed in a military convoy with *HMS Glory* to Murmansk, carrying Serbian troops to fight against the Red Army.<sup>135</sup> In the same convoy was another ship, the *SS Manitou*. The diary of one of the sailors on this ship has been preserved and gives a wonderfully detailed picture of the experiences of this convoy – which included lascars – in Murmansk and Archangel. A 21-year old ‘Harold’ wrote in his diary that there were a lot of British ships in Archangel, and also ‘a big French cruiser... bristling with guns so much so it looks as if in firing one they would knock several others off their mountings.’<sup>136</sup> Ships of all nationalities jostled for space in these ports, like pieces on a chessboard of international conflict. At the same time, the sailors on board all these vessels were not mute witnesses to these events, but had their own understanding and interpretation of them. Harold’s shipboard diary, which he maintained as a sort of extended letter to be mailed back home, makes for a nice testament to his opinions of the war between ‘our people’ and the ‘Bolos.’<sup>137</sup> Writing with humour, his first mention of ‘the bolos’ actually comes with regard to a routine experience of working: ‘after doing the funnel red I did one of the funnel stays with oil and tar so got a coat of black over the red a great improvement as before my appearance was definitely Bolshie.’<sup>138</sup> Work then brought Harold in contact with Russians:

I have to go down to the holds to see that the Russians who are stowing the cargo don’t pinch anything. They are all Bolos at heart and those of them who can talk English don’t mind telling you so. We have several soldiers on board

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<sup>135</sup> ‘Group of Serbian troops, Murmansk. July 1918’. Imperial War Museum, British Forces in Russia, 1917-1919, Q17012

<sup>136</sup> ‘Diary Kept by a short-term member of the crew of a vessel (Manitou) at evacuation of Murmansk and Archangel’, 1919. National Maritime Museum, Journals and Diaries. JOD/194.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

who have just come from the front and they tell me the Bolos treat their prisoners quite well.<sup>139</sup>

Working alongside Russians led to interaction and familiarity across the lines of conflict:

I am writing this at a table in the tweendecks and had an unlighted cigarette in my mouth – one of the Russian cargo stowers noticed this and brought over a lighted match since he has been watching my pencil completely fascinated and at intervals he says ‘Dobra’ (very good). This cargo is being loaded entirely by women – men do the stowing only. The women are very strong and carry about great pieces of timber that I could scarcely lift.<sup>140</sup>

His interaction with the Russian cargo stowers led to political discussions on the civil war, and he reported sympathetically, ‘the people here...consider we are interfering in something that does not concern us, and as Admiral Kolchak who we are helping is fighting for the restoration of an Imperial Government, I quite agree with them.’<sup>141</sup>

Both sides of the conflict, recognising that war-weary soldiers and sailors were beginning to express their opinions on politics, calculated that the civil war could be won by winning them over through propaganda. They became the audience of newspapers and pamphlets. Harold scribbled,

this evening I have been reading some of the papers the Bolos have been circulating amongst our troops...I also read another leaflet from Admiral Kolchak’s party asking English soldiers to join his army...Today I have been reading some more Bolshie propaganda. They used to let it float down the Dvina (river) on rafts with English paper and books and our troops were almost entirely dependent on Bolo for literature. After this I shall never have much faith in our English papers.<sup>142</sup>

It is not known whether any lascars kept similar diaries, or whether they have been preserved. From the letters that Indian soldiers wrote back during the war, which were

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<sup>139</sup> ‘Diary Kept by a short-term member of the crew of a vessel (Manitou) at evacuation of Murmansk and Archangel’, 1919. NMM. JOD/194.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

preserved in the censor's records and reprinted in part in David Omissi's *Indian Voices of the Great War*, we know that sepoys expressed their views on the war, empire, commanders and enemies.<sup>143</sup> We can surmise that lascars on vessels like the *City of Marseilles* were also going through similar experiences as Harold. Moreover, as the lascar Amir Haider Khan found out when he went ashore without permission in Vladivostok, there was also an Indian community there which could have translated the events for those lascars who did not understand English.<sup>144</sup> Soon after the Russian revolution, there was also an influx of anti-colonial activists from India and the rest of the colonial world into the newly-formed Soviet Union, who may also have acted as linguistic and political intermediaries for colonial seamen.

As on the *SS City of Marseilles*, lascars also sometimes worked with Russian seamen, like one H. Savvin, who was signed on in place of the deceased firemen. In 1918, as the ship was steaming from Invergordon to Murmansk, the ship log noted that 'H. Savvin refuses today the orders of the Chief Engineer. He states he will not carry coal half way across the stokehold, the ship steaming ten knots instead of eight, she being in the danger zone with troops and Naval ratings on board.'<sup>145</sup> When this charge was read over to Savvin, he replied in terms of freedom and slavery, saying 'I am telling you straight I will not do it. I will not make a slave of myself for anyone.'<sup>146</sup> Through their presence in Russian ports and their contact with Russian sailors, dockers and Indians living in Russian ports, thus, lascars were 'ringside' witnesses to events which had distant reverberations.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War: Soldiers' Letters, 1914-18*.

<sup>144</sup> 'Diary Kept by a short-term member of the crew of a vessel (Manitou) at evacuation of Murmansk and Archangel', 1919. NMM. JOD/194.

<sup>145</sup> 'Ship log for *SS City of Marseilles*.' TNA, BT. BT 165/1861.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Chapter five will look at the reactions of lascars to anti-colonial uprisings at the end of the Second World War, as well as their practical demonstrations of solidarity.



## Conclusion

This chapter has drawn the scale of lascar mobility beyond South Asia and explored the effects of this mobility on their worldviews. It began with shifting the picture of lascar mobility from a focus on the structural constraints and segregation to an appreciation of the extent of their mobility. It argued that even with the constraints in place, their routine mobility covered a rather remarkable geographical sweep which was unusual even for elite travellers. Their 'normal' working lives could lead them to spend protracted periods of time in Trinidad, Argentina, South Africa or Britain. Thus, their geographical worlds came to encompass the shipping routes along which they travelled. It also showed that these constraints on mobility and interaction were not static throughout the first half of the twentieth century. In this, it argued that there was a productive tension between the long-term need of British shipping to maintain a low-paid segment of the international workforce, and a short-term flexibility required to adapt to increased demand for labour in wartime or on particular routes. This allowed for a greater mixing of crews in periods of relaxed regulations, and the settlement in Britain of a section of colonial seafarers at the end of the First World War. When regulations were tightened up in the mid-1920s, the geographical worlds of many of these 'settlers' expanded into the hinterlands of these ports in search of work, thus coming into contact with more working-class men and women.

The chapter explored the effects of this wide-ranging mobility on the worldviews of lascars. It argued that their contact with workers in different ports constituted an 'occidentalism from below', a 'discovery' of the Other which made them reflect on their own social and political assumptions. For one, the realisation of the existence of classes in Europe undermined the notion of a ruling race, while intimate relations with European women destabilised notions of a hierarchical

distance between races. Contact also brought opportunities for comparison: of wages, conditions and collective organisations such as unions in the case of European seamen, and the kinds of colonialism with Asian, African and Irish seamen. The ship itself was also a place for contact, allowing for an exchange of worldviews and a cross-pollination of political ideas. They were also eye-witnesses to political events that were unfolding in places distant from South Asia. Thus, by putting these tens of thousands of colonial seamen into motion along international trading routes, imperial shipping opened up new horizons of imagination for them which were beyond what any other 'sedentary' South Asian could experience. In doing this, it created the basis for potentially transformative experiences for many lascars, which undermined the very structures of colonialism and capitalism that put them into international circulation. The next chapter will look at how this international circulation brought lascars into contact with political ideas outside South Asia.

## Chapter Two: The Internationalist Moment

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This chapter argues that lascars' worlds cannot be understood as framed exclusively by South Asian nationalism. Owing to their mobility, they came into contact with a wider range of political ideas which informed their views on anti-colonialism. To flatten lascars' politics to nationalism, thus, would be to lose the complexity of the composition of lascars' anti-colonialism. While the previous chapter looked at the extension of lascars' geographical and phenomenological worlds along a web of international shipping routes, this chapter argues that their political worlds extended along an 'international web of anti-imperial activism'.<sup>1</sup> In so doing, this chapter introduces labourers into the story of cosmopolitanism and internationalism, while introducing politics into the story of mobile subalterns.

The chapter is divided into three sections. The first section engages with existing scholarship on the effects of mobility on the circulation of political ideas. It shows that although recent studies have vastly enriched our understanding of the quantity and quality of intellectual exchanges beyond the borders of post-colonial nation-states, they have focused almost exclusively on exchanges between literate elites. As a result of this focus the picture that emerges is that while mobile elites engaged in intellectual exchanges, mobile subalterns remained inert to the effects of the circulation of political ideas. The second section of the chapter sketches in outline three phases of internationalism, from 1884 to 1905, 1905 to 1917 and 1917 to 1945. It shows that the first two phases saw the involvement of small groups of anti-colonial intellectuals with ideas beyond South Asia, the last saw the intertwining of these

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<sup>1</sup> Harald Fischer-Tiné, "Indian Nationalism and the 'World Forces': Transnational and Diasporic Dimensions of the Indian Freedom Movement on the Eve of the First World War", *Journal of Global History*, 2 (2007); Fischer-Tiné, "The Other Side of Internationalism: Switzerland as a Hub of Militant Anti-Colonialism, c. 1910-1920" in Fischer-Tiné and Purtschert (eds) *Colonial Switzerland: Rethinking Colonialism from the Margins* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

intellectuals with much larger numbers of mobile subalterns. The third section looks at this last phase in more detail, arguing that lascars were not passive recipients of these ideas, but rather that these ideas accorded closely with their own first-hand observations gathered in the course of their mobile working lives. It shows that lascars were actively involved in the reception and transmission of these ideas, with some becoming political activists themselves. It also shows that these activists assisted in instances of lascar resistance. This section argues that this phase of ‘subaltern internationalism’ was further divided into two periods with slightly differing qualities of internationalism; while the first period in the 1920s saw an emphasis on labour internationalism, the second period in the 1930s saw a greater accent on pan-colonial solidarity. The section concludes by examining the salient features of these interwar internationalist ideas to which lascars were exposed outside South Asia.

To uncover the international dimension of subaltern political lives, this chapter draws primarily on Indian Political Intelligence (IPI) files in the India Office Records. Created in 1909 in response to the growing anticolonial movement in India, the IPI has been described as a ‘shadowy and formerly non-avowed organisation, devoted to the internal and external security of British India.’<sup>2</sup> It maintained close contact with Scotland Yard and MI5, even sharing accommodation with the latter from 1924 until 1940, when the office was bombed.<sup>3</sup> The IPI’s activities involved surveillance, censorship and passport control. For the historian, the record provides an invaluable and exciting insight into the meetings lascars attended, the pamphlets they read and speeches they heard. Many of these files are notes by police informants or spies who were present at the meetings, and had the advantage that the attendees at the meetings were often unaware of their presence and therefore spoke candidly. Of course, the

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Moir, *A General Guide to the India Office Records*, (London: British Library, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

filter of what was considered worthy of note is imposed, and so it is likely that, for instance, ideas advocating individual terror or pro-German sentiments are more pronounced in the record than other ideas, as are details of the movement of illicit literature. Nonetheless, with all these qualifications, they provide an interesting and useful insight into the ways in which the erstwhile anti-colonial networks were oriented towards the lascars and the different ideas that they espoused.

### Cosmopolitanism and the subaltern

The anti-colonial movement has generally been studied in ‘territorially bounded’ terms that are taken to be axiomatically nationalist.<sup>4</sup> The implicit reasoning of these histories of the ‘freedom struggle’ is that since the final outcome of the movement was the nation-state, this was by definition its goal.<sup>5</sup> More recent histories of cosmopolitanism and internationalism have complicated this understanding of the anti-colonial movement.<sup>6</sup> By looking at the circulation of political ideas beyond South Asia, they have questioned the adequacy of a national framework, which they have critiqued as shaped by a ‘methodological nationalism’ or ‘methodological

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<sup>4</sup> Harald Fischer-Tiné, *Shyamji Krishnavarma*; Goswami, “Imaginary Futures and Colonial Internationalisms.” *The American Historical Review*, 117, 5 (2012): 1431-1460.

<sup>5</sup> Chandra et al., *India’s Struggle for Independence*.

<sup>6</sup> Anderson, *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination*; Fischer-Tiné, *Shyamji Krishnavarma*; Fischer-Tiné, “Indian Nationalism and the ‘World Forces’: Transnational and Diasporic Dimensions of the Indian Freedom Movement on the Eve of the First World War”; Fischer-Tiné, “The Other Side of Internationalism: Switzerland as a Hub of Militant Anti-Colonialism, c. 1910-1920”; Goswami, “Imaginary Futures and Colonial Internationalisms”; Manjapra and Bose, *Cosmopolitan Thought Zones*; Manjapra, *M.N. Roy: Marxism and Colonial Cosmopolitanism*; Manjapra, *The Age of Entanglement: German and Indian Intellectuals Across Empire*; Kris Manjapra, “Communist Internationalism and Transcolonial Recognition,” in *Cosmopolitan Thought Zones: South Asia and the Global Circulation of Ideas*, ed. Kris Manjapra and Sugata Bose (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 159–77; Slate, “Creative India and the World: Bengali Internationalism and Italy in the Inter-War Period”; Mark Ravinder Frost, “Asia’s Maritime Networks and the Colonial Public Sphere, 1840-1920,” *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies* 6, no. 2 (2004): 63–94; Raza, Zachariah, and Roy, *The Internationalist Moment: South Asia, Worlds and World Views, 1917-1939*; Stolte, “Uniting the Oppressed Peoples of the East”; Stolte and Fischer-Tiné, “Imagining Asia in India: Nationalism and Internationalism (ca. 1905-1940)”; Stolte, “Trade Unions on Trial: The Meerut Conspiracy Case and Trade Union Internationalism, 1929-32”; Mrinalini Sinha, “Suffragism and Internationalism: The Enfranchisement of British and Indian Women under an Imperial State,” *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 36, no. 4 (1999): 461–84.

territorialism'.<sup>7</sup> Instead, they have proposed means to look at these international exchanges through alternative spatial and temporal frameworks. For instance, Kris Manjapra and Sugata Bose look at what they call 'cosmopolitan thought zones' which were 'zones of circulation that constituted South Asian intellectual and cultural life in the twentieth century, and that exceeded the logic of a nation-state teleology.'<sup>8</sup>

Temporally, Manjapra conceives of the period from 1880 to 1945 as an 'age of entanglement'.<sup>9</sup> Bookended by the near-total colonisation of Africa and Asia in the 1880s signified by the Berlin Conference in 1884-1885 and the Second World War in 1945, Manjapra sees the concept of 'entanglement' as capturing

both the multiplication of boundaries and claims of difference, as well as the accelerated mutual implications and transnational feedback loops developing among discrepant national groups around the world in this period despite their power differences.<sup>10</sup>

While Manjapra studies the contacts between the German and Indian scholars that were promoted by German state and educational institutions, Ali Raza, Benjamin Zachariah and Franziska Roy study the non-official nature of contacts between political actors in the inter-war years which they identify as an 'internationalist moment'.<sup>11</sup> They argue that for India, this moment was characterised by 'a profound consciousness of the interconnectedness of the political futures of India and the rest of the world' and by a 'spirit of internationalism which tied together the struggles of oppressed peoples...around the world...[and] enabled its actors to imagine themselves as citizens of the world.'<sup>12</sup> They argue that the end of this moment is less easily identifiable than its opening at the end of the First World War with the Russian

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<sup>7</sup> Goswami, "Imaginary Futures and Colonial Internationalisms"; Manjapra, "Communist Internationalism and Transcolonial Recognition."

<sup>8</sup> Manjapra and Bose, *Cosmopolitan Thought Zones*, 7.

<sup>9</sup> Manjapra, *The Age of Entanglement: German and Indian Intellectuals Across Empire*.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

<sup>11</sup> Raza, Zachariah, and Roy, eds., *The Internationalist Moment*, xvii-xx.

<sup>12</sup> Raza, Zachariah, and Roy, eds., *The Internationalist Moment*.

revolution, but they put the end point roughly at 1939. Thus, all these studies emphasise not only the vertical networks of power between the colonial centre and periphery, but also horizontal networks of solidarity and support which cut across the lines of empire.

This body of scholarship also challenges the assumption that the end goal of the anti-colonial movement was the establishment of the nation-state in the form in which it was ultimately realised. For instance, Manu Goswami has pointed to the tautology whereby

the triumph of the nation-state ... has been taken as methodologically conclusive, entrenching the sense that internationalism was either a minor key of anti-colonialism or a 'futile holding operation' against the inevitable consolidation of the nation form.<sup>13</sup>

Instead, she makes the crucial point that the ideas of historical actors must be judged not in retrospect but by their own 'horizons of expectation' of imagined futures.<sup>14</sup> To 'flatten' all anti-imperial politics to nationalism, thus, would be to lose the complexity of these imaginations. She points out that 'scholarship on nationalism, and its imagined pasts, is vast, that on internationalism, and the imaginary futures it elaborated, is sparse.'<sup>15</sup> Rather than assuming an *a priori* nationalism of lascars' political ideas, this chapter unpacks the different elements of their 'imagined futures'.

While advancing the means to look at global networks, zones and moments of interaction as well as non-nation-statist futurities, however, this body of scholarship focuses preponderantly on literate elites and leaves out similar studies of mobile subalterns and their interaction with these networks. For instance, Kris Manjappa's work deals with 'entanglements' between Indian and German scholars and scientists and Mario Dover's with Indian and Italian scholars under fascism; Manu Goswami

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<sup>13</sup> Goswami, 'Imaginary Futures'.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 1463.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 1462.

and Satadru Sen have both studied the renowned sociologist Benoy Kumar Sarkar's ideas and Harald Fischer-Tiné the Oxford-educated Shyamji Krishnavarma; Dilip Menon studies the modernist influences on Malayali literary critic Balakrishna Pillai and Mark Ravinder Frost the transnational colonial public sphere of 'non-European multilingual literati' spanning Indian Ocean ports.<sup>16</sup> As a result of these rich studies, literate elites emerge as individuated historical figures with complex ideas. Due to the lack of similar studies on subaltern cosmopolitanism, however, the multitudes of plantation labourers, soldiers and sailors who were on the move in this period appear as an un-individuated, anonymous mass, inert to the circulation of ideas along the networks which they traversed as part of their working lives. In other words, international mobility appears as having had no effect on their political worldviews.

The exclusion of subalterns leaves an important lacuna in our understanding of the breadth and depth of cosmopolitanism and internationalism in the first half of the twentieth century. Just as international flows of ideas had been a conceptual blind spot for many subaltern histories, subaltern history has tended to be a blind spot for many histories of twentieth century global history. For instance, despite emphasising the role of steamship communication in the circulation of ideas or the increasing global military and naval infrastructures of the colonial state in repression, neither Frost nor Manjapra indicate the potential that this opened up in terms of the circulation of seafarers, soldiers and labourers and their relation to the 'public spheres' or

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<sup>16</sup> Manjapra, *The Age of Entanglement: German and Indian Intellectuals Across Empire*; Mario Prayer, "Creative India and the World: Bengali Internationalism and Italy in the Interwar Period," in *Cosmopolitan Thought Zones: South Asia and the Global Circulation of Ideas*, ed. Sugata Bose and Kris Manjapra (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Fischer-Tiné, *Shyamji Krishnavarma*; Goswami, "Imaginary Futures and Colonial Internationalisms"; Satadru Sen, *Benoy Kumar Sarkar: Restoring the Nation to the World* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2015); Menon, "A Local Cosmopolitan: 'Kesari' Balakrishna Pillai and the Invention of Europe for a Modern Kerala"; Frost, "Asia's Maritime Networks and the Colonial Public Sphere, 1840-1920"; Isobel Hofmeyr, "The Complicating Sea: The Indian Ocean as Method," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 32, no. 3 (2012): 584–90.



‘cosmopolitan thought zones.’<sup>17</sup> This blind spot and its unintended implication of subaltern political inertness has, in some cases, come to be treated as an intentional argument. Of the few existing studies of the relation of lascars to anti-colonial émigré activists, for instance, all but one tend to view the relationship as purely instrumental, with activists utilising lascars as a sort of proxy courier system to evade state surveillance.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the émigrés appear as historical actors with political ideas, while the lascars are reduced to inert carriers of these ideas.

This elision derives in part from the nature of source material; intellectuals left their literary oeuvres as texts, whereas the subaltern was much less loquacious in the historical record. Moreover, the colonial record generally assumed that subalterns had to be ‘instigated’ by ‘outsiders’ with seditious intent. Subalterns who were called before police enquiries usually performed this colonial construction of political naiveté in order to avoid arrest.<sup>19</sup> As Vinayak Chaturvedi points out about twentieth century global histories, ‘what remained unanswered were the theories and methods required to investigate non-literate, non-elite, and subaltern forms of cosmopolitanism.’<sup>20</sup> Conversely, the exclusion of subalterns from global history relegates them to conceptual frameworks circumscribed by nationalism, with the result, as Marcel van der Linden observes, that ‘research into the real history of

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<sup>17</sup> Manjapra, *The Age of Entanglement: German and Indian Intellectuals Across Empire*; Frost, “Asia’s Maritime Networks and the Colonial Public Sphere, 1840-1920.”

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Hyslop, “Guns, Drugs and Revolutionary Propaganda: Indian Sailors and Smuggling in the 1920s,” *South African Historical Journal* 61, no. 4 (2009): 838–46; Balachandran, *Globalising Labour? Indian Seafarers and World Shipping, c. 1870–1945*. The two studies which argue against this view are, Carolien Stolte, “Orienting India : Interwar Internationalism in an Asian Inflection, 1917-1937” (Leiden University, 2013); Raza and Zachariah, “To Take Arms Across a Sea of Trouble: The ‘Lascar System,’ Politics, and Agency in the 1920s.”

<sup>19</sup> Raza, Zachariah, and Roy, *The Internationalist Moment: South Asia, Worlds and World Views, 1917-1939*.

<sup>20</sup> Chaturvedi, “Review of Sugata Bose and Kris Manjapra (Eds) *Cosmopolitan Thought Zones: South Asia and the Global Circulation of Ideas*.” 539.

working-class internationalism is still in its infancy.’<sup>21</sup> This chapter attempts to fill this lacuna by bringing together subaltern and global studies, to show how subalterns themselves were part of these international entanglements, and links in the movement of ideas. It draws conceptually on David Featherstone’s work on subaltern cosmopolitan cartographies in the Atlantic, in which he argues that in creating global networks of trade, exchange, transport and communication, capitalism also created the infrastructure for ‘counter-global networks’ that sought to undermine this structure by allowing for ‘spatially stretched resistances’.<sup>22</sup> This framework is well suited for the international political networks which interwove with lascars’ webs of mobility.

### **International political networks**

The international ‘webs’ of anti-imperial activism began to develop as counter-global networks in the late nineteenth century, concomitant with the increasingly dense networks of transport and communications as well as military and political infrastructures. Firstly, the telegraph, railway and steamship developed, which in turn allowed for a greater volume of communication, movements and connections.<sup>23</sup> For those who did not travel, the world was made proximate through an explosion of print media and, at the end of the century, radio broadcasts. Secondly, the world was being knitted into an ever tighter geopolitical and economic unit. Rival European colonialisms penetrated further into hitherto unconquered territories and drew borders where their armies confronted each other, a process culminating in the Berlin Conference of 1884-85 for the division of Africa. The same period saw the creation

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<sup>21</sup> Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World : Essays Toward a Global Labor History* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 261.

<sup>22</sup> David Featherstone, *Resistance, Space and Political Identities: The Making of Counter-Global Networks* (West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2008).

<sup>23</sup> Antoinette Burton and Tony Ballantyne, eds., *World Histories From Below: Disruption and Dissent, 1750 to the Present* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016).

of the first avowedly internationalist organisations and activities. Manu Goswami argues that the creation of the International Workingmen's Association in London in 1864, marked the emergence of an internationalist imagination which was impelled 'by a concrete historical and geopolitical futurity', of a non-imperial, and in the case of various anarchist groups a non-statist, future.<sup>24</sup> The political successor of this organisation, the Second International, was formed in Germany in 1889, four years after the conclusion of the Berlin Conference. The same decade saw the first interlinkages between European internationalists and anti-colonial activists. Benedict Anderson's study shows the links between Filipino anti-colonialists and French, Spanish and Cuban anarchists, and explores the geographical spread of émigré Filipinos across New Orleans, Paris, Hong Kong, Barcelona, Shanghai, Madrid, Barcelona, Yokohama and Macau.<sup>25</sup> On the whole, however, in this period anti-imperial webs were still in their nascent stages of construction.

The period from 1905 to 1917 saw a qualitative shift in the nature of these counter-global webs of anti-imperial activism. In India, the largest colony of the British Empire, the period following the Swadeshi movement saw an extension of geographical scales of anti-colonial activism to international networks centred on Tokyo, London, Berlin, Paris, San-Francisco and even Geneva, Lausanne and Zurich.<sup>26</sup> As work by Harald Fischer-Tiné, Kris Manjapra, Maia Ramnath, Carolien Stolte, Seema Sohi, and others has shown, this geographical spread informed new, geographically stretched ideas of anti-colonialism, from pan-Asianism to pan-

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<sup>24</sup> Goswami, 'Imaginary Futures', 1464.

<sup>25</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Under Three Flags*, 208.

<sup>26</sup> Fischer-Tiné, "The Other Side of Internationalism: Switzerland as a Hub of Militant Anti-Colonialism, c. 1910-1920"; Fischer-Tiné, *Shyamji Krishnavarma*; Manjapra, "Communist Internationalism and Transcolonial Recognition"; Manjapra, *The Age of Entanglement: German and Indian Intellectuals Across Empire*; Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia*; Stolte, "Orienting India.; Stolte, "Orienting India"

Islamism and Ghadarism.<sup>27</sup> Daniel Brückenhaus and Seema Sohi have shown how the increasing ‘transnationalisation’ of policing and surveillance contributed to the concomitant transnationalisation of anticolonial networks across the world.<sup>28</sup> Both argue that this in turn imbued their anti-colonialism with broader meanings than the nationalism of anti-colonials in India.<sup>29</sup> They argue that this transnational anti-colonialism deconstructed western liberal discourse by exposing its limits where race and anti-imperialism coincided.<sup>30</sup> Sohi argues that in North America, this led to an identification of anti-colonialism with anti-racism.<sup>31</sup> Until the end of WWI, these émigré networks comprised relatively small nuclei of anti-colonial intellectuals and students. The networks which they formed only intertwined with the networks of lascar mobility after the First World War. As such, this section will only provide an outline and main features of this period, at the risk of simplifying this period of rich political exchange which has received a generous share of recent scholarly attention.

The defeat of imperial Russia by Japan in 1905 exerted a great pull on the imaginations of a range of anti-colonial activists, particularly those involved in ‘revolutionary terrorist’ activities during the Swadeshi movement. It created a ‘coloured internationalism’ whose effect was so strong that Japan began to be regarded, for a period, as the potential leader of all ‘coloured’ peoples, even by black

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<sup>27</sup> Manjpara has looked at the motivations of the German Foreign Office in exercising ‘soft power’ through educational institutions as well more a direct undermining of British imperial power by supplying weapons to anti-colonial activists. Fischer-Tiné and Stolte have looked at the motivations of Indian activists and the ways in which they appropriated these supranational ideologies and projects. Manjpara, *The Age of Entanglement: German and Indian Intellectuals Across Empire*; Stolte and Fischer-Tiné, “Imagining Asia in India: Nationalism and Internationalism (ca. 1905-1940)”; Seema Sohi, *Echoes of Mutiny: Race, Surveillance, and Indian Anticolonialism in North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>28</sup> Brückenhaus talks of a ‘feedback cycle’ whereby the authorities and anti-colonial emigres ‘pushed each other to expand the scope of their networks further and further across inner-European national borders.’ Daniel Brückenhaus, *Policing Transnational Protest: Liberal Imperialism and the Surveillance of Anticolonialists in Europe, 1905-1945* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 2; Seema Sohi likewise discusses the dialectical relation between repression and radicalism. Sohi, *Echoes of Mutiny*.

<sup>29</sup> Brückenhaus, *Policing Transnational Protest*, Sohi, *Echoes of Mutiny*.

<sup>30</sup> Brückenhaus, *Policing Transnational Protest*, Sohi, *Echoes of Mutiny*.

<sup>31</sup> Brückenhaus, *Policing Transnational Protest*, Sohi, *Echoes of Mutiny*.

activists in the USA like W.E.B. DuBois and Marcus Garvey.<sup>32</sup> In India, it brought the promise of a modern, ascendant Asia which maintained its ‘spiritual’ roots, a construction that Prasenjit Duara has pointed out had its roots in European colonial representations of Asia, and as Stolte and Fischer-Tiné point out, was a ‘self-orientalising’ move on part of the Pan Asianists.<sup>33</sup> Stolte and Fischer-Tiné show that the appeal of Japanese pan-Asianism led to ‘a growing number of patriotic young Indians deciding to obtain their education abroad in Tokyo... At the same time, a series of radical Indian nationalists found their way to this city, where they tried, mostly by appealing to pan-Asian solidarity, to win Japanese support for the Indian freedom struggle.’<sup>34</sup> Among these was Rashbehari Bose from Calcutta, who had been part of the revolutionary terrorist secret society Jugantar, and fled arrest to Japan in 1915, where he became a naturalised Japanese citizen, married a Japanese pan-Asianist, and published the journal *New Asia*.<sup>35</sup> By 1909, the British government was concerned enough about Indian anti-colonial activity on foreign soil to set up a counter-intelligence unit specifically to shadow Indian émigré activists, the so-called Indian Political Intelligence unit.

This new international network of anticolonial émigrés stretched from Japan across the Pacific to the west coast of North America. Taraknath Das’ political trajectory, for instance, spanned Tokyo and San Francisco.<sup>36</sup> Involved in the clandestine revolutionary terrorist *Anusilan samiti* (committee), he was forced to flee India and travelled via Japan to the United States, where he joined the Ghadar party.

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<sup>32</sup> Marc S. Gallicchio, *The African American Encounter with Japan and China: Black Internationalism in Asia, 1895-1945* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

<sup>33</sup> Prasenjit Duara, ‘The Discourse of Civilisation and Pan-Islamism’. *Journal of World History*, 12:1(2001); Stolte and Fischer-Tiné, ‘Imagining Asia in India.’

<sup>34</sup> Stolte and Fisher-Tine, ‘Imagining Asia in India’. 69-70.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Maria Framke, “Shopping Ideologies for Independent India? Taraknath Das’s Engagement with Italian Fascism and German National Socialism,” *Itinerario* 40, no. 1 (2016): 55–81; Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia*.

Ghadar, ‘whose name, it declared, was its work, meant ‘mutiny’ or ‘revolt’, was set up in 1913 in San Francisco as an explicitly anti-colonial organisation of intellectuals who were seeking to create links with the West Coast farm workers.<sup>37</sup> In 1916, Das ‘returned to Japan, closely trailed by British Intelligence, which suspected that he had embarked on a propaganda tour of the Far East.’<sup>38</sup>

Another Ghadarite and editor of the *Ghadar* newspaper, Har Dayal, had also had a wide and eclectic range of geographical and political journeys.<sup>39</sup> Having studied Sanskrit in Delhi’s prestigious St. Stephen’s College and then at Oxford, he had turned down a career in the Indian Civil Services and, after wanderings in Paris, Algeria, Martinique, California and Hawaii, finally settled down to teach Sanskrit in Stanford University near San Francisco.<sup>40</sup> Here, he turned to anarchism and became a branch secretary of the revolutionary syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World (IWW, also known as the ‘Wobblies’) in the USA which, in addition to its opposition to the First World War, advocated the overthrow of capitalism by means of a general strike, and the organisation of all workers into one union, irrespective of colour, nationality or gender.<sup>41</sup> Among his political influences were Buddha, Mazzini, Bakunin and Marx.<sup>42</sup> Under his editorship, the scale of his travels and range of political references reflected itself in the international scope of the *Ghadar* newspaper. Ramnath describes the issues as

often featuring...references to the other nationalist groups within the British Empire, namely, those in Ireland and Egypt; or other groups...involved in struggles against autocratic or imperial rule, such as those in Russia, China and

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<sup>37</sup> Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia*, 2.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 90.

<sup>39</sup> Benjamin Zachariah, “A Long, Strange Trip: The Lives in Exile of Har Dayal,” *South Asian History and Culture* 4, no. 4 (2013): 574–92.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, Ole Birk Laursen, “‘The Bomb Plot of Zurich’: Indian Nationalism, Italian Anarchism and the First World War,” in *Anarchism 1914-1918: Internationalism, Militarism and War*, ed. Ruth Kinna and Mathew S. Adams (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 140; Zachariah, “A Long, Strange Trip,” 575.

<sup>41</sup> Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia*, Laursen, “‘The Bomb Plot of Zurich’”.

<sup>42</sup> Zachariah, “A Long, Strange Trip.”

Mexico. One might also find biographical sketches of independence fighters of India, Ireland, Italy, Poland or even America, such as that renowned anti-British guerrilla fighter George Washington.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, the Ghadar party was more eclectic in its political imagination and inspirations than pan-Asianism, engaging with revolutionary currents spanning wide geographical scales from Asia, Latin America and Europe, and combining anarchism, Marxism and republicanism, none of which precluded the other. Their literature frequently addressed Indian sepoys, inciting them to mutiny. The issue of 17 February 1914, for instance, asked: ‘O Hindustani sepoys, e.g. warrior Sikhs, Musulman, and lionhearted Rajputs, residents of Peshawar and frontier Pathans and dignified Afridis and Afghans, who have entered the military service of the British, for what reason do you fight for the British and sacrifice your lives for no purpose? Are you not ashamed that in time of war you are ordered to the trenches and British troops are kept in the rear in security?’<sup>44</sup> Heather Streets-Salter has shown how the 1915 sepoy mutiny in Singapore was inspired in part by Ghadarite ideas combined with pan-Islamism.<sup>45</sup>

Besides Japan and the USA, another nucleus of Indian anti-colonial émigrés was in Germany, whose government also offered support to Sinn Fenians in Ireland and the USA.<sup>46</sup> Manjapra has argued that ‘upheaval in India’ preoccupied German Kaiser’s ‘planners of *Weltpolitik* from at least 1907...until the summer of 1915’.<sup>47</sup> He shows how this preoccupation was mediated by German orientalist knowledge which saw the ‘whole Orient stretching from Egypt through the Ottoman empire and Persia to India as a single, monolithic cultural and psychic whole’ which was Muslim and

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<sup>43</sup> Zachariah, “A Long, Strange Trip.”, 39.

<sup>44</sup> Heather Streets-Salter, “The Local Was Global: The Singapore Mutiny of 1915,” *Journal of World History* 24, no. 3 (2013): 553.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia*, 2.

<sup>47</sup> Kris Manjapra, “The Illusions of Encounter: Muslim ‘Minds’ and Hindu Revolutionaries in First World War Germany and After,” *Journal of Global History* 1, no. 03 (2006): 363.

imbued with warlike fanaticism which had only to be fanned in order to undermine the British empire.<sup>48</sup> In 1915, the German Foreign Office helped organise a meeting of the Berlin India Committee, bringing together émigrés based in Germany and the Ghadriles from the USA.<sup>49</sup> There was some coordination with the Berlin India Committee and nationalist groups in India that believed in the armed overthrow of colonialism, like the Jugantar group led by Jatin Mukherjee, also known as Bagha (Tiger) Jatin. Jatin had cultivated contacts with the German Crown Prince and, according to his prosecutor, ‘tampered with the loyalty of Indian soldiers’.<sup>50</sup>

Harald Fischer-Tiné, Patricia Purtschert and Ole Birk Laursen have also shown how Switzerland formed another node in this international web of anti-colonial émigré networks. Here, the Indian anti-colonial émigrés made use of the historical patchwork of nationalities in Switzerland, using it as a base to forge and maintain links with French socialists, Italian anarchists and the German Foreign Office.<sup>51</sup> The International Pro-India Committee was formed in Zurich in 1912 with Indian engineering student Chempakaran Pillai, ‘protégée of the ‘anarchist baronet’ Walter Strickland’, who was also involved in the Committee alongside Shyamji Krishnavarma and the German novelist Karl Bleibtrau.<sup>52</sup> They were joined in 1914 by the Ghadarite Har Dayal who was fleeing political persecution in California.<sup>53</sup> The activities of this committee involved bringing out anti-British leaflets. This network carried on after the war, and the paper called *Vanguard* that was edited in Berlin by M.N. Roy and smuggled into Indian ports by lascars, was published in Zurich.<sup>54</sup> The

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<sup>48</sup> Manjapra, “The Illusions of Encounter”, 369.

<sup>49</sup> Manjapra, *The Age of Entanglement: German and Indian Intellectuals Across Empire*.

<sup>50</sup> Cecil Kaye, *Communism in India with Unpublished Documents from the National Archives of India* (1919-1924), ed. Subodh Roy (Calcutta: Editions Indian, 1971).

<sup>51</sup> Laursen, “The Bomb Plot of Zurich.”

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 140.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 141.

<sup>54</sup> ‘Books and Publications: Proscription of a newspaper in English entitled ‘The Vanguard of Indian Independence’. 1922. Maharashtra State Archives. Home Department (Political), No. 289.



Ottoman empire also became a destination for pan-Islamist Indians seeking to defend it against attack from their common British enemy.<sup>55</sup>

Until the end of the First World War, such were the geographical contours of international political networks. They comprised mainly anticolonial intellectuals organised in small clandestine groupings. Contact across this international émigré network was largely mediated by the German and Japanese Foreign Offices, which were primarily interested in causing disruption behind British lines by backing assassination plots or bombings of public buildings and bridges.<sup>56</sup> These lines of support were tentative, however, depending on the changing diplomatic relations between these powers. Moreover, when these groupings went beyond their remit and formed links with other political organisations based in the host country or espoused anti-capitalist ideas in addition to the anticolonial, as the Ghadar did with the IWW, they were subjected to persecution by the governments of their host countries.<sup>57</sup>

From 1917 onward, these organisations were to undergo a qualitative transformation in terms of their political imaginations as well as their intersection with the routes of itinerant subalterns. As Raza and Zachariah have noted, the emergence of the Soviet Union on the international scene reconfigured these networks on a new organisational and ideological basis.<sup>58</sup> When the Czarist empire fell to the Russian revolution – thus turning Russia from a British ally to a target of its attack – the émigrés now looked to it for support. But to the imaginations of these activists, there was something that distinguished this new power from all the other British rivals: they were awed by the mass movement that had toppled a repressive regime.

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<sup>55</sup> Manjapra, *M.N. Roy: Marxism and Colonial Cosmopolitanism*.

<sup>56</sup> The same was also true of Switzerland-based anti-colonialism during the First World War. Fischer-Tiné, “The Other Side of Internationalism: Switzerland as a Hub of Militant Anti-Colonialism, c. 1910-1920.”

<sup>57</sup> Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia*.

<sup>58</sup> Raza, Zachariah, and Roy, *The Internationalist Moment: South Asia, Worlds and World Views, 1917-1939*.

For many, it was not expediency that drew Indian anticolonialists, pan-Asianists and other radical nationalists from all over the world to the Soviet Union, but inspiration.<sup>59</sup> This victorious workers' revolution, which had offered the right to self-determination to all the oppressed nationalities of the Russian empire, combined the anticolonial and anti-capitalist political imaginations that had hitherto largely been seen as separated between the colonial and imperial worlds. The fledgling Soviet state articulated a new political imagination and practice which combined the anticolonial struggle with the struggle against feudalism and capitalism. At the Congress of the Peoples of the East organised in Azerbaijan one year after the 1917 revolution, delegates from twenty-two Asian nationalities were in attendance, among whom were fourteen Indians. Three years later, the Communist University of the Toilers of the East was set up in Moscow, through which many Indian, Chinese, Japanese and Indonesian, Indochinese and other Asian activists were to undergo a political education in combining the struggles of anticolonialism, self-determination and international socialism.<sup>60</sup>

Such, for instance, was the case of Narendra Nath Banerji. Born in Chingripota in Bengal's 24 Parganas, he was involved in his teens in the revolutionary terrorist Jugantar group. From there, he followed the classical route of an anticolonial activist until 1917. At the outbreak of the War, he had gone to Batavia to meet German agents and discuss offers of 'landing arms in India'.<sup>61</sup> With their assistance, he went to Shanghai, and then as a stowaway on an American ship to San Francisco in 1916, where he became acquainted with the Ghadar Party, and took the alias of M.N.

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<sup>59</sup> Stolte, 'Uniting the Oppressed Peoples of the East' in Raza, Roy and Zachariah (eds.), *The Internationalist Moment*, 56-85.

<sup>60</sup> Manjapra, "Communist Internationalism and Transcolonial Recognition"; Stolte, "Uniting the Oppressed Peoples of the East."

<sup>61</sup> Kaye, *Communism in India*, 180, IOR/L/PJ/12/46, 1923.

Roy.<sup>62</sup> It was also here that he encountered socialist ideas. Facing arrest, he fled to Mexico, where he helped to found the Mexican Socialist Party.<sup>63</sup> At this time, the Communist International was founded, and Roy was among the first to take the new trajectory of support from this newly-founded power.<sup>64</sup> He went to attend its Second World Congress in Moscow. From there, he set up base in Tashkent, which also became the a transit point in the movement of pan-Islamist Khilafatist *muhajirs* from South Asia, who were opposed to the dismemberment of the Ottoman empire and planned to fight for its defence against British and French colonialism.<sup>65</sup> Inasmuch as the new Soviet Union was opposed to colonialism, professed active support for the self-determination of oppressed nations, and had been established by a popular overthrow of oppressive rule, this also appealed to the imagination of the *muhajirs*. In the hope of military assistance, many *muhajirs* proceeded from the North West Frontier Province of British India to Soviet Central Asia via Afghanistan in hope of military assistance.<sup>66</sup> Tashkent was at the physical cross-roads of two ideological anticolonial movements: pan-Islamism and communism.<sup>67</sup>

The reorientation of Indian anti-colonial networks towards the Soviet Union brought about a qualitative change in the material and imaginative nature of these international networks. Materially, in terms of networks of circulation of information, propaganda and activists, the new networks renewed and deepened the coordination between European internationalists and the anticolonial cause, which had remained limited in the nineteenth century and been actively opposed by the German, Japanese

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<sup>62</sup> Kaye, *Communism in India*, 3.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Shaukat Usmani, *From Peshawar to Moscow: Leaves from a Muhajireen's Diary* (Benares: Swarajya Publishing House, 1927).

<sup>67</sup> Such was the trajectory of Shaukat Usmani, who recounts his topographical and political movement in these years from Khilafatist to communist. Usmani.

and USA's Foreign Offices. This in turn was facilitated by a new imagination of internationalism – born in the crucible of the First World War – which tied together the destinies of the colonial world and the imperial labouring masses. In this new articulation, as we will see in the following section, the subjugation of the colonies precluded liberation for workers in the colonising countries.

The imagination of a decolonised future and the means to attain it were also transformed for activists involved in this new network. It no longer comprised merely the ousting of the colonial powers from Asia and Africa, but also an egalitarian society devoid of other forms of social oppression. The means to this future, consequently, was no longer small secret societies conducting bombing and assassination plots, but mass movements. As a result, special efforts were devoted to addressing the colonial subaltern, linking their own condition to wider political structures of oppression. While Germany and Japan had shown hardly any interest in this aspect, Soviet-inspired and affiliated organisations devoted considerable resources towards bringing out newspapers, leaflets and other agitational material addressed to the colonial subaltern. The change in the nature of support for political émigrés also saw a consequent change in orientation of small nuclei of émigré intellectuals towards the Indian subalterns. In this process, itinerant seamen were to prove an important target for their ideas and activities.

The new orientation of Soviet-inspired anti-colonial émigrés was given organisational form through the international network of the Profintern (the Red International of Labour Unions) founded in 1921 by the Soviet Communist International.<sup>68</sup> As part of the Profintern, International Propaganda Committees were formed to carry out political propaganda. With one aimed specifically at Transport

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<sup>68</sup> Edward Hallett Carr, *Socialism in One Country, 1924-1926*, vol. 3 (London: Macmillan, 1964).

Workers, Port Bureaus and Seamen's Clubs were opened in the docksides of most important international ports.<sup>69</sup> The political message conveyed through these channels was one of labour internationalism. Whether through printed or spoken word, the central message of the network was the necessity for the international maritime workforce to overcome its racial and geographical segmentation and unite on the basis of a common opposition to internationally united employers. The Profintern and its networks and activists emphasised that the economic aim of equal pay necessitated the political struggle to end colonialism, and thus the structural segmentation of the workforce. Thus, the Vladivostok bureau of the Propaganda Committee published an appeal to Asian seamen, which for the first time explicitly linked the colonial seamen's struggle for equality to the larger anticolonial struggle. It invited them:

1) to struggle for equality on board ship, in other words there are no 'foreigners' among seamen and workers 2) to help workers from the Asian seaboard to free themselves from their European and native masters and from the exploitation of these masters 3) to resist in an organized fashion any kind of foreign intervention in the affairs of Asian countries.<sup>70</sup>

In Britain, the Profintern-affiliated National Minority Movement appealed to British seamen to join their own fights with their colonial counterparts for equal pay and political freedom. In a pamphlet titled 'The Struggle of British Seamen', written by the erstwhile 'Wobbly' George Hardy, it argued that their economic struggle could not be won without supporting the anticolonial struggle.<sup>71</sup>

The British seamen's trade union leaderships, however, were notoriously opposed to the employment of 'coloured' labour and argued for their exclusion.

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<sup>69</sup> Josephine Fowler, "From East to West and West to East: Ties of Solidarity in the Pan-Pacific Revolutionary Trade Union Movement, 1923-1934," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 66 (2004): 99-117.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 100.

<sup>71</sup> George Hardy, *The Struggle of British Seamen* (London: Seamen's Section of Transport Workers' Minority Movement for the International Propaganda Committee of Transport Workers, 1927).

Against their nationalism and xenophobia, the abovementioned pamphlet proclaimed, 'all seamen are internationalists.' It continued:

The policy of the shipowners is 'divide and conquer'. Ours is to unite internationally, East and West, for as long as your arguments are directed at Eastern and African seamen the Western shipowners will grab that 'lion's share'. Remember: an injury to coloured seamen is a blow struck at British seamen.<sup>72</sup>

In San Francisco, communist labour activists were briefed by the Profintern to 'concentrate on active work among the Japanese sailors and also develop work among the Chinese, Indian and other nationalities of sailors who come to American and Canadian ports on the Pacific Coast.'<sup>73</sup> Among the activists in San Francisco were Ghadarites like Taraknath Das and Har Dayal.<sup>74</sup>

The port where these new networks of political activists developed the closest contacts with lascars, however, was Hamburg. Manjapra argues that 'while the interactions between Germans and Indians remained largely limited to the realm of military operations during the war, unexpected spaces of social and ideological encounter between Germans and the Indian émigré population opened up in the war's aftermath, particularly on the radical fringes of German society.'<sup>75</sup> As during the First World War, Germany in the 1920s continued to serve as a base for internationalist political activity. Unlike the period until the end of the war, however, this was not due to the police's volition, but rather in spite of it. The efficaciousness of the police in managing political dissent was weakened by an ascendant German working class movement there, which had overthrown the Kaiser in 1918.<sup>76</sup> In this, sailors in

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<sup>72</sup> Hardy, *The Struggle of British Seamen*, 46.

<sup>73</sup> Fowler, 'From East to West', 108.

<sup>74</sup> Ramnath, *Haj to Utopia*.

<sup>75</sup> Manjapra, "The Illusions of Encounter," 364.

<sup>76</sup> Pierre Broué, *The German Revolution, 1917-1923* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2006).

Hamburg and Kiel had played an important role.<sup>77</sup> As a result of these seismic political events, revolutionary ‘atmosphere’ and weakened control of the authorities, Berlin became a gathering ground for radical political activists. Manjapra notes that over 4,000 ‘anti-colonial and socially radical groups of Korean, Chinese, Indian, Japanese, Cameroonian, Egyptian and Persian activists’ operated from Berlin in the 1920s.<sup>78</sup> Berlin was to remain a rich ‘contact zone’ for political activists and exiles through this decade, until Hitler’s rise to power in 1933, when their base of activities shifted to Britain.

Let us first examine the circle of Berlin revolutionaries who made contact with lascars there, and where they fitted into the larger international coordination. The moving force of this organisation was M.N. Roy, who moved from Tashkent to Berlin some time in 1920.<sup>79</sup> Here, he joined the erstwhile Berlin India Committee, of Virendranath Chattopadhyay (a brother of Sarojini Naidu’s) and Trimul Acharya, who had gone to Moscow in 1919 and, as an intelligence report noted, ‘thence proceeded to Kabul...having definitely allied himself with the Bolsheviks. Early in 1920 he was living in the Amir’s palace in Kabul.’<sup>80</sup> In August of that year he returned to Moscow, where he worked in association with Barkatullah and M.N. Roy.’<sup>81</sup> Then there were ex-Ghadarites like Surendra Nath Kar. With them also came many pan-Islamists: Obeidulla, who had previously travelled between Ankara, Mecca and Kabul, Abdur Rahman Siddiqui, who had moved from Smyrna to Rome to Kabul to Berlin; and others like Dr. Nur Mohammed and Zafar Hasan. Then there was the charismatic Ali Shah who had been to Moscow and was described as ‘an expert Bolshevik’,

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<sup>77</sup> Broué, *The German Revolution*.

<sup>78</sup> Kris Manjapra, ‘Communist Internationalism and Transcolonial Recognition’, 166.

<sup>79</sup> ‘Indian Communist Party – Intelligence reports’. 1922. India Office Records (IOR) Public and Judicial (PJ) Department. IOR/L/PJ/12/46.

<sup>80</sup> Nirode K. Barooah, *Chatto: The Life and Times of an Indian Anti-Imperialist in Europe* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid* and ‘Indian Communist Party – Intelligence reports’. 1922. IOR/L/PJ/12/46.

very tall, clean shaven, wears spectacles, aged about 24. He speaks a little Russian, knows Persian well, and was a student under Roy in Russia. He is described as the son of the Nawab of Aligarh, having been educated at Aligarh and Delhi. He belongs to an Afghan family settled in Bulandshahr... He represents the Young International, and often goes to the 'Jugend International' Office in the Fourig Strasse, Berlin.<sup>82</sup>

While many of these activists worked on recruiting Indian students coming to Germany for technical degrees, one of them, Khushi Mohammed, who had been a 'jehadi student and revolutionary in Kabul' and then won over to communism, spent his time in Hamburg's docks addressing lascars. He went by the aliases of Mohammed Ali, Ibrahim and Sepassi.<sup>83</sup>

This circle of Indian revolutionaries, likewise, forged new connections with European and other Asian revolutionaries. For one, they established close connections with the German communist party, and many of them carried membership cards of the Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (KPD). Many of the KPD members worked closely with the Indian nucleus. One of them was Arnold, a

typical German, stout, strongly built, aged about 45, with a rather harsh voice, speaks slowly, clean shaven, ruddy complexion and hair. He is chief of the secret Illegal Section of the German CP. He issues false passports, conducts men and carries literature and letters over the frontiers. ... He is known among the Communists by the nickname 'Viva'.<sup>84</sup>

Another figure was Hertha, alias Julia, a

mysterious lady...[who] is the Russian representative of the Third International in Berlin. She is well off, speaks English, French, German, Russian, Italian, Dutch and Flemish fluently. She used to travel all over the Continent. Roy knows who she is but her identity is a well preserved secret. She states that if the English or Germans knew her real name she would at once be arrested.<sup>85</sup>

It was conjectured by the British secret service that she was 'identical with Hertha Sturm, who with Klara Zetkin is at the head of the Women's Section of the Third

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<sup>82</sup> 'Indian Communist Party – Intelligence reports'. 1922. IOR/L/PJ/12/46.

<sup>83</sup> 'Indian Communist Party – Intelligence reports'. January-June 1923. IOR/L/PJ/12/47.

<sup>84</sup> 'Indian Communist Party – Intelligence reports'. 1922. IOR/L/PJ/12/46.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.



International.’<sup>86</sup> In Hamburg, Amir Haider Khan was met by another ‘Comrade Albert’ and taken to the home of ‘Comrade Walter’ who was once a seaman himself and now oversaw the movement of activists through the ‘Comintern channel’.<sup>87</sup>

The Indian nucleus also coordinated their political work in Hamburg with a string of other internationalist activists. An Englishman named Ashleigh alias John Ashworth, ‘a dangerous communist’ was ‘associating with Roy and making preparations to start for India’.<sup>88</sup> This ‘Ashleigh’ had a syndicalist past in the IWW and in 1918 had been sentenced to 10 years imprisonment in Leavenworth Penitentiary, Kansas,

in connection with the Industrial Workers of the World strikes and riots in America... Released and deported in February 1922 from America to the UK, where he got in touch with various extremists and started his career as travelling agitator and communist propagandist. Left Berlin for India, in August 1922, as an agent of the Comintern.<sup>89</sup>

In Bombay, Ashleigh met the communist S.A. Dange, later to become a leader of the Communist Party of India. George Hardy, also from England, ‘formerly of the IWW, and had ‘for some time been working for the Profintern in Canada’ also went to Berlin to meet Roy the same year.<sup>90</sup> The Indians in Berlin also had contacts with the Javan communists, many of whose leaders were resident at the time in Berlin, as was Tan Malaka, one of their leading activists, through whom a special system of international money wiring to India was organised through Dutch firms in Java.<sup>91</sup> Their activities centred on Hamburg, one of the biggest European ports, where they aimed to establish contact with lascars. From here, they maintained a complex web of international coordination with other ports like Antwerp, Rotterdam, Marseilles,

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<sup>86</sup> ‘Indian Communist Party – Intelligence reports’. 1922. IOR/L/PJ/12/46.

<sup>87</sup> Hasan Gardezi (ed.), *Chains to Lose*.

<sup>88</sup> ‘Indian Communist Party – Intelligence reports’. 1922. IOR/L/PJ/12/46.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

London, Glasgow, Colombo, Rangoon, Bombay and Calcutta, where they secured the cooperation of local communists in their activities directed at lascars.<sup>92</sup>

It was this ‘counter-global network’ of political activists, spanning many geographical scales, with whose activities and ideas lascars’ movements were to become ‘entangled.’ The objectives of these activists were threefold: to politically influence the lascars, organise them into collectivities against their employers, and to deploy their movement in the circulation of literature between Europe and India. The last of these has received the most attention in scholarly literature due to the abundance of records owing to the anxieties of the colonial state about sedition.<sup>93</sup>

These accounts generally do not account for lascars’ own political agency, which begs the question as to why they agreed to carry proscribed literature at the risk of arrest in the first place. On the contrary, I try to unravel the ways in which lascars’ worldviews were transformed through these political encounters and entanglements. As Raza and Zachariah have pointed out, ‘historians’ lack of attention to the importance of lascars’ politics is not merely due to the difficulty of the source materials, but also to the colonial conception of lascars as purely economic subjects incapable of their own political convictions. Those who were interested or involved in politics were assumed to be political subversives masquerading as lascars for the sake of mobility.<sup>94</sup> This conception drew on the colonial understanding of labourers as politically innocent or ignorant and capable only of being manipulated by outside ringleaders. I suggest that lascars’ complicity in the movement of literature was informed by their own political outlooks. The next section turns to the interweaving of the material and imaginative networks of these activists with lascars in ports around the world.

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<sup>92</sup> ‘Indian Communist Party – Intelligence reports’. July-December 1923. IOR/L/PJ/12/48.

<sup>93</sup> Cf. Jonathan Hyslop, ‘Guns, Drugs and Revolutionary Propaganda: Indian Sailors and Smuggling in the 1920s’. *South African Historical Journal* 61, no.4, 838-846; Balachandran, *Globalising Labour? Indian Seafarers and World Shipping, c. 1870–1945*.

<sup>94</sup> Raza and Zachariah, ‘To Take Arms’, 15.

## **Lascars in the Internationalist Moment:**

### **‘The world was our university’**

Lascars’ worlds around the web of international shipping routes began to interweave with the web of anti-imperial networks of émigré intellectual activists after the First World War. This does not imply, however, that lascars did not have their own political ideas prior to their contact with the literate activists who formed these networks. We have seen in the previous chapter that lascars formed social and political impressions of other societies, particularly on the relation of race, class and gender. As workers on British ships carrying cargo and weapons in trade and war, seamen of all nationalities were exposed to the tangible effects of economic and political dominance. Many of these impressions were to be formative. As American seaman Frederick ‘Blackie’ Myers put it, his first trip on a merchant vessel at the age of sixteen ‘proved to be quite an education’.<sup>95</sup> He saw ‘famine in China, the brutal face of colonialism in India.... and in Naples he caught a glimpse of fascism. Everywhere he went he saw abject... poverty that made him wonder if this was the best of all possible worlds.’<sup>96</sup> Myers went on to become a communist and a leader of the National Maritime Union. This theme of a ‘ship education’ was echoed in many other testimonies of seafarers. It is also worth recalling what the well-known pan-Africanist George Padmore once said of the Trinidadian Chris Braithwaite that

as a seaman, ...the world was thus his university, and what an education it provided him! It was always a pleasure to hear Chris... relate his many sailor’s yarns, and, in his more serious moments, to listen to him describing the conditions of the working-class in the various lands it was his good fortune to visit.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Cited in Bruce Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront: Seamen, Longshoremen and Unionism in the 1930s* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> George Padmore, ‘Chris Jones: fighter for the oppressed’, *New Leader*, September 1944. Cited in Høgsbjerg, *Mariner, Renegade and Castaway: Chris Braithwaite : Seamen’s Organiser, Socialist and Militant Pan-Africanist*.

As a young man, Ho Chi Minh had worked as a chef's assistant in 1911 on the *Amiral Latouche-Tréville* of the Chargeurs Réunis company, shipping from Saigon to Marseilles. On board the ship, he befriended two French colonial soldiers who helped him learn French and lent him books. Moving from Marseille to Le Havre, he befriended the French household staff of the rich family for which he worked as a gardener. He then went to sea for another two years, stopping in England, then Bordeaux, Lisbon, Tunis, Dakar, East African ports, the Congo and the Reunion Islands and then to North America, Antilles, Mexico and South America.<sup>98</sup> In his biography of Ho Chi Minh, Pierre Brocheux notes that his 'observations of those two years of wandering reinforced what he knew about colonial regimes, as he witnessed the oppression suffered by Arabs, Africans and the blacks of the United States... His travels showed him misery and oppression throughout the world, not just in Vietnam.'<sup>99</sup> By 1917, he settled in France, where he established a network involving the Koreans who were fighting against Japanese colonialism, and with the Irish against the British.<sup>100</sup> This theme of seafaring as an 'education' and a 'university' recurs in the narratives of seamen. Through 'seeing many things', their *weltanschauung* underwent a political transformation.

From the early 1920s, this education became a more organised activity when lascars' networks of mobility interwove with the Profintern's international networks of political activists. The early contact between lascars and these activists began to be made at seamen's clubs set up at international ports. One such club was set up in Hamburg's dock area of Sankt Pauli, where political meetings were held. A dockside coffee-shop owner, Abid Ali, would go onto the ships to invite lascars for these

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<sup>98</sup> Pierre Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh: A Biography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 10.

<sup>99</sup> Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh*, 10.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

meetings. One lascar described a political meeting he attended in Hamburg which was organised by Khushi Mohammed thus:

I came to learn from Abid Ali that a meeting of the seamen would be held at a place called Sampoli (Sankt Pauli) at Hamburg...The meeting was held in two ground floor rooms of a big pucca building. These two buildings were occupied by a Club known as Bolshevik Club. There was seating accommodation for 50 or 60 persons.... I also saw newspapers, books [and] registers arranged in the form of a Library.<sup>101</sup>

In these meetings, lascars' first-hand experiences of war, trade, class, race and revolution were articulated collectively. The fact that the authorities feared not only the movement of literature but also the transformation in lascars' political imaginations as a result of these encounters is evidenced by a letter from Sir William Duke of the India Office to the owner of the P&O shipping company Lord Inchape, in 1923, which warned that:

some communistic clubs have been started in Antwerp, Hamburg and other places which our native seamen are invited with the object of instilling into their minds revolutionary and seditious ideas. If you can as far as possible prevent the lascars and firemen from visiting these clubs it would be an advantage... You will all realise I am sure that in a service such as ours bound up as it is with India, it is essential to avoid any possible reflection on the way we treat our Indian crews.<sup>102</sup>

Although Inchape replied that he would do everything possible to 'prevent our Lascar crews from getting contaminated', lascars did in fact carry these ideas back to South Asia in intangible and, often, more tangible forms.<sup>103</sup> For instance, S.A. Khalique, a lascar on the British India Steam Navigation Company's vessel *SS Matiana*, could read some English and bought some revolutionary literature in a meeting at the Hamburg club.<sup>104</sup> Like Khalique, many of those carrying this literature back to Indian

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<sup>101</sup>Raza And Zachariah, 'To Take Arms', 23.

<sup>102</sup>'Indian Communist Party: conveyance of seditious literature into India; correspondence with shipping companies'. 1922-1923, IOR/L/P&J/12/52.

<sup>103</sup>'Indian Communist Party: conveyance of seditious literature into India; correspondence with shipping companies'. 1922-1923, IOR/L/P&J/12/52.

<sup>104</sup>Raza and Zachariah, 'To Take Arms', 24.

ports were not politically inert ‘couriers’, but had a sustained engagement with the ideas espoused in these meetings and newspapers, though what exactly they made of these ideas we cannot be certain, since apart from Amir Haider Khan’s memoir we have few known published testaments of their own views.

What we do know, however, is that they rendered practical assistance to the circulation of this literature, thus playing a role in turning internationalist ideals into a more material, global network of circulation of printed material. In the Belgian port of Antwerp, for instance, another communist, Nalini Gupta, had established connections with lascars. Among them was Mohammed Latif, a lascar working for the same shipping company as Khalique. Latif was ‘in touch with a large number of stewards on steamships of the Indian lines...He promised to act as a courier and to form a group of workers among the seamen and their stewards.’<sup>105</sup> Both Khalique and Latif were in touch with a communist activist in Calcutta called Muzaffar Ahmad, thus forming human links in the movement of ideas and literature between the ports of Calcutta, Hamburg and Antwerp. Ahmad also exchanged literature with communists in England – he received the British communist newspaper for seamen titled ‘International Seafarer’ – at his European Asylum Lane residence in Calcutta, and he despatched copies of the Bengali communist paper *Ganavani* (People’s Voice) to the British Communist Party’s Great Ormond Street address in London for distribution to Bengali seamen in the docks there.<sup>106</sup> Seamen from other colonies calling at Hamburg also smuggled proscribed literature back to their home ports: West African seamen, for instance, carried back the publication *Negro Worker* that was being produced by George Padmore in London.<sup>107</sup> Thus, from being largely observers of political events

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<sup>105</sup> ‘Indian Communist Party: Intelligence Reports, 1922’. IOR/L/PJ/12/46.

<sup>106</sup> *Meerut Conspiracy Case*, Prosecution Exhibit P. 2074.

<sup>107</sup> Hakim Adi and Marika Sherwood, *Pan-African History: Political Figures from Africa and the Diaspora Since 1787* (London: Routledge, 2003).

until the end of the First World War, lascars were now actively involved in an active anticolonial network which stretched across colonial and imperial ports.

Apart from the circulation of literature, sailors also assisted in the movement of the revolutionaries themselves. M.N. Roy wrote from Hamburg to a certain Shamsuddin in Lahore saying,

It is quite possible to get some kind of work on ships. One has only to go to some big port – Karachi, Bombay or Calcutta – and look about for chances. The other way is to come illegally. In this case one must go to a port and talk to the [lascars], among whom there are many sympathetic men to be found these days.... We have met many Indian serangs (boatswains) in European ports who offered to render such help.<sup>108</sup>

Nalini Gupta, one of the chief accused in the Meerut Conspiracy Case show trial, was helped by a lascar in getting to India from Antwerp in September 1922 as an emissary, carrying mandates to the Indian National Congress and the trade unions sewn into the collar of his coat. When he was stopped by the British Consul at Genoa, where his passport was impounded, he found a ship sailing for India, and ‘through the help of a ships’ butler, arranged to get shipped as a seaman in the name of Assanullah Khan.’<sup>109</sup>

Activists in Hamburg and other ports not only attempted to give lascars’ experiences a broader political meaning but also to link larger structural inequalities to their own economic position at the bottom rung of an international workforce, thereby forming a ‘counter global network’ to challenge the segmentation of the maritime labour force. A body was set up for the specific purpose of addressing them under the Profintern called the International Propaganda Committee for Transport Workers, which had a special Colonial Section to raise issues of the underpaid Asian and African seamen, and to agitate for unity between white and ‘coloured’ seamen.

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<sup>108</sup> ‘Indian Communist Party: Intelligence Reports, 1924’. IOR/L/PJ/12/49.

<sup>109</sup> ‘Indian Communist Party: Intelligence Reports, 1923’ IOR/L/PJ/12/46.

This committee undertook to ‘issue... popular literature in all European and Oriental languages adapted to the circumstances and interests of seamen’, thus giving the project what Benedict Anderson has called ‘the hard internationalism of the polyglot’ which required mastery over many mediating languages of intellectual exchange.<sup>110</sup> As part of this, a pamphlet was brought out in 1923 called ‘An Appeal to Indian Lascars’ whose trail of circulation became a marker of the international webs of coordination in the attempt to address lascars politically and organise them economically. Printed in Urdu and English at Hamburg, it was also distributed there. The indefatigable Khushi Mohamed/Ibrahim was noted in intelligence files handing it out to ‘to the crew of a British ship from Rangoon, [who] were harangued by an Indian named Ibrahim’.<sup>111</sup> It was sent to Marseilles to an activist called ‘Siki’ who disseminated it there.<sup>112</sup> In London and Liverpool, a man named Ajoy Banerjee distributed a thousand copies of the same pamphlet.<sup>113</sup> Here, it was reprinted in the newspaper called the *International Seafarer*, the mouthpiece of the aforementioned Propaganda Committee.<sup>114</sup>

The appeal described the abominable conditions of the Indian working class, and went on to say that the oppressors in India were the same as those in Britain, and that British and Indian workers needed to fight them together. Against the divisions in the ranks of the seamen on racial and religious lines, and against those conservative trade union bureaucrats who wanted to maintain their privileges by playing on these, the appeal argued that there needed to be unity among the seamen to fight against the united employers. And as the shipowners were united on an international level, the

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<sup>110</sup> ‘Indian Communist Party – Intelligence reports’. July-December 1923. IOR/L/PJ/12/48; Anderson, *Under Three Flags*.

<sup>111</sup> David Petrie, *Communism in India 1924-1927* (Calcutta: Editions India, 1972).

<sup>112</sup> ‘Indian Communist Party – Intelligence reports’. July-December 1923. IOR/L/PJ/12/48.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.



leaflet urged, the seamen needed to counter them at the same geographical scale. It ended by saying:

Seamen of all countries! Nobody knows better than you how the world's marine transport workers are treated.... This condition can be remedied. There is no need for long hours, low wages, lousy fo'c'sles and rotten chuck. All this and much more can be abolished if only you will shake off your indifference and rise above your petty rivalries, jealousies and prejudices to shake hands across the ocean with fellow workers in all ports of the world.<sup>115</sup>

It pleaded: 'let every Indian seaman who can read, talk to his mates about these things. Discuss them on the ship or off the ship.'<sup>116</sup> As the audience of these pamphlets, lascars were exposed to ideas of international working class solidarity, the roots of racial segmentation in the workforce and the means of overcoming it. Lascars were not merely the passive carriers of the political literature, but also its audience. Their content drew on lascars' own observations of race, class and colonialism in their predicament as the lowest segment of the international workforce.

This was not only a matter of lascars' changing worldviews. Rather, it was accompanied by the creation of organisational frameworks within which lascars could actively intervene against these economic inequalities. Ibrahim addressed these meetings in Hindustani, saying that 'Indian seamen were poorly paid and ... [that] they [should] organize a seamen's union which would arrange for a club where they could sit together and read newspapers and books and also arrange with the authority to increase their pay and improve their prospects.'<sup>117</sup> Towards overcoming their inferior conditions, ideas of collective organisation now began to circulate among lascars. In 1922, a committee was formed by the Indian communist and MP for Battersea, Shapurji Saklatvala, 'to investigate the needs of the lascars and to organise

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<sup>115</sup> *International Seafarer*, the publication of the Seamen's Section of the International Propaganda Committee of Revolutionary Transport Workers. Dec 1924-Jan 1925 issue.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> *International Seafarer*, Dec 1924-Jan 1925 issue.

them.’<sup>118</sup> From this came the Lascars’ Welfare League, and between this organisation and M.N. Roy’s in Hamburg, ‘a definite link’ was believed to exist.<sup>119</sup> In 1925, the League was renamed the Indian Seamen’s Union.

The counterpart of Ibrahim in England was a man by the name of Nathalal Jagjivan Upadhyaya, who arrived from Bombay in late 1922 and began ‘studying communism’.<sup>120</sup> He was noted as giving public speeches with Jim Larkin, who the British seamen’s union had branded a ‘criminal anarchist’.<sup>121</sup> Upadhyaya - or ‘Paddy’ as he was known to his friends - was also in touch with Ibrahim and M.N. Roy, whom he went to meet in Holland.<sup>122</sup> The plain-clothes policeman who was detailed to trail Paddy reported with grudging admiration: ‘he was most assiduous in his efforts to attract the lascars. Numerous open air meetings were organised and addressed by him, and he became the leading light of the Indian Seamen’s Union.’<sup>123</sup> It was reported that he was holding ‘weekly meetings at the dock gates for Indian seamen and circulating literature’.<sup>124</sup> These were held in ports throughout the UK and were attended by 50 to 60 seamen.<sup>125</sup> As part of his activities in ‘circulating literature’, Paddy issued a leaflet in Urdu, entitled ‘Our Grievances and How to Remedy Them’, distributing them in the London docks and in the lodging houses of the lascars. To avoid the watchful eye of the authorities, he even took to disguise: ‘his modus operandi,’ it was noted, ‘is to pose as a missionary, and he frequents the Docks, carrying a Bible and religious tracts, in which are a number of Communist leaflets.’<sup>126</sup> His disguise was perhaps

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<sup>118</sup> ‘Indian Communist Party – Intelligence reports’. July-December 1923. IOR/L/PJ/12/48, 1923.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Nathalal Jagjivan Upadhyaya, colonial section, Communist Party of Great Britain and Indian Seamen's Union: political activities in UK’. 1924-1938. IOR, PJ, IOR/L/PJ/12/233.

<sup>121</sup> *The Seaman*.

<sup>122</sup> Petrie, *Communism in India 1924-1927*.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Marika Sherwood, ‘Lascar Struggles Against Discrimination In Britain 1923–45: The Work Of N.J. Upadhyaya And Surat Alley’, *The Mariner's Mirror* 90, no.4 (2004): 439.

<sup>125</sup> ‘Nathalal Jagjivan Upadhyaya’, IOR/L/PJ/12/233.

<sup>126</sup> ‘Nathalal Jagjivan Upadhyaya’, IOR/L/PJ/12/233.

made credible by the existence of the Mission to Seamen described in the previous chapter. This particular leaflet outlined the problems of wages, accident compensation, working hours, pensions, accommodation and racial distinctions. It ended by asking:

How can we remedy these evils and improve our conditions? There is only one way. We must all join together in a union.... It is no use one or two of us asking for help in our grievances. But where one is weak a group is strong. Let us all join the Indian Seamen's Union, and then we will have a strong organization which can speak for all of us and can meet the employers on equal terms.'<sup>127</sup>

Living in East London, Paddy travelled to Cardiff and Glasgow to organise lascars there, and thence to Birkenhead. A 1927 police report outlined the results:

considerable trouble [had] been experienced by the Shipping Companies with Indian crews, several engine room crews having refused to sail at the last minute, and bringing forward some alleged grievance. The crews have not previously caused anything like the same amount of trouble, and when they have had a grievance have vented it immediately upon arrival in port. Lately, however, the grievances have been put forward at the last minute, which has caused serious inconvenience and had the appearance of having been engineered for the purpose of delaying the sailings.'<sup>128</sup>

This was a carefully thought out strategy, the report noted, because the ship owners would have difficulty replacing the lascars with any other workers at wages quite as low.

The end of the 1920s marked the end of a labour internationalism and the beginning of a decade of pan-colonial internationalism that was less directly organised and supervised by the Profintern.<sup>129</sup> Stalin's ascension to power in the Soviet Union in 1925 marked a turning point. For the first few years, he sought to entrench his clique in power by preventing, through the communist parties worldwide,

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Michele L. Luoro, "'Where National Revolutionary Ends and Communist Begins' The League against Imperialism and the Meerut Conspiracy Case," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 33, no. 3 (2013): 331–44.

other working class upheavals. In Britain, for instance, a national general strike in 1926 was channelled into the 'safe' course of following the moderate trade union leadership. In China, the communists were ordered to join the nationalist Kuomintang, with the result that a workers' uprising was drowned in blood by Chang Kai Shek, who had been celebrated in communist propaganda as an ally and hero. For the rest of the colonial world, similar 'alliances' between the nationalists and communists were promoted. To give these alliances an institutional form, the 'League Against Imperialism' (LAI) was initiated in 1926 and inaugurated in 1927, bringing together a hundred and thirty-four organisations from thirty-seven countries, seventy of whom came from the colonies.<sup>130</sup> The LAI's aim was to assist the more ambitious sections of the nationalists to develop a policy of complete freedom, as opposed to home-rule or dominion status within the empire.<sup>131</sup> Within the Indian National Congress, Nehru used this international backing, along with local support from the Communist Party of India, which had been calling for complete independence since 1922, to pass a motion in its favour. What is important for our purposes here is that it intertwined with an organisation in Britain that was to seek influence among lascars. This was the India League, with V.K. Krishna Menon at its head in England.

The project of the LAI was suspended by two processes. One process originated in the Comintern. With the defeat of the armed Chinese workers' movement, all cooperation between communists and nationalists was suspended in what was called the 'Third Period' (1928-1933).<sup>132</sup> Another process was initiated by the colonial government in India; that of a political show trial in the Meerut Conspiracy Case. With the highly publicised arrests of the main Indian organisers of

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<sup>130</sup> Michele Luoro, 'India and the League Against Imperialism' in Ali Raza, Franziska Roy and Benjamin Zachariah (eds.) *The Internationalist Moment: South Asia, Worlds and World Views, 1917-1939*. P. 31.

<sup>131</sup> Luoro, "'Where National Revolutionary Ends and Communist Begins.'"

<sup>132</sup> Luoro, "'Where National Revolutionary Ends and Communist Begins'" .

the Profintern network, including Nalini Gupta and M.N. Roy, the international networks that had been constructed in the early 1920s was effectively dismantled.<sup>133</sup> As proof of the international political dimensions of the network set up in under a decade, the magistrate presiding over the case, Mr Milner White, listed sixty-three bodies and individuals ‘resident out of India’ that were associated with the charge of plotting to overthrow the government.<sup>134</sup>

The end of the ‘Third Period’ in 1933 – with the coming to power of Hitler in Germany – did not, however, resuscitate the labour internationalism of the early 1920s. On the contrary, it led to ‘anti-fascist’ alliances between the communists and imperial governments in Britain and France. Reiner Tosstorff has recently argued that ‘the successive strategies pursued by the RILU the (Red International of Labour Unions, i.e., the Profintern) in the course of its existence always followed changes in the line adopted by ... the Comintern’.<sup>135</sup> He shows how, with the rise of fascism in Germany, the Comintern steered towards rapprochement with the French and British governments, seeking a coalition against an imminent attack by Hitler against the Soviet Union.<sup>136</sup> The rapprochement took the form of Popular Fronts of the Communist Parties with all centre-ground parties against the right-wing. As a gesture of goodwill, the Comintern instructed the Profintern-affiliated trade unions to dilute its labour internationalism of the previous period in favour of national ‘democracy’.<sup>137</sup> As a supplementary gesture of goodwill to the colonial powers of Britain and France, the Comintern also abandoned the emphasis on colonial oppression by the British and

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<sup>133</sup> Stolte, “Trade Unions on Trial: The Meerut Conspiracy Case and Trade Union Internationalism, 1929-32”; Carolien Stolte and Michele L. Luoro, “The Meerut Conspiracy Case in Comparative and International Perspective,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 33, no. 3 (2013): 310–15.

<sup>134</sup> Proceedings of the Meerut Conspiracy Case.

<sup>135</sup> Reiner Tosstorff, *The Red International of Labour Unions (RILU) 1920 - 1937* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid; Broué, *The German Revolution, 1917-1923*.

French governments. Marika Sherwood notes that ‘at the 7th Congress (of the Comintern) in July 1935 demands for struggle for the independence of colonial peoples were replaced by less contentious calls for joint action with the national bourgeoisies against imperialism.’<sup>138</sup> In 1937, the Profintern itself was disbanded.

Owing to the abandonment of an emphasis on labour internationalism, political activists from the colonies who had worked within the Profintern channels were left alienated. While often retaining their personal membership of the Communist Parties in Europe, their activities towards colonial subalterns were organised independently of the Profintern networks and more through community networks in various port cities. Their internationalism shifted emphasis to pan-colonial solidarities, while retaining a central role for colonial labour in their conception of the anti-colonial movement. The emphasis on labour gained weight also from the nature of these organisations, which were rooted in diasporic communities of working class South Asians. We have seen in the previous chapter that the growing numbers of lascars deserters and pedlars were mobile across Britain, but tended to gravitate towards areas which had factories engaged in war production. These were mainly in the Midlands, and produced concentrations of Bengali and Punjabi settlers in Birmingham, Coventry, Bradford, Newcastle, Manchester and Sheffield, but also in ports like Glasgow and Southampton. By 1942, a rough estimate put their numbers employed in industry at 3,000.<sup>139</sup> Their presence changed the orientation of political activists; political activity of Europe-based émigrés in the 1920s had focussed on transient lascars, whereas political organisations now focused on their ‘settler’ communities.

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<sup>138</sup> Marika Sherwood, “The Comintern, the CPGB, Colonies and Black Britons, 1920–1938,” *Science & Society* 60, no. 2 (1996): 139.

<sup>139</sup> ‘Indian Workers’ Union or Association: Reports on Members and Activities’. 1942-1947. IOR/L/PJ/12/645.

With growing settlements in Britain from the mid-1930s, political activism began to develop among the settler communities. An Indian Political Intelligence file noted in 1942 that ‘communist and anti-British Propaganda amongst Indian pedlars and unemployed lascars, etc., in the East End of London has increased greatly during the past few weeks.’<sup>140</sup> The propagandists were twelve unemployed Indians, and ‘much of this work is being carried out in the Hindustani Social Club and the Hindustani Community House,’ both institutions run by one Surat Alley, an Indian from Orissa and a member of the British Communist Party.<sup>141</sup> The Club in Tower Hamlets even mobilised international networks of artists and intellectuals in its favour. In 1939, the world-renowned dancer Ram Gopal held a charity performance on its behalf in the Vaudeville Theatre, Strand.

Lascars could also have political encounters in their very places of lodging. Those who lived at the Indian Sailors’ Home at London’s Victoria Dock Road would encounter its proprietor, Syed Taffi Aley, who was ‘bitterly anti-British, and takes every opportunity of propagating his views among the lascars who stay at the Home’, urging them ‘to get as much as possible out of the British shipping companies now that Britain is at war’. It was said that he ‘also encourages communist propaganda at his boarding house. He said that his contact with lascar crews had made it clear to him that they received much better treatment on German and Italian ships than they did on British vessels, where they were regarded as animals.’<sup>142</sup> Thus, whether on ship, in docks or at their boarding houses, lascars encountered this propaganda.

The second period of interweaving of political activists and seafarers began in the mid-1930s in London’s ethnically-mixed seafarers’ dockside boarding houses. In

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid..

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Indian Seamen: Reports on Unrest and Welfare and Union Activities’, November 1939-January 1945. IOR/L/P&J/12/630.

1935, Surat Alley joined two Trinidadian activists, Chris Braithwaite and George Padmore, in organising the Colonial Seamen's Association in response to the introduction of the British Shipping (Assistance) Act, which restricted the number of non-British seamen on ships receiving governmental subsidies. The mobilisation by the Association, which united Caribbean, African, Arab, Indian and Chinese seamen, was successful, along with a general outcry in India against the Act, as well as an economic recovery, in having the Act repealed in 1936. Alley, who by some accounts had been a lascar himself, was a member of the Communist Party in Britain, and was made Propaganda Secretary for Poplar in East London, where many lascars lived.<sup>143</sup> Braithwaite, too, had once served on ships and joined the Communist Party, but like Padmore, had left in frustration against the Comintern 'line' to support the 'democratic' imperialist governments against the fascist, which, in practice had translated into the dropping of the race and colonial questions. Shipping employers and police noted the effects of these efforts, and in a conference on seamen deserters, they raised the spectre of the liminal lascar, insidiously destabilising the moral, physical and political 'body' of the British nation. In a plaintive letter to the Home Office Alien's Department, the Board of Trade noted:

apart from the question of moral laxity, filth, drunkenness and disease, there is also a grave danger of politically minded Indians (and there are many in Birmingham and Coventry) organising these Indian seamen and using them directly or indirectly against the interest of Britain.<sup>144</sup>

Notwithstanding the familiar trope of manipulative outsiders, their fears about political sedition among lascars were not unfounded.

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<sup>143</sup> 'Communist Party of Great Britain: Reports on Members and Activities'. 1939-1944. Public and Judicial Department, APAC. IOR/L/PJ/12/384.

<sup>144</sup> 'Indian Workers' Union or Association: reports on members and activities', January 1942- July 1947. IOR/L/P&J/12/645.



The successes of these activists make for a telling contrast with the attempts of elite Indian politicians in influencing working class Indians in Britain. While recent scholarship on internationalism focuses to a great extent on nationalist leaders like Nehru and V.K. Krishna Menon, a focus on their relation to international subalterns in the same period reveals a their lack of success in gaining political influence.<sup>145</sup> V.K. Krishna Menon, who came to England as a student, and went on to become the Labour MP for the London Borough of St. Pancras and later independent India's first High Commissioner to Britain, has been studied as an individual Congressman who encapsulates the period of international fora from the League Against Imperialism to the United Nations.<sup>146</sup> In his bid to speak on behalf of Indians in Britain, Menon attempted to make links with Indian workers. Yet, while he had extensive contacts with Labour Party grandees like Stafford Cripps and Bernard Shaw, his attempts to develop influence over working class Indians, the majority of whom were ex-soldiers and lascars, met with little success. It was noted that he 'finds it difficult to make the necessary direct contacts with the lascar element and relies on Tahsil Miah to accomplish this for him.'<sup>147</sup> Tahsil Miah, whose real name was Abdul Oodoot, was a lascar who had been an activist in the Indian Seamen's Union, and deserted his ship at Liverpool in February 1938 but was deported to India in 1939.<sup>148</sup>

Despite the scholarly attention that Menon has received, he was, however, outdone in his efforts to influence working class South Asians by Surat Alley. While Menon's 'Social Centre' in east London's Whitechapel area, opened 'as a bait to

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<sup>145</sup> Michele L. Luoro, "'Where National Revolutionary Ends and Communist Begins'"; Michele L. Luoro, "India and the League Against Imperialism: A Special 'Blend' of Nationalism and Internationalism" in *The Internationalist Moment*, 22–55.

<sup>146</sup> Hall, "'Mephistopheles in a Saville Row Suit': V. K. Krishna Menon and the West"; McGarr, "'A Serious Menace to Security': British Intelligence, V. K. Krishna Menon and the Indian High Commission in London, 1947–52."

<sup>147</sup> 'Indian Seamen: Reports on unrest, welfare and union activities'. 1939-1945. IOR/L/P&J/12/630.

<sup>148</sup> 'Indian Seamen: Reports on unrest, welfare and union activities'. 1939-1945. IOR/L/P&J/12/630.

attract Indians in the East End' had 'largely failed in its purpose and [had] to close down', Alley 'aroused the jealousy of Menon' by organising a charity performance by the celebrated dancer Ram Gopal in the Vaudeville Theatre at Strand.<sup>149</sup> 'More galling than anything else to Menon' the same file noted, 'who is nothing if not ambitious, is the realisation of the fact that Surat Alley has apparently secured the recognition of the Indian Seamen's Union in Calcutta, which Menon imagined was virtually in his own pocket.'<sup>150</sup> It noted further that

in proportion as Surat Alley has attracted to himself more limelight, VK Menon who has been attempting to oust Surat Alley, has lost influence among the Indian seamen. The fact that he is a prospective Labour candidate for Parliament and has many connections in the House of Commons has availed him little. His only effective link with the East End and the Indian seamen was Tahsil Miya, since whose deportation to India such little influence as he had over the lascars has rapidly waned.<sup>151</sup>

Thus, while Menon's role in what may be called the 'proto-statist' international organisation of the LAI, as well as in the India League in Britain, has been much chronicled, this may lead to the assumption that he played an influential role in the political worlds of working class Indians in Britain.<sup>152</sup> As we see, however, this was not the case; the worlds of itinerant Indian workers in this case did not overlap with those of diasporic Indian nationalists even where the latter made efforts in this direction. Thus, seamen's anti-colonialism ran more or less in parallel with the efforts of elite nationalists at creating international alliances like the League Against Imperialism.

The Second World War in 1939 brought about intensified activity on the part of both lascars and political activists like Surat Alley. The declaration of war sparked

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> For instance, Rehana Ahmed makes this argument in Rehana Ahmed, "Networks of Resistance: Krishna Menon and Working-Class South Asians in Inter-War Britain," in *South Asian Resistances in Britain: 1858-1947*, ed. Rehana Ahmed and Sumita Mukherjee (New York: Continuum, 2012).

off a wave of strikes, with lascars walking off ships for war bonuses and pay increases. In the midst of the developing strike, these lascars drew closer to the network of outside activists. In a successful nine-day strike by lascars on the *SS Oxfordshire* in London's King George V Dock on 17 October 1939 which demanded double pay and the payment of a £10 war bonus 'the activities of two agitators named Surat Alley and Tahsil Miah' were noted.<sup>153</sup> The success of this strike spurred a series of strikes on other vessels: the *SS Clan Alpine*, the *City of Manchester*, the *SS Somali*, the *City of Capetown* and *City of Agra*. In order to spread the word, Alley and Miah prepared a number of cyclostyled leaflets explaining the reasons for the strikes and appealing for support. Some 200 copies of this leaflet were subsequently distributed among Indian seamen. It urged Indian seamen to strike unless they received double pay and a £10 war bonus and to boycott ships on which strikes had taken place. Echoing the allegations against Nathalal Jagjivan Upadhyay in the previous decade, an informer's report stated that 'these two men are endeavouring to ensure that every Indian lascar shall break his contract just before his ship is due to sail.'<sup>154</sup> Insinuating instigation, likely plausibly, an intelligence note pointed out that 'it will have been noticed that this is exactly what happened on the *City of Agra* and was threatened on the *City of Capetown*'.<sup>155</sup>

That the strike was not the handiwork of outside agitators alone, as the official records insinuated, is evidenced by the close collaboration of one lascar, M.A. Jalil, from the striking crew of the *SS Somali*, with Alley and Miah. According to the intelligence jottings, he was believed to have given 'considerable assistance to Surat

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<sup>153</sup> 'Indian Seamen: Reports on Unrest and Welfare and Union Activities, November 1939-January 1945.' IOR/L/P&J/12/630.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> 'Indian Seamen: Reports on Unrest and Welfare and Union Activities, November 1939-January 1945.' IOR/L/P&J/12/630.

Alley and Tahsil Miah in their propaganda campaign.’<sup>156</sup> Jalil spoke at a meeting organised by Alley in London’s Whitechapel district to air the grievances of Indian seamen. Eighty persons were present, among them fifteen of the crew of the ship *Mulbera* of the British India line which was to go on strike two weeks after this meeting.<sup>157</sup> At the meeting, he said his crew had decided to strike because on arrival in the Thames they had been informed by a representative of the All India Seamen’s Federation (AISF) of the disparity in their conditions of service when compared with those of seamen on other ships. Surat Alley also spoke, drawing the larger links between their immediate actions, their repercussions and colonialism, and declared that ‘within three and a half months of the outbreak of the war, 150 Indian seamen had lost their lives from enemy action and 500 had been imprisoned by the British authorities in various parts of the Empire merely because they demanded reasonable wages to cover war risks.’<sup>158</sup>

The start of the war also saw the beginnings of political activity among other concentrations of working class Indians in Britain, particularly in the Midlands where, as we have seen in the previous chapter, many ex-lascars had settled. The community of ex-seamen and soldiers who had worked as seamen on British contracts and pedlars in the Depression years, now began to work in the war industries, initially as construction labourers and then in munitions, aircraft and automobile industries. With the recovery of shipping and industry against the backdrop of the arms race, new arrivals began to expand the existing Indian communities. These new arrivals brought an urgent interest in Indian politics and the anticolonial movement. One event in particular galvanised the Indian anti-colonial groupings in Britain: Udham Singh’s assassination in 1940 of Michael O’ Dwyer, who had been governor of Punjab during

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in 1919, in which General Dyer opened fire on peaceful protesters, killing hundreds.<sup>159</sup> Udham Singh's act, moreover, encapsulated a whole period of history, spanning revolutionary terrorism, communism and nationalism. Having served as a soldier abroad from 1917 to 1919, Singh is said to have witnessed the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in April 1919.<sup>160</sup> He left for Africa some time in 1920, then returned to Amritsar before leaving again for California in 1922 via London.<sup>161</sup> There, Singh joined the Ghadar party in 1924, returned to India in 1927 and been influenced by Bhagat Singh, and returned to Britain in 1934, where he worked as an electrician and lodged with Surat Alley in London. On trial, Singh proclaimed:

He (O' Dwyer) deserved it. He was the real culprit. He wanted to crush the spirit of my people, so I have crushed him. For full 21 years, I have been trying to wreak vengeance. I am happy that I have done the job. I am not scared of death. I am dying for my country. I have seen my people starving in India under the British rule. I have protested against this, it was my duty. What a greater honour could be bestowed on me than death for the sake of my motherland?<sup>162</sup>

In July 1934, Singh was hanged in Pentonville Prison. Despite Singh's professedly pre-meditated and politically motivated assassination, Mohandas Gandhi condemned the shooting as an 'act of insanity.'<sup>163</sup> For this, Gandhi was denounced by the Hindustan Socialist Republican Army, an organisation which was formed in Punjab in 1924 with connections to the Ghadar Party in the USA.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> 'Indian Workers' Union or Association: Reports on Members and Activities'. 1942-1947. Public and Judicial Department. IOR/L/P&J/12/645.

<sup>160</sup> Louis E. Fenech, "Contested Nationalisms; Negotiated Terrains: The Way Sikhs Remember Udham Singh 'Shahid' (1899-1940)," *Modern Asian Studies* 36, no. 4 (2002): 832.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>162</sup> 'Defendant: Udham Singh. Charge: Murder'. Records of the Criminal Court – Depositions. The National Archives, Kew, CRIM 1/1177.

<sup>163</sup> *Harijan*, 15 March 1940.

<sup>164</sup> 'Indian Workers' Union or Association: Reports on Members and Activities'. 1942-1947. Public and Judicial Department, IOR/L/P&J/12/645.

This episode led to a grouping of relatively new working class arrivals from India into the Indian Workers Union (henceforth IWU) in 1938.<sup>165</sup> Among them were Punjabi emigrants with Ghadar sympathies, like Charan Singh Cheema, the nephew and ‘ardent follower’ of the Punjabi Ghadar leader Karm Singh Chima, who arrived in the UK in 1938 and lived in Coventry working as a pedlar and then builder’s labourer.<sup>166</sup> The intelligence file on him noted that ‘from the outset he was interested in Communism and took advantage of his opportunities in England to study Communist literature which was banned in India. Some of this he endeavoured to send to India for translation into...Punjabi’, thus creating a new trail in the circulation of subversive literature.<sup>167</sup> The month that Udham Singh was hanged in London, Cheema found work at an aircraft factory in Coundon, Coventry, and became a member of the local Communist Party group. He frequently attended the local Communist gatherings and was also believed to have been the vice-president of the Indian Workers’ Union, ‘the organisation in which his scheme for a U.K. branch of the Ghadar Party took shape.’<sup>168</sup> Sometime during 1941 Cheema was sent by his employers to work in an aircraft factory at Gloucester. Here there were few or no Indians, but ‘he soon interested himself in the local Communist Party and resumed active membership.’<sup>169</sup>

Although the IWU started among working-class Punjabis in Britain, the organisation was open to all Indians with ‘no distinction of caste or creed’, perhaps in line with the early influence of the IWW on the Ghadarites. Thus, among its leading lights were a Punjabi Muslim, Akbar Ali Khan, who it was noted, was ‘completely

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> ‘Indian Workers’ Union or Association: Reports on Members and Activities’. 1942-1947. Public and Judicial Department, IOR/L/P&J/12/645.

westernised and a Muhammedan in name only’, lived in a Sikh establishment and could read and write Gurmukhi.<sup>170</sup> The other active organiser was Thakur Singh Basra, who was also ‘similarly westernised and a Sikh in name only.’<sup>171</sup> The third was a Hindu ‘Madrasi’, V.S.S. Sastry. The IWU was unanimously against communal divisions. One member, Jagdish Rai, said ‘the Hindu-Muslim question had been created by the British rulers.’<sup>172</sup> Another, Dr. Diwan Singh, denied that Hindus and Mohammedans were incapable of agreeing with each other and said that ‘if the British were turned out the factions would not quarrel among themselves.’<sup>173</sup> A Bengali attendee at their meetings opined that ‘the Muslim League and Hindu Mahasabha were puppets of the government. The Indian National Congress was the only body which represented India as a whole.’<sup>174</sup> Another, Sadhu Singh of Bradford said ‘Indians had to fight for freedom, and should give up silly ideas of fighting for religion.’<sup>175</sup> Against the background of a growing rift between the Congress and the Muslim League in India, the adoption of the Pakistan resolution in 1940 and the support of the Muslim League for the war, the ideas of the IWU on Hindu-Muslim unity stood in stark contrast to those of the nationalist leadership.

The first loose groupings of the IWU were formed around individuals like Cheema in Birmingham, Bradford and Coventry. But the structure remained informal, and despite the enthusiasm of the members, lacked a coherent direction and vision. A report noted, ‘The rather ineffective groupings of the men who were endeavouring to lead the movement ceased in October 1941, when the then secretary, one Muhammad

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

Amin Aziz, retired in favour of an extremely able Madrasi named V.S.S. Sastry.<sup>176</sup> Velalla Srikantaya Seshagiri Sastry, a 24-year old Tamilian, arrived in the UK in 1936 to study journalism. Unable to find a job with a news agency, he found work in a Daimler car factory where he became a union shop steward, and then became an Inspector in the Gauge Control Department in the BSA cycle works in Birmingham. In 1940, he began taking an evening course in economics and, it was noted, developed 'a keen interest in Trotskyism and was propagating these views among his fellow workers' and was seen selling the Trotskyist newspaper, *Socialist Appeal*. When the IWU was formed in Coventry, 'he had already begun to take an interest in educating the Indian worker politically with a view to preparing him for the task of bringing about a social, economic and political revolution in India.'<sup>177</sup> Now the IWU offered a wider opportunity to pursue this line of activity. Before long, he was serving as Secretary of the IWU and endeavouring to 'open branches all over the country.'<sup>178</sup> As a result of his efforts, branches were established in Wolverhampton, Manchester and Newcastle-on-Tyne. The Home Office put him on a list of people marked for internment in case of a German invasion. It noted, 'Sastry is probably the most dangerous Indian in the Midlands though he is anti-Fascist. He is dangerous not because of the particular views he holds, but because he has considerable organising ability and seems to be able to infect others with his own enthusiasm.'<sup>179</sup> Under Sastry's stewardship, the IWU made 'considerable progress' in 1942, setting up new

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<sup>176</sup> 'Indian Workers' Union or Association: Reports on Members and Activities'. 1942-1947. Public and Judicial Department, IOR/L/P&J/12/645.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> 'Indian Workers' Union or Association: Reports on Members and Activities'. 1942-1947. Public and Judicial Department, IOR/L/P&J/12/645.



branches as well as organising weekly closed meetings and bi-monthly public meetings at which attendance ranged between 80 to 140 people.<sup>180</sup>

The organisation also had links with current and erstwhile seamen. While the organisation was strongest in Coventry where the majority of Indians were Punjabi, the second-largest branch was in Birmingham, where the population was predominantly made up of Bengali and Assamese ex-seamen.<sup>181</sup> Although meetings were conducted in Hindustani, Bengalis were noted as presences in the meetings: ‘one of the office-bearers of the Birmingham branch was believed to be Bengali,’ noted one intelligence report.<sup>182</sup> Apart from the Bengali lascars there were also Punjabi seamen. The police noted a tendency on the part of the Glasgow counterpart of the IWU to set themselves up as the representatives and advisers of ship deserters.<sup>183</sup> Indeed, one Punjabi ex-seaman, Jan Mohamed, was the President of the Birmingham branch of the IWU in 1943. In the previous year, the IWU and Surat Alley had moved closer together. There was talk of Surat Alley reviving the Hindustani Social Club and affiliating it to the IWU. The records noted that ‘hitherto his outlook has been strongly communist, but he is dissatisfied with the failure of the communist leaders to take a vigorous line on the question of Indian independence.’<sup>184</sup>

Based in the Indian working class in Britain, the IWU also maintained international links with other anticolonial organisations. Internationally, ‘a certain amount of correspondence passes between the IWU of Coventry and kindred organisations in Canada and the USA, and the money from these countries and Britain

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

is sent to P.C. Joshi (of the CPI) in India.’<sup>185</sup> There were also some attempts at working with Menon’s India League over their common aim of complete independence, and joint meetings were held at Bradford and Birmingham, but these were not successful and the two organisations continued to function in parallel. An intelligence file, however, noted the different social composition and outlook of the IWU and the India League:

The main reason why the League and the Union are unable to join is that the former attracts the intelligentsia, whereas the latter is essentially a working-class movement. The League conducts its proceedings in English, its membership is largely English and its propaganda is directed towards converting the English public, particularly that section of it which is able to influence Parliament in favour of support of the Indian independence movement. Membership of the IWU is open only to Indians, a large number of whom are illiterate, and the proceedings of the Union normally take place in Punjabi and Bengali.<sup>186</sup>

Thus the political networks with which the movement of lascars intertwined in the 1930s had similarities and differences with those of the preceding decade. While many the main organisers of the IWU and Hindustan Club continued to be affiliated to communist organisations, they received less official assistance from these organisations for their activities. Like their counterparts of the 1920s, they continued to involve themselves with lascars on strike. In this, they met with greater success than the nationalist leaders. Unlike the 1920s, however, these networks were more local and community-based than stretched across international ports. This was in part owing to the withdrawal of support from the Profintern and its final disbandment, but also to the change in lascars’ own geographical worlds; whereas in the 1920s they had been more transient presences in international ports, by the 1930s, concentrations of resident ex-lascars provided a base for political activities centred in these cities.

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<sup>185</sup> ‘Indian Workers’ Union or Association: Reports on Members and Activities’. 1942-1947. Public and Judicial Department, IOR/L/P&J/12/645.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

Consequently, political activists in these communities were more organically linked to these communities than they were in the previous decade.

Apart from the scale and associations of these networks was the political imagination which they espoused, which combined elements of the labour internationalism of the previous decade with a pan-colonial consciousness which envisioned the anti-colonial movement at the scale of the whole colonial world. For instance, on what was celebrated as 'Empire Day' in 1940 to commemorate the establishment of British colonialism in India, Surat Alley brought out a news bulletin which generalised the political aspects of colonialism from India to all the British colonies. Printed in Urdu and Bengali for the lascars population of East London, it placed the struggle against the British in India at the scale of colonial oppression across the British empire. It read:

[T]he peoples of Africa, the Arabs in Palestine, the Malayans in Singapore and our compatriots in Jamaica and Trinidad who endure the oppressions of the British Government, all know that until the British Government is ended there will be no peace or tranquillity in the world. Therefore on this day we ought... to think of upsetting the British Government in India.<sup>187</sup>

This wide geographical scope of the critique of British imperialism would have resonated with lascars' own first-hand experiences of calling at different ports in the colonial world. Lascars also worked alongside Sierra Leonians, Yemenis, Trinidadians, Malayans and Chinese and thus had opportunities to compare their own working conditions as well as the colonial contexts from which they came. This reference to the 'Malayans in Singapore', moreover, comes merely two years before the fall of Singapore to the Japanese, which affected the routes plied by lascars, and

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<sup>187</sup> 'Indian Workers' Union or Association: Reports on Members and Activities'. 1942-1947. Public and Judicial Department, IOR/L/P&J/12/645.

six years before a lascars' strike in solidarity with the 'Malayans' and Indonesians who were fighting against the restoration of Anglo-Dutch power on their island.<sup>188</sup>

Like Surat Alley's pamphlet on the war which referenced subjugation in across the colonial world, the IWU's meetings also expressed a profound consciousness of the effects of British colonialism in other parts of the world, and the necessity for practical solidarity of Indians for their colonial brethren. Moreover, these meetings and leaflets, gave the Second World War a political meaning. At a meeting of 140 Indians in East London, for instance, one Akbar Ali Khan of Coventry said,

both in this war and the last [Indians] had fought for this country (Britain) in Basra, Egypt and Persia, in fact wherever the British had wanted to make other countries slaves. When Indians can fight for another nation to make slaves, then they can fight for themselves....Not only did the Indian people intend to win back their own land but they intended to assist other oppressed nations to achieve independence.<sup>189</sup>

Against the conception of a civilisational war of democracy versus fascism, Khan pointed to Britain's tyranny in many regions of the world:

the Indian people were aware now that they had nothing to expect from the British who had allowed the rape of Abyssinia and Czechoslovakia and other countries in order that England's own Imperialist system could be perpetuated. ...the existing British government...enforced a dictatorship in India of a more severe character than any European or Eastern dictatorship, and also held dictatorial sway in Africa.<sup>190</sup>

What is significant here is not only Khan's expression of solidarity with other colonies but his reference to the reluctance – and occasional refusal – of Indian soldiers to fight against their 'Muslim brothers' and the Ottoman empire on grounds of religious solidarity in the First World War. He went on to emphasise the role of

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<sup>188</sup> Goodall, "Port Politics: Indian Seamen, Australian Unions and Indonesian Independence, 1945-47."

<sup>189</sup> 'Indian Workers' Union or Association: Reports on Members and Activities'. 1942-1947. Public and Judicial Department. IOR/L/P&J/12/645.

<sup>190</sup> 'Indian Workers' Union or Association: Reports on Members and Activities'. 1942-1947. Public and Judicial Department, IOR/L/P&J/12/645.

Indian soldiers and sailors in fighting for the freedom of other colonies. That his sentiment was not his alone is evidenced by lascar strikes in support of the Indonesian anti-colonial movement in 1945, but also by the demand for the withdrawal of British troops (which included Indian soldiers) from Indonesia raised during the Royal Indian Navy mutiny in 1946.<sup>191</sup>

Other speakers at IWU meetings explicitly combined this growing pan-colonialism with a labour internationalism. Fenner Brockway of the Independent Labour Party, which had been represented at the League Against Imperialism, said:

The Africans and Arabs were now starving as were the peoples of India....The issue before the end of this war will not merely be between German Nazism and British and American imperialism, but a great third movement will come, a rising of the common people of the whole world, of Indians, Arabs and Negroes – a movement of the people of West Indies, of all the people in Europe, a movement with which the workers of Britain must identify themselves. This will be the front of common people of all countries against oppression of all kinds.<sup>192</sup>

Brockway's words exemplify the spirit of connectedness in this period. Here, the fates of the colonial peoples were inseparable from those of the workers in Britain. In a sign of the growing importance of anti-colonial struggles in 1942, another speaker, belonging to the Workers International League, a Trotskyist organisation in Britain, presented the Quit India movement as the one which could bring down imperialism and thus play the role in the Second World War that the Russian revolution had played in the first. He said that the Quit India movement

held out hope for the workers of the world....[It's success] would mean for the British workers that the greatest blow...had been struck against their Imperialist masters....India would free herself and strike a blow for workers the world over...and by doing so would help to free themselves from all forms

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<sup>191</sup> Dipak Kumar Das, *Revisiting Talwar: A Study in the Royal Indian Navy Uprising of February 1946*; Banerjee, *The RIN Strike*; Bose, *RIN Mutiny, 1946: Reference and Guide for All*.

<sup>192</sup> 'Indian Workers' Union or Association: Reports on Members and Activities'. 1942-1947. Public and Judicial Department, IOR/L/P&J/12/645.

of Imperialism so that all could join hands in a world commune where there would be no exploitation.<sup>193</sup>

These references to ‘workers of the world’ and a ‘world commune’, thus, point to a consciousness in these meetings of the interconnectedness of the future of the world, an observation that has thus far been made only with regard to the literati of the so-called ‘internationalist moment’ but not subalterns.

While internationalism during the war was overlaid with tones of pan-colonial solidarity, earlier inflections of labour solidarity from the 1920s remained. For instance, a leaflet titled ‘Indian Seamen and the War’, on which the lascar M.A. Jalil’s signature also appeared alongside Alley’s and Miah’s, made an effort to underline networks of working-class support that cut across the racial divide, saying:

In their fight the Indian seamen are rapidly finding allies. In London, dockers and seamen showed their sympathy with the crew of the *SS Oxfordshire* when they struck, contributing their pennies to help the strikers. Workers on shore are also taking a keen interest in the matter. The Trades Councils of Shoreditch and Stepney have passed resolutions wholeheartedly supporting the demands of the Indian seamen, and demanding the release of the crew of *SS Clan Alpine*.<sup>194</sup>

To raise consciousness amongst the British labour movement and workers about colonialism in India, Alley gave speeches at meetings organised by the CP. One in 1940 was attended by about 350 people. From 1943, Alley also published a monthly news bulletin titled ‘Indian Worker’ in Urdu, which contained news of the movements of workers and peasants in India, but also from other parts of the world, thus fostering a wider imagination of the political movement against colonialism.<sup>195</sup> For his part, Sastry also underlined the need for active cooperation between the IWU and British

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<sup>193</sup> ‘Indian Workers’ Union or Association: Reports on Members and Activities’. 1942-1947. Public and Judicial Department, IOR/L/P&J/12/645.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> ‘Indian Workers’ Union or Association: Reports on Members and Activities’. 1942-1947. Public and Judicial Department, IOR/L/P&J/12/645.

workers. In 1942, he published 'An Appeal to Indian Workers' which pointed out the potential future significance of the Quit India movement:

the Indian workers are playing an increasingly important role in the movement for national liberation...Groaning under tremendous burdens, they are fully awake today. We in England...should assist them in their struggle...It is the purpose of the IWU to struggle against those hardships and play its part in the British Labour movement.<sup>196</sup>

Sastry also urged the importance of winning British workers to the cause of Indian freedom. It was perhaps on his urging that on the May Day march of 1942 in Coventry a contingent of 'well over a hundred Indians marched with banners flying and were awarded the trophy offered by the local Communist Party for the most striking display.'<sup>197</sup> In this, they also received some support from British trade unionists, such as an official who told an IWU meeting that 'the trade union movement needs more education regarding the Indian problem and if you join our movement, you can do much to educate the English workers'.<sup>198</sup>

The IWU envisioned an important and active role for labour in the anti-colonial movement. One Gurbaksh Singh of Bradford spoke from the standpoint of a war production worker at Messrs George Cohen Sons and Co. in Stanningly, near Leeds, saying, 'what we will get after the war will be something worse than the Rowlatt Act which we got after the last war. We will be fools if we trust their promises. We should get together and not beg, but demand, our freedom.'<sup>199</sup> The discussions on the participation of subalterns was practical and urgent. In all the meetings of the IWU, there was a clear sense of Indian independence being close at hand, particularly after the Quit India Movement and the defeat of the British at the

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid

<sup>199</sup> 'Indian Workers' Union or Association: Reports on Members and Activities'. 1942-1947. Public and Judicial Department, IOR/L/P&J/12/645.

hands of the Japanese in South East Asia in 1942. There were lively discussions on the means to attain this independence, often endorsing the use of individual and collective violence against the colonial state. Most members speaking at IWU meetings eulogised Udham Singh's assassination of O' Dwyer, in which Ghadars' distant *goonj* (echo) was to be heard. Against the background of the Quit India movement in the subcontinent and the formation of the Indian National Army abroad, many speakers also repudiated Gandhi's 'old policy' in favour of Bhagat Singh's, which was short-hand for the debate between non-violence and direct action to overthrow colonialism.<sup>200</sup> Karm Singh sang a Punjabi poem about 'India producing brave men – those who did not care for their own lives so as to get freedom for all. Udham Singh was such a brave man....All Indians should be like that and should not stop even at any cost.'<sup>201</sup> Kartar Singh Nagra recited his poem which talked about how 'Indians should put their ploughs and yokes away, and bring out their guns and fight for freedom.'<sup>202</sup> Others proposed organising strikes to sabotage war production, thus reflecting the IWU's social composition as well as the involvement of communist activists. A majority of the IWU also became involved in an anti-conscription campaign in order to undermine the war effort. Thakur Singh Basra of Coventry, for instance 'a Sikh who has shaved his beard, 42 years old, bespectacled' had been a sepoy in the 38<sup>th</sup> Rifles Frontier Force in the First World War, moved to the UK in 1935, became a subscribing member of the 'Hindustan Ghadar...and believes in securing independence for India by force if necessary.' In 1942, he had refused to join the armed forces. He said he 'was willing to fight for freedom, but whose freedom?' In 1939, he toured the length and breadth of Britain to raise funds for Udham Singh's defence and 'took advantage of these visits to advise Indians to stand firm on the

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid. *Ghadar ki Goonj* was the name of the Ghadar Party newspaper.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.



subject of national service and to claim it was against their religious scruples to take part in military training... They claimed to be members of obscure sects regarding which Appeals Tribunals could not possibly have any knowledge.'<sup>203</sup> Figures like Basra's perhaps imbued anxious journalistic outpourings on the politically seditious pedlars from South Asia propagandising on the 'Indian cause'.

After Subhash Chandra Bose's turn to Germany and Hitler, the old paradigm of alliances with Britain's rivals seemed poised to return. Subhash's nephew in Britain, Amiya Nath Bose, initiated a break from India League called the Committee of Indian Congressmen. The IWU maintained cooperation with Amiya Bose, and the intelligence files note that 'though Bose has fascist leanings and Akbar Ali Khan and Thakur Singh Basra have hitherto been inclined to Communism, both parties discovered that their common denominator was hatred of British rule in India.'<sup>204</sup>

Although a Bengali interjector urged 'those present to join the Army in order that they might be trained to use weapons to fight their common enemy,' the general consensus within the IWU was, as the ex-lascar Jan Mohamed put it, 'We do not want the Japanese and we do not want the British.'<sup>205</sup> The decade of the mid 1930s till the end of the Second World War, thus, exposed lascars to ideas of pan-colonial internationalism which envisioned an anti-colonial movement at the scale of the whole colonial world. This imagination posited a central role for labour in this movement which incorporated the labour internationalism of the previous decade, but also practical aspects such as a refusal to enlist, and to take up weapons, the last of which was borrowed from an earlier Ghadarite imagination from the First World War.

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<sup>203</sup>'Indian Workers' Union or Association: Reports on Members and Activities'. 1942-1947. Public and Judicial Department, IOR/L/P&J/12/645.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

<sup>205</sup>'Indian Workers' Union or Association: Reports on Members and Activities'. 1942-1947. Public and Judicial Department, IOR/L/P&J/12/645.

While espousing the use of violence and mutiny, however, this imagination was explicitly opposed to religious violence between Indians.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that lascars' international mobility exposed them to 'counter global networks' of political organisations and activists that sought to undermine the structures of inequality in the international maritime workforce, as well as structures of colonialism. These structures produced different imagined futures for those with whom they engaged. There were two different phases and varieties of 'internationalism' in the first half of the twentieth century which combined the elements of labour and colonial emancipation in varying proportions. The early phase began with the support of rival Great Powers for anti-colonial groups in each others' colonies. These were small nuclei of activists which did not seek to engage with subalterns. The second phase opened with the Russian revolution, which orientated these small nuclei towards Indian subalterns, and activists began to approach lascars. These networks emphasised the identity of interests between colonial and non-colonial workers. This phase lasted until the late 1920s, when a series of arrests and the Stalinisation of the Soviet Union brought about a decline in the role of the Profintern and its emphasis on labour internationalism. The phase of the mid 1930s through to the Second World War saw the labour internationalism of the previous decade combined with a pan-colonial consciousness, which encompassed the geographical breadth of colonialism and was thus much broader than the imagination of the movement envisioned by the nationalist leadership of the Congress and Muslim League. Subaltern internationalism also differed from that of the elite in its emphasis on the role of labour in overthrowing colonialism and this, at the scale of the colonial

world. Moreover, while imagining the use of violence in this movement, its use was directed against the colonial state and not towards internecine religious violence.

Through each of these phases, these ideas were not external to lascars, nor were the latter ‘manipulated’ or duped into participating in these political networks. On the contrary, individual memoirs of sailors testify to the fact that many of their own personal observations and thoughts on class, race and colonialism accord with those of the political articulations of the time, whether pan-Islamist, syndicalist, communist, anti-colonial and/or pan-colonial. Their first-hand observations of these global structures, and of different colonialisms, made their understanding of them more generalised than most South Asians whose experiential worlds were relatively circumscribed. Throughout the interwar period, which has been called an ‘internationalist moment’, new languages and imaginations of political mobilisation emerged that were broader than, the discourse of Indian independence, and were not reducible to the project to construct a nation state. Thus, just as lascars’ experiential worlds were not nationally bounded, neither were their political worlds. The ports they called at were not only nodes in the movement of people and goods, but also in ideas, and lascars themselves were the living links in their international circulation. While this and the previous chapters have focused more on the ideas of the lascars, the next two chapters will focus on their actions, from quotidian shipboard contestations to the formation of collective organisations.

## Chapter Three: Authority and Contestation

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This chapter shifts focus from the international ports through which the lascars circulated to the ships on which they voyaged and laboured. It argues two things: firstly, that the larger structures of race, class and colonialism were inscribed onto the structures of authority on the ship and secondly, that this authority was continuously fraught and contested in small, everyday forms of resistance which ‘snowballed’ into larger moments of resistance at certain moments, notably at the end of the First World War and the outbreak of the Second World War. I suggest that there was a continuum between these ‘small’ moments of contestation, which involved local authorities on ship and in port on the one hand, and ‘large’, public moments which engaged the colonial state on the other and saw lascar crews walking off many ships simultaneously. The ‘large’ moments, I propose, can be explained by the cumulative experience acquired by lascars in the interwar period through the ‘small’ moments of everyday contestation in ship and in port. Seen in this light, the naval mutiny at the end of the Second World War no longer appears as a flash-in-the-pan incident without precedent, but one which draws on the experiences of collectively contesting authority on ship and in port. I also explore the question of the extent to which political ideas informed their contestation. Although the relation of ‘politics’ to ‘resistance’ is richly documented in an instance such as the 1946 naval mutiny, it is more difficult to uncover from the sources for instances of everyday contestation. While we have seen in the previous chapter that lascars were engaged with political ideas and that political activists played a role in lascar strikes in 1939, however, it is worth posing the question. The chapter is divided into four sections. It begins with the layout of the steam ship, before going into the nature of labour in the different physical spaces of

the ship. It then goes on to look at the regimes of authority on board ship and finally at the forms of contestation by the lascars in the interwar years.

## Understanding subaltern resistance

### The scale of resistance

Studies of subaltern resistance tend to be divided between those of ‘large’ moments such as strikes, revolution and insurrection on the one hand, and ‘small’, everyday contestations on the other. Revisionist labour historians have questioned the focus on the more public moments that challenged governments, owing to their political repercussions, for presenting a picture in which ‘relations of power enjoy a rather uncomplicated and unchallenged life until moments of societal upheaval; and ... that in ‘normal’ times, the cultural practices and identities of the dominated remain firmly grounded in a terrain mapped by the dominant.’<sup>1</sup> They asked what was happening in times when mass upheavals and rebellions were not taking place, and shifted focus to the ‘more enduring, ‘everyday’ forms of resistance constantly present in the behaviours, traditions and consciousness of the subordinate’.<sup>2</sup> They also questioned the understanding of resistance as always overt and conscious. The seminal work in this respect was James C. Scott’s *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* which studied ‘non-confrontational’ forms of covert resistance.<sup>3</sup>

Writing histories of everyday resistance required the use of new kinds of primary sources. Unlike large moments of confrontation, uncovering the small forms of scattered, hidden resistance did not leave many traces in the official record and

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas E. Haynes and Gyan Prakash (eds.) *Contesting Power: Everyday Social Relations in South Asia* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985).

required an innovative use of sources. For instance, in *Weapons of the Weak*, Scott used ethnographic fieldwork among Malaysian peasants to probe their attitudes to authority and modes of ‘hidden’ and covert ‘everyday resistance’.<sup>4</sup> Veena Oldenburg, likewise, conducted oral interviews with courtesans in Lucknow.<sup>5</sup> Gyan Prakash used poetic traditions among the outcaste Bhuinya dependent agrestic labourers of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, collected a century apart by the author in the 1980s and a colonial official in the nineteenth century to argue that this enabled these bonded labourers to create a sense of autonomy.<sup>6</sup> Chandavarkar used oral evidence presented at the Textile Labour Enquiry Committee to show the ways in which mill workers’ small-scale forms of resistance scuppered the owners’ plans of rationalisation. In a rarer instance, Jacques Rancière, in his work on labourers in France, has used their own writings to show their views on labour and domination, and their yearnings for a world in which they would be released from the drudgery of mechanical work to do ‘things that exercise and enlarge the mind’.<sup>7</sup> It was these yearnings and an imagined future which informed their involvement in the revolutions of the century.<sup>8</sup>

In seeking to ‘fill in’ the picture of subaltern resistance outside of ‘large’ moments, however, these studies of subterranean streams of everyday resistance marked a departure – and indeed, a divorce – from moments in which this stream burst forth in open rebellion. To use this aqueous metaphor, these studies shifted focus to look at the drops that made up streams and oceans, but lost sight of tidal waves and even of periodic tsunamis. In this chapter, I bring both the ‘large’ and the

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<sup>4</sup> Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*.

<sup>5</sup> Veena Talwar Oldenburg, ‘Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow’, in Haynes and Prakash (eds.) *Contesting Power*, 23-61.

<sup>6</sup> Gyan Prakash, ‘Becoming a Bhuinya: Oral Traditions and Contested Domination in Eastern India’, in Haynes and Prakash (eds.) *Contesting Power*, 145-174.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Proletarian Nights: The Workers’ Dream in Nineteenth Century France* (London: Verso, 2011), 27.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

‘small’ moments into single focus, by looking at the ways in which the everyday resistances fed into the larger moments of strike and collective action which drew in the colonial state.

### **The forms of resistance**

Debates around the forms of subaltern resistance and consciousness have generally taken two approaches. While some scholars have argued for a pre-modern/pre-working class consciousness of authority and resistance which takes violent and atavistic forms of defiance on the one hand, others have argued for a modern, working class consciousness with legal and organised forms. For instance, Dipesh Chakrabarty saw violence among jute workers as the predominant form of resisting authority which he associated with a ‘pre-capitalist’ consciousness.<sup>9</sup> In his study of colonial Calcutta’s jute-mill workers, he assigned class consciousness to ‘the figure of the worker... [who had]...internalised and enjoyed formal freedom, the freedom of contract’, and bourgeois notions of equality; in other words, the English worker.<sup>10</sup> Since these notions were not hegemonic in South Asia, he argued, the labouring poor did not have a working-class consciousness, and consequently, its forms of resistance belonged to an earlier epoch of peasant rebellions which were characterised by violence and personalised attacks against figures of authority. On the other hand, Gopalan Balachandran’s study of Indian seamen’s protest in the steamship era argues that ‘acts of resistance by Indian seamen [were] firmly rooted in the law’ and that ‘there is no evidence of protests by Indian seamen turning ‘personalised’, ‘vengeful’ or ‘violent’ – manifestations of resistance that in the maritime context were associated

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<sup>9</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History: Bengal 1890-1940* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*,1.

with mutinies'.<sup>11</sup> In other words, both sides of the argument were following the binary of worker/peasant-artisan social origins, and mapping these on to modern/pre-modern forms of consciousness and legal/violent forms of resistance.

I would argue that these binaries in labour and subaltern histories derive from modernisation theories which measured the extent to which 'labour' was becoming fully 'committed' to industry by leaving behind its pre-industrial social attributes such as caste and religion and adopting 'modern' forms of organisation such as trade unions.<sup>12</sup> For instance, Frank Broeze, who inaugurated the study of lascar labour in the 1980s, called his a 'socio-industrial' study and asked 'to what extent they had torn themselves loose from their former social ties and loyalties', and related this to the 'development of Indian trade unionism'.<sup>13</sup> While formally rejecting modernisation theories, studies of subaltern agency nonetheless often adopted this teleological assumption by associating the development of a working-class consciousness with the development of capitalism.<sup>14</sup>

In fact, the history of lascar protest frustrates all such neat divisions between a 'pre-modern' age of violent and mutinous buccaneers and a 'modern' age of litigious trade unionists. Instances of violence and legal proceedings by lascars can be found across the three centuries that lascars were employed on Europe-going ships. In the age of sail, in which there were no stable organisations of lascars of the nature of

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<sup>11</sup> Gopalan Balachandran, 'Cultures of Protest in Transnational Contexts, 1886-1945', *Transforming Cultures eJournal* 3, No. 2 (2008): 15.

<sup>12</sup> For instance, Morris D. Morris, *The Emergence of an Industrial Labour Force in India* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965).  
asked 'how greatly have the sentiments of agricultural attachment, the religious tenets of caste and family, and the continued existence of rural occupations operated to limit the mobility of labour...into the factories of India?'. Morris D. Morris, *The Emergence of an Industrial Labour Force in India* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965), 2.

<sup>13</sup> Frank Broeze, 'The Muscles of Empire': Indian Seamen and the Raj, 1919-1939'. *International Economic and Social History Review* 18, no. 1 (1981): 43.

<sup>14</sup> Sukomal Sen, *Working Class of India: History of Emergence and Movement* (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi and Company, 1977).



trade unions, violence against ships' officers was widely recorded.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, however, Rozina Visram has also shown instances of lascars bringing legal cases against ship owners as early as 1795, when five lascars of the *Kent* pressed charges for overdue wages – and won their case.<sup>16</sup> Equally, Aaron Jaffer has demonstrated instances of shipboard strikes, or collective withdrawals of labour.<sup>17</sup>

As I will show in this chapter, protest on board the twentieth century steamship, even after the formation of trade unions, did not preclude the use of violence. Violence was often deployed in the twentieth-century maritime world, albeit not in Chakrabarty's sense of the only weapon available to subalterns, but through complex contestations over labour and markers of authority. Indeed, we often see the same crews resorting to collective withdrawals of labour, engaging in acts of violence and then making their case when taken to court. It is the issues that are contested that are central here; the forms of protest, in this respect, are circumstantial. Moreover, maritime history clearly demonstrates the limits of drawing a dichotomy between periods of 'pre-capitalist' violent protest and 'modern', legal forms of resistance. The international workforce provides a perfect case for comparison between colonial and metropolitan workers subjected to the same authority. Since Chakrabarty holds up the English working class as the polar opposite of the Asian, arguing that 'the notion of equality before the law was an essential ingredient of the culture...[of] the English working class', what were the forms of resistance of English sailors?<sup>18</sup> What emerges from a cursory search through ship logs show that instances of physical assaults by English seamen on their superiors happened no less frequently

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<sup>15</sup> Aaron Jaffer, *Lascars and Indian Ocean Seafaring, 1780-1860: Shipboard Life, Unrest and Mutiny* (Woodbridge and Rochester: The Boydell Press, 2015); Michael H. Fisher, 'Finding Lascar 'Wilful Incendiarism': British Ship-Burning Panic and Indian Maritime Labour in the Indian Ocean', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 35, no. 3 (2012): 596-623.

<sup>16</sup> Rozina Visram, *Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 19.

<sup>17</sup> Jaffer, *Lascars and Indian Ocean Seafaring*, 169.

<sup>18</sup> Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History*, 3.

than among lascars. This challenges Chakrabarty's claim of the exceptionalism of violent south Asian workers and its relation to their peasant outlooks.

At the same time, Balachandran's claim that 'personalised', 'vengeful' or 'violent' resistance was associated with mutinies needs to be qualified.<sup>19</sup> The development of a unionised workforce did not preclude mutinies, nor was violence the central feature of these mutinies, which often had more in common with industrial collective action. The distinguishing feature of the Royal Indian Navy mutiny was the shift in the centre of authority from the Admiralty to an elected strike committee as an alternate centre of command. A quarter of these men were lascars from the merchant ships who had prior experience of everyday resistance, collective action and even trade unionism. The relation between everyday resistance, collective action, trade unionism and mutiny, thus, needs to be seen in dynamic interaction. While this chapter will explore moments of everyday resistance and collective action, Chapter Four will examine trade unions and Chapter Five, mutiny.

### **The ship: An archival empty space?**

Colonial seafarers' histories are shrouded in silences, as Georgie Wemyss points out, at the archival and narrative levels. Recovering a picture of life on board the ship at sea, far from the direct gaze of state authorities, is even more challenging.<sup>20</sup> Clare Anderson has observed that ships often emerge as 'empty archival spaces' in the historical record, as they left archival traces only until they departed from one port and after they arrived at another.<sup>21</sup> As a result, studies have tended to focus on the

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<sup>19</sup> Gopalan Balachandran, 'Cultures of Protest in Transnational Contexts, 1886-1945', 15.

<sup>20</sup> Wemyss, "Littoral Struggles, Liminal Lives."

<sup>21</sup> Clare Anderson, "The Feringees are Flying - the ship is ours!': the convict middle passage in colonial South and Southeast Asia, 1790-1860' *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 42, no. 2 (2005): 143-186. Roland Wenzlhuemer and Michael Offermann, call the ship an archival 'black box'. Roland Wenzlhuemer and Michael Offermann, 'Ship Newspapers and Passenger Life Aboard

ship in port, in which police and court records predominate. There is, however, an emerging scholarly interest in the ship at sea. Martin Dusinger and Roland Wenzlhuemer have argued that while global history and connections are studied, the ships which enabled these connections have been elided.<sup>22</sup> Dusinger and Wenzlhuemer's focus on being 'in transit' emphasises not only the ways in which transit mediated the experience of arrival, departure and connection, but also that there was not one but many transits depending on the social and geographical origins of the passengers or crew on board specific ships and on specific routes.<sup>23</sup> This chapter focuses on the experience of the colonial crew on being in transit. It explores the experience of labouring on the ship, the regime of authority which enforced the performance of this labour, and the contestation of this authority as constitutive of their experience of global mobility. This on-board experience also fed into the ways in which reaching a port was experienced, whether with relief, rebellion or retribution.

But can sources be found to recover a history of shipboard life and relations of authority and resistance? And would these change our understanding of the forms of lascar resistance, whether legal or otherwise? The primary sources for this chapter come from three quarters: those created by the captain, the passengers and the lascars themselves.<sup>24</sup> The captains maintained ships' logbooks at sea, whose purpose was to record the most routine of matters with regard to the running of the ship: the

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Transoceanic Steamships in the Late Nineteenth Century', *Transcultural Studies*, 1 (2012) Katherine Foxhall, "White Men in Quarantine: Disease, Race, Commerce and Mobility in the Pacific, 1872," *Australian Historical Studies* 48, no. 2 (April 3, 2017): 244–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1031461X.2017.1293704>.

<sup>22</sup> Martin Dusinger and Roland Wenzlhuemer, "Editorial – Being in Transit: Ships and Global Incompatibilities," *Journal of Global History* 11, no. 02 (July 2016): 155–62.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Others have used shipboard sources from similar quarters. For instance, Paul A. Gilje, *To Swear like a Sailor: Maritime Culture in America, 1750–1850* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016). and Aaron Jaffer, *Lascars and Indian Ocean Seafaring, 1780-1860: Shipboard Life, Unrest and Mutiny* (Woodbridge and Rochester: The Boydell Press, 2015). Gilje uses ship logbooks, journals and sailors' 'yarns' and songs as shipboard sources. Jaffer uses logbooks and private voyage journals kept by passengers and officers.

geographical coordinates, the weather and the upkeep of the ship (whether the lifeboats had been checked, decks scrubbed, etc), technical faults and the cargo loaded and unloaded at each port of call. These made up the bulk of entries. The crew were generally entered in cases of injury, desertion or insubordination. These sources also record collective refusals to work, verbal and physical assaults by officers on lascars and vice versa. They often describe these tense moments, which sometimes include verbal exchanges during challenges to authority. Lastly, they note the amount that the lascar was fined for his misdemeanours. Interestingly, the accused seaman was allowed to answer to his charges, and occasionally these replies are also noted in the logbooks. Aaron Jaffer has conducted a study of shipboard life on eighteenth and nineteenth century sailing ships by piecing together information from sources such as ships' logbooks, private voyage diaries of captains and European passengers. His study has uncovered a spectrum of resistance, from collective avoidance of or refusals to work, to desertion, seizing the ship from the captain, attacking officers and burning the ship, the last of which Michael Fisher has also studied.<sup>25</sup> In this chapter I also employ ships' logbooks to uncover instances of collective refusals to work and violent confrontations between the officers and crew of ships.

While logbooks recorded instances of insubordination immediately upon their occurrence, I do not suggest that the immediacy of this record makes it transparent. The captain of the ship was liable to exaggerate an incident so as to better justify his own, or his junior officers', physical assault on lascars or to justify fines or attempts to have a troublesome crew imprisoned upon arrival in port. Likewise, while lascars were free to reply as they chose, an 'insolent' remark could incur further fines, so many of them would have had to hold their tongues and admit guilt. Nonetheless,

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<sup>25</sup> Jaffer, *Lascars and Indian Ocean Seafaring*; Fisher, 'Finding Lascar 'Wilful Incendiarism'.

some did not – there are replies that refuse to accept the fines, and warn that they would settle scores later.<sup>26</sup> Despite noting that ‘we know very little’ about ‘everyday’ forms of resistance at the workplace’ and that ‘not much direct information exists about relations between Indian crews and their European officers on board ship,’ Balachandran discounts the use of ship logs, arguing that they

record the exceptional rather than the routine...[They] might record instances of officers being punished for beating up their Indian crews. But in this case the more noteworthy incident from the point of view of the master of the ship and the log he kept was the punishment meted out to the officer, not the latter’s treatment of his victim.<sup>27</sup>

Yet, the drawback of the ‘exceptionalism’ of recorded resistance in ship logbooks could apply equally to land-based sources recording the transgression of authority. Moreover, the logbooks offer an important corrective to existing ‘land-bound’ archival sources and change the picture of the sites of resistance. For instance, because of his use of shore-based sources, Balachandran argues that collective contestations of authority usually took place usually in port upon arrival of the ship, close to its sailing, or when seamen were being transferred from one vessel to another.<sup>28</sup> By viewing these contestations in port in conjunction with those at sea, I show how protests on the ship and shore were intertwined and cannot be understood separately.

Nonetheless, ships’ logbooks are ultimately official sources and are coloured by the master’s anxiety to maintain order and authority at sea. While they reveal instances of ‘insubordination’ aboard ship, they cannot tell us about lascars’ subjective experience of the space of the ship and the regime of authority, nor about their motivations in contesting this regime and what ideas informed these contestations. To get a sense of lascars experiences of labour, authority and

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<sup>26</sup> Ship Logs. Board of Trade Papers, TNA. BT 99.

<sup>27</sup> Balachandran, ‘Cultures of Protest’, 53.

<sup>28</sup> Balachandran, ‘Cultures of Protest’, 46.

contestation on the ship, I use oral histories and the memoir of Amir Haider Khan, who worked as a lascar in the First World War.<sup>29</sup> As Ravi Ahuja points out, this memoir has this advantage of recording the ‘quotidian world of maritime labour *as sequentially experienced and interpreted*’ (emphasis in the original), while official sources record instances of ‘insubordination’ as ‘isolated, decontextualized, apparently random incidents’.<sup>30</sup> From the oral narratives, we get to explore lascars’ own experiences of the ships as workspaces, from which emerge leitmotifs of wonderment, fatigue, confinement and anxiety.

To understand the spaces of the steam ship, passengers’ accounts are invaluable. Intended as extended letters to family ashore, diary-writing on long ship voyages had become a well-established practice by the turn of the twentieth century. Andrew Hassam has studied the spread of shipboard diaries with European emigration to Australia in the mid-nineteenth century and argued that these played a role in allowing their authors to ‘retain a sense of never having left Britain’.<sup>31</sup> The practice of shipboard diary-writing developed further with passenger travel, whose greater predictability also brought a concomitant monotony. Confined on board the vessel, passengers ‘beguiled the monotony of the long voyage’, for which ‘diversions’ such as games, musical performances, fancy dress parties and publishing newspapers with ‘ship news’ were devised.<sup>32</sup> Jeffrey Auerbach has argued in *Imperial Boredom* that

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<sup>29</sup> Caroline Adams, *Across Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers: Life Stories of Pioneer Sylheti Settlers in Britain* (London: Eastside Books, 1987); Yousuf Choudhury, *Sons of the Empire: Oral History from the Bangladeshi Seamen who Served on British Ships During the 1939-45 War* (Birmingham: Sylheti Social History Group, 1995); Hasan Gardezi, (ed.), *Chains to Lose: Life and Struggles of a Revolutionary: Memoirs of Dada Amir Haider Khan* (Karachi: Pakistan Study Centre, University of Karachi, 2007).

<sup>30</sup> Ravi Ahuja, “A Freedom Still Enmeshed in Servitude: The Unruly ‘Lascars’ of the SS City of Manila or, a Micro-History of the ‘Free Labour’ Problem,” in *Working Lives and Worker Militancy: The Politics of Labour in Colonial India*, ed. Ravi Ahuja (New Delhi: Tulika, 2013).

<sup>31</sup> Andrew Hassam, *Sailing to Australia: Shipboard Diaries by Nineteenth-Century Emigrants* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1994).

<sup>32</sup> Harry Furniss, *P&O Sketches in Pen and Ink*. P&O Collection. National Maritime Museum, Greenwich. P&O/95/4; Wenzlhuemer and Offermann, ‘Ship Newspapers and Passenger Life’, 16.

this monotony, recorded in private confessions in the pages of diaries of imperial officials, belies the public propaganda by the same officials about the empire as a place of adventure, excitement and heroic exploits. While imperial officials were accustomed to distant lands and made frequent voyages between the ‘home’ and the colony – the seaborne predecessors of busy corporate jetsetters of our age of air travel – many passengers and tourists were not. For these occasional voyagers, an oceanic voyage was still a novel experience and, for this very reason, they write of the routine functioning of the ship with wonderment and an eye for detail. Jaffer points out that passenger diaries in the age of sail ‘commented on occurrences that many captains would have regarded as commonplace, including floggings, funerals, feasts, outbreaks of disease, and public acts of worship’.<sup>33</sup> The greater structural sophistication of the steamship, however, meant that many of these occurrences would take place out of sight of its passengers, for whom lascars continued to be picturesque figures as of old but were refigured in the mould of the colonial domestic servant.

With shipboard diary writing gaining in popularity, shipping companies by the turn of the twentieth century even began to produce diaries with company insignia to encourage the practice. The P&O archive at the Maritime Museum in Greenwich houses many such diaries, some of which I use in this chapter. Other diaries in the collection belong to European sailors who comment on life at sea, many of them in wartime. Taken together, these diaries are written, drawn and photographic observations on the daily life on the ship: the amusements, social life and also their view of the crew. Also part of this collection is P&O’s publicity material which includes, among other things, a booklet titled ‘Our Asian Crews’ and a book of

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<sup>33</sup> Jaffer, *Lascars and Indian Ocean Seafaring*, 25.

sketches by a passenger on board a P&O steamer from India to England which carried a lascar crew.

To understand the regime of labour, authority and discipline aboard ship, there are two more sources that give a close-up and almost aural insight into the commands which lascars would be given. First, we have training manuals and company rulebooks which minutely detail the tasks which they were expected to perform. Second are dictionaries written for officers commanding lascar crews, translating orders and ‘typical’ conversations from ‘*lascari*’, an Indian Ocean pidgin which incorporated elements of Gujarati, Urdu, Konkani, Bengali, English and Portuguese, into English. One such was called *Lascari Bât: A Collection of Sentences used in the Daily Routine of Modern Passenger Steamers, Where Lascars are carried as the Deck Crew; Also a Copious English-Lascari Vocabulary*. It was compiled by an officer, A.L. Valentini, who had served on P&O ships with lascar crew. The dictionary gives instances of work-related commands to scrub and wash the decks or paint the funnel, but also instances of conversations between an officer and lascar which set up expectations of the industrious/lazy or docile/disobedient lascar.

Bernard Cohn has pointed out the correspondence between the ‘command of language’ and the ‘language of command’, arguing that language acquisition for the colonial rulers was ‘necessary to issue commands, collect taxes, maintain law and order – and to create other forms of knowledge about the people they were ruling.’<sup>34</sup> The years after the Battle of Plassey and the establishment of Company rule in Bengal in the late eighteenth century, he shows, saw the inauguration of ‘

a program of appropriating Indian languages to serve as a crucial component in their construction of the system of rule.... This was the period in which the British were beginning to produce an apparatus: grammars, dictionaries,

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<sup>34</sup> Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 21.



treatises, class books, and translations about and from the languages of India.<sup>35</sup>

The lascari-English dictionaries can be seen in the same ‘investigative modality’, as Cohn calls it, of language allowing the creation of knowledge about the lascars as well as the issuing of orders and the ‘governance’, as it were, of the ship.

While looking at shipboard forms of authority and contestation, however, I do not see these in isolation from the shore. Discontent that was brewing between officers and men at sea often boiled over when the ship reached a port. In these instances, the lascars often walked off ship and the captain attempted to coerce them back either by the exercise of his own force or with assistance from the local police officials. In some instances, the lascars were taken to court and either made to return to ship and fined for disobedience, or else, sentenced to a term in prison. Pursuing a court case at the cost of mounting docking charges was expensive, however, and often captains chose to set sail leaving lascars behind. These lascars became public charges and were sometimes put into poor houses to await the next ship sailing for India. These cases are documented in local police records, parish and home office records. The proceedings in court were also reported by local newspapers, often playing on racist clichés.

### **The spaces of the steamship**

The spaces of the twentieth century steamship were marked by class, colonialism and gender. The technological transition from sail to steam and the building of iron – rather than wooden – ships allowed for the building of much larger vessels with a greater physical separation of spaces of labour and leisure. Earlier wooden ships had a fairly rudimentary division of space along class lines – sailors’ lives and work were

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<sup>35</sup> Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*.

carried out on the upper deck, where the passengers and officers were also quartered, and what was termed as cargo - sugar, rum, slaves, tea, ivory and tobacco - was stowed below. By contrast, modern steamships were divided vertically into a number of decks, like multi-storeyed buildings, with up to eleven decks. One British commentator called them 'modern leviathans', and indeed, the twentieth century steamship dwarfed the most celebrated ships of British history in which Drake and Nelson had sailed.<sup>36</sup> To illustrate the point, when James Lancaster landed the first English ships on the Indian coast in 1594, the biggest ship in his fleet had a carrying capacity of 350 tonnes. Three centuries later, at the end of the First World War, ships of 20,000-tonne capacity were being built.<sup>37</sup>

Changes in technology also brought about a change in the spatial ordering of the ship. The bottommost were occupied by heavy infrastructural components of the ship like the engines, boilers, furnaces, coal bunkers and the shafts to turn the propeller. It was here, in the bowels of the ship, that the engine room crew worked. To steady the ship, the weight of these machines was distributed with that of cargo in the lower holds, which were emptied and re-filled in different ports. At each port, the deck crew had to open hatches into the cargo holds and either carry out some cargo manually or operate hauling equipment like slings and cranes. This new spatial organisation resembled Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*, where two parallel worlds coexisted: a subterranean city of workers who toiled at giant, diabolical engines, and the 'business city' above, powered by the labour of those invisible workers.

In passenger ships, the spatial division was marked visually by a class structure: with first-class passengers on the top deck and third-class or 'steerage' passengers below. While cargo had been the mainstay of shipping profits until the

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<sup>36</sup> Adam Willis Kirkaldy, *British Shipping: Its History, Organisation and Importance* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1914).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

mid-nineteenth century, the greater predictability of steam shipping and the faster passage with the opening of the Suez and Panama Canals led to growing commercial travel. Some ships began to be built with more space expressly designed for passengers. By the turn of the twentieth century, the upper deck of luxury liners had spacious and luxurious *en suite* cabins, libraries, ballrooms and smoking rooms. On the eve of the First World War, luxury passenger ships like the Hamburg Amerika Line's *Imperator* had the capacity to carry 4,000 passengers, a crew of 1,100 and had eleven decks with lifts going between them. It also had a winter garden, a Ritz restaurant, a theatre, a Roman swimming bath, a ballroom, gymnasium, and even private promenade decks.<sup>38</sup> Passenger ships carried, on average, a third more crew than cargo ships.<sup>39</sup> This was accounted for by a much larger saloon department which worked in what were veritable 'floating hotels'.<sup>40</sup> Here worked the saloon crews – maintaining stores in the pantry, preparing meals in the galley for hundreds of passengers and serving them in the saloons. The deck crew was also larger, owing to positions like cabin attendants, bathroom attendants, squash racket attendants, bell boys, elevator attendants, a ships' band and a hairdresser.<sup>41</sup>

Not all passengers could afford to travel in such sumptuousness however. The second class passengers travelled in the deck below, in modest but comfortable cabins without as many additional luxuries. Some ships had decks below this, the third and fourth classes, called 'steerage'. These decks carried the waves of immigrants from Europe to America and Australia, fleeing poverty, famine or political persecution. 60

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<sup>38</sup> Kirkaldy, *British Shipping*.

<sup>39</sup> For instance, if the ship was carrying only cargo, the deck crew of a medium-sized vessel would comprise around 50 sailors, and engine room crew around 34, making up a total complement of 77 sailors. On a passenger ship of the same size, however, the deck crew would increase to 60 and be joined by 29 stewards in the kitchen and saloon, in addition to the same number of engineroom sailors, to make up a complement of 120.

<sup>40</sup> Furniss, *P&O Sketches*. NMM. P&O/95/4.

<sup>41</sup> Board of Trade Papers, TNA, BT 99 series.

million people are estimated to have left Europe in these waves between 1815 and 1930.<sup>42</sup> Besides them, the indentured labourers and poorer Muslims on pilgrimage also travelled on these decks.<sup>43</sup> In wartime, some passenger ships were chartered by the Admiralty and converted into troop ships and hospital ships. They carried troops to and from theatres of war, and picked up the injured. These ships replicated the class structure of passenger ships: troops were hierarchically segregated by rank into first, second and third classes. In addition, even non-chartered ships would undergo a quasi-military transition: artillery would be mounted on the ship to deal with enemy gunfire, and with it would come its naval gun-operator. The ships would have to sail in strict formation in a military convoy for protection, the route and destination kept secret even from the crew, with a radio operator joining the ship to maintain contact with the rest of the convoy. Thus, in wartime the merchant navy functioned as an auxiliary and complement to the Royal Navy, a point which had implications for the overlap between the merchant navy and the Royal Indian Navy during Second World War).

This class structure was even more marked in the case of the crew, and in the case of the lascar crew was compounded by colonial conceptions of the 'Asiatic' way of life. The members of the lascar crew were segregated from the passengers. They lived in the 'forecastle' – a structure right at the front of the ship – in cramped quarters much like the steerage class. The Royal Commission on Labour in India noted in 1929,

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<sup>42</sup> Dudley Baines, *Emigration from Europe 1815-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>43</sup> Michael Christopher Low, 'Empire and the Hajj: Pilgrims, Plagues and Pan-Islamism under British Surveillance', *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 40 (2008), 269–290. 'the costs of transport and the length of passage for Indian pilgrims traveling after the introduction of the steamship were reduced drastically. Although previous generations of pilgrims were confined mainly to elite officials, wealthy merchants, and the *ulama*, the 'modern' hajj also became accessible to Muslims of modest means.'

[O]ften they are not given separate cabins for use and even those cases where allowed they are not at all fit for use and would have been better termed if called cages. What is worse is that these so-called cabins are situated adjacent to the folk-cell and hence the carousing of these who are awake hardly allows them to utilise those few hours. Want of a wheel house in some ships leaves them to sun and rain and consequently prey to sickness.<sup>44</sup>

This, then, was the slum of the ship-city. Where lascars were given separate cabins, the legal requirements of space for those on Asiatic Agreements were half of those on European Agreements: 36 cubic feet as opposed to 72 cubic feet. Even for European sailors there was just about enough for a man to lie down and stand up, no more. This had been considered insufficient by medical opinion by 1900, and a Royal Commission had recommended an increase to 120 cubic feet.<sup>45</sup> As early as 1900, some lascars petitioned the Secretary of State for India for increased sleeping space, and for lockers to keep their belongings.<sup>46</sup> Having no lockers, all their belongings were kept in the metal trunks they carried with them. A mere 2 ½ to 3 feet long, barely enough to fit in the allocated spaces in their quarters, lascars had to curl up to sleep on these trunks in the absence of bunks.<sup>47</sup> Sometimes they strung up hammocks, and at other times slept on beds of straw which in English sailors' argot were called 'donkey's breakfast'.<sup>48</sup> Cramped into these quarters, which port sanitary officers repeatedly emphasised were impossible to properly ventilate, the lascars often slept out on the open deck.<sup>49</sup> Ahuja points to the irony of the steamship age: that alongside 'an unheard-of intensification and acceleration of the circulation of commodities and people around the globe', there was, simultaneously, 'the exponential proliferation of

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<sup>44</sup> *Royal Commission on Labour in India (RCLI)*, Vol V, Part I, 434-35.

<sup>45</sup> *Royal Committee on Mercantile Marine (RCMM)*, 1902 – oral evidence of Mr Burt.

<sup>46</sup> *RCMM* - oral evidence of Mr. Burt.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* Testimony of Colonel Denny.

work spaces that were excessively constricted in both spatial and social terms'. As he puts it, 'unprecedented mobility shared a cabin with unprecedented confinement.'<sup>50</sup>

The inferior accommodation for lascars was justified in colonial ethnological terms by shipowners and Indian elites in England. The Indian Conservative MP from Bethnal Green and inveterate loyalist, Sir Muncherjee Bhowmagaree, whose fervent support of British rule in India had earned him the sobriquet of 'Bow-and-Agree', argued along lines of 'native' 'habits' and 'manners', that 'by their habit of life they generally prefer to sleep out in the open..[and on] a very cold night... [the lascar] likes the greater warmth of a close room to the cold of a rather larger space.'<sup>51</sup> This was added to the chorus of opinion that 'the accommodation provided for Lascars on board ship is very much superior to what they are accustomed in their own houses.'<sup>52</sup> In his enthusiasm, Bhowmagaree, who always travelled first class, dismissed calls to increase the space allocated to lascars as 'foist[ing] on him a luxury he does not require'.<sup>53</sup> Asked during the proceedings of a Committee in 1902 to enquire into the growing employment of lascars in the British merchant marine at the turn of the century whether fresh air could be considered a luxury, since their small quarters could scarcely be ventilated, he replied with upper class arrogance: 'we have fresh air in this room, but if I go to the Swiss mountains just now, it would be fresher, but that would be a luxury.'<sup>54</sup> Cloaking his own preference for the continuation of the status quo in favour of the imperial shipping companies by posing as the champion of lascars' employment, Bhowmagaree argued that this 'luxury' would be 'expensive and

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<sup>50</sup> Ravi Ahuja, 'Capital at Sea, Shaitan Below Decks? A Note on Global Narratives, Narrow Spaces, and the Limits of Experience', *History of the Present*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Spring 2012): 80.

<sup>51</sup> *RCMM*. – oral evidence of Muncherjee Bhowmagaree.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>53</sup> *RCMM* – Oral evidence of Muncherjee Bhowmagaree.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*.

detrimental to [the lascars'] interests'.<sup>55</sup> In other words, since smaller quarters and lower wages allowed their employers to make large savings, their employment was supposedly being safeguarded by maintaining their inferior conditions relative to European sailors. If the conditions and wages of the lascars were to improve fifteen years later, it was in spite of Bhowmagaree's best efforts - and owing to the lascars' own - in the context of the First World War.<sup>56</sup>

The class and colonial segregation on board ship was further problematized by gender. These different decks, though segregated, were in close proximity throughout the voyage. The fear of social transgression was real, and spatial divisions had to be enforced, particularly when it came to women passengers. The Hollywood film *Titanic* has elevated this theme to a popular image – the aristocratic lady escaping stuffy lunches to go to lively dances in the 'steerage class' and learning how to 'spit like a man'. Because of the fear of a 'lady' losing her class and femininity in the close confines of the ship, matrons and stewardesses were employed on passenger ships to maintain these divisions between female and male passengers, upper and lower deck, passengers and crew. Where the spaces of crew and passengers overlapped of necessity, there were restrictions imposed on the forms of interaction which this could take. Stewards, who served the food and drink in the saloon, and had the closest contact with passengers, were under instruction in their handbook to have a 'cheery disposition' while serving, and to 'be attentive' to passengers' needs, but only so far as the calls of a desirable service required, and no more.<sup>57</sup> Through handbooks and fines, a moral separation was imposed between passengers and crew. Spatial and social barriers were especially impermeable for the crew. Stewards were not to enter a

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<sup>55</sup> RCMM – Oral evidence of Muncherjee Bhowmagaree.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Richard Bond, *The Ship Stewards' Handbook: A Complete Guide to the Victualling and Catering Departments on Board Ship*, (Glasgow: James Munro, 1918), 231-237.

female passenger's cabin in the absence of a stewardess.<sup>58</sup> Crew members found on passenger decks when not on duty were fined. A white steward who was found on the 'after end of the Boat Deck, a space belonging exclusively to passengers – and sitting in intimate conversation with a lady passenger' was fined a pound for this transgression.<sup>59</sup>

Just as there were passenger areas that were out of bounds for crew, there were crew areas that were off limits for the passengers. Passengers, in particular female passengers, were prohibited from entering the engine room without the permission of the ship's captain, and even with this, could only visit under escort. When they were escorted, they considered it 'a great privilege to be allowed to visit the engine rooms', which were so removed from the passengers' daily experience on deck that they felt they were 'penetrat[ing] that mysterious region'.<sup>60</sup> Like characters out of Lang's *Metropolis*, they descended from the dazzling world of luxurious ultramodern chambers into that steamy netherworld where exhausted workers toiled at the giant machines which powered the world above. To these wide-eyed passengers entering a part of the ship utterly unknown to them, the sheer scale of the machinery inspired awe. As the caricaturist Harry Furniss noted, 'parties of ladies... may frequently be seen admiring the brightly polished brass work, and the huge cylinders and levers with their rhythmical motion.'<sup>61</sup> The workers who set this vast machinery in motion, shovelling coal into the furnace, and keeping them running at the right temperature,

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<sup>58</sup> Frances Steel, 'Women, men and the southern Octopus: Shipboard gender relations in the age of steam, 1870s–1910s', *International Journal of Maritime History* 20, no.2 (2008): 285–306.

<sup>59</sup> *SS Barrabool* Ship log, National Archives, Kew. Board of Trade Papers. BT 165/2043.

<sup>60</sup> Furniss, *P&O Sketches*. NMM. P&O/95/4. The excitement of the female passengers may be better explained by the fact that they were expressly forbidden by many shipping company rulebooks from entering the engine room: 'Ladies shall not be permitted to visit the engine room except by the permission of the Captain, and under the personal charge of the Chief Engineer', *1895 General Instructions of the Union Steamship Company, the 'Red Book'*.

<sup>61</sup> Furniss, *P&O Sketches*, 142.



raising or dropping the level of steam as the ship required, maintaining the huge cylinders and polishing them, were rendered invisible in the passengers' accounts.

### **Labouring aboard the steamship**

To better understand the regime of authority and forms of contestation, it is important to understand the nature of work that was sought to be disciplined, and the tensions which arose over the imposition of this discipline and its subversion. One must look at the different forms of specialised labour on the steamship, the ways in which these were marked by colonialism, as well as the experience of this labour by lascars. The ship was divided into three specialised 'departments': engine room, deck and saloon. Within each of these departments, there were further sub-specialisations of different jobs. In each case, the division of labour was marked by race and colonialism.

#### **Engine Room**

The employment of Asian and African sailors in the heat and dust of the engine room was justified in racial terms. The engine room itself was a maze of furnaces, coal bunkers and machinery: boilers, shafts, gauges, thermometers, brass pipes and cylinders, all operating at high temperature and pressure, in the midst of ashes, fumes, steam and the constant din of machinery. The conditions often evoked comparisons with purgatory. To Furniss, ever the connoisseur of a good image, the blazing furnaces recalled 'visions of Doré's picture of the inferno.'<sup>62</sup> Another British passenger called it the 'Hades of the furnace-room'.<sup>63</sup> These conditions, according to

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<sup>62</sup> Furniss, *P&O Sketches*, 178.

<sup>63</sup> Janet Ewald, 'Bondsmen, freedmen, and maritime industrial transportation, c.1840–1900', *Slavery & Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies* 31, no.3 (2010): 452.

one officer, were ‘utterly unfit for white men’.<sup>64</sup> Along with unfitness of white men to labour in the engine room, it was posited that black men were racially adapted to labour in extremely hot conditions. The displacement of white seamen came at a time of their growing organisation into trade unions and this racial justification served ship owners to naturalise their replacement by lower paid workers. Laura Tabili has further argued that this was accompanied by the rhetorical de-skilling of certain jobs , whereby ‘black men were... assigned shipboard jobs considered menial, unskilled, or low in status, such as stoking, while high status jobs such as engineering were reserved for white men.’<sup>65</sup> Thus, work on the new technology of the steamship which required intelligence, dexterity and experience was demeaned as not belonging to traditional seafaring skills, and thus, worthy of lower remuneration.

Let us look briefly at the nature of this work, the sub-division of labour and the experience of lascars working in the engine room. This engine room was designed with a central area housing up to a hundred large furnaces, one fireman tending three or four at a time. Around this area were coal bunkers, skirted by the boiler rooms. The furnaces heated water in five or six enormous boilers, which produced the steam to power the ships’ engines. The dimensions of all this machinery dwarfed those who worked at them. Each of the five boilers measured fifteen feet nine inches in diameter and was twenty feet long and each furnace was over eight feet in length.<sup>66</sup> The whole place would have been baffling to a lascar, coming from his village in Sylhet or Punjab to the engine room of a ship for the first time. This was the reaction of Syed

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<sup>64</sup> Janet Ewald, ‘Crossers of the sea: Slaves, freedmen, and other migrants in the northwestern Indian Ocean, c. 1750-1914’, *The American Historical Review* 105, no.1 (2000): 85.

<sup>65</sup> Laura Tabili, “‘A Maritime Race’: Masculinity and the Racial Division of Labour in British Merchant Ships, 1900-1939,” in *Iron Men, Wooden Women: Gender and Seafaring in the Atlantic World, 1700-1920*, ed. Margaret S. Creighton and Lisa Norling (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

<sup>66</sup> Alston Kennerly, ‘Stoking the boilers: Firemen and trimmers in British merchant ships, 1850–1950’, *International Journal of Maritime History* 20, no. 1 (2008): 191-220.

Rasul's uncle who, 'saw all the wheels and levers and heard all the noise; he didn't know what it all was. He pulled a lever and the ship stopped.'<sup>67</sup> The awe of the machinery could also produce fear. Kamal Ahmed said of his first time,

They took me down inside the ship, such a strange place. I was frightened, because I had never seen anything like that before. Then the sea started to go... like that...*oh my God!* I think for six or seven days I didn't have any (sic) cup of tea or food or anything. Still I had to work.<sup>68</sup>

The engine room was layered with grease and coal, the floor covered with water. The air was thick with coal dust. Lascars came out of the engine room covered in thick soot, which gave even white engine room crews the epithet of the 'black gang'. As Dada Amir Haider Khan recalled of working as a lascar in the engine room in the First World War:

When we spat it was black. When we blew our noses it was black. Even our excrement was black. The devil only knew how much black dust we had to imbibe in these coal bunkers. What was it all for?... For eighteen rupees a month and some cheap dal, rice and vegetables to eat.<sup>69</sup>

Labour in the engine room was subdivided between different workers. Bunker men worked in the coal bunkers, hewing blocks of coal. From here, trimmers brought coal in wheelbarrows to the furnaces, sometimes pushing as much as 250 kilograms.<sup>70</sup> Once the coal had been brought near the furnace, the firemen (or *aagwallas*) took over. Each *aagwalla* shovelled the coal into three large furnaces and kept them burning at the right temperature, opening the doors to rake the coal and empty the ashes. In the adjacent boiler room, *pani-wallahs* or water-tenders were in charge of supervising the work and maintaining the level of water in the boiler. The *donkeywallahs* (or *donginwalla* in Sylheti), were the charge-hands for the 'donkey

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<sup>67</sup> Caroline Adams, *Across Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers: Life Stories of Pioneer Sylheti Settlers in Britain* (London: Eastside Books, 1987), 11-28

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Gardezi (ed), *Chains to Lose*, 93.

<sup>70</sup> Kennerly, 'Firemen and Trimmers', 20

engine', while the oilers looked after engines and auxiliary machinery, including refrigerators. Then there were the *telwallahs*, or greasers, who were in charge of ensuring that the engines were well greased, and that they were operating at the right temperature and pressure.

The experience of this labour in lascars' narratives is marked by fatigue and injury, an observation that is corroborated by notes from the ship's surgeon in the logbooks. Despite colonial rhetoric of lascar suitability to conditions of extreme heat, severe dehydration, collapse and burns were frequently reported. Amir Haider Khan remembered that,

working in the coal bunkers through the Red Sea was such hell that the firemen had to pour buckets of water over their bodies before opening the furnace door to throw coal inside, or rake the fire.... Some firemen, scorched and asphyxiated, had to be carried to the decks by their workmates.'<sup>71</sup>

Others would get dehydrated from profuse sweating near the furnaces and boilers and get the 'fireman's cramp'.<sup>72</sup> This excruciating pain was accompanied by such cries that ships doctors often euphemistically called it 'heat frenzy' or 'cerebral disturbance' in their notes.<sup>73</sup> This was apart from people dying of heat apoplexy, particularly in the Red Sea in the summer months. As Shah Abdul Majid Qureshi remembered, 'it was hot, oh yes, it was hot. We put coal in the boiler, and then it gets heat, and then the ship runs, it is a most difficult job, very hard and very hot too, and many people died in that heat'.<sup>74</sup> The work of the bunkermen was similar to coal miners, with the hazards of falls, inhalation of coal dust and gas trapped in unventilated bunkers. Coal also emitted a flammable gas, which in unventilated coal bunkers built up and caused spontaneous combustion if a naked fire was exposed to

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<sup>71</sup> Kennerly, 'Firemen and Trimmers', 100.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> *SS Majestic* Ship Log. TNA. Board of Trade, BT 165/2043.

<sup>74</sup> Adams, *Across Seven Seas*, 22.

it.<sup>75</sup> Trimmers became marked by their ‘badges’, permanent shoulder bruises caused by being flung repeatedly against the ship's ironwork.<sup>76</sup> Firemen's work was extremely hazardous, and ships' logs contain entries by the ship's doctor concerning their injuries. One fireman on the *SS Majestic* sustained burns on the left side of his face and left forearm while opening the stokehold door. Another, using the eight-foot long shovel to stoke the fires dislocated his shoulder while turning over the heavy coals.<sup>77</sup> The boiler room had its own hazards, apart from the inescapable heat. Faulty machinery or high pressure could cause explosions, a fact which had led a Colonel to remark in 1902 that ‘there are occasionally circumstances arising in the stokehold of ordinary vessels which are about as trying as a [military] action could possibly be – they have occurred... in vessels manned by Lascars – the bursting of a steam pipe for instance.’<sup>78</sup> Such incidents were not uncommon.

Given the fatiguing nature of this manual work, the crew was meant to work two four-hour shifts in a 24-hour period. But in practice, this meant working morning to evening with only a two-hour interval to rest and have their meal.<sup>79</sup> These usually comprised meagre rations compared with their European counterparts. A combination of physical exhaustion, malnourishment and insanitary living quarters made them more prone to illness. In addition, they had to pay for their own clothing, so in the colder latitudes they often did not have sufficiently warm clothing and were susceptible to hypothermia.

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<sup>75</sup> Kennerly, ‘Stoking the boilers’, 5.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid*, 4.

<sup>77</sup> *SS Majestic* Ship Log. TNA. Board of Trade papers, BT 165/2043.

<sup>78</sup> *RCMM* – oral evidence of Colonel Denny.

<sup>79</sup> *RCLI*, Indian Seamen's Union, 227

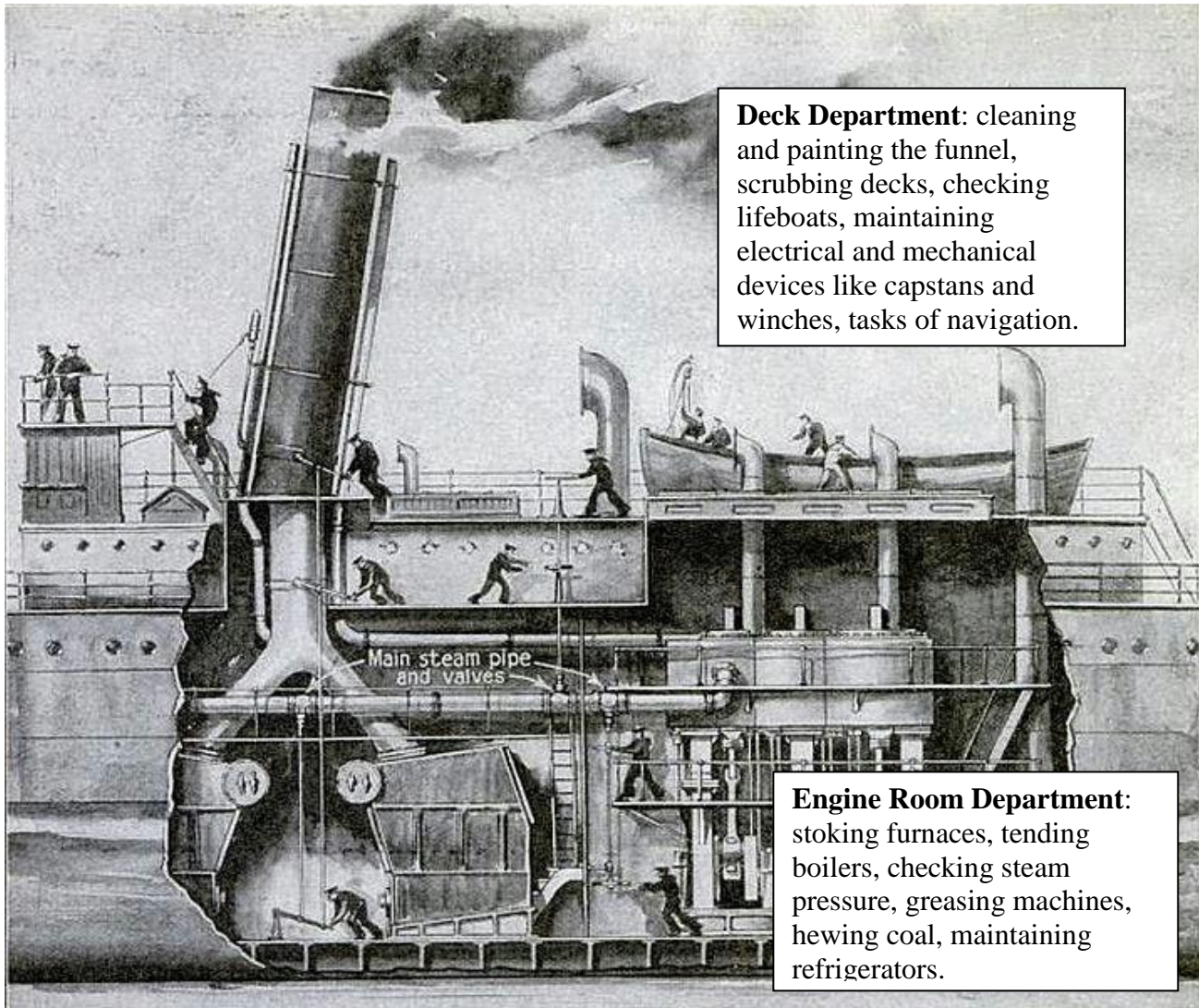


Figure 1. Cross-section of a steam ship, 1909

## The Deck Department

Above the engine room worked the deck crew, which was divided between those who were tasked with technical work relating to the ship such as maintenance and haulage, while on passenger ships another section was devoted to service-related jobs as attendants and servants. Both sections worked twelve-hour shifts.<sup>80</sup> A P&O publicity pamphlet titled *Our Asian Crews* described the work of the technical section, thus: ‘they heave on the ropes and scrub decks, [and] preserve the ship against the inroads of weather and time by chipping and scraping, painting and varnishing; they overhaul the cargo, the cargo-blocks and gear.’<sup>81</sup> Although it is generally assumed that the captain would always convey orders to the crew through the intermediary of the serang, a shipboard dictionary from ‘lascari’ to English, compiled as a handy guide for officers to give work orders directly to their crew. In this dictionary, called *Lascari Bât*, we see how the ‘command of language’ facilitates the ‘language of command’.<sup>82</sup> The following excerpts give a ringside view into the nature of the work:

‘Scrub the deck with bouges’ (‘Bouge gasso’)  
‘Holystone today’ (‘Aj pathar maro’)  
‘Bring sand to sprinkle on deck’ (‘Ret la-o, tutuk chhitna kewaste’)  
‘Scrub heavy, you men’ (‘Tum logon, zor si gusso’)  
‘When you have finished, wash down’ (‘Jab khalas hai, pani maro’)  
‘Now take a squeegee to dry the deck’ (‘Abi soogi leno, tutuk sukhana kewaste’)  
‘Wash the salt from the funnel’ (‘Nimak fundle-par nikalo’)  
‘Paint the sheer pole black’ (‘Loon-ke-sie kala rang legao’)  
‘Where is the life-buoy?’ (‘Kak-ke ‘buoy’ kahan hai?’)

The work of deck lascars involved in technical and maintenance work entailed going between the various decks of the ship – climbing ladders and opening hatches to fix parts or to haul cargo or mail. Carrying out these duties on a ship that was constantly

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<sup>80</sup> *RCLI*, Vol V, Part I, 434-35.

<sup>81</sup> ‘Our Asian Crews’, 1955. P&O Collection. National Maritime Museum, Greenwich.

<sup>82</sup> Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*.

rolling and pitching, often in the darkness and with no safety gear, they often suffered serious – and sometimes fatal – injuries from falls. A report details the case of Deen Mohamed Esmail, a 26-year-old lascar on the P&O vessel *SS Mooltan*, who fell from a height of 25 feet from the upper deck of the ship into the lower hold when a hatch in the ground that was meant to be fastened was loose. He broke his neck, and died instantly. His body was ‘committed to the deep’, that is, buried at sea, and his meagre belongings sent to the Shipping Master of Bombay to be forwarded to his family.<sup>83</sup> Many injuries were also caused by heavy slings for hauling cargo striking lascars, or by unsafely fastened ‘floating stages’ by which they suspended themselves at a height to clean, fix or paint an inaccessible part of the ship.<sup>84</sup>

The work of the attendants and servants was clearly overlaid with Victorian notions of home, domesticity and the gendered nature of labour involved in cooking, cleaning and personal service. To these notions was added that of being attended upon by colonial servants.<sup>85</sup> This evoked the feeling that the passengers ‘had never left Britain’, and at the same time were at home in the empire. As one passenger on the P&O *Parramatta* put it, their ship was of a piece with ‘the glorious British Empire of which we are here a small, moving, isolated fragment’.<sup>86</sup> In the passengers’ accounts, the labour of these lascars appears solely in the idiom of domestic service. A journalist wrote of ‘Indian boys... in snow white garments and scarlet turbans...

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<sup>83</sup> *SS Mooltan* Ships Log. TNA. BT 165/2043.

<sup>84</sup> Ships Logs. TNA. Board of Trade Papers.

<sup>85</sup> Tabili, ‘A Maritime Race’, 173. Tabili notes that, ‘a gendered division of labour prevailed aboard ship... The survival of the shipboard world as a ‘total institution’ required that women’s work of reproducing the workforce – cooking, cleaning and personal service – proceed onboard. In earlier days this ‘women’s work’ was performed by cabin boys, apprentices, or disabled older men, or shared out among the crew, but in the early twentieth century much of it was assigned to Black men from the colonized empire, principally South Asians, East and West Africans, Arabs, and men from the Caribbean.’

<sup>86</sup> Quoted in Janet Ewald, ‘“Crossers of the sea”: Slaves, freedmen, and other migrants in the Northwestern Indian Ocean, c. 1750-1914’, *The American Historical Review* 105, no.1 (2000): 81.



dreamily working punkhas.’<sup>87</sup> Furniss calls the ‘ubiquitous lascars’ an ‘active and painstaking race: indefatigable in the exercise of the many duties that devolve upon them.’<sup>88</sup> In his account, they labour joyfully, even in the sweltering heat,

You see them apparently impervious to the heat on the hottest of hot afternoons, when the sea almost seems to boil and the paint of the ship is blistering with the heat, merrily running along the rails fixing up awnings... for the protection and comfort of the passengers, their figures in the strong sunlight casting grotesque shadows.<sup>89</sup>

Here, the labour of the lascars and the description of the heat appear only relative to the ‘comfort of the passengers’. Just as, ‘in the hot weather, clothed merely in pyjamas, there is nothing more refreshing than to stand in the way of Lascars who, hose in hand, are engaged in the work of cleaning the deck.’<sup>90</sup> Sometimes, the labour of the lascars intruded on the passengers’ comfort, as when ‘the lazier [gentlemen passengers], awakened by the noise of the Lascars swabbing down the deck, turn over to enjoy another half-hours’ snooze before rising.’<sup>91</sup>

To emphasise the aspect of colonial subjects at the service of passengers, deck lascars were given faux-traditional uniforms with all the elements of supposedly ‘oriental’ costume: embroidery, colour, sashes and turbans. The intended visual effect was rarely lost on passengers, who saw lascars in terms of their picturesque appearances, as exhibits of the empire, foreshadowing the novelty of their destinations. Furniss emphasises their colours in his description of the Sunday ‘parade’ of the deck hands in front of the captain of the ship: ‘the lascars, appear in pure white, with red turbans bound around their curious straw hats and with sashes around their waists. Backed by the deep blue of the Mediterranean Sea, they present a

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<sup>87</sup> Janet Ewald, ‘Bondsmen, freedmen, and maritime industrial transportation, c.1840–1900’, *Slavery & Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies* 31, no. 3 (2010): 451.

<sup>88</sup> Furniss, *P&O Sketches*, 148

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 144

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 10

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

*picture* not easily forgotten.’<sup>92</sup> Of the costumes of the engine room crew, who were usually invisible to passengers, he says, ‘though on six days out of seven they are clothed but in apologies for dress, on Sunday they outvie the deck hands in the purity of their white garments, and, added to this, their gorgeously embroidered waistcoats and turbans render them particularly striking and picturesque objects ...[They] are a rollicking, happy, merry lot of fellows, and enjoy a joke.’<sup>93</sup> Elsie Watkins Grubb, a young woman on board a P&O passenger liner in the Mediterranean, *SS Vectis*, wrote in her diary at Fiume: ‘we saw some of our (sic) Lascars walking on shore with lovely clean white clothes and brilliant red turbans. They are most interesting people and I like them.’<sup>94</sup> If, for Elsie the lascars were ‘sweet’ and ‘likeable’, for Furniss they are the image of the jolly sailor, if not quite full sailors in their child-like native state. In neither of these passengers’ narratives does the toil and fatigue of the work come through, that one so often encounters in the lascars’ accounts.

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<sup>92</sup> Furniss, Furniss, *P&O Sketches*, 8

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*, 6

<sup>94</sup> Elsie Watkins Grubb’s journal on the P&O *SS Vectis*, JOD/139, NMM.



**Lascars suspended from 'floating stages' painting the sides of the ship.  
(P&O/98/67, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich.)**

## The Saloon/Galley

The gendered aspect of domestic service also applied to the saloon department where the food was prepared and served. Frances Steel, in her work on shipboard gender relations, has argued that given the traditional associations of this work with femininity, the replacement of European crew by the colonial fitted with cultural conceptions of subservience.<sup>95</sup> It appears that some saloon crews were mixed. Miss Grubb affably noted that ‘our crew seems to be mostly Lascars, all with nice faces. Our dark-skinned table steward is a dear, so is the white one.’<sup>96</sup> Where passengers looked forward to the dinner bell so that they could retire to their cabins or get changed for the fancy dress party afterward, there were saloon department crew hard at work in the ‘enormous floating hotels have daily to cater for the hundreds of healthy appetites sharpened by the sea breezes’.<sup>97</sup>

The saloon crew of between thirty and forty workers was made up of those who issued supplies for the kitchen (the storekeeper and pantryman), those who prepared the food, (the chef, cook, assistant cook, baker, butcher) and those who served it (the steward, butler, waiters and the purser). Some passenger ships also employed a stewardess and a matron but they were always white.<sup>98</sup> Then there was the bandman and his performers to entertain the passengers at dinner and after. On passenger ships in the kitchen – or ‘galley’ – lascars made rather elaborate meals. On the *SS Vectis* for instance, they prepared a French menu where the spread at one dinner comprised filets de soles, *aloyau de boef*, *ris de veau*, *faisan* and *pouding Autrichienne*.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Steel, ‘Women, men and the Southern Octopus’.

<sup>96</sup> Elsie Watkins Grubb’s journal on the P&O *SS Vectis*, JOD/139, NMM.

<sup>97</sup> Furniss, *P&O Sketches*.

<sup>98</sup> On the *SS Canopic*, for instance. BT 99/7790.

<sup>99</sup> Elsie Watkins Grubb’s journal on the P&O *SS Vectis*, JOD/139, NMM.

Work in this department, too, was beset with hazards. In the kitchen, the cook, butcher and his assistants peeled and chopped vast quantities of vegetables and meat and when the ship was passing through rough seas this could lead to dangerous cuts. The most common injuries were cuts from knives and peelers. Indeed, in the identity papers of many saloon workers, ‘scars on the forearm’ appears under the ‘distinguishing marks’ section.<sup>100</sup> The stewards in the saloon had to have very strong sea legs to remain standing during rough weather. Thus, in all three departments on the ship, lascar labour was racialised, whether by naturalising their ability to withstand extreme heat as in the engine room, or by the feminising and ‘domesticisation’ of their labour as in the deck and saloon departments. As Laura Tabili puts it, ‘the gendered construction of racial differences... explain[s] the division of labour and the attendant definitions of skill and status aboard British ships’.<sup>101</sup>

### **The regime of authority**

The regime of work and authority underwent qualitative changes in the transition from sail to steam technology. The regime of work changed from what E.P. Thompson has called ‘task-orientation’ to industrial ‘time orientation’.<sup>102</sup> Sailors on sailing ships had periods of frenetic activity, for instance when the wind was blowing the ship off course, heaving-to to unfurl the sails and angle them correctly or, when the sea was rough, taking strenuous turns at the pump to get the water out. On the

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<sup>100</sup> Seamen’s Identity Papers, BT 372. TNA. Also colonial cooks’ certificates at the Caird Archive, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich. RSS/CC.

<sup>101</sup> Laura Tabili, ‘A Maritime Race’: Masculinity and the Racial Division of Labour in British Merchant Ships, 1900-1939,’ in *Iron Men, Wooden Women: Gender and Seafaring in the Atlantic World, 1700-1920*, ed. Margaret S. Creighton and Lisa Norling (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 172.

<sup>102</sup> E.P. Thompson, ‘Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism’, *Past and Present* 38 (1967): 56-97.

other hand, there could be periods of smooth sailing or windless doldrums where they had found themselves with a much- slackened pace of work. On the steamship, however work was relentlessly steady in its demands. To feed the furnaces, the seamen had to shovel seven hundred to a thousand tonnes of coal a day, come rain or shine. The engine-room crews were thus tied to the furnaces and boilers which had to be regularly fed and tended. There was, in other words, a change to industrial discipline, dictated by the clock rather than the winds and currents.

The technological change and the specialisation of labour on the ship brought about a change in the ship hierarchy. The relatively rudimentary division of labour on the sailing ship between able and ordinary sailors and their boatswain on the one hand and the captain and his mate on the other, meant that the captain had fairly direct contact with the sailors and thus usually meted out punishment personally. The masters were free to rule by the whip, as despots, and despite some honourable exceptions, many did. The regime of punishment for all sailors, Caucasian or otherwise, was corporal – forms of punishment until the late nineteenth century included being tied to a gibbet and flogged with a cat o’ nine tails, being ‘given the rope’s end’, gagging, branding and ‘running the gauntlet’.<sup>103</sup> Punishment was intended as a spectacle and all hands were mustered on deck to watch.<sup>104</sup> Moreover, such punishment was arbitrary – sailors complained of ‘being beaten without the slightest occasion’.<sup>105</sup> Left to the discretion of the master, the only code to be followed was the ‘custom of the sea’.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Branding was only outlawed in 1834 in England, and flogging in 1870.

<sup>104</sup> Isaac Land, ‘Customs Of The Sea: Flogging, Empire, and the ‘True British Seaman’ 1770 to 1870’ *International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 3, no. 2 (2001): 169-185.

<sup>105</sup> Marcus Rediker, *Between The Devil and The Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World 1700-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 99.

<sup>106</sup> Land, ‘Customs of the Sea’, 170

The captain of the steamship enforced a regime of discipline different from his predecessor on the sailing ship. With the development of the steamship and its sophisticated division of labour, there emerged a new layer of intermediaries between the captain and the crew. Under the captain at the top, were officers in charge of the three different departments on the ship: the engine room, deck and saloon departments. The officer in charge of the engine room was called the Chief Engineer, that of the saloon department was called the Chief Steward, that of the deck department, the Chief Mate. Under them was the next rung in the hierarchy: the Second Engineer, the Second Mate and the Assistant Steward, respectively. These officers were always white. Beneath them stood the foremen of the crew, the boatswains.

These intermediaries decreased the contact between the captain and the crew, and the captain no longer meted out direct punishment. Formally, from the arbitrary and spectacular corporal punishment of the sailing ships, the penal regime gave way over the nineteenth century to a scheme of graded fines, 'proportionate' to a list of offences. This move mirrored what Foucault studied as the shift at the turn of the nineteenth century from ritualised public violence to an impersonal ritual of investigation and sentencing with a penalty of the loss of money, liberty or life.<sup>107</sup> In the new institutionalised form of disciplining the aberrant, 'the body as the major target of penal repression disappeared'.<sup>108</sup> The effectiveness of the punishment, Foucault noted, was 'seen as resulting from its inevitability, not from its visible intensity.'<sup>109</sup> Thus, half a day's pay was deducted for 'swearing or using improper language' and 'neglecting to bring up, open out and air bedding when ordered'. One day's pay was docked for 'insolence or contemptuous language ... towards the Master

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<sup>107</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 18.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid*, 16.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

or any [officer]', quarrelling, drunkenness and 'defacing a copy of the ship's agreement'. Two days' pay was the fine for 'not being on board the ship at the time fixed by the agreement' or 'disobedience of the masters' lawful commands', three days' pay for 'bringing or having on board spirituous liquors' and 'wilful neglect of duty', seven days' pay for 'sleeping or negligence while on the look-out' and 'smoking below (deck)' and a month's pay for 'secreting contraband goods on board with intent to smuggle'.<sup>110</sup>

Despite the fact that the captain now presided over a more codified – and therefore less personal – form of disciplining seamen, physical violence that accompanied the exercise of authority did not disappear from the steam ships. Instead, its exercise was displaced from the officially-recognised right of the master of the sailing ship to the unofficially-asserted prerogative of the junior officers of the steamship. The most instances of violence seem to have been associated with the junior engineer - usually the Fourth Engineer on most ships – who worked in the engine room, conveying orders from the Chief Engineer to the crew. The deck and saloon officers, in their immaculate white uniforms, did not consider the more hands-on engineers real 'officer material'. The engineers, in turn, treated their subordinates with contempt and one sociological study as late as 1969 showed that they 'consistently' spoke of even white engine- room workers as 'animals'.<sup>111</sup> The firemen in turn did not hold them in great esteem, seeing them only as 'jumped-up fitters'.<sup>112</sup>

When it came to lascars, this regime of authority was further mediated by race and colonialism. The officers commanding the lascars crews were all white and under them were the native foremen and boatswains, the *serangs* and *tindals*. The *serang*'s

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<sup>110</sup> Ships' logs. Board of Trade Papers BT 165, TNA.

<sup>111</sup> Peter H. Fricke, 'The Social Structure of Crews of British Dry Cargo Merchant Ships: A Study of the Organisation and Environment of an Occupation' (PhD Thesis, Durham University), 70.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.



presence probably reduced the interaction between the junior officers and the lascars crew. The *serang* conveyed orders to the lascar crew, translating it in the process. His role, however, was not limited to the transmission and translation of orders but also their implementation. An article in the P&O's magazine titled 'Our Asian Crews' stated that 'a good *serang* is worth his weight in gold to his officer', for 'keeping [the lascars] in order, for checking them at their working, and checking evildoers'.<sup>113</sup> In other words, the *serang* was indispensable for the maintenance of lascar discipline. Part of his authority derived from being a kinsman of crew members, and partly from his usual role as a money-lender.<sup>114</sup> Situations when these relations did not suffice in carrying out orders from the junior engineer often occasioned the use of violence. Some violence was thus displaced from the junior officer to the *serang*. One instance clearly illustrates the shift in the exercise of corporal punishment from the captain to the *serang*: lascars on the *SS Uhenfels*, a German vessel of the Hansa Line, approached the captain of the ship complaining of a *serang* who had assaulted them.<sup>115</sup> In this instance, the captain represented the official code of maritime law, while the intermediary *serang* represented the unofficial custom of shipboard relations. The Shipping Masters in British ports had to deal with numerous instances of lascars deserting their ships in England because their *serang* had beaten them.<sup>116</sup>

Many instances of violent impositions of authority continued to be associated with the junior officers, however, thus making lascars subject to two rungs of such authority. While in theory, *serangs* were supposed to be the intermediaries between

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<sup>113</sup> M. Watkins Thomas, *Our Asian Crews*, P&O, 1955.

<sup>114</sup> Ravi Ahuja, 'Networks of Subordination'; Gopalan Balachandran, *Globalising Labour? Indian Seafarers and World Shipping, c. 1870–1945* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>115</sup> 'Captain and Lascars. Combination Against Serang'. *Times of India*, May 27, 1908.

<sup>116</sup> In 1922, for instance, the Shipping Master in London's Tilbury docks received a number of disgruntled men – Eusof Fazal Khan and his father of the *SS Macedonia* and Mangolor Mahomed Omi and Omar Ali of the City of Naples - who had walked off their respective ships complaining that they had left because the *serang* had beaten them.

officers and lascars, in practice the officers also conveyed orders directly. These situations could lead to the use of violence – so much so that by the Second World War, British officers were being warned that this could spark trouble with lascar crews and jeopardise the war effort. Even the simple issuing of an order could erupt in gratuitous violence on the part of the junior officer. One such instance took place on the *SS Ameer* in 1901. The fireman Assuen Ula was cleaning a handrail in the engine room, when the engineer shouted something from above. Assuen Ula, who either because he was ‘utterly ignorant of the English language,’ as a court later noted, or because he did not understand the officer’s functional Hindustani or simply deafened by the din of the engine room with the clanging of shovels, buckets and wheelbarrows and the hissing of pressure vents, did not understand the orders. For this the officer ‘struck him two or three times on the face with his fist’.<sup>117</sup> Here, the incomprehension caused by language could have been an exacerbating factor. What followed after the officer struck Assuen Ullah we will see more of in the next section.

While it is difficult to get a sense of the frequency of violent incidents in interactions between white officers and lascars, the *Lascari Bât* dictionary translates the most ‘typical’, routine interactions which officers could expect to encounter the need for. In doing this, however, it also generates a set of expectations of lascars. The following extract from *Lascari Bât* gives us some insight into such exchanges:<sup>118</sup>

<i>Lascari</i>	English
Kyun udhar jata ho?	Why do you go there?
Mera kaam, usmeh jagah hai.	My work is at that place.
Kya tumhara kaam hai?	What is your work?
Rang e ‘varnish’ dhounga.	Cleaning paintwork and brightwork.

<sup>117</sup> ‘Lascars’ Grievances’. *The Courier*, May 6, 1901.

<sup>118</sup> A.L. Valentini, *Lascari Bât: A Collection of Sentences used in the Daily Routine of Modern Passenger Steamers, Where Lascars are carried as the Deck Crew; Also a Copious English-Lascari Vocabulary* (London: Miller and Sons, 1896).

Tumhara nam kya hai?	What is your name?
Mohamed; ham <i>serang</i> ke beta hai.	Mohamed; I am the <i>serang</i> 's son.
<i>Tindal</i> mera chacha hai.	The <i>Tindel</i> is my uncle.
<i>Serang</i> e <i>Tindal</i> ke bhai hai.	The <i>Serang</i> and <i>Tindel</i> are brothers.
Tumhara puggar kya hai?	What is your pay?
Sola rupee mahiyana.	Sixteen rupees a month.
Bas hai.	And quite enough too.
Tum bahut susta admi hai, ziyada bat karta.	You are very lazy, you talk too much.
Ham kam kart, sahib.	I also work, sir.
Khabardar; tum ache kam nahin karega, saza deunga.	Look out, if you don't work properly I shall punish you.
Kistarah saza kara hoga?	In what manner will I be punished?
Paggar katega.	Your pay will be cut.
Tumhara baap e chacha acha admi hai.	Your father and uncle are both good
Kistarah tum bahut susta e jangli admi?	workmen.
	How is it you are so lazy and stupid?
Kya karega?	How can I help it?
Ab chup raho, kam karo.	Now hold your tongue and set to work.

Through contrasts, this exchange sets up the expectations of the industrious and lazy, good and bad, impertinent and obedient lascars. It also gives an instance of the quotidian exercise of punitive authority on the one hand, and the lascars' responses on the other. These responses are non-confrontational but at the same time non-quiescent

in ways which resonate with Scott's understanding of everyday contestation and the role of dissimulation in such contestations.

### **Contestations of Authority**

Lascars contested these regimes of authority at various levels, from individual and collective everyday resistance on isolated ships at sea or in port, to moments when these 'snowballed' to involve the lascar crews of many ships simultaneously with the same demands. At the everyday level, contestations of authority were usually over working conditions and often over the way in which officers exercised their authority, particularly when crews considered that they had violated the moral economy of customary expectations. Material conditions, too, played a part. On old ships whose machinery did not operate well, or when the crew was expected to work without breaks or with too few hands or not enough rations, tensions between officers and crew mounted through the voyage, breaking out in confrontations. Where relations between them were already strained, seemingly minor incidents could quickly escalate into verbal and physical fights.

For the lascars' part, everyday shipboard contestation involved multiple strategies, from 'covert' and unassuming forms of resistance to more open verbal confrontations to refusals to work and finally, physical assaults on officers. The 'covert' forms are more difficult to recover because of their unremarkable and routine nature, which officers may not always have even registered. The *Lascari Bât* dictionary, however, gives us some good insights into routine exchanges in which officers confronted 'small' forms of subverting authority. In the extract cited above, the 'laziness' of the lascar could have been a deliberate attempt at dilatoriness or an unconscious refusal of a young lascar to subscribe to the industrial time discipline of

the steam ship. Chandavarkar has shown how cotton textile workers' resistance to 'rationalization' plans in textile mills included foot-dragging, absenteeism, loitering, and damaging cloth alongside the more 'spectacular confrontations'.<sup>119</sup>

Verbal contestations of authority could take covert and dissimulative, or more open, forms. The 'lazy lascar' quoted above exasperated his captain by 'talking back' ('I also work, sir') and questioning him ('In what manner will I be punished?', 'How can I help it?'). As Scott's work has shown, such unassuming exchanges can conceal chagrin behind a veneer of formal deference.<sup>120</sup> Yet, 'talking back' was not always so covert. Paul A. Gilje's work on Atlantic seafarers shows how sailors often swore at their officers, an instance of which we will shortly see in the case of lascars.<sup>121</sup> This veneer of deference was usually torn when an officer was perceived to have overstepped the line dividing the legitimate exercise of authority and its abuse, a line that was historically contingent.

The lascar crew of the *SS Ameer* perceived such a line to have been crossed when the Fourth Engineer struck Assuen Ullah 'two or three times on the face with his fist'.<sup>122</sup> According to the captain's later testimony before a magistrate, this assault brought forth a protest from the rest of the crew by a collective refusal to work, thus letting the steam go down and bringing the ship to a halt mid-ocean. This brought the Third, and then Second Engineer down into the stokehold, but all of them failed to get the men back to work. Even the Chief Engineer had to intervene in the impasse. Finding that the ship was still stationary at sea, the captain of the ship finally left the bridge to go down into the stokehold himself. When he got there, he found 'the Chief

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<sup>119</sup> Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, "Workers' Resistance and the Rationalization of Work in Bombay between the Wars," in *Contesting Power: Resistance and Everyday Social Relations in South Asia*, ed. Douglas E. Haynes and Gyan Prakash (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 135.

<sup>120</sup> Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*.

<sup>121</sup> Gilje, *To Swear like a Sailor*.

<sup>122</sup> 'Lascars' Grievances'. *The Courier*, May 6, 1901.

Engineer surrounded by the lascars, who were threatening him with violence.’<sup>123</sup> He resorted to ‘putting them in irons’ and ‘detained in confinement’, a treatment he claimed had a ‘good effect’ on the others.<sup>124</sup> Unfortunately for him, it did not have a salutary effect on the working of the ship as it reduced the number of hands and the Chief Engineer had to swallow his pride and intercede on behalf of the men to release them.<sup>125</sup>

It was this brewing tension at sea involving verbal altercations, collective refusals to work and, finally, violence, which boiled over when the ship berthed in port. *The Courier* in Dundee reported ‘a very extraordinary incident’ when the lascar crew, ‘dressed in every variety of costume’, ‘left off work, came ashore and refused to go on board again unless the chief engineer was sent ashore’.<sup>126</sup> The next day, twenty-nine firemen ‘came up to the city in a body’.<sup>127</sup> There, they ‘invaded’ the Post Office and ‘put the officials in a state of alarm by their incessant jabber of unintelligible voices’.<sup>128</sup> The post officials telephoned the police office and a force of constables was despatched to ‘raise the siege’.<sup>129</sup> In the police station, Abdul Guna the mess-room steward, ‘who could speak fairly good English,’ acted as an interpreter.<sup>130</sup> The men complained of having been ‘badly treated on board during the whole voyage, chiefly, it was alleged, by the chief engineer, against whom a charge of assault was also preferred for striking the fireman Assuen Ula’.<sup>131</sup> The Chief Engineer denied the charge in court, but the *serang*, reportedly called ‘Sillea Baba,’ corroborated the accounts of other lascars. In defence, the officer’s counsel said they had ‘great trouble

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<sup>123</sup> ‘Lascars’ Grievances’. *The Courier*, May 6, 1901.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

with the crew during the voyage': 'they refused to obey orders' adding, in a seeming justification of the use of violence, that they 'almost rose in mutiny'.<sup>132</sup> If the lascars appeared in court to argue their case, it was not because of their litigious modernity but because they had been hauled off there by the local police. In the *SS Ameer* incident, the local Superintendent of Police at Dundee finally managed to have the case dismissed.

These forms of contestation at sea (collective withdrawal of labour and violent confrontations) and port (walking off the ship *en masse*) simmered on individual ships over the next four decades of the twentieth century, albeit with varying frequency. While abusive officers appear to have been the most common cause of strikes and walk-offs, conditions of work were another frequent complaint. During the First World War, the pressure to keep the ships moving in order to avoid them becoming sitting targets for torpedo attacks worked in favour of the lascars. Conscious of their indispensability to the war effort, witness to growing expressions of war-weariness in ports around the world and themselves exposed to the constant danger of being torpedoed at sea, lascars were contesting even the right of officers to command. A record from the ship's log for the *SS Queen* in 1917, notes that when the Fourth Engineer went into the stokehold, ordering the fireman Ismail Yousuf to raise more steam, 'the fireman answered in a contemptuous manner and using truculent and filthy language, calling him 'an English bastard' and told him to go and 'f--- himself', at the same time raised his shovel and attempted to strike him, telling him that his place was in the engine room and not in the stokehold'.<sup>133</sup> The next rung of authority, the Third Engineer then intervened, going down to exert more pressure and back up his junior officer. To counter this, another fireman, Ali Farah, stepped in. He told the

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<sup>132</sup> 'Lascars' Grievances'. *The Courier*, May 6, 1901.

<sup>133</sup> *SS Queen* Ship Log, BT 165 1067, Board of Trade Papers, TNA

Third Engineer 'in a contemptuous manner and in contemptuous language... that he was getting all the steam there was. And when ordered by the Third Engineer to clear out of the cockpit, he replied that the Third Engineer could clean it'. From verbal threats, the situation escalated to physical violence against the officer. Possibly in response to violence from the officer, which the ship's log did not record, 'Ali Farah struck the third engineer with a shovel ...and inflicted injuries to his hand. ... [the third engineer] complained of severe pains in arms and back. On examining him several bruises were found.'<sup>134</sup> Here we see a situation that started with a 'routine' command, which turned into an instance of resistance. Violence was used, but in a complex contestation over labour, space and, by the same token, the right of the officer to command.

Indeed, where collective action sufficed, violence was not required. When the *SS City of Manila* was sailing in the South China Sea in 1917, the men working near the furnaces were dehydrated. When they were refused drinking water, they collectively ceased work in the engine room. 'The steam went down and the ship came to a halt... The captain immediately came down and the men demanded that the hand pump be unlocked so they could have water. Desperate to get the ship moving, the captain ordered this done.'<sup>135</sup> The situation was resolved without violence but as 'disobedience of captain's orders, it could have been construed as mutiny by the captain of the ship. Keen to rid himself of an assertive crew, however, the captain did not press charges but instead took on a Malay crew at Singapore and paid for the passage of the discharged crew back to Bombay. At Bombay, they got a red mark on their discharge certificates for rebellious behaviour. Under normal circumstances this

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<sup>134</sup> *SS Queen Ship Log*, BT 165/1067, Board of Trade Papers, TNA

<sup>135</sup> Gardezi (ed), *Chains to Lose*, 122.



would have created an obstacle to reemployment, but in wartime did not prevent them from getting employed on another ship.<sup>136</sup>

These everyday resistances of varying scale gathered pace at the end of the war, when the crews of one ship after another used these forms simultaneously, and behind the same demands. Starting in 1918, lascars walked off their ships, demanding fifty to hundred percent wage rises to compensate for wartime inflation. Seen as a watershed moment leading to one of the first trade unions in India and inaugurating the ‘age of labour’ in mass politics and state policy, this moment of ‘large’, public contestation is often treated as the origin of workers’ resistance in colonial India. In fact, as I have shown, lascars in this moment were drawing on longer cultures of everyday resistance, and among those who played an active role in the 1918 strikes were those who had earlier experiences of contestation and confrontation with shipboard and port authorities. Moreover, these strikes were also not isolated within the dockside, but were taking place against a background of mass working class unrest in the big Indian port cities. The next chapter will look in greater detail at the formation of lascar trade unions.

Not only did the longer history of ‘small’ everyday resistances feed into the ‘large’ and spectacular moments of collective resistance but these ‘large’ moments also had an impact on the ongoing ‘small’ contestations aboard ship. Instances of lascars’ collective assertions in this period go beyond work-related issues and the ‘usual’ forms of contestation. We saw in Chapter ne how, against the background of the Russian revolution, a Russian seaman working with a lascar crew, H. Savvin, when berated by an officer, replied in terms of freedom and slavery for the sailor. Even where there were no explicit connections made between ideas, events and

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<sup>136</sup> Gardezi (ed), *Chains to Lose*, 125.

actions, there was a perceptible change in the nature of contestations. For instance, in 1918, when an eighteen-year-old Amir Haider Khan's ship reached the Russian port of Vladivostok, the European deck crew were given shore leave, the Indian engine room crew were not. Khan and two other men defied the master's orders and left the ship. When they returned to the ship after exploring the town, the master called them to his cabin on the top deck to punish them. The men decided not to go alone but to take fifty other crew members with them and assembled *en masse* outside his cabin. Faced with this crowd, there was nothing the master could do but let the matter go.<sup>137</sup> In this instance, the terrain of moral economy was redefined. The lascars not only found that in giving what in earlier periods could be considered a legitimate and routine order the captain had overstepped a line, but that he no longer had the ability to discipline them for having disobeyed his order.

Although it is difficult to point to an exact year, this period of concurrent contestation on a number of ships together, through walk-offs and strikes, seems to have drawn to a close around 1926. Nonetheless, contestation on individual ships carried on. In February 1926, the *Daily Mail* carried an article titled 'Lascars charged. Captain alleges they refused work. Demanded warmer clothing'.<sup>138</sup> It described twelve lascars of the *SS Brantsome Hall* who had been signed on at Karachi and walked off the ship in Hull because they were not provided enough warm clothing, being clad in little more than cotton shirts and trousers in the cold month of February. The Captain argued that their contracts provided for warm clothing to be provided only when they reached the coast of South America and haughtily declared that despite their scant clothing, 'they could stand the cold weather as well as any

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<sup>137</sup> Gardezi (ed), *Chains to Lose*, 116.

<sup>138</sup> 'Lascars Charged. Captain Alleges They Refused to Work. Demanded Warmer Clothing,' *The Daily Mail*, February 10, 1926.

Englishman'.<sup>139</sup> In November of the same year, the *Sunday Post* reported that forty-two men of the *SS Clan Macaulay* left the ship because, according to the *serang*, 'some of their numbers had been badly treated because they had refused, while on the high seas, to give money to the officers and ...the disaffection spread to other members of the crew.'<sup>140</sup> The captain of the ship denied the charge of bribery, adding that 'the men had been truculent for some time'.<sup>141</sup>

For the next decade, contraction in merchant shipping and consequent unemployment led to a reduction in the absolute number of strikes, while wages stagnated and even declined. Yet, as we have seen in the previous two chapters, walk-offs and desertions in European ports continued, despite the prevailing economic conditions of shipping through the 1920s and '30s.<sup>142</sup> This is perhaps because in periods of brisk shipping, such as during wartime, lascars could hope for a rapid resolution of their issues owing to the urgency of sailing, while in periods of economic slump, desertion in a British port seemed a preferable prospect to returning to the high unemployment of Calcutta or Bombay. It meant the possibility of either settling in Britain and engaging on British contracts or at least of engagement on another ship for an extended period. It was also likely in part due to networks ashore that encouraged lascars' desertion, whether of kinsmen or activists or both. All of these instances were dealt with by local government officials - local police, magistrates and immigration officers.<sup>143</sup>

The scattered and molecular processes that had been taking place through the 1920s and '30s underwent a dramatic quantitative increase with the outbreak of the

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<sup>139</sup> 'Lascars Charged. Captain Alleges They Refused to Work. Demanded Warmer Clothing.' *The Daily Mail*, February 10, 1926.

<sup>140</sup> 'Lascars Desert Glasgow Liner. 41 Sent to Prison for Refusing to Sail'. *The Sunday Post*, 21 November, 1926.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>142</sup> Wemyss, "Littoral Struggles, Liminal Lives."

<sup>143</sup> '31 Lascars sent to Prison, Indian Liner Held Up'. *Times of India*, 30 August, 1935.

Second World War. The build-up to the official declaration of war had considerably improved the position of lascars by increasing employment. From 1936, there were growing hostilities between the imperialist powers. Germany had initiated an arms race and Britain accordingly commenced preparations for a war which was going to be decided overwhelmingly by sea and air power. Britain began to expand its fleet, drawing up plans for sending older Royal Navy vessels to the colonies to set up colonial navies like the Royal Indian Navy. From the mid-1930s onwards this led to a recovery for shipping from the Great Depression of the early 1930s. Between 1936 and 1939 alone, the number of lascars employed on British ships increased by 25%, from 41,760 to 50,700.<sup>144</sup> Indeed, the shortage of cheap maritime labour had led shipping companies to increase the length of lascar contracts from the customary 6-12 month period to one of 18 months. While lascars had always had the advantage of being virtually irreplaceable as cheap labour in British ports, wartime shipping made them even more indispensable. This improved their bargaining position manifold and no doubt contributed to the increase in strikes. As early as July 1938, lascars on troopships in South Devon refused to wear gas masks and threatened to walk off their ships, believing they were being sent to Spain to intervene in the war between Franco and the Republican forces. It was only after an assurance from Whitehall that they agreed to resume work.<sup>145</sup>

The second 'large' moment of resistance in the late colonial period began on the eve of the Second World War, when a wave of lascar strikes spread across ports in Britain, India, Burma and Australia. On 3 September 1939, the very day that war was declared, when the lascar crew of the *Clan Macalister* walked off the ship, striking for a 100% wage increase to compensate for the previous twenty years of wage

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<sup>144</sup> William P. Elderton, 'Merchant Seamen During The War'. Institute of Actuaries, 1946.

<sup>145</sup> 'Strike Over Mock War Averted'. *Daily Independent*, July 6, 1938.

stagnation.<sup>146</sup> The P&O's *Straithard* followed suit and, in the urgency to get them steaming out, the Board of Trade which had requisitioned both vessels, granted the lascars' demands. Four days later, the Ministry of War Transport conceded to the same demands by lascar crews of the *Clan Ross* and *Clan Macbrayne*. Three days into the war, eight ships were on strike, some for 200% wage increases, and a £10 war risk bonus.<sup>147</sup> Within a week, 310 lascars were imprisoned in Britain.<sup>148</sup> To pre-empt the spreading of these strikes, the Ministry of War Transport wired the Shipping Master in Calcutta to write a 50% wage rise into the new contracts, but the Board of Trade, concerned that this would lead British crews to demand a similar rise, had the order rescinded. This infuriated the Calcutta crews, who walked off their ships in protest. Similar events took place in Bombay, which we will look at it in greater detail in the next chapter.

The demand for a 100% wage rise and £10 war bonus became generalised to a number of lascar crews, who walked off their ships in various ports.<sup>149</sup> As their vessels steamed into British ports, lascars heard of the concessions granted to individual ships and walked off their ships *en masse* with the same demands. In London's King George V Docks, for example, the lascar crew of the *SS Oxfordshire*, a Bibby Line steamer undergoing refitting as a hospital ship went on strike on 17 October 1939, with a list of the same demands.<sup>150</sup> Nine days later, their demands were conceded by the agents of the shipping company in port.<sup>151</sup> Within a week, forty-four lascars of the crew of the *Clan Alpine* 'declined to go to sea, or to obey the orders of the Master, or Chief Engineer, and put forward the following demands: every man to

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<sup>146</sup> Wemyss, "Littoral Struggles, Liminal Lives."

<sup>147</sup> Visram, *Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History*; Lane, *The Merchant Seamen's War*.

<sup>148</sup> Tony Lane, *The Merchant Seaman's War*

<sup>149</sup> Wemyss, "Littoral Struggles, Liminal Lives."

<sup>150</sup> 'Indian Seamen: Unrest and Welfare', 1939-1945. IOR/L/PJ/12/630.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

receive a bonus of £10, and wages to be increased 100%'.<sup>152</sup> Pointing to political involvement in the organisation of these strikes, an intelligence file noted that

The strikers on the *SS Oxfordshire* received considerable assistance from Surat Ali, the Indian Communist in the East End, his associate Tahsil Miah (of the Indian Seamen's Union) and, through the latter, from V.K. Menon and the India League. It was the successful outcome of the strike in the *SS Oxfordshire* that led to the strike on the *SS Clan Alpine*.<sup>153</sup>

Other lascars crews followed suit. On arrival in the Port of London the crew of the *SS Somali*, a vessel belonging to the Hain Steamship Company, a subsidiary of P&O, heard of the increases in wages granted to other vessels and decided to agitate for similar concessions.<sup>154</sup> The following week, the *SS Burdwan* belonging to the same company went on strike. News of strikes also travelled to other ports, probably through word of mouth, as lascars were transferred to other vessels. The same intelligence report noted: 'encouraged by the successful outcome of the strike on the *SS Oxfordshire*... the coloured seamen on the *SS Dorsetshire* which is also being fitted out as a hospital troopship at Southampton, refused to come on duty until granted similar concessions.'<sup>155</sup>

Reflecting upon the temper of the lascar crews, the Deputy to the Indian High Commissioner warned that

The officers of vessels carrying Lascar crews should treat the Lascars properly and above all should listen patiently to what [they] had to say... if the Lascars are properly treated by their officers it will be possible to get them into a reasonable state of mind, and even to appeal to them on patriotic grounds, but ... if the contrary happens we shall get more and more trouble with Lascars and no-one can tell where it will end.<sup>156</sup>

The owner of the Clan Line Lord Cayzer, was, however, in no mood to 'indulge' the lascars. Fuming, he declared that 'to give lascar labour what it wants' would be 'the

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<sup>152</sup> 'Indian Seamen: Unrest and Welfare', 1939-1945. IOR/L/PJ/12/630.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

same [as giving in to] Hitler's demands'.<sup>157</sup> For raising demands for a wage rise, this shipping magnate, even called the lascars 'profiteers', apparently without irony.

Through inertia of habit, captains continued to respond to these strikes at the local level in the same way as before the war, through involving the police and the courts. The colonial state, though caught thoroughly by surprise at the beginning of the war by this strike wave, eventually devised an international network of reconciliation and coercion to deal with lascar resistance in wartime. On the one hand, a special conciliatory mechanism was created in the system of 'Indian Welfare Officers' stationed at various ports around the world. This officer was to be called on board when the captain either perceived a dangerous level of discontent, or already had a strike on his hands. His role was to induce seamen to return to 'a reasonable frame of mind', in other words, of submitting to the status quo of authority. This step of 'persuasion' came before the next one of coercion. But most often his task consisted in reminding discontented crews of what awaited them if they did not withdraw their demands. The Director of Military Intelligence lauded their role in the 'satisfactory disposal of embarrassing incidents and forestall[ing] any large-scale expressions of discontent'.<sup>158</sup> Naturally, Indian seamen did not perceive the figure of the Indian Welfare Officer as someone concerned with their well-being. Indian seamen in Australian ports said the Welfare Officer was 'forcing Indian seamen to do anything the shipping companies wanted, for which he was being paid £100 a week by the Indian government.' They asked that he be returned to India 'as the Indian

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<sup>157</sup> 'Indian Seamen: Unrest and Welfare', 1939-1945. IOR/L/PJ/12/630.

<sup>158</sup> 'Note Furnished By The Director, Intelligence Bureau, Giving An Account Of The Unrest Among Indian Seamen Prepared In The UK, Causing Or Threatening Strikes At British Ports.' National Archives of India. Home Political (Internal). F.No. 183/1941.

Seamen's Union felt they were more capable of looking after the interests of Indian seamen in Australia'.<sup>159</sup>

Indeed, in this respect the official response to lascar resistance on the outbreak of the Second World War differed qualitatively from the two preceding decades. While resistance had earlier been dealt with by local authorities in the port, including the Captain, Shipping Master, police and magistrate, from 1939 onwards, there was a much greater involvement of the central state apparatus in local disputes. The confrontations through the 1920s and '30s were with local authorities: captains of individual ships, local police and magistrates. This was transformed at the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. With the re-organisation of shipping for the war effort, the resolution of demands required the intervention of the state. This mirrored a closer integration of shipping with the war apparatus. Top shipping managers had always acted as advisers to the Ministry of Shipping; now they were co-opted into the Ministry of War Transport.<sup>160</sup> This Ministry decided the cargo and destinations of British merchant shipping. There was also closer integration with the Royal Navy, which decided the routes that merchant ships would take to avoid the risks associated with the war. In particularly dangerous zones, merchant ships also sailed in military convoy, which was directed by the Admiralty.<sup>161</sup> Fifty mid-sized passenger ships were requisitioned for direct military use as troopships, along with their crews numbering 10,000 merchant seamen.<sup>162</sup>

The 1939 strikes were a turning point in the history of lascar contestation of authority, which through the 1920s and 30s had been confined to individual ships. Were these strikes actively coordinated together or was this mere coincidence? This is

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<sup>159</sup> 'Minutes of General and Council Meetings, Oct-Dec 1945', 2496-2498, Indian Seamen's Union in Australia. Microfilm, NAI. E 177/3.

<sup>160</sup> Lane, *The Merchant Seamen's War*, 15.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid*, 12.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid*, 21.



a question which we cannot fully answer from the official record because if there existed networks of coordination between various crews which were walking off their ships with the same demands, the authorities may never have come to know about them. Maintaining such a network of transient sailors may have been difficult but not impossible, given the presence of small communities of lascars who had settled in port towns and of political activists and organisations like Surat Ali, Tahsil Miah and Krishna Menon in Britain of the Communist Party, Indian Seamen's Union and India League respectively, along with their many counterparts in Indian port cities. As we have seen in the previous chapter, these activists also lent a political interpretation to the exploitation of lascars and to the reasons for the war.

Yet, activists and organisations could only act as outside support to mobilisations that stemmed from lascars themselves. What is incontestable is that for as long as lascars had been employed in steamships, there had been confrontations with officers at sea, and police and magistrates in ports. Among the lascars were those who had the experience of organising these collective actions. Many crews had been to prison. Their experiences were generalised through the constant intermixing of crews in a highly casualised workforce and through the transfer of crews from one vessel to another. The 1939 strikes were sparked off in a context of low unemployment. It was here that the cumulative experience of many years of molecular contestations came into play. The striking lascars used the same methods they had been using over the twenty years past – refusing to work and walking off the ship.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the spaces of the steamship, the nature of labour, the regime of authority and forms of lascar contestation. It has shown how the physical structure

of the ship was marked by class, gender, race and colonialism. It has also shown how the increasing employment of colonial labour in different sections of the ship was underpinned by colonial rhetoric about unskilled and feminised/domestic work as well as native customs and habits which made them suited to hot temperatures or unventilated accommodation. To get this work done on the ship, a regime of authority exercised itself through a system of fines which, theoretically, replaced the regime of spectacular violence on the sailing ship for any infractions of orders. In practice, violence continued to be employed, though its use was displaced from the master of the sailing ship to the junior officers of the steam ship and in the case of lascars, to their native foremen.

Lascars contested these regimes of authority through various strategies on board ship, and such contestations could escalate at sea and boil over when the ship reached the port. These 'small', everyday contestations could 'snowball' into 'larger' moments of collective action which could draw in state authorities at the highest level and, as we will see in the next chapter, political parties. The simultaneity of contestation across ships was most evident at three historic moments: the end of World War I (1917- ca. 1925), the beginning of World War II (1939) and, much more menacingly for the colonial state, at the end of World War II (1946) in the Royal Indian Naval mutiny which also began with a refusal to obey the orders of officers. What made these 'large', public moments possible, I argue, was the cumulative experience that a generation of lascars gained from the multiple 'small', localised contestations of power. The 'large' and 'small' moments were not only part of the same continuum, but were also constitutive of each other. Just as the 'small' contestations fed into the 'large' ones, the latter could then redefine what was considered acceptable in the exercise of shipboard authority, thus leading to an

intensification of shipboard struggles. The next chapter examines the unions that were formed out of the post-WWI lascar strikes, and the involvement of Indian nationalist parties in these unions.

## Chapter Four: Lascars and Nationalists

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This chapter shifts focus from the ship back to port. Having examined the relation of lascars to internationalist ideas and organisations in Chapter Two, this chapter now examines their relation to nationalism and the nationalist parties in the ports of Bombay and Calcutta. It argues that while the ideas of labour and pan-colonial internationalism provided non-nationally bounded and non-statist imagination of the anti-colonial movement, the nationalist parties had a narrower vision of what they conceived of as a movement not only against colonialism, but for a nation-state. In their vision of a mass anti-colonial movement, labour played a subordinate role to the nation, and represented a potentially dangerous and fissiparous ‘separate interest’ that had to be controlled and channelled as a base for mass mobilisation or as an electoral constituency.

The chapter begins at the moment of lascar strikes at the end of the First World War described in the previous chapter, showing how many of the lascars who came to play a prominent role in these and became involved in the new lascar unions had been involved in previous ‘small’ contestations. These strikes were of a piece with a wider context of mass politics, with the non-cooperation and Khilafat movements, as well as general strikes in industrial centres. The next section looks at the ways in which nationalists gained legislative and administrative positions by ‘representing’ labour in the two decades prior to gaining full state power in 1947. In the interwar period of institutionalised corporatism which allowed for labour representatives in legislative councils, commissions of enquiry, trade unions and the International Labour Organisation, middle class political figures from a wide range of political organisations became involved in lascar unions, such as C.R. Das’ Swaraj party of Congress council-entryists, Fazlul Huq’s Krishak Praja Party and

Suhrawardy's Muslim League in Bengal, as well as liberals like N.M. Joshi in Bombay. The chapter first examines their views on the role of organised labour in the anti-colonial movement, and then at the motivations for their involvement with lascars and their unions. Lastly, it discusses their dispositions towards moments of lascar contestation.

### **'Large' lascar contestations in Indian ports**

It was the 'large' moment of lascar strikes at the end of the First World War that drew the attention of nationalists to Indian seamen. In 1918, lascars went on strike *en masse* in Indian ports. Until this point, contestation was a regular phenomenon on individual ships, as we saw in instances on the *SS Ameer* in 1901, the *SS Manila* in 1916 and the *SS Queen* in 1917. Another lascar-crewed ship, the *SS Elysia*, had also seen an instance of collective action in 1915, led by the *serang*, Mohamed Ebrahim. In this instance, their action was successful in winning them a five per cent pay rise. In 1918, Ebrahim was involved again in a four-day strike on the *Kaiser-i-Hind* (a ship on which Gandhi had once travelled), this time winning a fifty per cent pay rise to compensate for wartime inflation.<sup>1</sup> Demands of fifty to hundred per cent pay rises became common to crew after crew that went on strike, leading to a general pay rise across the board. By January 1919, there were 10,000 lascars of the British India Steam Navigation Company on strike.<sup>2</sup>

This 'large' moment drew on the prior experiences of lascars; 'small', everyday resistances on board ship had built up a generation of activists among them. Such continuities in terms of the memories of collectivities formed what Chitra Joshi

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<sup>1</sup> Abdulghani Y. Serang, *Tribute to the 'Father of Indian Seafarers Movement* (Mumbai: National Union of Seafarers of India, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India, 1885-1947* (New Delhi: Macmillan, 1983), 199.

has described as a ‘sedimented part of workers’ experiences.’<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the same figures often appear in both kinds of contestation, like Mohamed Ebrahim in Bombay, who in those years stood on a box on a kerb of the street in the dock areas of Bombay and gave speeches to seamen to organise.<sup>4</sup> In Calcutta, Samad Khan, another serang, was observed during the 1919 strikes ‘incit[ing] the men to refuse to sign articles [of agreement]’ and was ‘on two occasions...turned off ships on which articles were being signed by the Deputy Shipping Master.’<sup>5</sup>

Some lascars involved in the 1918 strike wave reappeared in later strikes as union activists. For instance, Hesamuddin Ahmed Chowdhury, a lascar quartermaster, came to the attention of the Shipping Master in 1919, when he ‘was twice ejected from the Shipping Office and once from on board a ship during the signing on of a crew for trespass and attempting to create dissatisfaction amongst the seamen.’<sup>6</sup> In 1922, he wrote to the Marine Secretary saying, ‘[W]e laid a complain (sic) to the Shipping Master who speaks of his powerlessness to do anything against the wishes of the Captains and agents’, adding, ‘the seamen of all ranks suffer as much as can hardly be described by means of pen’.<sup>7</sup> In 1923, Chowdhury, then working aboard the *SS Goldenfels* docked in Antwerp, corresponded with James Henson, an official of the National Sailors’ and Firemens’ Union in Britain, enlisting his cooperation in eliciting replies from the India Office on the steps that had been taken towards

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<sup>3</sup> Chitra Joshi, *Lost Worlds: Indian Labour and Its Forgotten Histories.*, 207.

<sup>4</sup> Author’s interview with Abdulgani Serang, great-grandson of Mohamed Ebrahim ‘Serang’. Abdulgani confirmed this anecdote with his aunt, who had heard it from Mohamed Ebrahim himself.

<sup>5</sup> ‘Representation from the Indian Seamen’s Union regarding the recruitment of seamen’. 1921. National Archives of India (NAI). Government of Bengal Marine Department (GBMD), Proceedings Nos. 17-28.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Petition from the General Secretary, Indian Seamen’s Union re: the redress of certain grievances of the Indian seamen.’ 1922. NAI.GBMD. Proceedings Nos. 215-218.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Petition from Hessamuddin Ahmed Choudhury complaining against the present system of recruitment of seamen 1922. NAI. GBMD. Proceedings Nos. 235-236.

implementing the recommendations of a commission of enquiry into lascar recruitment.<sup>8</sup>

Lascars who were actively involved in organising collectives faced victimisation from the shipping companies and colonial state. Captains of ships could blacklist such seamen by putting in unfavourable remarks about their conduct and quality of work on their employment certificates (*nullies*) which could mean they would not be re-employed.<sup>9</sup> Recruiters in port ‘refus[ed] to engage any seamen of the [Indian Seamen’s] Union’.<sup>10</sup> In a move to reassure shipping companies that the colonial state would exert itself to rid them of ‘troublemakers’, the Collector of Bombay contemplated deporting Goan union activists Floriano Gama, Victorino Demello, Joaquim Rebello and Quintin Dias, as ‘undesirable alien’ Portuguese subjects, thus showing the protection that the colonial state guaranteed British shipping companies.<sup>11</sup>

The 1918 strike wave led to the creation of the first formal trade unions to negotiate with the employers and state, in which nationalist leaders were soon to play a role. The strikes were what Rajnarayan Chandavarkar called ‘an active undergrowth of informal organisation and seemingly spontaneous industrial action’ over which the unions were a ‘loose superstructure’.<sup>12</sup> In 1918, two unions of saloon stewards were formed out of pre-existing mutual benefit clubs, one of the P&O stewards and cooks,

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<sup>8</sup> ‘Handwritten letter from Hesammudin Ahmed Chowdhury, SS Goldenfels, to The General Secretary, National Sailors’ and Firemen’s Union, Great Britain and Ireland, 22 October, 1923’. ILO Archives, Geneva. D602/900//1.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Action taken by the Commerce Department on the Draft Convention concerning Seamen’s Articles of Agreement adopted at the 9<sup>th</sup> International Labour Conference of the League of Nations held at Geneva in June 1926’ NAI. Industries and Labour, Labour (I&L,L), 1928, F. No. L- 1460.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Representation from the Indian Seamen’s Union regarding the recruitment of seamen’. 1921. NAI, GBMD, Proceedings Nos. 17-28.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Foreigner: Proposed deportation of certain persons associated with the Indian Seamen’s Union, Bombay’. Maharashtra State Archives, Bombay (MSA). Political Department, B. Branch. 1925. File No. S-43/253.

<sup>12</sup> Chandavarkar, *Imperial Power and Popular Politics: Class, Resistance and the State in India, c. 1850-1950*, 74.

and the other of saloon lascars working for all other shipping companies.<sup>13</sup> A third union was formed in the same year of the deck and engine room lascars. The saloon department unions merged with each other in 1921, and subsequently with the third union of the other departments in 1926, becoming the Indian Seamen's Union. While these developments were taking place in Bombay, in Calcutta, the Indian Seamen's Benevolent Union was formed in 1918, also changing its name to Indian Seamen's Union in 1920. Despite attempts to unify them, the two unions continued to operate separately until the end of the Second World War.<sup>14</sup> It is likely that seamen's unions were among the earliest to be formed in India was because of lascars' familiarity with trade union organisation in international ports. In 1922, a Government of Bengal report noted the 'direct contact of the men ... with western trade unionism' which it dated back to the beginning of the twentieth century, and their possession of 'tickets' entitling them to 'what they call trade-union benefits in England' which contributed to their predisposition to unionise.<sup>15</sup>

It is easier to recover a picture of the formal 'superstructure' from the official records than of the 'active undergrowth of informal organisation' that played out in the strikes. While we have anecdotal instances like those of shipboard organisers like Hesamuddin Chowdhury, what clearly emerges in the official records is the role of the *serangs* like Mohamed Ebrahim and Samad Khan in the newly formed organisational structures of trade unions. There are a number of possible reasons for their prominence in the formal structures and thus, the official records. Ahuja and Balachandran point out that *serangs'* very role placed them as intermediaries between

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<sup>13</sup> A. Colaco, *A History of the Seamen's Union, Bombay* (Bombay: Pascoal Vaz, 1956).

<sup>14</sup> Dinkar Desai, *Maritime Labour in India* (Bombay: Servants of India Society, 1940). 'Representation from the Indian Seamen's Union regarding the recruitment of seamen'. 1921. NAI, GBMD, Proceedings Nos. 17-28.

<sup>15</sup> 'Note by the Department of Industries, Government of Bengal, September 1921' NAI, GI, CD-LS, 1-30. In G. Balachandran, 'Cultures Of Protest In Transnational Contexts: Indian Seamen Abroad, 1886-1945'. *Transforming Cultures Ejournal* 3, no.2 (2008): 53.



shipping authorities and lascars: on ship, they combined the role of discipliner and spokesman for lascars.<sup>16</sup> To maintain this relationship, they had to be ‘for the most part on excellent terms with the owners and the officers of their vessels.’<sup>17</sup> The *serangs* thus formed a conduit between the seamen and the captain or shipping agents. In this position, they occupied a precarious position between voicing the concerns of the seamen on the one hand and the orders of the owners on the other, depending which side was exerting itself more at different junctures. As we shall see, the unions came to occupy a very similar position.

Nationalists first made contact with these *serangs* during the strikes, offering their legal counsel. In Calcutta it was middle class Khilafatists who had given up their professional practice as part of the non-cooperation movement who first engaged with the on-going lascar strikes. Many of these Khilafatists belonged to the so-called ‘Young Party’ of the Muslim League, with its centre in Aligarh, which steered it from an elite, loyalist position to one of ‘greater militancy, some kind of accommodation with nationalist Hindus, and increasing pan-Islamism’.<sup>18</sup> In the context of the post-war strikes and popular unrest, they gained a new orientation to Muslim subalterns like lascars. Mohamed Daud, a barrister in the Alipore Court and later member of the Bengal legislative council from Krishnanagar in western Bengal, established contact with the *serangs* Samad Khan, Manfar Khan, Moghal Jan and Syed Minnat Ali during the lascar strikes.<sup>19</sup> Like his fellow lawyers R. Braunfield and the Khilafatist Kabiruddin Ahmed, who defended the saloon crew of the *SS City of Chester* in 1919,

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<sup>16</sup> Ravi Ahuja, “Networks of Subordination – Networks of the Subordinated: The Ordered Spaces of South Asian Maritime Labour in an Age of Imperialism (c.1890-1947)”; Balachandran, *Globalising Labour? Indian Seafarers and World Shipping, c. 1870–1945*.

<sup>17</sup> ‘Representation from the Indian Seamen’s Union regarding abuses in connection with the engagement of seamen in Calcutta’1921. NAI .GBMD,.Proceedings Nos. 96-100 & K.-W.

<sup>18</sup> Sarkar, *Modern India*, 143.

<sup>19</sup> ‘Representation from the Indian Seamen’s Union regarding abuses in connection with the engagement of seamen in Calcutta’1921. NAI .GBMD,.Proceedings Nos. 96-100 & K.-W.

Daud took up legal cases involving striking and victimised lascars.<sup>20</sup> When the Indian Seamen's Union was formed in Calcutta that year, Braunfield became its President and Ahmed its Vice-President. The *serang* Manfar Khan was appointed Secretary, but was soon replaced by Daud, a change which the Secretary of the Mercantile Marine Department noted with satisfaction, 'is an improvement'.<sup>21</sup> In this meeting of the lawyers and *serangs*, we see a coming together of two very different worlds: the respectable one of educated lawyers and legislators, and the 'rough' one of seamen.

In Bombay, the middle-class politicians who engaged with lascars were largely liberal constitutionalists who reposed more faith in the reformist intent of the British Parliament than in a mass anti-colonial movement. Here the established Tilakite leadership was unenthusiastic about Gandhi, and consequently the Khilafat and non-cooperation movements remained relatively weak.<sup>22</sup> Tilak's Home Rule League had chosen to adopt the overtly Hindu symbolism of Shivaji and Ganesh festivals, thus likely alienating lascars who were overwhelmingly Muslims from Ratnagiri, North Kanara and Punjab. Moreover, with the announcement of constitutional reforms in 1919, Home Rule Leaguers turned their attention entirely towards legislative activities, at a time when there were widespread strikes. Having become well-known through their activities in the Home Rule League in a previous period, however, some of the prominent Leaguers like B.P. Wadia in Madras and Joseph Baptista in Bombay were approached by strikers to head unions. At the same time, welfare workers of Gokhale's Servants of India Society also played a role in Bombay trade unionism, which they often treated as a continuation of their earlier social work activities involving famine relief, the formation of credit and cooperative

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<sup>20</sup> 'Representation from the Indian Seamen's Union regarding the recruitment of seamen'. 1921. National Archives of India (NAI). Government of Bengal Marine Department (GBMD), Proceedings Nos. 17-28.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Sarkar, *Modern India*, 212.

societies, the sanitisation of *Holi* celebrations and the promotion of abstinence from alcohol. Gokhale's own vision of this work was strictly philanthropic: as President of the Indian National Congress in 1905 he had famously declared that the educated were the 'natural leaders of the people' and that Congress did not stand for political rights 'for the whole population, but for such portion of it as has been qualified by education to discharge properly the responsibilities of such organisation'.<sup>23</sup>

The links that were established between nationalists and lascars were qualitatively new developments in the post-First World War period. While nationalists had created some contacts with striking workers in European-owned enterprises during the *swadeshi* movement in Bengal in 1905, this had not produced formal structures or permanent linkages.<sup>24</sup> Neither had Tilak's popularity in Bombay, which had prompted a strike in nearly all cotton textile mills in 1908 on the occasion of his conviction for sedition and transportation to Mandalay, translated into any lasting organisational forms.<sup>25</sup> In that period, it was politicians associated with the more militant (or in Tilak's case, 'extremist') section of the nationalists that had sought to establish a wider base of support. In 1918, however, this changed. Political moderates also began to establish contacts with lascars, and this time these contacts were formalised through the structures of trade unions. Seemingly overnight, unions were created and their top rungs occupied by leading nationalists. At various times between 1920 and 1930, Lala Lajpat Rai, Chittaranjan Das, Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose occupied the Presidency of the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC). The first AITUC conference was attended by Motilal Nehru, Vithalbhai

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<sup>23</sup> Sarkar, *Modern India*, 90.

<sup>24</sup> Some *swadeshi* leaders like Aswinicoomar Banerji who were involved in the *samitis* (committees) of local action and assistance addressed meetings of strikers. In Bengal, the fact that strikes occurred in large enterprises largely dominated by European capital, allowed the *swadeshi* leaders to illustrate a nationalist point. (Sarkar, *Modern India*, 118.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 134.

Patel, Annie Besant and Jinnah, hardly figures associated with the left wing of the anticolonial movement.<sup>26</sup> Jinnah was President of the All India (including Burma) Postal and Railway Mail Service Association which had a membership of 30,000. A.K. Fazlul Huq, at the time president of the All India Muslim League and general secretary of the Congress in Bengal, controlled the Howrah Labour Union and at one point the Indian Seamen's Union in Calcutta.<sup>27</sup> The involvement of middle class figures with labour unions in this period is reflected in the composition of the seamen's union in Calcutta; its seven vice-presidents comprised, among others, a sub-editor of the *Bengalee*, a financial manager at the *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* newspaper, a legal remembrancer of the Bengal government, and a retired magistrate.<sup>28</sup> With such persons of eminence at their helm, the Calcutta union came to acquire a permanent executive body, staffed with respectable names which appeared on elegantly-designed official letterheads. As we shall see in the case of lascars' unions, nationalists often engaged in manoeuvres to 'capture' unions, and sit on the national executives of as many unions as possible. Mohamed Daud, for instance, was simultaneously President of the Calcutta Indian Seamen's Union, the Indian Quartermasters' Union and the Bengal Mariner's Union. At various times, Fazlul Huq, Huseyn Suhrawardy, Subhas Bose and Aftab Ali were to vie with Daud for leadership of these unions.<sup>29</sup>

The shift from *serang* leadership to leadership by middle-class politicians raises a number of questions about the relation of nationalists to labour in the interwar period. Why did these middle-class politicians in Calcutta and Bombay make contact with the lascars? Why did this contact take the particular form at this historical moment? What role did their political ideas play in their relations with lascars and

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<sup>26</sup> Sarkar, *Modern India*, 200.

<sup>27</sup> R.R. Bakhale, *The Directory of Trade Unions*, (Bombay: All India Trade Union Congress, 1925)

<sup>28</sup> Balachandran, *Globalising Labour?*, 232.

<sup>29</sup> Kamruddin Ahmad, *Labour Movement in East Pakistan* (Dhaka: Progoti Publishers, 1969).

these unions? What was their attitude to lascars' contestations of authority? What were their larger visions of the role of labour in the anti-colonial movement? The next two sections will address these questions.

### **A platform for state power**

Under late colonialism, labour became an important field for nationalists to represent, 'capture' and channel behind competing claims. For one, these years of labour unrest produced corporatist institutions and discourses worldwide, thereby creating avenues for nationalists to gain legislative positions through the 'representation' of labour.<sup>30</sup> The interwar years saw recurring strike waves across the subcontinent every decade: in 1918-1921, 1927-29 and 1937-39.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the lascar strikes of 1918 took place against a background of general strikes in the industrial centres of colonial India, particularly Calcutta, Kanpur and Bombay. The strikes in Bombay saw 200,000 mill workers simultaneously on strike.<sup>32</sup> As a Committee on Industrial Unrest noted in 1921, however, 'the 'strike fever' in India was only one phase in 'the general unrest which has prevailed since the close of the war in every country in the world'.<sup>33</sup> At the international level, an anxiety to allay this 'general unrest' (which also included mutinies, general strikes and armed workers' uprisings in Germany, Italy and France) led the signatories of the Versailles Peace Treaty in 1919 to institute the International Labour Organisation (ILO). The ILO was based on a corporatist structure formed of national delegations including government, employers' and workers' delegates.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Kapil Kumar, *Congress and Classes: Nationalism, Workers and Peasants*; K. N. Panikkar, *National and Left Movements in India* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1980).

<sup>31</sup> Simeon, *The Politics of Labour Under Late Colonialism: Workers, Unions, and the State in Chota Nagpur, 1928-1939*.

<sup>32</sup> Sarkar, *Modern India*, 199.

<sup>33</sup> Joshi, *Lost Worlds*, 60.

<sup>34</sup> *League of Nations International Labour Conference: First Annual Meeting, October 29, 1919- November 29, 1919* (Washington, Government Printing Office, 1920).

Most workers' delegates who were included in these delegations were leaders of trade unions which had supported their governments' war effort, been co-opted onto Councils of State and were opposed to the post-war revolutionary tendencies that were developing as part of the 'general unrest'.<sup>35</sup>

The corporatist structure of the ILO spurred the setting up of trade unions in India. As one of the founding members of the ILO, India had to send trade union representatives to the ILO conferences, and this provided an impetus for the creation of formal organisations.<sup>36</sup> The All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) was formed in 1920, a year after the ILO was established. One trade unionist noted with candour at the time that the 'main reason' for AITUC's existence was 'to have a representative central organisation which the government could consult in nominating workers' representatives to attend the conferences of the ILO.'<sup>37</sup> Representatives of Indian seamen's unions were to attend the ILO numerous times as workers' delegates.

In India, this new corporatism was also institutionalised through the introduction of a labour constituency as part of the Montague-Chelmsford reforms in 1919. This was only a partial corporatism because the representative of labour in the councils was to be nominated by the government. Nevertheless, representing labour became one avenue for Indian political leaders to exercise legislative and administrative power for two decades before coming into full state power in 1947. The potential success of this approach was demonstrated by the experience of the imperial metropolis through the successes of the Labour Party in Britain, which permanently displaced the Liberal Party in 1922 to become the second party in Britain, and in 1924 formed a government for the first time. Many Indian liberals like

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<sup>35</sup> Joshi, *Lost Worlds*, 4.

<sup>36</sup> Ahuja notes that the inclusion of India was a move to strengthen British influence on the ILO. Ravi Ahuja, *Monthly Reports of the India ILO Branch of the International Labour Organisation, 1929-1969: A Finding Aid* (Göttingen: Centre for Modern Indian Studies, 2012), i.

<sup>37</sup> V.B. Karnik, *N.M. Joshi Servant of India* (Bombay: United Asia Publications, 1972), 53.

G.K. Gokhale, Lajpat Rai and even Tilak maintained close contact with members of the Independent Labour Party in Britain.<sup>38</sup> To the Indian nationalists, this proved that a strategy based on using ‘moderate’ trade unionism as levers of influence could in fact lead to governmental power. As we will see, the control of this constituency played an important part in the inter-party struggles of the 1920s and 30s.

The corporatism that marked this historical juncture at which labour was becoming central to politics and statecraft, transformed the political fortunes of those who claimed to represent labour. Perhaps the most successful figure in this context was Narayan Malhar Joshi in Bombay. Joshi’s career is illustrative of the way in which ‘representing’ labour could become a springboard for a political career, and became an example for other nationalists to emulate. Joshi had been a member of Gokhale’s Servants of India Society since 1909.<sup>39</sup> Like his political mentors Gokhale and Ranade, he located himself within the ‘moderate’ wing of Indian nationalism, which believed in gradual constitutional reform, and opposed the ‘extreme’ faction represented by Tilak and the Home Rule League and their ideas of mass civil disobedience.<sup>40</sup> The 1918 strike wave in Bombay, however, transformed Joshi from a social worker into a statesman. Joshi did not become directly involved in the textile millworkers’ strikes that immobilised the entire cotton industry, but collected statistics and wrote journalistic articles on workers’ conditions, the need for shorter working hours, medical, educational and welfare facilities, and better housing.<sup>41</sup> The credentials acquired by his writings along with his political moderation, made him the government’s candidate of choice to attend the first conference of the ILO in

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<sup>38</sup> Howard Brasted and Carl Bridge, ‘The British Labour Party and Indian nationalism, 1907--1947’, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 11, no. 2 (1988): 74.

<sup>39</sup> V.B. Karnik, *N.M Joshi: Servant of India* (Bombay: United Asia Publications, 1972).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

Washington in 1919, before the AITUC had been formed.<sup>42</sup> There, he played the part of a loyalist, liberal reformer, reposing his faith in legislation by the British Parliament. At the ILO conference, countering a speech by the South African member, Joshi declaimed,

Mr. Warrington Smyth... has placed before you a picture of India... [as] an uncivilized country. But... India has been governed by the British Parliament for over 100 years .... The British Parliament, than which there is no more democratic governing institution in the world .... And can you believe, if you are told that under that Government for over 100 years India could not have made any greater progress than that which has been pictured...?<sup>43</sup>

For his moderation and liberal belief in gradual constitutional reform, Joshi was again approved by the government as a workers' delegate to the ILO in 1921, 1922, 1925, 1929, 1934, 1946 and 1947.<sup>44</sup> As part of the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms, he was nominated as Labour Member to the Central Legislative Assembly in 1921, a position he retained until 1946 when the Imperial Assembly was superseded by the Constituent Assembly.<sup>45</sup> Joshi and liberal trade union figures associated with the Servants of India Society like P.G. Kanekar, L.G. Pradhan, Syed Munawar and Dinkar Desai, were also involved in the Indian Seamen's Union in Bombay.

Corporatist structures helped to elevate many of the leaders of Indian seamen's unions into provincial, national and international positions on delegations, councils, commissions and ministries in the three decades before decolonisation. The process of attaining such positions was often complex. In Bombay, Mohamed Ebrahim, who had come to Bombay as a 13-year old orphan in search of work, led a strike on the *SS Elysia* during the war, and became General Secretary of the Indian Seamen's Union in Bombay in 1926. For this lascar, the emergence of labour as a

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<sup>42</sup> Karnik, *N.M. Joshi*.

<sup>43</sup> *League of Nations International Labour Conference: First Annual Meeting*, 95.

<sup>44</sup> 'Biographical Notes on India's Leaders of Labour', India Office Records (IOR), Economic Department (E), IOR/L/E/8/8226.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*



representative category dramatically altered the conditions of life by allowing him to become a member of the Bombay Municipal Corporation from 1929 until 1948 as an official of the seamen's union.<sup>46</sup> Apart from this experience as a municipal corporator, he was also a labour member of the Indian delegation to the ILO in 1936.<sup>47</sup> Another seaman, Aftab Ali, had come from his native Kathal Khair in Sylhet during the First World War to Calcutta, where his brother was a boarding-house owner. Ali had worked on ships during the war, and like Moghal Jan, Samad Khan and Syed Minnat Ali, began to play a part in lascar unions in the post-war strikes. Unlike them, he moved into the upper echelons of the union. By 1926 he was secretary of the ISU and was also on the national executive of AITUC along with N.M. Joshi. In 1933, 1940 and 1944, he attended the ILO conference as a representative of labour.

Similar changes in fortune resulted for other leaders of lascar unions. From a practising lawyer in the mofussil courts, the leadership of the Calcutta Indian Seamen's Union got Mohamed Daud nominated as a Labour member in the Legislative Council. When the Simon Commission toured India in 1928 in order to prepare the framework for the second Government of India Act of 1935, which would establish a system of provincial governments elected on a wider franchise, Daud demanded special representation for lascars in the proposed Bengal legislative assembly.<sup>48</sup> In 1929, he attended the ILO Congress in Geneva as the workers' representative on the Indian delegation, along with other office-bearers of the union, its General Secretary Syed Munawar and Assistant General Secretary, Muzzammil

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<sup>46</sup> Abdulgani Y. Serang, *Tribute to the 'Father of Indian Seafarers Movement'*. (National Union of Seafarers of India: Mumbai, 2012). The street in the dockside area of Dongri in Bombay where the felicitation programme to celebrate his election in 1929 was held under the auspices of the Malabar Muslim Jamaat came to be named after him. 'Muslim Corporator Congratulated: Malabar Muslims Meeting'. *Times of India*, 9 April, 1929.

<sup>47</sup> Serang, *Tribute*.

<sup>48</sup> Kenneth McPherson, *The Muslim Microcosm: Calcutta, 1918–1935* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1974), 89.

Ali, as well as the Vice-President of the union in Bombay, L.G. Pradhan. The 1928 Congress conference had been attended by the Vice-President of the Calcutta union Mahbub ul-Huq, a Swarajist councillor of the Calcutta Municipal Corporation.<sup>49</sup> Munawar was nominated to sit on the Bombay Port Trust in 1929 to ‘represent labour’.<sup>50</sup> The newly-emerging possibilities of occupying positions within the state for representing labour in the legislative councils, municipal bodies, and the ILO, saw various figures vying to occupy leadership positions in seamen’s unions. By 1936, there were labour representatives within provincial ministries and during the Second World War, in the Viceroy’s Council. Trade unionism, thus, allowed these politicians to rehearse state power for the two and a half decades before decolonisation.

### **Capture, control and channel**

The post-First World War strikes also marked the nascence of labour as a political force in a new age of mass anti-colonial mobilisations during the Khilafat and non-cooperation movements. Representing labour provided a means for nationalists of different hues to create a mass social base tied to particular claims of nation, region or religion. The field of trade unionism became a contested terrain for rival nationalists to capture and control as a mass base. Controlling unions also became a platform for political parties to claim more representation. As a majority-Muslim workforce, different parties addressed lascars as subalterns and as Muslims. In the years immediately following World War I, nationalists mobilised notions of the ‘contribution’ and ‘service’ of lascars to resonate with larger Indian nationalism – a colony which had sent millions to fight for the British in their war and anticipated

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<sup>49</sup> *List of Indian Delegates and Advisers to International Labour Conference, 1919-2011* (Government of India, Ministry of Labour and Employment).

<sup>50</sup> ILO Correspondence, New Delhi, Monthly reports on India (Jan 1929 – Jun 1929), ILO Archives, Geneva.

more reforms and legislative autonomy by way of reward. Articles began to appear in the press on the working conditions of lascars and questions asked in the Legislative Councils on the role of the Indian seamen during the war. In 1920, for instance, Babu Brojendra Kishor Ray Chaudhuri, a zamindar from Gouripur *zila* in east Bengal's Mymensingh district, asked the Secretary of the Marine Department:

How many men who shipped from Bengal during the war...were employed in keeping the seas open? Is it a fact that nearly nine hundred of these men, though non-combatants, lost their lives in the war? What relief has the Government granted to the dependants of those who died? [How do they meet] the requirements of Bengal seamen employed in the Mercantile Marine, in the matter of their terms and conditions of service, health, food and clothing?<sup>51</sup>

The government was forced to admit that 108,392 men from Bengal alone had served on British ships, of which almost 900 non-combatants had indeed died, and that the government had made no provisions for hospitals or rehabilitative institutions for them.<sup>52</sup> Turning the colonisers' paternalistic and liberal discourse against themselves, Ray Chaudhuri mobilised the image of the suffering lascar as a metonym for the colony.

Other politicians used lascars as a metonym for region, and as a constituency to mobilise behind their own agendas. One such agenda was the question of whether the up-river province of Sylhet, from where a large proportion of Muslim lascars employed in the port of Calcutta hailed, should remain an administrative district of Assam or be restored to Bengal.<sup>53</sup> For the Sylheti elite, being part of Bengal was disadvantageous because of the competition they faced from the Hindu *bhadralok* in

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<sup>51</sup> 'Question asked in the Legislative Council held on the 29<sup>th</sup> March 1920, regarding the terms and conditions of services of the Bengal seamen in the Mercantile Marine.' NAI, GBMD. Proceedings Nos., 59-60.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Sylhet had been carved out of Bengal and 'given' to Assam in 1874 in the interest of the tea plantation economy. It was subsequently returned to west Bengal during the 1905 partition and then restored to Assam when the partition was annulled in 1912. Ashfaque Hossain, 'The Making and Unmaking of Assam-Bengal Borders and the Sylhet Referendum', *Modern Asian Studies* 47, no. 1 (2013): 250-251.

the spheres of the legislature, administration and education. Ashfaque Hossain has shown how, in the struggle for a dominant position in these spheres, the majority of the Hindu elite ‘insistently supported a ‘back to Bengal’ movement’ for Assam in the 1920s and 1930s, while the Muslim elite considered that their position was better safeguarded within Assam.<sup>54</sup> With the strike wave in Calcutta at the end of the war, some of these Sylheti Muslim elites appealed to lascars to lend popular weight to their argument. Abdul Matin Chaudhury from Bhadeswar in Sylhet, a student of law in Calcutta from 1917 to 1919, found out about a planned meeting of the pro-Bengal Sylhet Association of Calcutta, and realised that ‘it was not possible for him alone to oppose [it]’.<sup>55</sup> He therefore tried to enlist support:

[H]e went to Khidirpur [Kidderpore] where many seamen of Sylhet lived... He sought their help, requesting them to support him in his opposition to the inclusion of Sylhet in Bengal. In compliance with his request a few hundred seamen turned up... As a result of this protest the meeting broke up.<sup>56</sup>

Before coming to Calcutta, Chaudhury had been a student in Aligarh, which was the hub of the radical Muslim section which was turning from the moderate Muslim League leadership to pan-Islamism and an engagement in mass mobilisation. In 1921 Chaudhury became a Khilafatist in Assam, and after a short stint in prison came to Calcutta and joined the Swaraj Party led by C.R. Das. In 1922 he also joined the executive body of the Indian Quarter Masters’ (*sukhani*’s) Union with Mohamed Daud.<sup>57</sup> For the next ten years, Chaudhury’s activities in the Assam legislature combined advocating the continued place of Sylhet in Assam on the grounds that Sylheti Muslims did not want to be part of Bengal, alongside raising the ‘cause’ of Sylheti lascars. In one session he declared that ‘these brave seamen who saved

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<sup>54</sup> Hossain, ‘The Making and Unmaking of Assam-Bengal Borders’, 250-251.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 20-21.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

England from starvation during the War have been left to their fate'.<sup>58</sup> Positioning himself as the spokesman of Sylheti Muslim lascars, Chaudhury could thus mobilise notions of 'loyal' but 'unrewarded' 'sacrifices' in the war.

As a predominantly Muslim group of subalterns, some nationalists also sought to mobilise lascars as a religious constituency. Already in 1908, two years after the Muslim League had been established to lobby for separate electorates along religious lines, a new organisation among the lascars from east Bengal, the Indian Seamen's Anjuman, had been set up in Calcutta on an explicitly religious basis. Its founder was Nawab Chowdhury, who Kenneth McPherson describes as 'a wealthy zamindar and political from east Bengal... a communalist and political conservative who used the union to provide a further basis of support for [his] political activities'.<sup>59</sup> In setting up the Anjuman, Chowdhury used the intermediaries of *serangs*, among whom were Moghal Jan, Samad Khan and Syed Minnat Ali.<sup>60</sup> The Anjuman remained a 'moribund and unimportant' organisation and there were rumours of some financial discrepancies.<sup>61</sup>

After the First World War, the Khilafatists had taken a special interest in mobilising lascars. Mohamed Daud, the leader of the Indian Seamen's Union in Calcutta from its creation in 1918 until his death in 1933, belonged to the Congress-Khilafat Swarajya Party, or Swaraj Party.<sup>62</sup> In line with the Swaraj Party's council-entry tactics, Daud 'declared himself in favour of the... constitutional system of

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<sup>58</sup> Action taken by the Commerce Department on the Draft Convention concerning Seamen's Articles of Agreement adopted at the 9<sup>th</sup> International Labour Conference of the League of Nations held at Geneva in June 1926' NAI. I&L,L, 1928, F. No. L- 1460.

<sup>59</sup> Kenneth McPherson, *The Muslim Microcosm: Calcutta, 1918-1935* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1974), 37.

<sup>60</sup> 'Representation from the Indian Seamen's Union regarding the recruitment of seamen'. 1921. NAI, GBMD, Proceedings Nos. 17-28.

<sup>61</sup> 'Letter from A. Marr to C.A. Innes, 8 August 1921, Calcutta. Representation from the Indian Seamen's Union regarding abuses in connection with the engagement of seamen in Calcutta' 1921. NAI. GBMD, Proceedings Nos. 96-100 & K.-W.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

politics'.<sup>63</sup> After C.R. Das' death in 1925, however, there was a growing communalisation in Calcutta and an attempt to channel lascar unions behind communal aims. McPherson notes that by the time of the 1926 election, 'the era of Hindu-Muslim political cooperation was at an end'.<sup>64</sup> A.K. Fazlul Huq and Huseyn Suhrawardy, two of Das' deputies, split from the Swaraj Party, with Suhrawardy eventually joining the Muslim League and Huq the Krishak Praja Party.<sup>65</sup> Abdul Matin Chaudhury from Sylhet, one of the leaders of the Indian Quarter Masters' Union, also left the Swaraj Party in 1927 to join the Muslim League, representing the Assam Muhammedan constituency from 1925 to 1937.<sup>66</sup>

As an overwhelmingly Muslim workforce, lascars were an obvious section of labour for the religious nationalists to appeal to. In the elections in November 1925, Fazlul Huq conducted a 'pointedly anti-Swarajist and anti-British campaign'.<sup>67</sup> In 1926, Huq, then Education Minister in the Bengal Legislative Council, addressed a meeting of 500 lascars at the ISU office in Calcutta's Kidderpore dock area. Although the meeting was convened to discuss measures of support to the Bengal Nagpur Railway workers' strike, Huq substituted communal unity for class solidarity: '[H]e appealed to the members... to be welded in a common bond of unity... By religious tradition, he said, a muslim (sic) is a brother to a muslim and the formation of the Union... is but following in the footsteps of the Prophet.'<sup>68</sup> Although he lost the elections in 1926, Huq was to later become Mayor of Calcutta in 1929.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> McPherson, *Muslim Microcosm*, 89.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*, 88.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 77.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 96.

<sup>68</sup> 'General Meeting of the Bengal Mariners Union, Kidderpore, 29.8.26'. 1926. International Labour Office Archives, Geneva. MA 40/13/1.

<sup>69</sup> McPherson, *Muslim Microcosm*, 96.

The growing communal forces redoubled their efforts at ‘capturing’ lascar unions with the announcement of the Simon Commission in 1929 to institute a new round of constitutional reforms introducing provincial ministries and thus, newer platforms to exercise state power before decolonisation. For Suhrawardy and Huq, adding labour representatives to their existing communally-allocated seats in the Legislative Assembly would augment the seats for Muslim members in the Assembly. In September 1933, they submitted a memorandum to the government, appealing for five of the eight labour seats in the provincial assembly, and one seat in the Imperial legislative assembly to be set aside for lascar representation.<sup>70</sup> McPherson points out that this was a ‘somewhat exaggerated claim in view of the fact that the Muslim seamen constituted barely 11% of the labour population which the Bengal Government proposed to enfranchise’.<sup>71</sup> To bolster their claims of representing labour, the League and Krishak Praja Party sought to build bases of support among the unions. Unable to dislodge Daud from the leadership of the seamen’s union, Suhrawardy attempted to form an employer-backed rival union, the Seamen’s Association of India, but this seems to have, in Balachandran’s words, ‘languished in relative wilderness’.<sup>72</sup> Daud held on to the top executive posts of the ISU, the Bengal Mariners Union and the Indian Quarter Masters’ Union until his death in 1933. This was followed by a series of short-lived take-overs by Huq and Suhrawardy, who became the president of the Indian Quarter Masters’ Union and the Indian Seamen’s Union in Calcutta in 1934. In the run-up to the declaration of provincial autonomy, he emphasised his belief in the religious basis of nationalism and at the same time a social conservatism, saying, ‘Muslims of Bengal did not have any sympathy with a

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<sup>70</sup> McPherson, *Muslim Microcosm*, 130.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Balachandran, *Globalizing Labour?*, 232.

movement which might tend to upset the existing social structure'.<sup>73</sup> Thus, he combined a religious basis for nationalism along with a social conservatism which identified him more closely with the landlords and employers.

Despite the fact that the Communal Award of 1932 gave Suhrawardy and Huq an uncontested position over the Congress in the Bengal provincial Legislative Assembly, this did not translate into success in terms of 'capturing' lascars' trade unions.<sup>74</sup> In Suhrawardy's case, this was likely because of his proximity to British and upper-class interests in Bengal. Huq distanced himself from Suhrawardy to form the Krishak Praja Party of predominantly Muslim tenant farmers in 1935. However, he did not fare better with 'controlling' lascar unions. Although he was elected President of the Bengal Mariners Union in 1937, this was short-lived. According to a piece of government correspondence, 'as he couldn't spare time for [Bengal Mariner's] Union work, Aftab Ali became President'.<sup>75</sup> Ali was to become a member of the Legislative Assembly and to have 'clashes' with Suhrawardy 'in the trade union field' from 1926 till the end of the Second World War.<sup>76</sup>

Aftab Ali's political career illustrates another field of political forces vying to 'capture' seamen's trade unions in the 1920s and 1930s, including the Communist Party, the Congress and sections of the non-political trade union liberals like N.M. Joshi. In the mid-1920s Ali was associated with the communists at a time when they were collaborating with the Congress. Between 1925 and 1929, the communists had been oriented toward local Congress activists and had even directed their members to

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<sup>73</sup> In Bengal the communal award gave the Muslims 48.4% of the seats in the proposed provincial Legislative Assembly, and the Hindus 39.2%, nearly half of which were set aside for representatives of the depressed class Hindus who were Fazlul Huq's allies (McPherson, *Muslim Microcosm*, 130).

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, 117.

<sup>75</sup> 'Nomination of Aftab Ali as Adviser to the Workers' Delegate to the 13<sup>th</sup> International Labour Conference. Procedure to be adopted in future in connection with the selection of delegates to the ILC.' 1929. NAI.Home Poll. F. No. 284.

<sup>76</sup> Ahmad, *Labour Movement*.



join the Congress. A Home Political file describes Ali as ‘a member of the All India Congress Committee and Secretary of the Indian Seamen’s Union, who is intimately connected with the [communist] Workers’ and Peasant’s Party’.<sup>77</sup> When his name was proposed as the workers’ delegate to the International Labour Conference in 1929, the government withdrew his nomination because ‘his communist activities... had already caused the Government of Bengal to refuse him a passport.’<sup>78</sup> An intelligence report on Ali mentions his ‘association with Communists in Europe, his visits to Moscow, and his distinctly pro-Communist sentiments as expressed in his correspondence, reveal him as a person unfit for selection by the Government of India in any capacity’ and was ‘embarrassing from the political point of view’.<sup>79</sup> Like Suhrawardy and Huq, Ali too manoeuvred to challenge Daud’s leadership of the Indian Seamen’s Union by forming his own breakaway organisation in 1926 called the ‘Union of Seamen/Seafarers of India’, but re-joined the Indian Seamen’s Union soon after.<sup>80</sup>

As a result of their role in the 1927-28 strike wave in large industrial centres like Bombay, Calcutta and Kanpur, the communists won positions within the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC).<sup>81</sup> Following the Communist Internationals’ so-called ‘third period’ of ultra-militant activity in a context of economic depression and an absence of working class militancy, the communists were accused of trying to take over the AITUC and drive it to revolutionary ends.<sup>82</sup> Alarmed, many Congress trade

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<sup>77</sup> ‘Possibility of the Congress Party Attempting to Associate Labour Strikes with the Civil Disobedience Campaign.’ 1930. NAI. Home Political. F. No. 257/1/1930.

<sup>74</sup> ‘Nomination of Aftab Ali as Adviser to the Workers’ Delegate to the 13<sup>th</sup> International Labour Conference. Procedure to be adopted in future in connection with the selection of delegates to the ILC.’ 1929. NAI. Home Pol. F. No. 284.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> *List of Indian Delegates and Advisers to International Labour Conference, 1919-2011* (Government of India, Ministry of Labour and Employment).

<sup>81</sup> Sukomal Sen, *Working Class of India: History of Emergence and Movement* (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi and Sons, 1977).

<sup>82</sup> Karnik, *N.M Joshi: Servant of India*.

unionists as well as believers in non-political trade unionism split from the AITUC.<sup>83</sup>

In this period, Aftab Ali began to move towards the Congress and sided against the communists. In 1929, Congress president Subhas Chandra Bose sent Lal Mohan Ghosh, Assistant Secretary of the Bengal Provincial Congress Committee, as an emissary to Aftab Ali 'with a request to... help him in organising a Labour Board under the Bengal Congress... It was arranged that Subhas would send a letter to Aftab Ali making an appointment with him for a discussion on the subject'.<sup>84</sup> Bose, himself a protégé of C.R. Das, felt the need to complete the project of 'capturing' labour.

David Petrie, Director of Intelligence Bureau reported on Bose's views:

Although there are signs of growing interest in Labour on the part of the Congress, and also a growing realisation of the importance of the part that organized Labour will play in the political future of the country, there is not yet sufficient evidence [that] Congress has so far captured Labour .... Only the other day at the Howrah Political Conference, Subhas Chandra Bose felt 'constrained to say' that the Congress leaders have so far given quite inadequate attention to the organization of Labour .... It is a subject that is much in the mind of the politically conscious at the moment, and of which much more will be heard.<sup>85</sup>

Bose, however, does not seem to have succeeded in his efforts in wooing Aftab Ali to this end. By 1933, Ali had joined N.M. Joshi's moderate National Trade Union Federation which had been set up to counter the AITUC and had, according to an intelligence report, 'presumably abandoned communist views and activities'.<sup>86</sup> This moderate turn brought him recognition from the colonial state. By 1933, the Minister for Industries and Labour A.G. Clow was personally recommending Ali's candidature as delegate to the ILO saying,

[he] is, in my view, by no means a bad candidate. I have known him personally for a number of years, and he has more of the elements that go to make a trade union official than others we have sent. He has some experience

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<sup>83</sup> V.B. Karnik, *Strikes in India* (Bombay: Manaktala, 1967).

<sup>84</sup> 'Possibility of the Congress Party Attempting to Associate Labour Strikes with the Civil Disobedience Campaign'. 1930. NAI. Home Political. File No. 257/1/1930.

<sup>85</sup> Quoted in Suchetana Chattopadhyay, *An Early Communist: Muzaffar Ahmad in Calcutta, 1913-1929* (Delhi: Tulika, 2012), 63.

<sup>86</sup> 'Nomination of Aftab Ali as Adviser to the Workers' Delegate to the 13<sup>th</sup> International Labour Conference. Procedure to be adopted in future in connection with the selection of delegates to the ILC'. 1929. NAI. Home Pol. F. No. 284.

as a worker himself, and if he was inclined to communistic ideas, he has matured a little.<sup>87</sup>

After Daud's death in 1933, Ali became the most important seamen's trade union leader in Bengal until 1947.

Thus, from their formation in 1918, nationalists of different political persuasions vied to control and capture lascars' unions. Khilafatists, Swarajists, Congressmen, liberals and communal forces attempted to take over the unions as a mass base in their political rivalries. Nonetheless, the only figures who succeeded in their endeavours were Mohamed Daud and Aftab Ali in Bengal and Mohamed Ebrahim in Bombay, while Bose, Suhrawardy and Huq all failed. Daud was a Khilafatist, Ali a communist, Congressman and then a trade union liberal, and Ebrahim was associated with Joshi's liberal Servants of India Society. Having looked at the different political affiliations of the seamen's union leaders, the next section will examine how they related to moments of large-scale lascar contestation, as well examine their conceptualisation of the relation of labour to the anti-colonial movement.

## **The separation of politics and trade unionism**

In conventional labour histories, the history of the working class is generally taken to be synonymous with that of trade unions.<sup>88</sup> The views of workers in these unions are seen to be largely congruent with those of the union leadership. In other words, workers' relation to politics is mediated by the union leadership, whose political

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<sup>87</sup> 'Grant of a passport to Mr Aftab Ali to attend the ILC as Worker's Delegate.' 1933. NAI. Home Political. 1933. F.No. 28/17.

<sup>88</sup> Kiran Saxena, *Trade Union Movement and the National Movement* (New Delhi : South Asian Publishers, 1990).

affiliations and views are taken as representing those of union members.<sup>89</sup> Contrary to this view, I argue that the nationalists strove to maintain a separation between the spheres of trade unionism and politics out of a fear that a class-based movement could disrupt the project of building a nation-state. Referring to Mahomed Daud, for instance, the Secretary of the Marine Department wrote in 1921 that although there was ‘good reason to believe that [he] is acting in communication with the non-co-operation party and the Khilafat Committee... he does not seem to have imported politics into the Seamen’s Union’.<sup>90</sup> Given that pan-Islamist ideas were not uncommon among Muslim soldiers and sailors returning from the First World War, as we have seen in Chapter Two, Daud’s choice to keep these ideas out of the union can only have been deliberate.

In fact, the separation of trade unionism and politics was maintained by other nationalist leaders of trade unions at the time and reflected their ideas of the place of labour in the anti-colonial movement. Gandhi made a point of emphasising the need to maintain this separation during the non-cooperation movement in 1921. Foreshadowing the famous burning of a police chowki in the village of Chauri Chaura in the United Provinces, eight thousand tea plantation workers in the Chargola valley of Assam, the majority of whom came from the districts of Basti and Gorakhpur in the eastern United Provinces where the non-cooperation movement had been influential, led a mass exodus from the plantations on the rumour that ‘Gandhi-Raj’ was coming to give them land in the villages from which they had been brought.<sup>91</sup> They were fired on in the railway stations as they were attempting to board trains; this brought the railway workers out on a sympathetic strike, followed by lascars working on river

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<sup>89</sup> Saxena, *Trade Union Movement*.

<sup>90</sup> ‘Letter from A. Marr to C.A. Innes, 8 August 1921, Calcutta. Representation from the Indian Seamen’s Union regarding abuses in connection with the engagement of seamen in Calcutta’. 1922. NAI. GBMD, Proceedings Nos. 96-100 & K.-W.

<sup>91</sup> Sarkar, *Modern India*, 217.

steamers.<sup>92</sup> Writing in *Young India*, in an article titled 'The Lesson of Assam', Gandhi abjured these events taking place in his name. He wrote:

In India we want no political strikes.... We must gain control over all the unruly and disturbing elements .... We seek not to destroy capital or capitalists, but to regulate the relations between capital and labour. We want to harness capital to our side. It would be folly to encourage sympathetic strikes.<sup>93</sup>

This reference to strikers as 'unruly and disturbing' elements prefigures Gandhi's criticism of the 'hooligans of India' in Chauri Chaura, whose worst 'crime' was 'not just the violence but its political nature'.<sup>94</sup> The same reference to labour as dangerous and criminal came from N.M Joshi, even though he is remembered as a champion of labour reform. In 1919 he commented that,

The danger of allowing a large mass of discontented working class population to brood over their wrongs secretly in an industrial city such as Bombay is really very great. They form a mass of combustible material waiting to catch fire at the slightest ignition, and threaten to be a source of constant danger to the peace of the city.<sup>95</sup>

In accordance with this fear, his view of trade unionism was a means to lessen these 'wrongs' in a legal and constitutional manner, while at the same time keeping at bay the 'ignition' of politics. In a context of intertwining political radicalism and labour militancy, particularly in the textile mills in the late 1920s, Joshi was a firm proponent of 'non-political' and 'responsible' trade unionism, believing that issues of labour reform must be kept firmly apart from politics and the anti-colonial movement.<sup>96</sup> Similarly, the same year as he attended the ILO as a seamen's union delegate, Syed Munawar bemoaned the fact that 'communistic principles' had

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<sup>92</sup> Dipankar Banerjee, *Labour Movement in Assam: A Study of Non-plantation Workers' Strikes Till 1939*, (New Delhi: Anamika Publishers, 2005), 35.

<sup>93</sup> 'The Lesson of Assam', *Young India*, 14 June 1921. Quoted in Sarkar, *Modern India*, 208.

<sup>94</sup> Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura 1922-1992* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 49.

<sup>95</sup> Prashant Kidambi, *The Making of an Indian Metropolis: Colonial Governance and Public Culture in Bombay, 1890-1920* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 230.

<sup>96</sup> Sanat Bose, 'Communist International and Indian Trade Union Movement (1919-1923)', *Social Scientist* 8, no. 4 (1979): 31.

'captured the minds of textile workers to a great extent' and extolled the groups of company men who helped strike breakers enter the mills.<sup>97</sup>

Other nationalists who saw the importance of engaging with labour also remained keenly aware of the dangers of such an engagement, beset as it was with the prospect of labour escaping the control of its leaders. At the 1922 Gaya Congress, C.R. Das' Presidential speech urged the Congress to 'organise Labour and the Peasantry of India'.<sup>98</sup> This exhortation was, however, primarily a warning. Das warned that if Congress volunteers did not organise these subaltern sections, they would become 'detached from you, disassociated from the cause of Swaraj' and this would bring 'class struggles and the war of special interests'.<sup>99</sup> To avoid this, they had to be 'take[n] in hand'.<sup>100</sup> For the nationalists, as many of its leading figures articulated on numerous occasions, class was a potentially fissiparous 'separate interest', always to be kept subordinate to the Nation.

The tension between labour/class and Nation increased as decolonisation drew near. As Chitra Joshi has argued, 'once Congress came to power in 1936-37, its populist rhetoric lost its edge and the provincial government's need for order complicated the relationship between nationalists and labour'.<sup>101</sup> In Kanpur, Nehru made a speech saying, 'The workers should not forget that, after all, their wages are paid out of the profits made by the mills and factories. Whatever therefore is injurious to the working of a mill ultimately proves detrimental to the interests of the

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<sup>97</sup> Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, 'Workers' Politics and the Mill Districts in Bombay between the Wars', *Modern Asian Studies*, 15, 3 (1981), 623-632.

<sup>98</sup> Prithwis Chandra Ray, *Life & times of C.R. Das : The story of Bengal's self-expression. Being a personal memoir of the late Deshbandhu Chitta Ranjan and a complete outline of the history of Bengal for the First Quarter of the Twentieth Century* (London, Bombay, Madras, Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1927), 288.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> Joshi, *Lost Worlds*, 277.

worker.’<sup>102</sup> The Congress now emphasised that change would come through elections and not mass action, and the struggle between Indian worker and capitalist was seen to cause ‘disunity’. Janaki Nair notes that in Karnataka, Congressman ‘K.T. Bhashyam played a key role in keeping a tight leash on worker radicalism...promising that the Congress would soon come to power and thereafter several facilities would be granted ‘at the stroke of a pen’.<sup>103</sup> Thus, while attempting to annex labour to competing nationalist projects, the nationalists maintained a separation between labour and their nationalism.

### **Nationalists and Lascars’ Contestations**

What was the attitude of nationalists in the realm of ‘non-political’ trade unionism? What positions did they take, for instance, on lascar strikes? Chandavarkar has shown how the formal machinery of unions was usually imposed once strikes had already begun, and how the union leaders subsequently often imposed unfavourable compromises on the strikers.<sup>104</sup> Given that positions to ‘represent’ labour at the legislative councils were government-nominated and at ILO conferences were government-vetted, nationalists who sought these positions had to prove that they were ‘responsible’ trade unionists who not only kept politics apart from trade unionism but also restrained their members in disputes with company managements. In the case of lascars, there were two ‘large’ moments of contestation where we can see this relation in stark relief. One such instance had been developing since the strikes at the end of the First World War in Calcutta, where lascars did not receive the same pay rises as the Bombay lascars had after their strikes. Among Calcutta lascars,

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<sup>102</sup> Joshi, *Lost Worlds*, 296.

<sup>103</sup> Janaki Nair, *Miners and Millhands: Work, Culture and Politics in Princely Mysore*, (New Delhi: Sage, 1998), 284.

<sup>104</sup> Chandavarkar, *Imperial Power and Popular Politics: Class, Resistance and the State in India, c. 1850-1950*.

the demand for an equalisation of wages with Bombay was consequently welling up. In 1921, Daud wrote to the Marine Secretary that ‘the general feelings of the seamen were so strong that it was with some difficulty that a resolution for a general strike was postponed’.<sup>105</sup> Highlighting his own role as a ‘responsible’ trade unionist, he emphasised, ‘it is not the desire of my Union to create a dislocation in the services... by a general strike’ and that ‘the removal of the grievances’ was a means to avert such a strike.<sup>106</sup> Having discussed the matter with the Marine Secretary, however, Daud passed a resolution stating that ‘the time and circumstances are most inopportune for an increment’, thus going back on their own demand of a ‘general increase in wages’.<sup>107</sup> He organised a meeting where ‘the men accepted the advice of their leaders to defer action till the companies had been communicated with’.<sup>108</sup>

Yet, Daud and the union leaders did not control the lascars completely. Within a week of the aforementioned meeting, a crew headed for Singapore refused to sign articles of agreement, demanding wages equal to those in Bombay. This triggered a massive strike that paralysed the Calcutta port for ten days.<sup>109</sup> Importantly, this strike took place ‘against the advice of the chief officials of the Union’.<sup>110</sup> The *Times of India* reported that the striking lascars

refused to sign on for fresh agreements on any vessel unless the demand for increased wages was acceded to...The strikers assembled outside the shipping offices... and... discuss[ed] the situation in small groups...2000-3000 men entered the Port Office where negotiations over pay were going on... As a result of their action all shipping in Calcutta is affected.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> ‘Representation from the Indian Seamen’s Union regarding abuses in connection with the engagement of seamen in Calcutta’. NAI. GBMD, 1921. Proceedings Nos. 96-100 & K.-W.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> ‘Strike of Indian Seamen’, 1922. NAI.GBMD. Proceedings Nos. 306-09.

<sup>108</sup> ‘Calcutta Seamen: 10,000 On Strike’. *Times of India*, June 15, 1922.

<sup>109</sup> ‘Strike of Indian Seamen’, 1922. NAI.GBMD. Proceedings Nos. 306-09.

<sup>110</sup> ‘Question asked by Rai Dr. Haridhan Dutt Bahadur in the meeting of the Bengal Legislative Council held on the 10<sup>th</sup> July 1922 regarding strike of Calcutta seamen’. 1922. NAI.GBMD. Proceedings Nos. 37-38.

<sup>111</sup> ‘Calcutta Seamen: 10,000 On Strike’. *Times of India*, June 15, 1922.



Once the strike had broken out, the leadership played a dampening role. Just when the strikers were taking such an active part in the strike as to appear ‘threatening, they were kept in hand by the officials of the Seamen’s Union and the excitement soon subsided’.<sup>112</sup> In reports of the Shipping Master there is a palpable sense of relief at the role of the union leaders who help in dissipating the situation. The leadership waited for the strike to wear itself out and run aground. Having gone back on their demand for a wage rise before the strike, the union leaders sympathetically cited ‘the hard position of Shipowners in respect of the trade and shipping conditions now prevailing’.<sup>113</sup>

Another instance of union leaders restraining their members and compromising with the employers and state came in 1939. Just as Daud had played a dampening role on the strike in 1922, so did Dinkar Desai, Aftab Ali and Surat Ali in 1939. The year 1938-39 saw a strike wave across India owing in part to an upturn in trade, as well as to the expectation that strikes would meet with favourable responses from the nationalist provincial ministries formed in 1937. This was the context within which lascars’ strikes broke out in Bombay between December 1938 and March 1939, and subsequently, as we have seen in the previous chapter, in a number of ports in August 1939 upon declaration of the war. December 1938 saw the beginning of the historic four month-long strike of lascars. An account by Dinkar Desai recalls,

The strike was complete. The movement of ships came to a standstill. Union volunteers picketed the offices of all shipping companies... [and] the entrance(s) to Alexandria, Victoria and Prince’s Docks to prevent any blacklegs from getting in. The docks and Ballard Pier looked like a battlefield.<sup>114</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Calcutta Seamen: 10,000 On Strike’. *Times of India*, June 15, 1922.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Desai, *Maritime Labour*.

The Bombay Indian Seamen's Union planned a procession to the Government Secretariat to present their demands, but was prevented by the city police from marching through the main route in south Bombay's financial and administrative area. It was 'escorted' by 'an unnecessarily large number of policemen and constables armed with *lathis* and rifles intended to intimidate the marchers... [and] arrested a large number of seamen'.<sup>115</sup> A few of the office-bearers were, however, able to speak with Gulzarilal Nanda, a Gandhian trade unionist who was then Secretary to the Prime Minister of Bombay, B.G. Kher.<sup>116</sup> While Kher assured them that he would 'do his best to get the grievances addressed', when the matter came up for discussion in the Bombay Legislative Assembly, Nanda, 'on behalf of the government, said the resolution [meeting the lascars' demands] should be rejected'.<sup>117</sup>

The strike was thus temporarily defeated. Within six months, however, when war was declared on 3 September 1939, strikes spread to nearly all the ships carrying lascars crews, with the demands of a 100% pay rise – their wages had been stagnant since the last war twenty years before – and a £10 war risk bonus. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the Ministry of War Transport wired the shipping master in Calcutta to write a 50% wage rise into the new contracts, but subsequently had this order rescinded. This only exacerbated the situation, producing a strike of Calcutta and Bombay crews. Not prepared to grant the lascars' demand of a 100% pay rise, the Ministry of War Transport contacted the seamen's union leader Aftab Ali, who had declared his support for the war, to urgently negotiate. Ali met with shipowners' representatives in Calcutta, and on 1 December 1939 agreed to a compromise: a 25%

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<sup>115</sup> Desai, *Maritime Labour*, 192.

<sup>116</sup> 'Bombay Seamen's Grievances: Deputation sees Mr. G. Nanda'. *TOI*, 28 February 1939.

<sup>117</sup> 'Unanimous Plea For Inquiry Into Unemployment: Bombay Assembly Resolution Move For Register Of Workless Defeated'. *TOI*, 29 Jan 1938.

pay rise, and a 25% war bonus.<sup>118</sup> As a consequence of this ‘Calcutta Agreement’, Ali agreed for all strikes to be called off. Just as the employers and shipping masters had been grateful to Daud for bringing a strike to an end in 1922, they were infinitely more relieved that wartime shipping could carry on in 1939. The Ministry of War Transport noted in a telegram, ‘the Strike situation is distinctly easier in consequence of Calcutta agreement and no action ... appears to be called for at present.’<sup>119</sup>

However, this agreement was a setback to lascars who were striking for a 100% rise in wages, and many refused to abide by it. On the *SS Burdwan* docked in London’s King George V dock, for instance, the lascars had been refusing to work unless granted double wages. ‘The men were mustered and informed [of the] result of negotiations... This solution of their grievances was far from acceptable to the dissident members of the crew, who adhered to their demand for double wages’.<sup>120</sup> Ironically, it was Surat Alley, as Aftab Ali’s representative in London, who had assisted lascars in their strikes in August 1939, who was called upon by the shipping authorities to help enforce the agreement. On the *SS Clan MacInnes*, for instance, ‘among the Indian crew of which a good deal of unrest was apparent towards the end of December, the shipping company asked Surat Alley to visit the steamer in the West India Docks and were very satisfied with the result of his visit. The crew were advised to abide by the terms of their Agreement and the unrest subsided.’<sup>121</sup> On 19 December 1939, Surat Alley was visited by a number of lascars from the *SS Clan McNeil* and asked ‘whether the crew should strike for better terms, as there was a general feeling that the conditions arrived at in the Calcutta agreement were not sufficiently

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<sup>118</sup> ‘Indian Seamen: Reports on Unrest and Welfare and Union Activities’, November 1939-January 1945. India Office Records, Public and Judicial Department, IOR/L/PJ/12/630.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

favourable.’<sup>122</sup> Although the shipping authorities were satisfied with Alley’s services, the intelligence services suspected that these were not whole-hearted, noting,

there can be little doubt that Surat Alley’s policy is *reculer pour mieux sauter* [retreat to better strike a blow]. He accepts the present state of affairs... His inner sentiments are Communistic – he is a member...of the Communist Party – and he is not actuated by any motives of loyalty to the Allied cause.<sup>123</sup>

Whatever his motives and political ideas, Alley’s choice of alliance with Aftab Ali led him to restrain the lascars in claiming greater gains and to conclude a compromise with the shipping companies.

## Conclusion

To summarise, the nationalists engaged with labour after the First World War owing to the institutionalisation of corporatism through the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms, the ILO and later the provincial ministries. They used their ‘control’ of trade unions to advance greater claims to positions within the state. ‘Representing’ labour thus allowed them to exercise limited state power before decolonisation. In this sense, their conception of the place of labour in the anti-colonial movement was bounded by state institutions and structures of the nation-state. This was contrary to the internationalists who envisaged anti-colonialism in the non-statist terms of a labour internationalism in the 1920s and a pan-colonialism in the 1930s.

The conception of the nationalists of the relation of labour to political ideas also contrasted starkly with that of the internationalists. The nationalists explicitly warned against combining the labour movement with politics, maintaining a separation between politics as a realm for the leaders, while issues of wages and

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<sup>122</sup> ‘Indian Seamen: Reports on Unrest and Welfare and Union Activities’, November 1939-January 1945. India Office Records, Public and Judicial Department, IOR/L/PJ/12/630.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

working conditions were matters for the members. The internationalists, as we saw in Chapter Two, sought to explain how low wages, 'lousy fo'c'sles and rotten chuck' were intrinsically linked to colonialism and capitalism, and had held political meetings for lascars through the 1920s and 1930s. The contrast also holds in terms of the respective attitudes of nationalists and internationalists with regard to lascars' contestations. While we had looked at the ways in which internationalists had helped to organise lascars' strikes in the previous chapter, this chapter has looked at how nationalists restrained these strikes and helped the employers to tide over 'labour troubles'. To understand the ways in which lascars imbibed these contrasting ideas of the anti-colonial movement, the next chapter will turn to the denouement of the period, the Royal Indian Navy mutiny.

## Chapter Five: Contending Anti-colonialisms

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This chapter argues that the internationalist ideas of itinerant labourers came into contradiction with those of the nationalist leadership on the cusp of independence, as illustrated by the RIN Mutiny in 1946. The preceding chapters have traced colonial seafarers' international mobility, their first-hand experiences of distant lands, their political understanding of the colonial world and the anti-colonial movement that encompassed a wide geographical sweep and finally, their acts of everyday and 'large' contestation up to 1939. The previous chapter explored the interaction between lascars and nationalists in the same period, showing that the nationalists regarded labour as a potentially dangerous and fissiparous 'separate interest' which was to be kept apart from politics and only mobilised in a controlled manner by the nationalist leadership. This chapter focuses on the Royal Indian Navy (RIN) mutiny on the eve of decolonisation. The events of the mutiny draw together all the strands from the previous chapters, in which anti-colonial imaginations, expectations and actions were amplified and brought to a climax. As such, it acts as a *tableau vivant* that illuminates all these strands in stark relief, thus allowing us to see each of them in its most developed form. Firstly, the mutiny was a 'large', spectacular form of contestation, which drew in the whole of the Royal Indian Naval fleet of seventy ships and twenty thousand seafarers. Secondly, the mutineers' reflected a geographically wide and non-statist imagination of the anti-colonial movement, indicated in their gesture of support to the Indonesian movement against Dutch colonialism which was unfolding more than four and a half thousand miles away. Thirdly, the Congress and Muslim League opposed the mutiny on the grounds that it was 'hooliganism', despite its avowedly anti-colonial aims.

This climax saw the clash between two overlapping but divergent imaginations of the nationalists and seafarers regarding the anti-colonial movement and a decolonised future. In lascars' anti-colonialism, subaltern contestations played a central role and did not preclude the use of violence. In their contestations, however, violence was employed against the colonial state rather than in religious strife: as noted by contemporary commentators, the mutiny was marked by a remarkable communal unity between Hindus and Muslims. Moreover, their imagination of a decolonised future was non-statist and encompassed wide swathes of the colonial world, from the Caribbean to Southeast Asia. This imagination drew as much on their previous exposure to internationalist, pan-colonialist, pan-Asianist and pan-Islamic ideas as it did on their mobility across colonies which were seeing growing anti-colonial movements across Asia during the Second World War. In this sense, their anti-colonialism encompassed a wider range of projects than the term 'nationalism' suggests.

In the conception of both the Congress and the Muslim League, the post-colonial future had the definite form of a territorialised nation-state, with all its institutions of power inherited from the colonial state. In its attainment, subaltern action was to be strictly controlled and to play no role independent of the leadership in the process of decolonisation. Although they considered crowd violence against symbols and institutions of state authority as hooliganism and anarchy, the Congress and Muslim League instigated religious fratricide to bolster their competing claims at the Cabinet Mission talks, culminating in the partition of the subcontinent. Moreover, of these two contending imaginations, one had to be actively foreclosed in order to produce the kind of decolonised future that finally ensued, resulting in two nation-states born in the bloodshed of Partition.

The mutiny raises important questions that challenge the way we think about history, historiography and historical memory by focusing on a site of enduring occlusion.<sup>1</sup> For one, as an event it disrupts ‘what is taken as common sense’ by challenging the inexorable process of decolonisation leading to a seemingly inevitable end-point of the nation-state and Partition.<sup>2</sup> As Indivar Kamtekar points out, ‘historiographies obsessed with independence, partition, and the end of empire, highlight the incidents which led to the unfurling of new national flags in August 1947. They tend to portray the occurrences of twentieth century Indian history as the inevitable results of deliberate policies.’<sup>3</sup> By portending a contending future, the mutiny recasts these end-points no longer as obvious and self-evident but as the contingent outcomes of a contested path. No longer treating the ultimate outcome of decolonisation as the inevitable end of a singular trajectory but as one among a constellation of other possibilities, it forces us to ask why and how, it was *this* particular form of decolonisation that prevailed and, crucially, how other contending futures were closed off.

Questioning the inevitability of Partition and the ‘transfer of power’ to the Congress and Muslim League also opens up new fields of historical enquiry. Histories which take these outcomes as their starting point and trace their ‘genesis’ backwards in time usually produce a narrative of an ascending nationalist movement, plotted along the decennial milestones of the non-cooperation, civil disobedience and Quit India movements, summoned and called off at the will of the ‘leaders’ and culminating in a triumphant independence.<sup>4</sup> In the case of Partition, histories trace a path of Hindu-Muslim conflict, with the implication that the two-nation theory was

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<sup>1</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Stoler, p. 35.

<sup>3</sup> Indivar Kamtekar, “The Shiver of 1942,” *Studies in History* 18, no. 1 (2002): 81.

<sup>4</sup> Chandra et al., *India’s Struggle for Independence*.



the inexorable end-point of this process. Most histories of these two processes are dominated by 1947, with the Cabinet Mission talks and the communal riots of Direct Action day in August 1946 as the fateful points of no return.<sup>5</sup>

The naval mutiny disrupts these narratives. The mass movement accompanying the mutiny, opposed by the nationalist leadership on the eve of independence, disrupts the first narrative of a mass movement sweeping the leadership into state power. On the contrary, it shows how the leadership came to power in part by diffusing the movement. It also disrupts the teleology of rising communal tensions leading to Partition. While there had undoubtedly been communal tensions long before Direct Action Day, the days of the mutiny were noted by contemporary observers of all political persuasions for their communal unity both in the ranks of the ‘mutineers’ and the large rallies and demonstrations of solidarity in Bombay and Calcutta. At the same time, ironically, the mutiny saw unity between the Congress and Muslim League leadership in opposing these mass demonstrations. Clearly, then, this episode disrupts narratives of growing communal tension on the one hand and Congress-League divisions on the other.

The mutiny also raises questions of what becomes memorialised as ‘History’ and what is occluded. As a result of the disruption it causes to the mainstream historical narrative of the anti-colonial movement as well as to the relation of the ‘leaders’ to the ‘masses’, the mutiny falls into historiographical amnesia, or is at best relegated to a historical footnote. As Shahid Amin puts it in relation to Chauri Chaura, ‘the triumph of [nationalist] histories lies not only in making people remember events from a shared past: ... [it] also induces a selective national amnesia in relation to specified events which would fit awkwardly, even seriously

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<sup>5</sup>Joya Chatterji, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947–1967* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition : Violence, Nationalism and History in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

inconvenience, the neatly woven pattern.’<sup>6</sup>As with Chauri Chaura, Kamtekar makes a similar point in relation to another ‘occluded’ episode, the possible Japanese invasion of India after 1942. He argues that

The Cripps Mission fits into the grand narrative of British decolonization; the Quit India movement fits into the grand narrative of the Indian Freedom Struggle. The prospect of a Japanese invasion is not easily slotted into either of them. Consequently, in history textbooks, monographs and published collections of documents, it has been pushed into the margin.<sup>7</sup>

As an anti-colonial movement opposed by the nationalist leadership, the RIN mutiny also falls through the cracks of official historiography, and its occlusion tells us as much about history-writing as about the historical period of decolonisation itself.

Yet, the mutiny has been preserved in other sites of memory. As Gyan Pandey points out with reference to Partition, there is the ‘historian’s history’ and then there is ‘community memory’, which preserves elements that are often left out of the former.<sup>8</sup> In the case of the mutiny, its impact on popular memory is reflected in its enduring representation in literature. Yashpal’s Hindi novel *Gita* (also published as *Party Kamred*), written in 1946, was set against the backdrop of the mutiny, and culminated in the firing on protestors in the Lalbaug area of Bombay.<sup>9</sup> John Masters’ 1954 novel *Bhowani Junction*, portraying the last days of empire through the eyes of an Anglo-Indian protagonist who worked as a secretary to the local army colonel, also featured the mutiny as a central event that shook British rule and drew the colonial officials closer to the Congress.<sup>10</sup> Nearly twenty years after the mutiny, in 1965, the events still had enough resonance for Utpal Dutt’s Bengali play on the mutiny, *Kallol* (Sound of

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<sup>6</sup>Shahid Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura 1922-1992* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 2-3.

<sup>7</sup>Kamtekar, “The Shiver of 1942,” 81. Like Amin, Kamtekar also studies the role of rumour, which generated a widespread panic about an imminent Japanese invasion of India.

<sup>8</sup>Gyanendra Pandey, *Remembering Partition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>9</sup>Yashpal, *Gita*, 2nd ed. (Allahabad: Lokbharati Prakashan, 1946).

<sup>10</sup> John Masters, *Bhowani Junction* (London: Michael Joseph, 1954).

the Waves), to be banned by the West Bengal government and yet run to packed audiences.<sup>11</sup> In the 1990s, Marathi poet Narayan Surve's poem about an RIN mutineer to Usman Ali, still wrote about the hope of communal unity that the mutiny had raised, which had been dashed first by Partition and then by the subsequent riots that had ripped through Bombay's social fabric.<sup>12</sup> The reverberations in 'community memory', thus, still made themselves felt half a century after the events had been 'banished' or 'occluded' from the 'historians' history'.

This chapter is divided into two broad sections, which draw a contrast between seamen's anti-colonialism on the one hand, and the nationalists' anti-colonialism on the other. The first section discusses the contestations and ideas of lascars during the Second World War and then in the immediate post-war situation of anti-colonial struggles in different parts of the colonial world. It uses the concept of 'maritime radicalism' that has been applied to the study of the impact of the era of early modern European revolutions on maritime contestations. It then goes on to discuss the nationalists' variant of anti-colonialism. It ends with an epilogue on the impact of the foreclosure of subaltern anti-colonialism on the course of South Asian decolonisation.

## **The anti-colonialism of seafarers**

### **Wartime Contestations**

The RIN mutiny is often represented in official accounts as well as accounts written by the 'leading participants' as 'instigated' by 'ring-leaders', a 'misguided few hot-headed malcontents' intent on corrupting an otherwise disciplined navy composed of

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<sup>11</sup> Arnab Banerji, "Rehearsals for a Revolution: The Political Theater of Utpal Dutt," *Southeast Review of Asian Studies* 34 (2012): 222–30.

<sup>12</sup> Alice Thorner and Sujata Patel, eds., *Bombay: Mosaic of Modern Culture* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1995).

politically naïve ratings.<sup>13</sup> As a matter of fact, the RIN was beset with contestations of authority from its very inception in 1939, seeing constant ‘small’ and ‘large’ forms of contestation, nine of which were classed as ‘mutiny’ during the war. By recruiting already-trained lascars into the RIN to build it virtually overnight at the start of the Second World War, the admiralty unwittingly ‘imported’ traditions of resistance into the RIN.<sup>14</sup> In the RIN, these lascars were called ‘Hostilities Only (HO) ratings’. These lascars-turned-RIN ratings were the mainstay of the navy for the first two years of the war until the Japanese entered the fray in 1941. In the course of the war, 9,000 lascars were recruited into the RIN in this manner; at the end of the war, they made up a quarter of the navy. It was these men who were a living link with the previous history of international ideas and contestation. Yet, the RIN has never been looked at in relationship with the merchant navy and its servicemen before.

From the very outset, the lascar-HO ratings contested the authority of their captains and the higher authority of the admiralty. It must be remembered that the transition from merchant seaman to rating was taking place against the background of lascar crews walking off their ships for a 100% wage rise in September 1939. Despite the RIN’s intentions to sign on crews on the coastal rate of Rs. 20 per month, lascars refused to engage at this rate and combined to demand the higher ocean-going rate of Rs. 25. The urgency of recruitment forced the RIN to relent and agree to the demands of the lascars, signing them on at a monthly wage of Rs. 25.<sup>15</sup> Yet, as the ongoing

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<sup>13</sup> E.C. Streatfeild-James, *In the Wake: The Birth of the Indian and Pakistani Navies*, (Edinburgh: Charles Skilton, 1983), 198. A participant, Balai Chandra Dutt, attributes the spread to the ‘seamen’ ratings who were ‘accept[ing] the leadership of their educated brothers-in-arms’ who had to play a ‘hoax’ on these less politically-literate brethren in order to ‘trick’ them into revolting. B.C. Dutt, *Mutiny of the Innocents*, 144.

<sup>14</sup> At the outbreak of the war in August 1939, the RIN had trained only 1,310 sailors or ‘ratings’. The RIN was forced to undergo a rapid expansion. By recruiting lascars, the number of ratings had doubled to 2,586 within three months. D.J. E. Collins, *The Royal Indian Navy, 1939-1945* (Bombay: Orient Longmans, 1964).

<sup>15</sup> Collins, *The Royal Indian Navy*; Balai Chandra Dutt, *Mutiny of the Innocents* (Bombay: Sindhu Publications, 1971).

lascar strikes until December 1939 led to wage increases ranging from twenty five per cent to two hundred per cent, the wages of lascars who remained merchant seamen immediately outstripped those of lascars drafted into the RIN. Thus, in December 1939, when the HO ratings' wages still stood at Rs. 25, the lowest wages in the merchant navy were between Rs. 30 and Rs. 35.<sup>16</sup> Wages in the RIN lagged behind those in the merchant navy throughout the war.<sup>17</sup>

Lascars used various means to renegotiate their contracts. Until 1942, they were recruited on one-year contracts, and so they simply used the opportunity of their discharge to return to the merchant navy where the pay was higher.<sup>18</sup> In 1942, however, the entry of Italy and Japan into the war posed a threat to British positions in the Red Sea and Burmese coast respectively. To prevent this annual haemorrhaging of HO ratings, the RIN made it legally impossible for the rating to return to being a lascar. In May 1942, it changed their contracts from a one-year contract with the ship to a contract with the Government of India for the (indefinite) duration of the war. By this contract, 'the man could not claim release as a matter of right, but [the government] could discharge him at 24 hours' notice.'<sup>19</sup> This change in the regime of control brought about a change in lascars' forms of contestation. Doubly bound now by military regulations which robbed them of their right to better their conditions as well as their legal freedom to choose their employment, HO ratings resorted to that time-honoured method from their lascar pasts: desertion. From 1942 onwards, a fifth

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<sup>16</sup> Collins, *The Royal Indian Navy*, 30; 'Indian Seamen: Reports on Unrest and Welfare and Union Activities', November 1939-January 1945. India Office Records (IOR), Public and Judicial Department (PJ) IOR/L/PJ/12/630.

<sup>17</sup> By December 1941, lascar wages had increased in most cases to Rs. 50 per month. 'India's War Effort: Indian Seamen', 1941-1945. India Office Records, Information Department. IOR/L/I/1/840. By the end of 1943, merchant seamen's wages were Rs. 78 per month, including a war bonus. 'Wages of Indian Seamen: Problem of Fixing Salaries', *Times of India*, August 27, 1945.

<sup>18</sup> It was without surprise that the official historian of the RIN noted that since 'the pay of 'Hostilities Only' ratings continued to lag far behind... there was little inducement for a rating to renew his agreement on its lapse.' Collins, *The Royal Indian Navy*, 28.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

of the total number of HO ratings deserted the RIN. The desertions occurred ‘mainly at times when rates of pay in the merchant fleet were increased.’<sup>20</sup> By 1943, the Flag Officer commanding the RIN was writing that

[I]t is becoming an urgent necessity to replace HO Ratings (Lascars) by special entry ratings... the HO ratings are paid much higher rates than the RIN proper [and]... every rise in the wages of... lascars crews will... have an even more unfavourable reaction on our HO personnel.<sup>21</sup>

Throughout the war there was, therefore, no clear dividing line between the HO ratings in the RIN and the lascars in the merchant navy. On the contrary, there was a constant mixing and churning of personnel: HO ratings returned to their civilian calling as merchant seafarers and new batches of lascars were recruited as HO ratings.

Lascars’ everyday contestations of shipboard authority also carried over into the Navy. From the outset, they made it known that they were not prepared to undertake combatant duties. As Commander Streatfeild-James recalled about the *HMS Ratnagiri*, ‘the first day I was informed by my erstwhile Merchant Seamen, now dressed up as Naval ratings, that whilst they had no objection to working the ship... to fight her was not their job.’<sup>22</sup> Although union structures were not to be heard of in the RIN, in practice, the men ensured that on shipboard matters such as food quality, ‘the ratings were allowed to send their own representatives to speak for themselves.’<sup>23</sup> Again, Streatfeild-James reminisced that ‘my ship’s company were not prepared to brook any more nonsense over their food.’<sup>24</sup> Along with the lascars, thus, shipboard contestations carried over into the everyday life of the RIN.

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<sup>20</sup> Collins, *The Royal Indian Navy*, 138.

<sup>21</sup> ‘India 1943-46: Vol. III’. National Maritime Museum, Greenwich. Godfrey Papers. GOD/43.

<sup>22</sup> Streatfeild-James, *In the Wake*, 80.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

These lascars in the RIN also had an influence on fresh recruits who did not come from seafaring backgrounds, of whom 36,000 were recruited during the war.<sup>25</sup> These new recruits, called Special Service (SS) ratings, were young men—according to regulations, they had to be between 17 and 24 years old at the time of entry into the service, which meant that the oldest of them would have been 30 years old by the time of the mutiny. Socially, these fresh recruits were drawn from different strata of Indian society. Many followed the existing trades in the merchant navy, training to work in the engine room, deck and saloon. These ratings worked in close proximity with the HO ratings, and, after a 24-week training programme, worked with them in mixed crews. The HO ratings served as the ‘old hands’ – the more senior ‘able seamen’ – while the younger SS ratings served as what on sailing ships would have been apprentices, or ‘ordinary seamen’.<sup>26</sup> The RIN vessel *HMIS Bhadravati*, for instance, which was requisitioned for minesweeping activities, had a mix of 18 experienced HO ratings and four freshly recruited SS ratings in the deck department, while in the engine room it had ten HO stokers and one SS stoker.<sup>27</sup> The officers feared the influence that the HO ratings might have on the young SS ratings. Faced with a series of cases of ‘insubordination’ in 1942, the Flag Officer commanding the RIN, Admiral Fitzherbert, darkly warned his officers of the ‘fear complex’...which puts younger and weaker ratings at the mercy of unscrupulous ratings with a stronger character.’<sup>28</sup> Behind the admiral’s fears we can see the figure of the older lascar, experienced in the ways of the sea, and shipboard contestations.

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<sup>25</sup> Collins, *Royal Indian Navy*.

<sup>26</sup> Streatfeild-James, *In the Wake*, 66.

<sup>27</sup> Collins, *Royal Indian Navy*, 26.

<sup>28</sup> Commission of Enquiry Report, National Archives of India (NAI), New Delhi. RIN Mutiny Papers, 21.

Among the new recruits were also those from working-class backgrounds who operated and maintained the guns on the ship.<sup>29</sup> Requiring no prior educational qualifications, these men were put through technical training as skilled machinists to operate low and high angle guns, the '12 pounders' and Oerlikon guns of differing calibres, anti-submarine depth charges and ASDIC.<sup>30</sup> Streatfeild-James, who was in charge of recruitment for a time, stated that 'recruitment was carried out mostly in Bombay' until the end of 1941, when it began to be supplemented by recruitment via army recruitment networks in Punjab.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the majority of RIN ratings until 1942 were drawn from Ratnagiri, Punjabi, Gujarati and Sylheti lascars on the one hand, and Bombay workers on the other. While previous chapters have explored the political worlds and experiences of the former, suffice it to say that in the interwar period of three large strike waves (1918-20, 1928-30, 1937-39) in most industrial centres, with Bombay most prominent, collective action was part of the experiences of their milieu.

The third section of Special Service ratings was the 'aristocracy' among the naval rank and file: the technical staff who went into branches like communications, medical and accountancy. Applicants to these technical positions had to take examinations in English and Mathematics to enter the training programme, where they were taught all basic matriculation subjects, and specialist subjects like signalling, radio and mechanical and electric engineering.<sup>32</sup> As one of them, B.C. Dutt, explains,

[They] were matriculates or with a college education and came from middle or lower middle classes. They received their training in English... Normally the 'communication' ratings flaunted their social superiority by disdaining the company of the 'seamen' ratings.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Collins, *Royal Indian Navy*, 115.

<sup>30</sup> Anti-Submarine Division (ASD) and IC (from superson-IC) the earlier method of detection of submarines.

<sup>31</sup> Streatfeild-James, *In the Wake*, 130.

<sup>32</sup> Dutt, *Mutiny of the Innocents*. (Mumbai: Bhashya Prakashan, 2015 reprint).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 144.



Their class background and educational training meant that rank-for-rank they were paid significantly higher than the other ratings.<sup>34</sup> Most known retrospective accounts of the mutiny by participants are written by members of this section. B.C. Dutt, for example, came from a Bengali zamindar family in financial decline. To save his father the pecuniary pressure of having to support him through a Calcutta college education, Dutt left home for Patna, doing a secretarial job where he learnt the Morse code and used this knowledge to join the Navy in 1941.

1942 marked a turning point in the contestations in the RIN in a phenomenon similar to what Clare Anderson has described in the case of the 1857 mutiny as the ‘the extension of terrestrial rebellion on to ships’.<sup>35</sup> That year saw the launching of the Quit India movement and in some parts of Maharashtra, Bihar, Orissa, U.P. and Bengal, the setting up ‘parallel governments’ in rural areas that replaced the colonial state apparatus.<sup>36</sup> This was also a period of strikes by urban workers over ‘dearness allowances’ to compensate for increasing inflation. In Bombay – from where a large proportion of the mechanical and gunner ratings were recruited – this demand led to an ‘increasing number of strikes between 1943 and 1947’.<sup>37</sup> It was against this background that the RIN increased recruitment by six hundred percent in 1942. This was necessitated by the entry of Italy and Japan into the war in 1941 whose superior air power was causing increased casualties. This led to a growing rate of desertion

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<sup>34</sup> Commission of Enquiry Report, NAI, 12

<sup>35</sup> Clare Anderson, “The Age of Revolution in the Indian Ocean, Bay of Bengal, and South China Sea: A Maritime Perspective,” *International Review of Social History* 58, no. Special Issue (2013): 229–51.

<sup>36</sup> Gyanendra Pandey (ed.), *The Indian Nation in 1942* (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi and Sons, 1988), 2; Gail Omvedt, “The Satara Prati Sarkar,” in *The Indian Nation in 1942*, ed. Gyanendra Pandey (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi and Sons, 1988).

<sup>37</sup> Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, “The War on the Shopfloor,” *International Review of Social History* 51, no. 14 (2006): 3.

from the RIN<sup>38</sup> The sinking of the RIN flagship *Indus* by Japanese Mitsubishi bombers in April 1942 was followed by the highest rate of desertion in the course of the war: until then, the highest point had been 55 desertions in three months. From the following quarter between April and June 1942, however, this shot up six times to 303 desertions and by January-June 1945 to 969 desertions.<sup>39</sup> To compensate for these losses and to expand the navy, particularly after the shock fall of Singapore in early 1942, the RIN began a frenetic recruitment programme.

The Quit India movement and the strikes influenced many of the recruits from this period. The Admiralty noted the fact of ‘strikes...in civil life and colleges in India from which many of the ratings came.’<sup>40</sup> It is perhaps no coincidence that the first to ‘mutiny’ in 1942 were ratings at the Mechanical Training Establishment in Bombay, which accommodated young, working-class trainees. The Admiralty put these down to ‘exaggerated notions about their rights which reacted unfavourably on their sense of duty and loyalty.’<sup>41</sup> These larger political developments also affected seafarers already serving in the navy. Try as the Admiralty might, they could not insulate the men from news and rumours of the movement, even by confining them to their ships and subjecting their mail to censorship. Two months after the Quit India movement was launched, captains of merchant ships berthing in British ports were reporting to a Royal Navy officer ‘the great anxiety, restlessness and uncertainty amongst Indian

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<sup>38</sup>On 6 April 1942, the RIN’s flagship *HMIS Indus* – one of the last warships to be built and thus relatively better equipped – suffered three direct hits from Japanese air bombers off the Akyab coast of Burma while it was engaged in withdrawing troops retreating from the advancing Japanese army. Neither was this the first RIN vessel to have been sunk; already in December 1941, the *HMIS Prabhavati* had been fired on and sunk by accident by a Royal Navy ship killing half its crew, and in March 1942, the *HMIS Sophie Marie* was mined in the Macpherson Straits. Commission of Enquiry Report, NAI, 17.

<sup>39</sup> Commission of Enquiry Report, NAI, 14

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 24

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

seamen... Wherever they go [they] are constantly reminded of ‘the difficult situation in India’ – ‘riots’ – ‘disturbances’ and similar talk.’<sup>42</sup>

The larger ‘terrestrial’ political context of the Quit India movement was reflected in the forms of defiance among RIN ratings. Along with longer ‘lascar’ traditions of collective defiance, strikes and organisation, thus, young Special Service recruits who came to outnumber lascars in the RIN after 1942 brought with them the political imaginations and experiences of the urban working classes as well as the lower middle classes. They were influenced by the Quit India movement, with its emphasis on direct mass action, its symbols of nationalism and a confidence in the Congress left personified by figures like Aruna Asaf Ali. Just as the post-World War I revolts and revolutions had produced a questioning by lascars of the everyday exercise of shipboard authority, the ‘spirit’ of 1942 seems to have permeated the everyday relations between officers and ratings. As a result, 1942 became such a bad year for officer-rating relations that the Flag Officer Commanding the RIN (FOCRIN) circulated a note to his officers opening with: ‘I am disturbed over the number of cases of insubordination which have occurred recently in His Majesty’s Indian Ships.’<sup>43</sup> Three such ‘cases’ between March and September 1942 were even classed as ‘mutinies’ - at the Mechanical Training Establishment in Bombay, on the *HMIS Orissa* and *HMIS Himalaya*, which saw collective refusals to obey orders.<sup>44</sup>

Moreover, discontent now broke out not only over questions of pay or conditions, but also over the exercise of authority that was seen as underpinned by colonial superciliousness. If, as we have already seen, shipboard authority was marked by colonial, race and class structures, captains on board naval vessels saw

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<sup>42</sup> ‘India’s War Effort: Indian Seamen’, 1941-1945. India Office Records, Information Department. IOR/L/I/1/840.

<sup>43</sup> Report of the Commission of Enquiry, 20.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

themselves in addition as direct embodiments of state authority. As one rating put it, they behaved 'like District Magistrates' on ships.<sup>45</sup> Orders, for instance, were nearly always shouted at them and sprinkled with verbal abuse.<sup>46</sup> The Admiralty later explained this attitude of many officers by the fact that many reserve officers were drawn from civil professions like plantation managers, work that typified the violence of colonial relations. Others, it claimed, were elevated from mundane callings in offices to positions of such authority that they abused it.<sup>47</sup> Anxious directives from the naval command called attention to 'the fact that all men are human seems to be forgotten frequently.'<sup>48</sup> The corollary of the ratings' feelings of indignity was their resentment at the privileges that the officers arrogated to themselves. An Admiralty note warned officers not to inflame the ratings' feelings by making 'a practice of officers... always taking the first opportunity of leaving their ship on arrival in harbour' while the ratings were forbidden to leave the ship.<sup>49</sup> This seemingly small practice irked the ratings as one manifestation of officer privilege among many. Ratings were, thus, constantly reminded of their colonial subjecthood.

The growing discontent and defiance among the seamen forced a change in the exercise of authority. Relations were so strained that the FOCRIN Vice-Admiral Fitzherbert circulated a warning note to officers stating that 'the frequency with which these cases have occurred points to the fact that there is something inherently wrong with the way ships' companies have been handled by their officers.'<sup>50</sup> The note gave officers pointers on how to maintain discipline, emphasising a more paternalistic approach:

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<sup>45</sup> Bose, *RIN Mutiny, 1946: Reference and Guide for All*.

<sup>46</sup> Dutt, *Mutiny of the Innocents*.

<sup>47</sup> Commission of Enquiry Report, NAI.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

The object which all officers should endeavour to achieve is the full realisation by every man in the ship's company that the officers have the welfare of the men at heart. This can only be achieved by personal example, close and understanding contact and intelligent propaganda... Firmness is essential...but this should not be mistaken for 'bullying.' If officers followed these guidelines, there should not be the slightest reason why the ship's companies of our little ships should not be very happy families.<sup>51</sup>

This note accorded with the trope of domesticity and filiality on board steam ships that had been employed to describe relations of authority since the late nineteenth century as well as those of master-servant relations.<sup>52</sup>

While everyday forms of contestation simmered through 1942, increasingly against naval manifestations of colonial authority, this year also saw a new form of defiance associated particularly with the Quit India movement: sabotage. Sabotage was the hallmark of the Quit India movement: the ripping up of railway lines, cutting of telegraph wires and the burning of police *chowkies* and post offices.<sup>53</sup> Given below are the number of cases of sabotage carried out in Bombay and Bengal Presidencies, the chief port districts and recruiting centres, from the start of the Quit India movement until 31 December 1943<sup>54</sup>:

<b>Cases of Sabotage</b>	<b>Bombay</b>	<b>Bengal</b>
Number of bomb explosions	447	151
Number of bombs or explosives discovered without damage	738	106
Number of cases of sabotage to roads	78	57

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>52</sup> Janet Ewald has discussed domesticity in Ewald, "'Crossers of the Sea: Slaves, Freedmen, and Other Migrants in the Northwestern Indian Ocean, c. 1750-1914"; Janet J. Ewald, "Bondsmen, Freedmen, and Maritime Industrial Transportation, c.1840-1900," *Slavery & Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies* 31, no. 3 (2010): 451-66. Gopalan Balachandran has discussed the master-servant relation in Balachandran, *Globalising Labour? Indian Seafarers and World Shipping, c. 1870-1945*.

<sup>53</sup> Kamtekar, "The Shiver of 1942," 82.

<sup>54</sup> F. G. Hutchins, *Spontaneous Revolution: The Quit India Movement* (Manohar, Delhi, 1971), 231.

By September 1942, instances of ship-burning and sabotage began to take place. Two ships caught fire midstream ‘under mysterious circumstances’.<sup>55</sup> The papers of the Bombay Congress cryptically note that ‘*HMIS Lawrence* and another ship were ordered to proceed to England from the Bombay harbour due to machine trouble created by the people. In the Alexandra Dock three warehouses and two more ships were set ablaze, but the news of this was suppressed.’<sup>56</sup> Although the period of wooden sailing ships had seen acts of sabotage in the form of ‘striking the sails’ or arson, this does not seem to have been much reported after the advent of steam ships.<sup>57</sup> During the Quit India movement, however, this form re-emerged: the burning of ships, sabotage of the ship’s engines and arson in the dockyard were of a piece with the larger ‘territorial’ anti-colonial movement. Such instances of contestation carried on through the rest of the war and show that the experience of collective action against authority was not lacking before 1946.

### **Wartime political ideas**

As we saw in Chapter Two, the 1920s had seen a labour internationalism and the 1930s a pan-colonial internationalism which envisioned decolonisation across the colonial world rather than in India alone. The Indian Workers’ Union had emphasised its non-sectarian character in its membership and maintained that divisions between Hindus and Muslims were a British tactic exploited by Indian nationalists. Drawing on older Ghadarite ideas, they emphasised the role that labourers, particularly soldiers

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<sup>55</sup> Bombay Provincial Congress Committee (BPCC) papers, 1942, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library.

<sup>56</sup> BPCC papers, 1942, NMML.

<sup>57</sup> Clare Anderson, “The Age of Revolution in the Indian Ocean, Bay of Bengal, and South China Sea: A Maritime Perspective”; Michael H. Fisher, “Finding Lascar ‘Wilful Incendiarism’: British Ship-Burning Panic and Indian Maritime Labour in the Indian Ocean,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 35, no. 3 (2012): 596–623; Jaffer, *Lascars and Indian Ocean Seafaring, 1780-1860: Shipboard Life, Unrest and Mutiny*.

and sailors, could play in bringing about the end of colonialism. To this end, they endorsed the use of revolutionary violence and even political assassinations through the valorisation of Bhagat Singh and Udham Singh and a celebration of martyrdom.

The same trend continued during the war years, through which seamen in the merchant and armed sections of the navy were exposed to political ideas outside of mainstream Indian nationalism. In London's East End, Surat Alley published a news bulletin in Urdu and Bengali which generalised the political aspects of colonialism from India to all the British colonies including 'the peoples of Africa, the Arabs in Palestine, the Malayans in Singapore and our compatriots in Jamaica and Trinidad who endure the oppressions of the British Government' and urged that it was time 'to think of upsetting the British Government in India'.<sup>58</sup> He also focused on the exploitation of labourers and their role in ending colonialism, arguing that 'day by day the fight for India's independence is intensifying. The British Government also has begun heavily to oppress the worker and peasant classes in India. Indian workers and peasants who live in this country ought to be made aware of these facts.'<sup>59</sup> From 1943, Alley also published a monthly news bulletin in Urdu called *Indian Worker* which contained news of movements of workers and peasants in India, as well as from other parts of the world. In a leaflet titled 'Indian Seamen and the War', he urged 'every Indian to... refuse to cooperate with the British government in any form of war work.'<sup>60</sup> The pamphlet highlighted a labour internationalism by giving examples of support for lascars strikes by British seamen and dockers.<sup>61</sup> Indian seamen were also

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<sup>58</sup> 'Indian Seamen: Reports on Unrest and Welfare and Union Activities', IOR/L/PJ/12/630. The reference to 'our compatriots' in the Caribbean is possibly to the 'East Indian' and Afro-Caribbean plantation workers' strikes in the West Indies and British Guiana in 1935-38. Frank Furedi, *Colonial Wars and the Politics of Third World Nationalism* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1998).

<sup>59</sup> 'Indian Seamen: Reports on Unrest and Welfare and Union Activities', IOR/L/PJ/12/630.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

exposed to political propaganda in some of the boarding houses in which they lived in England, such the Indian Sailors Home at Victoria Dock Road.

The impact of these ideas on colonial seamen can be gauged from the reactions of the employers and state. In 1941, at a meeting of the Home Defence Executive Committee, a representative of the Shipowners Federation had voiced concern that ‘subversive agencies were believed to be at work, particularly among Indian lascars and Chinese seamen in this country.’<sup>62</sup> In recognition of the growing anticolonial feeling among lascars and ratings, the government launched efforts at counter-propaganda in the vernacular. Urdu and Bengali newspapers in London were vetted for their views, and an India Office-compiled weekly newsletter was supplied to an Imam at Woking in Surrey to publish in these languages. The Ministry of Information, created on the day that war was declared, also considered bringing out a Gujarati edition of the paper but the literacy rate among these seamen was ‘too small to justify the expense of production’.<sup>63</sup> The Ministry of Information, in turn, got its news from the armed forces public relations directorate, which had recruited a *Times of India* junior editor, the Scottish journalist Ivor S. Jehu, to supply a weekly newsletter to the Bureau of Public Information in India to circulate among Indian seamen.<sup>64</sup> Finding that ‘the Imam did not take much extract from it and it seemed a pity to lose the rest’, the India Office sent cyclostyled copies of the newsletter to the RIN to circulate among the seafarers. In these, they emphasised the devotion to duty of the lascars under fire, with testimonies from officers, war decorations for lascars, glowing tributes from the Viceroy and descriptions of the welfare measures for lascars and their families by the navy. The political articles portrayed the brave Indian sailor

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<sup>62</sup> ‘Indian Seamen: Reports on Unrest and Welfare and Union Activities’, IOR/L/PJ/12/630.

<sup>63</sup> ‘India’s War Effort: Indian Seamen’, IOR/L/I/1/840.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid; Sangita P. Menon Malhan, *The TOI Story: How A Newspaper Changed The Rules Of The Game* (Noida: Harper Collins, 2013).



fighting in defence of Freedom. The Viceroy made a grandiloquent speech, which was reprinted in the loyalist press, putting the lascars at the centre stage of the war effort:

Freedom and tradition and culture... [are] in jeopardy in face of a ruthless challenge to civilisation. The struggle has now spread to all parts of the globe, and on the merchant navy has devolved the vital and formidable task of maintaining the interchange of essential supplies between the countries... who are united in their determination to destroy the common enemy. In this great task the Indian seaman is playing a magnificent part.<sup>65</sup>

After 1943, the RIN also brought out a magazine called the *RIN Log*, with entries in Hindustani transliterated into the Roman script. The majority of reports in the magazine were dedicated to fostering an *esprit de corps*, reporting humorously of ratings and officers fishing, feasting and sporting together. It carried poems, jokes, quizzes and cartoons. It also carried swashbuckling reports of military operations in which the RIN was involved in giving the ‘Japs some hearty poundings’.<sup>66</sup> These articles carried formulaic headlines like ‘Supremo Praises RIN Crews’ and reports of the ‘Gallantry and Skilful Seamanship in Face of Fire’ even as other reports emerged on ratings’ unwillingness to fight the Japanese and Bose’s Indian National Army. Besides news on the war front, the *Log* also carried a section on the Home Front called *Ghar Ki Khabrein (News from Home)*, which carried news reports from the chief recruiting states of Bombay, Bengal, Punjab and Madras. In the context of famine in Bengal, rationing and rising inflation, it portrayed a picture of peace and bounty: growing agricultural and industrial production, government welfare and relief schemes and cases of prosecutions of black-marketeers.<sup>67</sup>

Notwithstanding competing efforts to propagandise Indian seamen, lascars and ratings formed their own opinions of colonialism as consequence of their wide-

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<sup>65</sup> ‘RIN Log. Vol. II’, 1945-1946. National Maritime Museum, Greenwich. Caird Archive, Godfrey Papers. GOD/55.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

ranging mobility. Their range of mobility between 1939 and 1941 stretched from the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean and Atlantic oceans. RIN ships were sent as auxiliaries to the Royal Navy in these theatres of war, while lascar-crewed ships carried food and supplies to Britain.<sup>68</sup> From late 1940, when Italy entered the war, all but one RIN ships were withdrawn to operations in the Persian Gulf and Red Sea, carrying troops and ammunition to the ports of Aden (today Yemen), Djibouti, Berbera (Somalia), Jeddah (Saudi Arabia), Port Sudan, Suakin and Khor Nawarat (Sudan), Port Suez and Alexandria (Egypt) and Massawa (Eritrea). After 1941, with Japan's rapid military victories in Southeast Asia over the British possessions of Malaya, Thailand, Singapore, Hong Kong and Burma, the American Philippines, and the Dutch Sumatra and Java from the Dutch, RIN ships were concentrated in the Indian Ocean and the South China sea.<sup>69</sup> As part of this, RIN ships carried out the duties of troop convoys and evacuations between Australian ports and Batavia (Indonesia, today Jakarta), Colombo (Sri Lanka) and Rangoon (Myanmar, today Yangon).<sup>70</sup> Thus, as in the First World War, imperial military imperatives transformed Indian seamen into active participants and first-hand witnesses to other colonies and colonialisms. This gave them a wider understanding of the scale of the colonial world.

This mobility also made the seamen witnesses to anti-colonial and labour movements across these regions. Firstly, as Kamtekar has argued, the swiftness of Japan's military victories brought about a 'loss of credibility' for the colonial state, which suddenly appeared weak and vulnerable to overthrow.<sup>71</sup> Secondly, as in the First World War, competing colonial powers fostered anti-colonial forces as fifth columnists to undermine their rivals, although this time on a more substantial scale.

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<sup>68</sup> Collins, *The Royal Indian Navy, 1939-1945*.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 98-111.

<sup>71</sup> Kamtekar, "The Shiver of 1942.".

Thus, before its invasion, Japan extended support to armed nationalist groupings across Asia, many of them led by communists. Some of these groupings were attracted by Japan's pan-Asianist rhetoric of an Asian 'co-prosperity sphere' and others out of pragmatism.<sup>72</sup> The communist parties' brief in this period was to fight their colonial governments and, in this endeavour, they were not averse to taking Japanese assistance. After the Japanese occupation in 1942, the Allied forces backed resistance movements in Malaya and Indonesia, by which time the communists' brief had changed to fighting fascism.<sup>73</sup> These movements accepted the support on an understanding that the end of the war would bring political independence, an idea that was outlined in the Atlantic Charter. This was not, however, simply a technical exercise of manoeuvre. These movements, combined with the Atlantic Charter, produced a conviction that the end of colonialism was at hand, and that this was a decisive moment to act. As Frank Furedi points out, 'the terms *economic* and *political* do not capture the peculiar consciousness that defined the radical moment.'<sup>74</sup>

At the end of the war, however, the Allied forces turned from cautious support of these movements to large-scale repression of independence movements. Under Mountbatten's command, Indian, Australian and Dutch troops were sent to suppress the Indonesian anti-colonial 'insurgency', in a war which carried on for the next three years and cost between 60,000 and 200,000 Indonesian lives.<sup>75</sup> Many of these troops were transported on RIN ships, thus making Indian soldiers and sailors participants in the repression, and bringing them into contact with other anti-colonial movements. In one rating's words,

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<sup>72</sup> Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper, *Forgotten Armies: Britain's Asian Empire and the War with Japan* (London: Penguin, 2005).

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Furedi, *Colonial Wars and the Politics of Third World Nationalism*, 38.

<sup>75</sup> Bayly and Harper, *Forgotten Armies: Britain's Asian Empire and the War with Japan*.

If you see with your own eyes, you know more. For instance you find that people sacrifice everything for their countries. They work hard and fight for their freedom. Naturally it affects us more than reading books... You meet different types of people. You know their civilisation and culture. You know what they are living and fighting for. Naturally, you turn on thinking about your own country.<sup>76</sup>

Thus, echoing lascars' earlier narratives of 'seeing many things' and the world being their 'university', mobility was a central part of Indian seamen's political transformation to see the Indian anti-colonial movement in the perspective of other struggles.

The general context of anti-colonial unrest produced a 'maritime radicalism' similar to the one that Rediker, Anderson, Frykman and van Voss have argued existed in the age of seventeenth and eighteenth century anti-feudal revolutions in Europe.<sup>77</sup>

Mobile combatants and non-combatants at the end of the Second World War displayed a remarkable preparedness to make practical gestures of anti-colonial solidarity. Many Indian soldiers sent to Indonesia deserted their regiments. Some deserting soldiers told an American journalist, 'the cause of the Indonesian is the same as that of the Indian. Therefore, they resent fighting the Indonesian people.'<sup>78</sup>

Already in 1940 at Bombay, the Sikh Squadron of the Central India Horse Regiment of the Indian Army refused to participate in what they described as 'imperialist war'.<sup>79</sup>

For this, four men were executed and one hundred were transported to the Andaman Islands. The British suspected that the squadron had been influenced by the *Kirti Lehar* group of communists who had Ghadarite origins.<sup>80</sup> Although there was a general news blackout on such mutinies and desertions, Indian naval ratings were first-hand witnesses to the events in Indonesia.

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<sup>76</sup> 'P.O. Tel. S.W. Ray, HMIS Talwar, Bombay Witness 67', Commission of Enquiry Report, NAI.

<sup>77</sup> Frykman et al., "Mutiny and Maritime Radicalism in the Age of Revolution: An Introduction."

<sup>78</sup> 'Hundreds of Indian Soldiers Desert Ranks', *Free Press Journal (FPJ)*, 8 Jan 1946.

<sup>79</sup> Kaushik Roy, "Military Loyalty in the Colonial Context: A Case Study of the Indian Army during World War II," *The Journal of Military History*, 497-529, 73, no. 2 (2009): 507.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

An interesting episode highlights the combination of pan-colonial and labour solidarity with a mixture of pan-Islamism. This involved Indian and Australian seamen going on strike in support of their Indonesian counterparts who were striking in Sydney against ships carrying weapons to suppress the Indonesian anti-colonial movement. Australia was a node for British and Dutch shipping in the Indian Ocean, with P&O and the Dutch KPM lines dominating. On 23 September 1945, Indonesian seamen refused to work on these ships and were backed by Australian unions. British shipping companies agreed to 'lend' Indian crews to the Dutch from Bombay.<sup>81</sup>

On arrival in Australian ports, however, these Indian crews joined the Indonesian and Australian sailors in their strike. In remarkable incidents in October 1945, Indian seamen on board the *SS Patras* and *SS Pahud* who had already begun steaming out of the port, were addressed over megaphone by a communist lascar and union activist Dasrath Singh about the situation in Indonesia and the Anglo-Dutch collusion in suppressing the anticolonial movement by force of arms that were being carried on their ships. The lascars on *SS Patras* refused to stoke the ship's engines and the vessel had to be towed back into port. On the *SS Pahud*, 135 Pathan seamen lowered the lifeboats and rowed back to the harbour. One lascar expressed their feeling of solidarity in pan-Islamic idiom by saying that 'the Indonesians are 98% Mohammedan and the Indian seamen in Sydney are 98% Mohammedans. Thus the shipping companies are trying to force us to take part in a war on our brother Mohammedans. This is against our conscience.'<sup>82</sup> In a striking testament that this incident was linked to a longer history of strikes and organisation, one seaman explained to an Australian reporter:

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<sup>81</sup> Goodall, "Port Politics: Indian Seamen, Australian Unions and Indonesian Independence, 1945-47," 6-11.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid*, 14.

This is not the first time I have been on strike. During the big strike in Calcutta when the Indian Seamen's Union was first formed I went days without food. They killed some of the strikers and ever since then I have been true to Union principles.<sup>83</sup>

This history of collective organisation and action now took on the tones of an intimate, lived political internationalism when some of the Pathan seamen came to refer to one of the Australian communist organisers in Sydney as 'Campbell Bhai'.<sup>84</sup> Twentieth-century 'maritime radicalism' was thus informed by anti-colonial movements across the Indian Ocean.

This internationalism led to demonstrations of solidarity of Indian seamen with the Indonesian independence movement which were reciprocal. In January 1946, four months after the strike in Sydney, striking Indonesian seamen in Bombay were noted taking part in various violent anti-colonial processions. On 23 January, for instance, the Congress Socialists organised processions on Subhas Bose's birthday 'independent of the official Congress celebrations'.<sup>85</sup> The processionists 'attack[ed] the police with stones and soda-water bottles' and the police responded with firing live ammunition.<sup>86</sup> The police noted that 'the crowd also included a number of Indonesian seamen ... who had refused to work and struck in sympathy with the struggle of the Indonesians against the Dutch Government.'<sup>87</sup> Three days later on 26 January, Independence Day celebrations were held with processions of 25,000 ending on Bombay's Chowpatty beach. Again, the file noted, 'a prominent feature of the procession was a party of about 100 Indonesians wearing black ties and black caps

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>84</sup> 'Pathan seamen on strike in Sydney', *People's Age*, January 1946.

<sup>85</sup> 'Fortnightly Reports: Bombay', India Office Records, Public and Judicial Department. IOR/L/PJ/5/167.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

who jeered and shook their fists at the Police along the route.’<sup>88</sup> Their presence raises tantalising questions about the relation between the strike in Sydney with the lascars, their presence in Bombay and the raising of their demands by the RIN mutineers less than three weeks after the last procession in which the Indonesian seamen took part.<sup>89</sup> While we may never be able to recover the exact nature of these relations, there is little doubt that it was seamen’s international encounters and their role in the war which made these cross-colonial interlinkages possible in the ideas and actions of seafarers.

While colonial seafarers sailed through the cross-currents of these rising anti-colonial movements in the Indian Ocean, they were also influenced by similar movements in regions in which they were not directly engaged in operations through the geographical cross-section of passengers they carried. Merchant and naval ships conveyed a range of people besides POWs: refugees, ‘displaced persons’, ‘stateless persons’, ‘expellees’ and ‘evacuees’.<sup>90</sup> As part of this total war, the ships on which they worked carried troops for the Allied war effort that were drawn from across the colonial and ‘free’ world. For instance, RIN ships carried not only soldiers of the Indian army, but also the King’s African Rifles in the Red Sea and Burmese operations which included soldiers from Kenya, Tanganyika, Uganda, Nyasaland, Gold Coast, Nigeria, South Africa, Northern Rhodesia, and Somalia, as well as the Free French Army, the Royal Air Force and Italian prisoners of war.<sup>91</sup> This contact also brought cross-colonial encounters. Oliver Coates has shown how Nigerian

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> ‘Fortnightly Reports: Bombay’, India Office Records, Public and Judicial Department. IOR/L/PJ/5/167.

<sup>90</sup> Yasmin Khan, *The Raj at War: A People’s History of India’s Second World War* (London: Vintage, 2015), 122.

<sup>91</sup> David Killingray, *Fighting for Britain: African Soldiers in the Second World War* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2010).

soldiers serving in Burma were influenced by the Quit India movement.<sup>92</sup> Contact with sailors of the 'free', democratic countries and the overarching ideological construction of the war as one for democracy and against tyranny, led some of the colonial seafarers to contemplate the cruel irony of being called on to fight for freedom in a colonial army. As we have seen, Akbar Ali Khan of the Indian Workers' Union articulated this sentiment when he said that 'the existing British government... enforced a dictatorship in India of a more severe character than any European or Eastern dictatorship, and also held dictatorial sway in Africa'.<sup>93</sup> Some RIN ratings, such as twenty-two year old B.C. Dutt, asked themselves questions about their participation in the war. Just as Amir Haider Khan had searched for answers in the First World War about why they were being sent to fight their Muslim brothers in Turkey, Dutt introspected,

What did I fight for? Whose war did I fight?... To the British authorities, we were servicemen. We were not supposed to think, but do our jobs with unquestioning loyalty and devotion. But loyalty to whom?... Association with the men from free countries had given me a sense of identity with my own country.<sup>94</sup>

Thus, seamen's notions of colonialism and freedom were informed by their mobile experiences and encounters.

Besides a rising anti-colonial feeling in Asia and Africa, however, it is perhaps one single armed nationalist grouping that reacted directly on the 'maritime radicalism' of South Asian seamen: the Indian National Army. In November 1943, 80,000 troops of Subhas Bose's Indian National Army (INA) landed in Burma with the Japanese forces, and forced the British regiments back to the borders of India. The

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<sup>92</sup> Oliver Coates, 'West Africa's Orient: The rewards and limits of South-South encounters in the writings of Nigerian soldiers and journalists in India, 1943-1946'. Unpublished paper presented at the SOAS South Asia History Seminar, 14 March 2017.

<sup>93</sup> 'Indian Workers' Union or Association: Reports on members and activities', January 1942-July 1947. India Office Records, Public and Judicial Department. IOR/L/PJ/12/645.

<sup>94</sup> Dutt, *Mutiny of the Innocents*, 76.



INA scored propaganda victories by addressing the demoralised Indian troops. A letter from the INA to the Indian troops, laden with pan-Asianist idiom, read:

Dear Indian Brothers, the Japanese forces do not wish to fight against their Asiatic brothers, therefore you should not fight against us. It will be foolish to lose your lives by fighting for Britain who has been keeping you in slavery for years and has been ill- treating you.<sup>95</sup>

In addition, Bose broadcast an offer of Burmese and Malay rice over the radio to Bengal in the midst of a terrible famine. Rumours of Bose's proximity to the Indian border and his '*Dilli Chalo!*' slogan imbued his figure with a mythopoetic quality of death-defying opposition to the British. Commander-in-Chief and Viceroy Wavell found that Indian troops fought so half-heartedly that he became 'a bit disturbed'.<sup>96</sup> With the land troops in flight, the Governor of Burma wrote to the Commander-in-Chief of the Indian armed forces on 11 February 1942, 'I doubt we could ever recapture [Rangoon] except from the sea'.<sup>97</sup> Consequently, the RIN was sent to salvage the situation. Twelve RIN ships, *HMIS Jumna, Indus, Hindustan, Sandoway, Haideri, Sophie Marie, Ramdas, Narbada, Cauvery, Godavari, Kistna* and *Assam* were deployed in the Japanese theatre of war, thus bringing them into contact with INA propaganda.<sup>98</sup>

The contact with the INA generated more expressions of discontent among RIN ratings. In May 1944, Admiral Godfrey, the FOCRIN, opened a letter to Admiral James, Commander-in-Chief of the Eastern Fleet, with 'the discipline of the RIN ships based at Calcutta have been causing me some concern'.<sup>99</sup> Calcutta was, of course, at the frontier of the war with the Japanese in Burma. On 23 April 1945, over

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<sup>95</sup> 'Indian Intelligence summary 31 Dec 1942', India Office Records, War Staff Series, IOR/L/WS/1/1433.

<sup>96</sup> Bayly and Harper, *Forgotten Armies*, 157.

<sup>97</sup> 'Dorman-Smith to Amery, 11 February 1942', IOR, Mss Eur E215/1.

<sup>98</sup> Collins, *The Royal Indian Navy*, 95-110.

<sup>99</sup> 'India 1943-46: Vol. III'. NMM, Godfrey Papers. GOD/43.

a thousand ratings on the *HMIS Shivaji* refused orders to 'clean ship'. Commodore Coverdale Smith, the officer in charge, admitted to the FOCRIN,

I am convinced that the refusal to clean ship is mainly an expression of dissatisfaction on their part that the terms and conditions of service... coupled with their feeling that higher authority is not prepared to consider their grievances... their state of mind is such that they are prepared to go to jail than pinning any further faith in the possible redress of their grievances by higher authority.<sup>100</sup>

The Commission of Enquiry later noted a feeling that 'nothing short of direct action would galvanise the RIN authorities into redressing their grievances'.<sup>101</sup>

RIN ratings also came into personal contact with INA fighters, which shaped their political imaginations of the course of decolonisation. With the defeat of Japan after 1945, INA soldiers were captured and conveyed from Malaya, Singapore and Burma to India for a show trial. The INA prisoners were conveyed to India on RIN ships. The *HMIS Assam* was one such, carrying INA men from Rangoon to India. Although they were forbidden from speaking to the prisoners, two ratings, Nurul Islam and Ashraf Khan, 'talked and put questions about Netaji (Bose) secretly'.<sup>102</sup>

B.C. Dutt recounted:

A friend of mine, Salil Syam, returned from Malaya with strange tales of the INA... I had seen some of them at Rangoon... Having been with the occupation forces in Malaya, Syam had come in direct contact with them. He had brought letters from some members of the former Azad Hind Government addressed to Jawaharlal Nehru and Sarat Chandra Bose, the elder brother of Subhas Chandra Bose. He also brought relevant literature and photographs... In the RIN it would have been considered high treason if Syam was found with the letters.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Commission of Enquiry Report, NAI, 22.

<sup>101</sup> Commission of Enquiry Report, NAI, 25

<sup>102</sup> Dutt, *Mutiny of the Innocents*.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid*, 76.

Neither was this an isolated instance. As the flow of prisoners increased, ‘all the officers and ratings discussed about it openly.’<sup>104</sup> Telegraphist Ahmed of *HMIS Talwar* later told the Commission of Inquiry that ‘every rating obtained some sort of matter concerning INA Subhashe’s [sic] photos and speeches, Azad Army’s [the INA] newspapers in Roman Urdu, pamphlets such as *Delhi Chalo* and *Blood and Hunger* published in Thailand.’<sup>105</sup> Thus, their circulation throughout the Indian Ocean during the war drew the ratings into international networks of anticolonial propaganda. Communication branch ratings, especially, had their kit-bags full of such things including INA gramophone records.<sup>106</sup> Many ratings felt they could assist the INA’s cause. In Karachi, a ‘Sailor’s Association’ was formed ‘to raise money secretly for the INA relief fund’.<sup>107</sup> Thus, due to the nature of their work and international mobility, the RIN ratings were exposed to these developments in a more immediate sense than other sections of the South Asian population.

The ratings’ appropriations of Bose’s message of an armed overthrow of colonialism were, however, independent of the way in which they were intended. Bose had intended a disciplined army coup, in which the subalterns were foot soldiers led by a firm nationalist proto-government. The INA, of which he gave himself the title of Supreme Commander, was part of a quasi-state apparatus, with a Provisional Government, recognised by nine countries, of which Bose was Prime Minister, Minister of War and Foreign Minister.<sup>108</sup> For ratings, however, the imagination with which they invested Bose’s actions was akin to the manner in which Shahid Amin describes the response of peasants in Chauri Chaura who overlaid Gandhi’s message

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<sup>104</sup> Bose, *RIN Mutiny*, 18.

<sup>105</sup> ‘Memos of Witnesses submitted to the Commission’, NAI, RIN Mutiny Papers, Serial Number 13.

<sup>106</sup> Commission of Enquiry Report, NAI, 883.

<sup>107</sup> Anil Roy, ‘Our Journey to the Gallows, Theirs to the Throne’ in Bose, *RIN Mutiny*, 40. Roy was trained at *Talwar* and then sent to *HMIS Chamak*, a radar training school at Karachi.

<sup>108</sup> Ranjan Borra, “Subhas Chandra Bose: After Three Decades,” *Asian Affairs* 2, no. 5 (1975): 308–20.

of non-cooperation with their own meaning. Amin argues that there was a ‘polysemic nature of the Mahatma myths and rumours’ and a ‘many-sided response of the masses to current events and their cultural, moral and political concerns.’<sup>109</sup> Likewise, the ratings received Bose’s ideas in their own, particularly subaltern way. As one participant, B.C. Dutt later put it,

We were about to shorten the duration of [the] struggle by capturing one arm of the British forces in the country... We did not know that what we were conspiring to do was at total variance with the leaders’ way of doing things... we could be the sword arm of the movement... to oust the British.<sup>110</sup>

This interpretation accorded more closely with Ghadarite aspirations to rouse a mutiny of the colonial armed forces than with the nationalist leaders’ anxiety to prevent subalterns from asserting their own independent initiative.

This subaltern interpretation of Bose’s message inspired efforts to replicate his organisation in the RIN though under the control of ratings. In 1945, Dutt, Syam and a small core of other young, educated signallers formed a clandestine group of ‘twenty regulars and about a dozen sympathisers’ within one establishment of the RIN, fashioning themselves after the INA:

We no longer considered ourselves as mere ratings of the RIN. We considered ourselves as fighters for the country’s freedom. We called ourselves Azad Hindi (Free Indians)... The canteen of the *Talwar* became our recruiting centre... We made friendly enquiries about their experiences in different theatres of war and listened to their accounts attentively.<sup>111</sup>

Thus, Bose’s method of organised armed resistance unwittingly inspired sections of armed forces to take up his model – this time without the direct leadership of the nationalist parties.

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<sup>109</sup> Shahid Amin, ‘Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur District, Eastern UP, 1921-2’, in *Selected subaltern studies* Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (eds.) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 294.

<sup>110</sup> Dutt, *Mutiny of the Innocents*, 127-8.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

## **The Mutiny**

At the end of the war, these wartime contestations and anti-colonial ideas combined to produce a moment of widespread anti-colonial unrest which posed an imagination of the course that decolonisation might take and of a post-colonial future, distinct from the one held by the nationalist leadership. While the nationalist leadership envisioned a ‘transfer of power’ into their hands through diplomatic missions and negotiations, with competing claims between the Congress and Muslim League, neither of these parties, as we shall see, wanted a disruption of the masses ‘from below’. If it was the nationalists’ vision that ultimately came to be realised, this was not because they were firmly steering the proverbial ship through calm seas to the shores of independence. Rather, in the first half of 1946 many nationalists feared that they had lost control of the anti-colonial masses who might have steered a different course to a different shore. In this moment, those who were conventionally understood as the ‘leaders’ of the ‘freedom movement’, were seemingly paradoxically opposed to a movement of the ‘led’.<sup>112</sup> The mutiny thus changes our understanding of the relation between the nationalists and subalterns in the anti-colonial movement, as well as the often fatalist understanding of the course of independence and Partition as inexorable and unavoidable.

The prevailing anti-colonial unrest in other parts of the world had a direct bearing on the RIN. The Commission of Inquiry later instituted into the ‘causes and origins’ of the mutiny drew a direct link between the prevailing anti-colonial movements and the ratings’ mobility:

The political situation in the Mediterranean, the Middle East, Egypt, Palestine, Persia, South Africa, Indonesia, Malaya, Siam and Indo-China was daily news

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<sup>112</sup> Chandra et al., *India’s Struggle for Independence*.

in the World Press and Radio. [The ratings] drew inspiration from, and sympathised with, the efforts of other nations to achieve independence.<sup>113</sup>

The Commission also cited the spate of mutinies preceding the one in the RIN in various armed forces. With movements for self-determination in the colonies and erstwhile Axis-occupied territories from Greece to Indonesia, Britain and America maintained a high level of military mobilisation to crush these movements. The monthly rate of demobilisation was slashed for American soldiers from 800,000 to 300,000.<sup>114</sup> Added to soldiers' and sailors' feelings that this was no longer a war against fascism but against what were seen as legitimate freedom movements was their impatience to get home and deal with the economic and social dislocations and uncertainties that the end of the war had wrought.<sup>115</sup> American soldiers began protesting in Manila, Korea, Yokohama, Guam, Frankfurt, Paris and Calcutta with the slogans 'We want to go home' and 'Service yes, but serfdom never'.<sup>116</sup> The same sentiment prevailed among the British armed forces. Starting in Karachi's Drigh Road camp with 900 airmen, by 24 and 25 January 50,000 airmen across 60 units of the Royal Air Force were on strike across Asia. This mutiny, too, was informed by a history of ideas and contestation. One of the participants recalls in his account of the mutiny, 'there were nine or ten Communists on the Drigh Road camp, and we met as a group... many of us found inspiration in the example of the International Brigade [in the Spanish Civil War]'.<sup>117</sup> The leader of the Drigh Road mutiny, Arthur Attwood, brought his prior experience as a trade unionist in civil life to bear on organising the

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<sup>113</sup> 'Commission of Enquiry Report'. NAI, RIN Mutiny List, Part 1. Serial Number 4.

<sup>114</sup> Das, *Revisiting Talwar: A Study in the Royal Indian Navy Uprising of February 1946.*, 30.

<sup>115</sup> David Duncan, *Mutiny in the RAF: The Air Force Strikes of 1946* (London: Socialist History Society, 1999).

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

mutiny in the RAF.<sup>118</sup> Within days, the Royal Indian Air Force (RIAF) in Karachi was also on strike. The fact that these strikes in the RAF and RIAF were treated with ‘leniency’ was often later cited as an ‘encouragement’ to the mutiny in the RIN.<sup>119</sup>

In the RIN, too, political ideas formed during the war informed acts of ‘insubordination’. Dutt and Syams’ INA-inspired ‘Azad Hindi’ had been organising episodes of sabotage in RIN shore establishments since December 1945, writing political slogans such as ‘Quit India’, ‘Down with the Imperialists’, ‘Revolt Now’, ‘Kill the British’ on the barrack walls, wrecking senior officers’ automobiles and posting ‘seditious’ leaflets on the walls. Dutt was arrested for his involvement in these acts and mimeographed copies of ‘Indian Mutiny, 1857’ by the Congress Socialist Asoka Mehta, some leaflets and other personal papers were found in his locker.<sup>120</sup> In this politically-charged context, even ‘small’ contestations were marked by larger anti-colonial political symbolism. In fact, the first such contestation was over one officer’s expression of colonial arrogance, calling the ratings ‘sons of Indian bitches’.<sup>121</sup> Angered by this racial abuse as well as slow demobilisation and deteriorating food rations, the ratings in one signalling station, the *HMIS Talwar*, refused to eat their food. This act of everyday resistance was, however, suffused with appropriations from nationalist symbology. In a ‘polysemic’ appropriation of Gandhi’s message, Dutt recalled that ‘the idea sprang from the example of Mahatma Gandhi’s... Dandi (salt satyagraha) march... Salt touched everyone’s daily life. All India was roused from slumber... We decided that we take on some aspect of life in

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<sup>118</sup> Duncan, *Mutiny in the RAF*.

<sup>119</sup> ‘Commission of Enquiry Report’, NAI.

<sup>120</sup> Dutt, *Mutiny of the Innocents*.

<sup>121</sup> Dutt; Banerjee, *The RIN Strike*; Das, *Revisiting Talwar: A Study in the Royal Indian Navy Uprising of February 1946*.

the Navy which concerned all the ratings.’<sup>122</sup> On the morning of 18 February, all ratings of the *Talwar* refused to eat and to obey orders to work.

In a context tense with anti-colonialism, this ‘small’ contestation rapidly escalated. The *Talwar* signallers used their training in wireless and radio signalling to spread news of their strike to the rest of the RIN fleet across the Indian Ocean. The next morning, 2,000 ratings assembled and elected a strike committee of 45 representatives. The committee issued a communique to all the ships to strike work, form ship committees, elect a representative to the central strike committee, maintain internal discipline and refrain from communicating individually with authorities.<sup>123</sup> The strike soon spread beyond the *Talwar* to the rest of the R.I.N of 70 ships and shore establishments employing 20,000 naval ratings – the overwhelming majority of the navy. From the I.N.A.-inspired actions of sabotage and conspiracy, the movement now assimilated a grammar of ‘strikes’ and collective action, which resonated with lascars’ and industrial workers’ interwar history of contestation and union organisation. The strike committee issued a list of demands which included service-related demands like faster demobilisation, better food and accommodation and the disciplining of abusive officers, as well as political demands to free political prisoners and end British assistance to the Dutch in repressing the Indonesian anti-colonial movement. The centrality of the Indonesian demand to the mutiny, seen in light of the earlier maritime instances of Indian-Indonesian solidarity shows that for these seamen, the fight for decolonisation was wider than India alone, spanning other parts of the colonial world.

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<sup>122</sup> Dutt, *Mutiny of the Innocents*, 129.

<sup>123</sup> ‘Appeal to all RIN Personnel from NCSC’ published in *Hind Praja*, a Gujarati-English bilingual journal published bi-weekly in Bombay. Quoted in Das, *Revisiting Talwar: A Study in the Royal Indian Navy Uprising of February 1946*, 212.



Most accounts of the mutiny which seek to emphasise its nationalist – and even patriotic – character emphasise the role of the *Talwar* signallers, who were overwhelmingly young and educated, as ‘instigators’ of the mutiny, and allow no independent role or agency to the rest of the participants in the mutiny.<sup>124</sup> Most of the participants’ accounts, written by these signallers, reinforce this narrative. In Dutt’s account, titled *Mutiny of the Innocents*, the signallers are the enlightened few who lead the eponymous innocents into mutiny. He attributes the spread to the ‘seamen’ ratings who were ‘tough... more rustic...[and] less sensitive though equally well-travelled’ to them ‘accept[ing] the leadership of their educated brothers-in-arms’ who had to play a ‘hoax’ on these politically-illiterate brethren in order to ‘trick’ them into revolting.<sup>125</sup> And yet, the fact that the organisation of the mutiny almost immediately took the form of a strike committee, and spread to ports as distant as Aden, Bahrain and Colombo which were not within reach of the ‘Azad Hindi’ hoax attests to a preparedness of the seamen ratings to contest shipboard and state authority, and a longer history of contestation. The signallers on the other hand, were mostly recent recruits from 1942 onwards, who were influenced by the Quit India movement and the INA, but were not particularly familiar with older forms of collective contestations and organisation.

The political imaginations of these different generations and social backgrounds mingled in a heady mixture that drew not only on Quit India and the INA, but also on interwar internationalism. To briefly summarise these internationalist ideas from Chapter Two, firstly, it emphasised the involvement of subalterns and labourers as central to the politics and the process of decolonisation,

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<sup>124</sup> Rear Admiral Satyindra Singh, *Under Two Ensigns: The Indian Navy, 1945-1950* (New Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta: Oxford and IBH Publishing, 1985); Vasant Marotirao Bhagwatkar, *Royal Indian Navy Uprising and Indian Freedom Struggle* (Amravati: Charvak Prakashan, 1989); Bose, *RIN Mutiny*.

<sup>125</sup> Dutt, *Mutiny of the Innocents*, 144.

while Ghadarite ideas and the Indian Workers' Union had envisioned a specifically subaltern military dimension to the overthrow of colonialism. Secondly, decolonisation was imagined not only in India but across the colonial world, from the Caribbean, Africa, Middle East and Southeast Asia. And thirdly, some strands such as the Indian Workers' Union had argued against the divisions being created between Hindus and Muslims by the Congress and Muslim League.

Many of these ideas of interwar internationalism were expressed in the 1946 mutiny. For one, in their practical gesture of solidarity with the Indonesian anti-colonial movement, the ratings had expressed the idea that the anti-colonial project was not delimited by the borders of British India but extended to the rest of the colonial world. Further, they had envisioned an active role for themselves as military subalterns in effecting this decolonisation. Finally, among the RIN ratings, a strong communal unity was noted by all contemporary commentators.<sup>126</sup> The last was evidenced in a number of instances. The elected strike committee of forty-five representatives had a Muslim president (Leading Signaller M.S. Khan), and a Sikh vice-president (Telegraphist Madan Singh), as well as Hindus (like Signaller S. Sen Gupta) and Christians (like Able Stoker Gomez) among its members.<sup>127</sup> In a symbolically charged act, all the ships lowered the British ensign flying from their masts, and hoisted three flags in its place: the Congress tricolour, the League's green flag with crescent-and-moon, and the CPI's red flag with the hammer and sickle. Significantly, the striking ratings marched to Bombay's Oval Maidan shouting slogans of 'Hindu-Muslim *Ek Ho*' (Hindus and Muslims Unite).<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Frank Moraes, *Witness to an Era: India 1920 to the Present Day* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1973).

<sup>127</sup> Bose, *RIN Mutiny: 1946*, 172.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid*, Banerjee, *The RIN Strike*.

Other slogans raised by the ratings are also telling of their political imaginations. Marching out of the docks and through Bombay's 'white town' of Colaba, they shouted, 'release INA and political prisoners', 'withdraw Indian Army from Indonesia', and '*Inquilab Zindabad*' (Long Live Revolution).<sup>129</sup> A couplet by the Urdu poet Josh Malihabadi became their anthem of revolt and summed up the spirit of the times:

*Kaam hai mera taghayyur, naam hai mera shabaab*  
*Mera na'ara inquilaab-o-inquilaab-o-inquilaab!*  
(My work is change, my name is youth  
My slogan is revolution, revolution, revolution!)

That this revolution was linked to independence was clear to the ratings. On the *HMIS Assam*, the meeting which took place on the mess deck was described by a participant as 'the mini-parliament of the future 'Free India.'<sup>130</sup> Thus, in their maritime subaltern imaginations, labour had an active role to play in the course of decolonisation, as well as in a post-colonial future.

The fact that their whole fleet of armed battleships was now in the hands of avowedly anti-colonial subalterns sent the RIN admiralty into a state of panic. The marches in south Bombay had the same effect on the colonial government, passing as they did through the centre of financial and administrative power where the Mint, the Secretariat, the stock exchange, the University and the iconic Gateway of India were located. Many newspapers were aghast at the 'invasion' of this centre of power by these naval ratings.<sup>131</sup> In response to being first restricted to Castle Barracks and then fired upon when trying to break through the military cordon, the ratings exchanged signals between ships to the effect that if any shots were fired by military from the

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<sup>129</sup> Dutt, *Mutiny of the Innocents*, 159; Commission of Enquiry report, NAI.

<sup>130</sup> Bose, *RIN Mutiny: 1946*, 19.

<sup>131</sup> 'RIN Demonstrators Run Wild in Bombay'. *TOI*, 20 February, 1946.

shore, then all ships would open fire on the harbour.<sup>132</sup> *HMIS Jumna* had a large store of ammunition on board.<sup>133</sup> Admiral Godfrey, the FOCRIN, responded by broadcasting a message over radio headlined ‘Submit or Perish’, warning the ratings that ‘overwhelming forces’ were arriving in Bombay immediately, and that ‘if you persist, you will be completely obliterated’.<sup>134</sup> He added, ‘my advice to you is...that unconditional surrender is to be complied with immediately.’<sup>135</sup> This threat, and an appeal from the ratings to the ‘people’ of Bombay to come to their assistance, however, galvanised all of Bombay into action, thus reversing the wave from maritime to terrestrial radicalism.

The active role of Bombay workers in the following days (22-25 February, 1946), further strengthened the contending route to decolonisation. Discontent had already been rife in the Bombay working classes over retrenchments in textile mills owing to the post-war contraction of industry, and over a cut in food rations.<sup>136</sup> On 21 February, 12,000 workers in three large mills were on strike against these conditions.<sup>137</sup> When Godfrey’s threat was broadcast that day, the Communist Party immediately responded with handbills in several languages calling on the people to support them by coming out on *hartal*, closing down factories, colleges and shops. CPI leaders in Bombay like P.C. Joshi and S.A. Dange addressed large public meetings. On 22 February, Bombay saw a near-total shutdown. In the morning, 68 of the city’s 75 mills were completely closed, with 300,000 textile workers on strike.<sup>138</sup> By 2.30 pm, only three were working partially. Schools, colleges and shops were

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<sup>132</sup> ‘Secraphone message received by IB, Home Dept, GoI from the Chief Intelligence Officer, Bombay at 3:30pm on 21 February 1946’. NAI, Home Political, File No. 5/1/46.

<sup>133</sup> ‘All-out offensive planned to crush ratings’ revolt’. *FPJ*, 22 February 1946.’

<sup>134</sup> ‘Secraphone message received by IB, Home Dept, GoI from the Chief Intelligence Officer, Bombay at 3:30pm on 21 February 1946’. NAI, Home Political, File No. 5/1/46.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> Das, *Revisiting Talwar: A Study in the Royal Indian Navy Uprising of February 1946*, 303.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

closed, and buses, trams and trains were at a standstill. In the evening, a sympathy procession of 12,000 dockyard workers proceeded toward Castle Barracks, but the police managed to divert it when it reached Elphinstone Circle.<sup>139</sup> On the next day, 23 February, every single mill was on strike. With no transport, the city came to a standstill. A march of students and labourers in Pherozezshah Mehta Road in the predominantly European and wealthy area of Fort was joined by bus drivers in uniform. In the nearby Great India Peninsular (GIP) Railway offices, for the first time in history, 3,000 clerks went on strike, starting with the Chief Accountant's Office. Workers of the GIP and Baroda Bombay and Central India Railway workshops too went on strike. With the 'spilling over' of rebellion from the docks to the streets of Bombay, thus, the anti-colonial movement took on a mass character in which labour played a central role.

The demonstrations led to clashes with the colonial police and troops. During demonstrations in different parts of the city, offices symbolising state authority were attacked. Police *chowkies* and post offices were burnt down. Government cloth shops were looted in Kamatipura and Kala Chowki, predominantly populated by mill workers from the Satara district of Maharashtra, which had seen one of the strongest Quit India movements in the country, with the setting up of long-running *prati sarkar* parallel governments.<sup>140</sup> Grain shops – both government and Marwari – were looted and 'contents freely distributed to the public'.<sup>141</sup> The government responded with military patrols, which carried Bren guns and machine guns on their armoured trucks. The *Free Press Journal* reported,

A demonstration of students and workers passed from Victoria Terminus through Kalbadevi Road, to Girgaum Road near Chowpatty bringing traffic to

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid, 304.

<sup>140</sup> Gail Omvedt, 'The Satara Prati Sarkar', in G. Pandey (ed.), *The Indian Nation in 1942*, (Calcutta, 1989).

<sup>141</sup> 'Demonstrators machine gunned'. *FPJ*, 22 February, 1946.

a standstill. Police opened fire on the demonstration at Ramwadi and again at Dhobi Talao. [There are] military patrols in most of the main streets of the city.<sup>142</sup>

Everywhere, the demonstrators clashed with military police in armoured cars. The Governor of Bombay, John Colville, called in four military columns to ‘help’ the police. ‘Without military present on a large scale’, Colville later reported, ‘many police parties would have been overpowered... ring leaders have been shot as they appeared.’<sup>143</sup> The army was given orders to ‘spare no bullets’.<sup>144</sup> The heaviest police firing in Bombay took place at Kala Chowki police station: 113 rounds of rifle fire and 25 rounds of revolver shots were fired at the crowds attempting to burn down Lalbaug police *chowki*. By nightfall, the city resembled a battlefield:

Muslim localities which used to be comparatively quiet during previous disturbances have this time become the storm centres of popular demonstrations. Mohammed Ali Road and Ibrahim Rahimtoola Road are at [this] moment in the hands of military (sic) and only stray pedestrians are seen slinking from one side of the street to the other, jumping over barricades, smouldering lorries and road blocks. Tram tracks in Crawford Market... and other areas have been completely obstructed by empty drums, blocks of stones and steel barricades.<sup>145</sup>

On 22 February, more than 250 civilians were killed and more than a thousand injured. The dead and injured were taken to King Edward Memorial Hospital in Parel, the mill district.<sup>146</sup> Called by the RIN mutineers, and not by the nationalist leadership, to join their fight for decolonisation, the movement in Bombay became a war between the population and the colonial military apparatus.

## **The anti-colonialism of the nationalist leadership**

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<sup>142</sup> ‘Demonstrators machine gunned’. *FPJ*, 22 February, 1946.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>146</sup> ‘In the name of our dead.’ *People’s Age*, 24 January 1946.

While the mutineers had a vision of decolonisation that accommodated an active role for themselves and for the working class, that of the nationalists did not allow for a movement by the labourers independent of control from above. I have argued in the previous chapter that the nationalist leaders were wary of the perils of mobilising labour and feared ‘class struggles and the war of special interests’.<sup>147</sup> The independent initiative of the ‘masses’, even towards anti-colonial aims, was to be avoided and firmly subordinated to the control of the leadership. After the non-cooperation movement and the Chauri Chaura incident, Gandhi’s conception of the relation of the ‘leadership’ to the masses in the anti-colonial movement was that of a ‘mob’ which had to be strictly disciplined by Congress volunteers to prevent a descent into ‘mobocracy’. As Shahid Amin has argued, Gandhi’s ‘mobocracy...required Gandhian volunteers to purge it of its originary, subaltern impurities. [Congress] Volunteers, almost by definition, had to stand apart from demonstrators: they were to discipline nationalist exuberance by acting as [what Gandhi called] the ‘people’s policemen’.<sup>148</sup> Under no circumstance was the ‘mob’ to act independently on political issues, and if they appropriated the nationalists’ message and acted independently on it without being so called upon, the Congress divested their acts of political meaning and recast them in terms of criminality. Thus, Gandhi termed the demonstrators at Chauri Chaura the ‘hooligans of India’ and tea plantation strikers shouting ‘*Mahatma Gandhi ki Jai!*’, ‘unruly and disturbing elements.’<sup>149</sup> This stance during Chauri Chaura in 1922 became further entrenched within the Congress Working Committee in the subsequent two decades, including their stints in the provincial ministries after 1936.

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<sup>147</sup> Rajen Sen, *Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das: Brief Survey of Life and Work. Provincial Congress Speeches and Congress Speeches* (Calcutta: B.K. Sen, 1927).

<sup>148</sup> Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura 1922-1992*, 14.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid*, 48.

The same attitude towards political mobilisations ‘from below’ prevailed during the days of the RIN mutiny. The Congress disavowed the actions of the ratings and abjured them for having been taken without consulting the leaders, for their political aims and for their use of violence. The ratings first approached Aruna Asaf Ali because of her militant image as part of the Quit India movement. Yet, the initiative for Quit India had come from Gandhi himself and was thus considered ‘legitimate’. Faced with an independent grassroots movement she too followed Gandhi’s conception of the separate role of ‘leaders’ and ‘masses’ when it came to politics. She told them that they

were wrong in mixing up ‘political demands with our service grievances’. So she asked [them] to ‘separate the two and formulate your service demands’ to the Naval authorities. ‘But we are the authority’ she was told by the ratings. She... directed them to ‘see the highest Congress authority in Bombay, Vallabhbhai Patel.’<sup>150</sup>

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel was delegated by the Congress with the task of ‘dealing’ with the crisis that had enveloped the city. When representatives from the naval strike committee approached Patel on 21 February, his immediate response was to denounce their actions as ‘ill-advised’.<sup>151</sup> In no uncertain terms, he asked them to surrender unconditionally.<sup>152</sup> Despite its explicitly anti-colonial aims, he also condemned the strike in Bombay as ‘anarchy and goondaism.’<sup>153</sup> From the very outset the Congress treated the RIN strike and the Bombay *hartal* not as an anti-British agitation but as a law and order problem. While the mutiny was spreading to Bombay, Karachi, Madras and Calcutta, the Congress tried to bring it to an end. To counter the call from the CPI for a *hartal* in support of the mutiny, S.K. Patil, President of the Bombay Provincial

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<sup>150</sup> Dutt, *Mutiny of the Innocents*, 156.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> ‘Secraphone message received by IB, Home Dept, GoI from the Chief Intelligence Officer, Bombay at 3:30pm on 21 February 1946’. NAI, File No. 5/1/46.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.



Congress Committee (BPCC), issued a proclamation on 22 February. Replete with colonial constructions of the 'violent mob' 'incited' by 'ringleaders', the statement pronounced that '*hartals*... afford an excellent opportunity to hooligans and irresponsible elements to intimidate people and lead them to violence. It is easy to infuriate big crowds of people, especially when they have nothing to do.'<sup>154</sup> The Congress proclamation appealed to 'the people of Bombay to... give up the idea of observing any *hartal* today.'<sup>155</sup> To this end, they set up 'Peace Brigades' to 'move in the localities' and 'use their good influence in keeping the atmosphere normal'.<sup>156</sup> After Godfrey had threatened to physically obliterate the RIN with 'overwhelming force', Patel declared that

The primary and immediate duty of every responsible man is to see that... the city is not plunged into trouble and its peaceful atmosphere is not disturbed. Every effort should be made to prevent panic and to control the unruly elements... There should be no attempt to call for a *hartal* or stoppage of mills or closing of schools and colleges. Such a thing is not likely to help the unfortunate naval ratings in their efforts to get redress of their legitimate grievances or in the great difficulty in which they find themselves.<sup>157</sup>

The pro-British liberal like M.R. Jayakar, who had differed with Congress on their tactic of mass civil disobedience and believed in gradual parliamentary reform, was pleasantly surprised at the change that had overcome Congress. In a letter to fellow liberal Tej Bahadur Sapru he admitted,

When I read their present admonitions, I feel often surprised at the wonderful change which has come over these big Congressmen. No *hartals*, no meetings no processions, no closing of schools, no defiance, etc., a complete recantation of their previous teachings. Even the Mahatma now says that it is foolish to distrust the intentions of the British.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> 'Non-violence commended to RIN men facing fire!' *FPJ*, 22 February 1946.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> 'Non-violence commended to RIN men facing fire!' *FPJ*, 22 February 1946.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> 'Letter from M.R. Jayakar to T.B. Sapru', M.R. Jayakar Papers, 1946, NAI. File No. 807.

The Congress' seemingly paradoxical hostility to a mass anti-colonial movement on the eve of decolonisation is explained by their statist vision of a post-colonial future which contrasted with that of the lascars and ratings. After the Cabinet Mission had been announced by Clement Attlee on the second day of the mutiny, the nationalists prepared for a transfer of power from the colonial state to themselves. As Y.K.

Menon, a Congressman who had participated in the 1928 Bardoli *satyagraha* put it years later:

The Indian national leaders were disinclined at that time to encourage any kind of revolutionary activities because they had been persuaded that there would soon be another British Cabinet Mission coming over to discuss the transfer of power into Indian hands. In fact, it is well known that by then the leaders were assigning to themselves portfolios in the free Government of India.<sup>159</sup>

In this transfer, the military was to be an intrinsic arm of the inherited post-colonial state and as such, it had to remain disciplined. Patel deposed before the Commission of Inquiry into the mutiny that 'he was of the view that the ratings ought not to have taken up arms and he condemned their act of indiscipline in staging a mutiny.'<sup>160</sup> As he later said, 'discipline in the army cannot be tampered with... We will want an army even in free India.'<sup>161</sup> In the course of the Cabinet Mission negotiations, Congress leaders appealed to workers to stay away from politics, which was to be the sole prerogative of the nationalist leadership. Gandhi declared,

One hears of strikes all over the country to paralyse the government. This paralysis is an extreme political step, open only to a body like the Congress, not even to unions, however powerful they may be .... At the present moment, the Congress is engaged in making a success of the proposed Constituent Assembly. There are interminable difficulties in the way. Paralysis strikes must seriously hamper Congress action .... Therefore my frank suggestion to all strikers is to make a frank declaration of submission to arbitration or adjudication, to seek the guidance of the Congress and abide by its advice and for all sympathetic strikes to stop whilst the Congress is engaged in making

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<sup>159</sup> Y.K. Menon, Cambridge South Asian Studies Oral History Archive.

<sup>160</sup> Commission of Enquiry Report, NAI.

<sup>161</sup> Durga Das, ed., *Sardar Patel's Correspondence*, Vol IV (Ahmedabad, 1973), 162-165.

the contemplated Constituent Assembly a success and while Provincial National Governments are functioning<sup>162</sup>

Thus in Gandhi's view, labour was to play no role in the process of decolonisation, just as he had declared against political strikes in 1921. This conception of the role of labour was contrary to the vision of the seamen in February 1946.

The nationalists' vision of a decolonised future also contradicted that of the lascars in terms of the place of religion. In light of the later jostling before the Cabinet Mission between Congress and the Muslim League in the leadup to Partition, their unity at the time of the mutiny in February 1946 is remarkable. The ground for this unity was their opposition to the popular movement. Secret government reports of those days marvelled that the 'Congress and League continue to cooperate'.<sup>163</sup> Jinnah offered his 'services' to the ratings as mediator but only 'if they adopt constitutional, lawful and peaceful methods'.<sup>164</sup> This was a mere six months before he called for Direct Action Day, which was anything but peaceful. In the midst of a strike that was being lauded for its communal unity, Gandhi and Jinnah appealed to the strikers in explicitly religious terms to surrender.<sup>165</sup> Jinnah called 'particularly on the Muslims' in the Navy to give up the strike, while Gandhi denounced as 'unholy' 'the combination of Hindus and Muslims for the purpose of violence'.<sup>166</sup> B.C. Dutt questioned this non-violence, saying, 'How could combatants, which we were, remain pacific (sic) after taking over a complete arm of the British fighting forces in the

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<sup>162</sup> A.M. Zaidi, *INC: The Glorious Tradition, Vol 4 1939-1950. Texts of the Resolutions Passed by the INC, the AICC and the CWC* (New Delhi, 1988), 254.

<sup>163</sup> 'Secraphone message received by IB, Home Dept, GoI from the Chief Intelligence Officer, Bombay at 3:30pm on 21 February 1946' NAI. Home (Pol). File No. 5/1/46.

<sup>164</sup> 'My services at disposal of RIN'. *FPJ*, 22 Feb 1946.

<sup>165</sup> Sumit Sarkar (ed.), *Towards Freedom, 1946* (New Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research, Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

country? Either we moved on to the next logical stage or we got crushed by the combined might of the Empire.’<sup>167</sup>

The combination of the Congress and Muslim League against the mutiny and their refusal to take leadership of a movement that had begun against their advice led to a closing off of the contending future posed by the mutiny. On 22 February 1946, Patel had ‘a whole day’s talk’ with the president of the naval strike committee M.S. Khan, prevailing on him to surrender, with the promise that there would be no victimisation. Heated arguments raged through the night in the RIN. The strike committee sat from 2 am to 5.30 am. At the beginning, ‘the vast majority, 29 out of 36, were against surrender’.<sup>168</sup> Representatives of the 20 ships not represented on the Committee stated that under ‘no circumstances could they agree to unconditional surrender’.<sup>169</sup> There seems to have been some ambiguity about whether ‘surrender’ implied a ceasefire, a surrender of weapons or a complete surrender to British authority. Many representatives felt that Patel’s advice was not enough, Jinnah’s position too must be sought. His message came in at 5 am, backing Patel’s position to surrender and assuring no victimisation. ‘This swung the Committee,’ one rating remembers, ‘now 30 were for accepting the Sardar’s advice, 6 against... It was decided to call off the strike.’<sup>170</sup> By 9:45 the next morning, the *Talwar* was flying black flags of surrender instead of white as a last mark of protest.<sup>171</sup> Upon surrender, they made a last proclamation to the people of the subcontinent:

Our strike has been an historic event in the life of our nation. For the first time the blood of men in the Services and in the streets flowed together in a

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<sup>167</sup> Dutt, *Mutiny of the Innocents*, 156.

<sup>168</sup> *Inspiring Story of the Historic RIN Mutiny, by a Victimised RIN Striker*, 13.

<sup>169</sup> ‘No decision yet’. *FPJ*, 24 February.

<sup>170</sup> *Inspiring Story of the Historic RIN Mutiny, by a Victimised RIN Striker*, 13.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*

common cause. We in the services will never forget this. We know that you, our brothers and sisters, will not forget.<sup>172</sup>

In light of the future historical amnesia that descended upon this episode, these last public words on remembrance have a haunting ring. The same day, the ratings were disarmed and military guard installed at the barracks. Within days, four hundred ratings had been imprisoned in a distant camp in Bombay's Mulund area that had until recently been used to intern prisoners of war. While they continued to hunger strike in the camp, the streets of Bombay were filled with growing numbers of protesters. The following day, 100,000 students and workers marched in Calcutta. But faced with the intransigent opposition of the Congress and the Muslim League and without any alternative, the demonstrations across the subcontinent flared up and petered out within the next week.

The only other perspective for this subaltern contending future could potentially have come from the Communist Party which, unlike the Congress and League, supported the movement. Jayakar was observing that 'a curious change is taking place in Bombay' and saying he would 'not be surprised if the Communists will obtain a greater hold on the public mind owing to the apparent 'tame'ness' of Congress leadership at the present moment.' He added melancholically, 'Bombay was always a mad city, though the nature of its mad leadership and following varied from time to time. It always listens to the loudest demagogue.'<sup>173</sup> A 'prominent Muslim Leaguer' – possibly I.I.Chundrigar, President of the Bombay Provincial Muslim League – reportedly stated that 'the disturbances prove that the Congress and Muslim League no longer have any real control over the lower classes.'<sup>174</sup> Yet, for all their organisation of the movement in Bombay, the CPI's position at this time was to see

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<sup>172</sup> Subrata Banerjee, *The RIN Strike*, 75.

<sup>173</sup> 'Letter from M.R. Jayakar to T.B. Sapru'. NAI, MR Jayakar Papers, File No. 807.

<sup>174</sup> Sarkar (ed.), *Towards Freedom*, 1946.

the Congress and the Muslim League as the rightful inheritors of post-colonial power, and did not want to appear as a contender. Thus, in the editorials of their newspaper *People's Age*, the party general secretary Sajjad Zaheer called on the 'Congress and League, in whose hands the RIN ratings have left their case, [to] join hands.'<sup>175</sup> Thus, ultimately the CPI did not offer an alternative perspective to develop the movement. The horizon of possibilities that had opened up for the ratings began to close rapidly around them, while the Congress and Admiralty were regaining control of the situation.

With the surrender and arrest of the mutineers, the contending futures that had opened up in February 1946 were closed off. K.M. Munshi and I. I. Chundrigar, Presidents of the Bombay Congress and League Committees respectively, joined the FOCRIN with their wives on board the RIN flagship *Narbada* to celebrate the closing of this episode.<sup>176</sup> The arrested ratings were tried *in camera* to avoid a publicity backlash like the one that had been generated by the INA trials. In exactly a month the Cabinet Mission arrived in India and Congress-Muslim League amity was soon forgotten. In the run up to Partition, the unity of Hindus and Muslims in February that many remarked on was soon drowned out by the communal violence.

## Conclusion

The wartime contestations of authority by RIN ratings showed how earlier forms of resistance carried over into the RIN with the lascars, who comprised a quarter of the RIN's force. These contestations intensified and underwent qualitative changes against the background of the Quit India movement which coincided with a 600% increase in the intake of ratings into the RIN. Given this background, the scale and

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<sup>175</sup> *People's Age*, 3 March 1946.

<sup>176</sup> Das, *Revisiting Talwar: A Study in the Royal Indian Navy Uprising of February 1946*.

simultaneity of the RIN strike in 1946 no longer appears the work of 'ring leaders', nor the formation of a strike committee a mere accident of history. On the contrary, the mutiny can be understood in light of a long history of contestations, altered by the intake of working-class and educated middle-class recruits into the navy, as well as by the growing anti-colonial movement in India.

This chapter argues that seamen's radicalism and ideas of anti-colonialism were shaped by their mobility, encompassing large swathes of the colonial world in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean. For one, this was ingrained through anti-colonial propaganda which they encountered in British ports, such as that of the Indian Workers' Union, which emphasised the scale of British colonialism and the role of colonial subalterns in its' overthrow. Secondly, through their international mobility on board ships, seamen encountered the growing anti-colonial movements in different parts of the colonial world, from Asia to Africa, the Middle East and the Caribbean. Moreover, colonial seamen provided active assistance to anti-colonial movements outside their home ports, evidenced by Indian lascars' support for the Indonesian anti-colonial movement by both lascars and ratings, as well as of the reciprocal involvement of Indonesian seamen in anti-colonial marches in Indian ports. Their imaginations of an anti-colonial struggle and a decolonised future were, thus, neither nationally-bounded nor statist. Thirdly, their mobility also brought them into personal contact with the INA fighters in Burma and Southeast Asia, which led them to appropriate Subhas Chandra Bose's ideas of an armed uprising in a specifically subaltern register: while Bose had intended this as a disciplined army operation under the leadership of a government-in-waiting, the ratings interpreted it as a call to arms in a less statist, and more Ghadarite sense of a mutiny of subalterns.

The mutiny in February 1946 drew on all these elements to pose a particular vision of a decolonised future. While it is more difficult to read larger political ideas into interwar contestations, the mutineers in 1946 clearly stated their political demands. For one, their expression of support for the Indonesian anti-colonial movement is testimony to the fact that their imagination of a decolonised world was not limited to India. In their public appeal for support which galvanised the populations of Bombay, Calcutta and Karachi into a mass movement was the belief in the active involvement of subalterns in the political course of decolonisation. The events also showed that although in some instances ratings engaged in violence against the colonial state, there were no reports of religious violence during these events. On the contrary, the events were noted for their explicit gestures of communal unity in their slogans, banners and choice of strike leaders.

The mass movement sparked by the mutiny opened a path to decolonisation that clashed with the one chosen by the nationalist leadership. The vision of the nationalists did not accommodate the intervention of subalterns on political issues. Moreover, their view of the anti-colonial movement was geographically narrower than that of the seamen. While nationalists had earlier engaged in more internationalist projects such as the League Against Imperialism in the interwar period, this non-state variety of internationalism, as Raza et al have argued, was supplanted by a statist one at the outbreak of the war in 1939.<sup>177</sup> The aim of their anti-colonialism, thus, was the inheritance of state power from the colonial power. In this, the Congress and Muslim League were prepared to mobilise religious violence to bolster their competing claims to state power. While abjuring subaltern violence, thus, their anti-colonialism allowed for communal violence. In order to realise this vision,

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<sup>177</sup> Ali Raza, Fraziska Roy and Benjamin Zachariah, *The Internationalist Moment: South Asia, Worlds, and World Views 1917-39* (New Delhi: Sage, 2015).



however, both parties had to first foreclose the path embarked upon by the mutineers and the demonstrators in Bombay, Calcutta and Karachi.

The RIN mutiny thus demonstrates that within what is conventionally called the 'nationalist movement' were in fact two contending visions of decolonisation and a post-colonial future. One was a subaltern anti-colonialism which was neither statist nor regionally bounded and the other, a nationalist anti-colonialism, which was geographically circumscribed by the borders of British India, and aspired to state power.

## Conclusion

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The hopes and anticipations that had been raised by the RIN mutiny in February 1946 were dashed by the inter-religious riots that accompanied the partition of the subcontinent in August 1947. Possibly the most famous poem by Urdu poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz, *Subh-e-Azadi* (Freedom's Dawn), written after partition of the subcontinent was announced in June 1947, articulates the bitterness of this Pyrrhic victory:

This leprous daybreak, dawn night's fangs have mangled  
This is not that long-looked-for break of day,  
Not that clear dawn in quest of which those comrades  
Set out, believing that in heaven's wide void

Somewhere must be the stars' last halting-place,  
Somewhere the verge of night's slow-washing tide,  
Somewhere an anchorage for the ship of heartache.

....

But now, word goes, the birth of day from darkness  
Is finished, wandering feet stand at their goal;

Our leaders' ways are altering, festive looks  
Are all the fashion, discontent reproved; --  
And yet this physic still on unslaked eye  
Or heart fevered by severance works no cure.  
Where did that fine breeze, that the wayside lamp  
Has not once felt, blow from -- where has it fled?  
Night's heaviness is unlesened still, the hour  
Of mind and spirit's ransom has not struck;  
Let us go on, our goal is not reached yet.<sup>1</sup>

Four decades later, in light of the deep communal divisions of India in the 1980s in the lead-up to the Babri Masjid demolition, the Marathi poet Narayan Surve wrote a

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<sup>1</sup> Victor G. Kiernan, *Poems by Faiz* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1971), 122–127.

poem about Usman Ali, a sailor who had participated in the mutiny and lived in Bhendi Bazaar working as a peon in the Municipality:

Having come back from the War  
I was on a ship in 46.  
We rebelled then;  
ready to lay our lives against the British  
we hoisted all the three flags  
fired the big guns;  
Everybody came  
except the leaders, that is.  
We did not really lose  
but it almost amounted to losing.<sup>2</sup>

The poem then shifts chronological frames to the post-colonial present of the 1980s, when Usman Ali lost his whole family to religious violence, most likely in the series of riots that spread to different cities in Maharashtra in the early 1980s as a result of various militant Hindu groups aligned with the Shiv Sena.<sup>3</sup>

The difference between the visions of lascars and nationalists on anti-colonialism were most starkly illuminated in the context of the 1946 RIN Mutiny. The mutiny was a denouement that brought out the contradictions of nationalism to labour, in this case, lascar labour. The final chapter of this thesis examined the anatomy of this event in which the nationalists opposed a popular anti-colonial movement. Their mobility was central to the anti-colonial ideas of the naval ratings, both through the ideas of the lascars who made up a quarter of the Navy, but also through ongoing contact with growing anti-colonial movements in different colonies. I suggest, however, that the new recruits, most of whom were around the age of

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<sup>2</sup> Narayan Surve, 'Usman Ali' in Sujata Patel and Alice Thorner, *Bombay: Mosaic of Modern Culture* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1995), 151–53.

<sup>3</sup> It is not clear which riots the poem refers to. The poem was published in 1990, and there were a series of religious riots across Maharashtra in the early 1980s: in 1982 in Pune and Sholapur, in 1983 in the power loom and textile centre of Malegaon and in 1984 in Bhiwandi. The last of these were the deadliest, and, Hansen notes, 'intimately tied to Shiv Sena's pursuit...of an intense anti-Muslim rhetoric and... strategy.' Thomas Blom Hansen, *Wages of Violence: Naming and Identity in Postcolonial Bombay* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 75–76.

twenty at the time of the mutiny and had been recruited during the Quit India movement in 1942-44, were also influenced by a section of nationalists represented by Subash Chandra Bose and Aruna Asaf Ali who symbolised the idea of decolonisation by armed or 'radical' measures. The younger ratings appropriated the message of these nationalists in their own way, infusing their 'message' with their own imaginations. In this hybrid vision, the anti-colonial movement in India was placed alongside other colonies in a common fight for a decolonised world. Moreover, in their vision, subalterns were central to the process of decolonisation; as Dutt put it: 'we could be the sword arm of the movement...to oust the British'.<sup>4</sup>

This maritime subaltern appropriation of an anti-colonial message soon became territorialised, galvanising a mass movement of growing proportions that arguably had the potential to force Britain to withdraw on terms unfavourable to itself. Yet, the nationalists, who are conventionally accorded the central roles in histories of the anti-colonial movement, opposed what was an avowedly anti-colonial movement. In an amplified reverberation of the Chauri Chaura incident from twenty-four years previously, the nationalist leadership abjured the movement as a law and order problem. Thus, the mutiny brings the seamen's and nationalists' opposing anti-colonialisms into sharp relief: firstly, the seamen conceived of the movement as reaching across the colonial world, theirs was not an imagination restricted to that of a nation-state. The nationalists' project, on the other hand, was demarcated by the borders of British India and shaped by the imminent 'transfer of power' through which they would become the inheritors of a nation-state, thus reaching the end of the road that was opened by the Montague Chelmsford reforms in 1919. Secondly, where seamen imagined an active role for labour in the process of decolonisation, the

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<sup>4</sup>Dutt, *Mutiny of the Innocents*, 127-8.

Congress and Muslim League abjured their participation, appealed to the sailors to surrender and the task of the 'transfer of power' to be left to their own negotiations. Thirdly, these negotiations, begun after the defeat of the mutiny, posed even more poignant contrasts with the days of the mutiny. While the seamen had laid an overt, almost insistent emphasis on religious unity, the negotiations were marked by violence between Hindus and Muslims, particularly after Direct Action Day in August 1946. Where the Congress and Muslim League had abjured the mutineers' use of violence against the colonial state as 'hooliganism' and 'anarchy' in February 1946, their competing claims to state power plunged the entire subcontinent into one of the bloodiest episodes in twentieth-century history.

Given the clash of visions of the anti-colonial movement and its future, lascars' worlds cannot be understood within the conceptual framework of nationalism. Their mobility encompassed international shipping routes, their worldviews were shaped by experiences of 'distant lands and strange people' on docksides strung along these routes. Their contact with working class men and women from different parts of the world brought a realisation that class and gender undercut colonial notions of unequal races. Their lives on British ships also made them eye-witnesses to political developments of the early twentieth century. Employed to be unthinking cogs in the machinery of world trade and war, they nonetheless formed their own opinions of events of war, revolutions, fascism and anti-colonial movements which were unfolding in ports at which they called, often as part of partisan forces, carrying ammunition to militarily bolster one side against another. Their presence raised ethical questions for them about the justice of their participation, for instance in the war against the Ottoman empire or in the military repression of the Indonesian movement against Dutch colonialism. Despite their location within a racially

segmented labour force, the degree of interaction with seamen of other ethnicities was not insignificant. To be sure, this did not imply any spontaneous solidarity, but neither can one assume an unchanging hostility, as we can see from the close friendships that Amir Haider Khan formed with his Irish-American shipmate Joe, or the American syndicalist Frankie. Thus, just as much as a segmented and stratified international labour market created grounds for hostility, it also created the basis for interaction and a political cross-pollination and solidarity in what can be seen as a cosmopolitanism from below.

Lascars' circulation along international shipping routes intertwined with the circulation of contemporary political ideas. The inter-war period, which saw a communist-inspired labour internationalism in the 1920s and a pan-colonial internationalism in the 1930s, formed part of this political consciousness. Émigré political activists of these international tendencies also became involved with their resistance, as did 'Paddy' and Ibrahim in the 1920s and Surat Alley and V.S.S. Sastry in the 1930s. The political vision posited by these varieties of internationalism placed subaltern action at the centre of transformative political movements. In addition, pan-colonial internationalism of the 1930s inflected this vision with a revived Ghadarite politics that espoused the use of individual and collective violence against the colonial state. The Indian Workers' Union, which was primarily made up of expatriate soldiers and sailors, also criticised the nationalist leadership for their complicity with the colonial state in the attempt to generate religious divisions. The scale of these internationalist projects was comprehensible to lascars because of the scale of their own mobility and their 'wide angle' worldviews. These internationalist ideas framed the project of decolonisation at the scale of the whole of the colonial world, from South Asia to Southeast Asia, the Middle East and North Africa and the Caribbean.

The ideas of internationalists and their attitudes to lascar resistance is in marked contrast to those of the nationalist leaders in India who sought to represent lascars. The period after the First World War saw Indian nationalists engaging with lascars as a political constituency, facilitated by the setting up of the ILO and the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms which opened up opportunities for representing labour in state institutions. Gaining leadership positions in seamen's unions and in this 'capture' of labour were not without conflict. As is evident from the writings and speeches of several nationalist leaders, the relation of labour to the anti-colonial movement was strictly as a mass base; the independent action of labour was seen as a dangerous and potentially fissiparous force in the process of transition from empire to nation-state. Nationalists tried to mobilise lascars behind competing claims of nation, region and particularly religion, given that the majority of lascars were Muslim. Muslim nationalists, however, were not particularly successful in gaining control of lascars as an electoral constituency.

The antecedents of seamen's anticolonial stance that stood in distinction from that of the nationalists on the cusp of Indian independence, lay in resistance played out in small, everyday contestations of authority even outside moments of spectacular public confrontations with the state. In bringing together small and large contestations within the frame of a single study, I have attempted to show that not only were these part of a continuum, but that the small resistances were constitutive of the large. I argue that a constant, hidden transcript of everyday contestations created a cumulative, collective experience among a generation of lascars who were practised in the arts of resistance. At certain moments, these separate resistances snowballed into a single, large moment of confrontation with the employers and state, as it did in 1918-1920, 1938-39 and on a larger scale, in 1946. The question of the role of

political ideas in these contestations is a difficult one to pin down except in 1946, when the sailors explicitly stated their political aims. What can be deduced from the record regarding the other three large moments? 1918 and 1946 both coincided with mass political unrest in India and many other parts of the world; they were moments when the existing world order no longer appeared indestructible. Indeed, lascars' contestations in these moments underwent qualitative changes: they no longer simply contested poor working conditions, but questioned the very right of an officer to exercise authority. This bears out Anderson, Rediker, Frykham and van Voss' description of 'maritime radicalism' in the age of circum-Atlantic revolutions, as well as Anderson's observation that territorial rebellions often translated into maritime revolts in the Indian Ocean. The other such moment of strikes and confrontation in 1938-1939, presents a slightly different picture. It coincided not with an anti-colonial movement, but with a strike movement in the main industrial centres including the port cities in which lascars were engaged. Thus, moments of large-scale maritime contestation were related to the larger political movements of the time.

Thus not only were seamen's lived worlds wider than the South Asian subcontinent but that their views of the anti-colonial movement were inflected by their experiences and interactions along international shipping routes. This changes our understanding of subaltern politics as provincial or nationally-bounded and axiomatically nationalist. A study of the effects of mobility through first-person accounts also reveals that the scale of their mobility, even within the officially-exercised constraints, was considerably greater than the existing literature emphasising structural constraints suggests. A focus on these lived realities of mobility allows us to bring the extent of interaction into focus. Conversely, the introduction of subalterns to international exchanges of ideas can alter the picture of



cosmopolitanism. Scholarship on cosmopolitanism tends to focus largely on literate elites, while the quantitatively greater movements of subaltern soldiers, sailors and plantation labourers are relegated to part of the backdrop. By foregrounding these subalterns, this thesis hopes to open up questions of the qualitative impact of mobility, interaction and exchange on South Asian political and social processes and on its transformative impact on subalterns themselves.

This study has been ambitious geographical scope, having attempted a history of seamen's lives straddling multiple ports. It has not been able to fully answer all the questions it raises. Using archives relating to British and Indian ports has meant that the picture remains, of necessity, only partially complete, focussing on Bombay, Calcutta and London. Where possible, I have drawn attention to activities in other ports like Hamburg, or experiences in ports across these routes through oral histories or documents pertaining to passport controls. I have also tried to round out the picture by using other secondary literature, for instance on Australian and North American ports. Nonetheless, if this thesis could become an outline for a future project which involved further primary research into more port archives, it might be able to bring out the real breadth and depth of subaltern movement, interaction and exchange in the twentieth century.

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