

Colonial Labour in Perspective:

Towards a Global History of the Maritime Labour Market

The making of an international mercantile workforce was tied to the colonisation of Asia and Africa. The Portuguese entered the Indian Ocean in the fifteenth century, followed by the Dutch, English and French in the sixteenth century.¹ Setting up trading missions at entrepôts, 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.² 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.³ 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.⁴ Over the next three centuries, colonial labour was to make up an increasing proportion of the British and Dutch maritime workforce, contributing to their emergence – and continuation – as maritime powers.

Until the early nineteenth century, most lascars were employed on so-called ‘country’ ships, privately owned by Asian and European merchants and engaged in coastal and intra-Asian trade.⁵ 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.⁶ In the 1770s, for instance, 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.⁷ 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

¹ 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; Kenneth McPherson, *The Indian Ocean: A History of People and the Sea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Michael H. Fisher, *Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian Travellers and Settlers in Britain, 1600-1857* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004).

² Anne Bulley, *The Bombay Country Ships, 1790-1833* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000), 5–6.

³ Matthias 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.

⁴ 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.

⁵ Bulley, *The Bombay Country Ships, 1790-1833*; Fisher, *Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian Travellers and Settlers in Britain, 1600-1857*.

⁶ Bulley, *The Bombay Country Ships*.

⁷ *Ibid.*

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*.⁸ The Dutch East India Company had also begun to allow 'moors' to serve on voyages to the Netherlands after 1781.⁹ By the end of the Napoleonic Wars, 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.

The real increase in the internationalisation of seafaring routes and labour markets, however, came with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the concomitant development of steam-shipping, which drastically increased the pace and volume of trade and effectively 'fused' the Indian Ocean and Atlantic circuits of maritime circulation.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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. The continuation of Britain's predominance as a maritime power long after a decline in its economic and industrial might relative to newer powers like Germany, the USA and Japan, was linked overwhelmingly to its access to cheaper maritime labour markets in the littorals of Africa and South and Southeast Asia. Of these, Indian labourers made up the largest single section of the workforce.

It was these internationally itinerant lascars that my thesis focused on, exploring how their mobility informed their political worldviews. The constituent chapters of this thesis drew out the geographical scope of their mobility, their encounters with political events, activists and organisations, their resistance to authority at sea and ashore, their relation to political organisations in India, and finally, their role in the anti-colonial movement. The

⁸ Fisher, *Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian Travellers and Settlers in Britain, 1600-1857*.

⁹ van Rossum, 'A 'Moorish World'', 8.

¹⁰ Ahuja, "The Age of the 'Lascar': South Asian Seafarers in the Times of Imperial Shipping," 111. Conrad Dixon, 'Lascars: The Forgotten Seamen', in R. Ommer and G. Panting, eds., *The Working Men who Got Wet*, (St. Johns', Newfoundland, 1980).

¹¹ Heather Goodall, 'Port Politics: Indian Seamen, Australian Unions and Indonesian Independence, 1945-47,' *Labour History* 94 (2008): 46.

thesis argued that lascars' political worlds cannot be understood within the framework of a territorially bounded nationalism, as they were part of geographically stretched resistances spanning large swathes of the colonial world, from the Caribbean in the West to Indonesia in the East. Their imaginations of a decolonised future, consequently, were not delimited by the borders of British India but encompassed, at the very least, the littorals of Asia and Africa.

My doctoral research began as a project in South Asian labour history, but following the voyages of peripatetic seamen, began to take on more global dimensions. Important as lascars were to the international – though racially segmented – workforce, it made sense to see them as part of the global whole. It struck me that in fact, while excellent studies of seafarers of individual nations have been made, the maritime workforce provides an ideal case study for a global history of a labour force. It would allow for comparisons of wages and conditions across regions in what was arguably the first highly internationalised labour market. To look at the conditions of Indian lascars I had carried out archival work in India and Britain, looking at the records pertaining to shipping and political intelligence, as well as memoirs and oral histories. To expand the geographical scope of this enquiry, I wanted to look at the archives of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in Geneva. A generous grant from The History Project and the Institute for New Economic Thinking allowed me to undertake fieldwork in these archives which radically changed some of the ways in which I was thinking about my doctoral research questions.

The ILO archives contain a wealth of information about seafarers from different maritime nations. Founded in 1919 as part of the Versailles Treaty, the ILO was a tripartite body with representatives from governments, trade unions and employers of the constituent nations. India was the only colony to be represented, a fact that Ravi Ahuja notes was a move to strengthen British influence on the ILO.¹² The Office collected data from its member states by sending out the same questionnaire to all of them, thus allowing, in theory at least, for comparisons across regions. Moreover, in addition to the general conferences, the ILO also instituted separate Maritime Conferences to deal with questions relating to seamen, whose first conference in Genoa dealt with the international standardisation and codification of seamen's conditions, in particular regarding hours of labour at sea and in port. Perusing files relating to these Maritime Conferences between the functionaries of the ILO and the

¹² 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.

representatives of governments, employers and seamen was illuminating in a number of ways.

For one, the ILO archive provided a critical corrective to the near-exclusive focus on the British merchant marine, at least in Anglophone academia.¹³ This isolated focus, probably as true for scholarship in Dutch, French, German, Spanish, Portuguese and Japanese and compounded by a lack of conversation between these bodies of literature, has produced a fragmented picture of a global workforce and prevented an understanding of its totality. While my own work had looked at colonial seamen from the littoral of the Indian subcontinent employed on British ships, the ILO material expanded this scope to the rest of the colonial maritime workforce on board European ships. I should add the caveat here that I did not find much material on Japan, which was a member of the League of Nations and ILO from 1919 to 1940, and an important maritime power. Nonetheless, from this research, I was able to make a tentative beginning in drawing a picture, if somewhat simplified, of the global colonial maritime workforce. The majority of colonial seamen were lascars (from Punjab, Gujarat, the Konkan coast on the eastern side of the Indian subcontinent and Sylhet, Chittagong and Noakhali and the Arakan coast on the east), two-thirds of whom worked on British ships, the remainder working on Dutch, French, German and Japanese ships. The second largest contingent of colonial workers were Chinese seamen working on British lines operating from Hong Kong and Macau and Dutch and American transpacific lines.¹⁴ American ships also recruited Phillipino seamen.¹⁵ West African ‘Kru’ seamen worked in the engine rooms of British ships on the eastern trade routes, while Caribbean men from Trinidad, Barbados and Demerara worked in the engine rooms on the route to North and South America. Somalis, Egyptians and highland Yemenis worked in the engine rooms of British and French vessels.¹⁶ Dutch lines recruited colonial seamen of Javanese, Malay and Timorese origin in the east and Surinamese and Curaçaoan origin in their western possessions, while French lines recruited in West Africa and Indochina.¹⁷ The discussion on ‘coloured labour’ in the ILO archives, thus, led me to refocus the historical lens from lascars in the British merchant marine to a wider pool of colonial seamen working afloat the vessels of the major maritime powers, greatly enriching my understanding of the global composition

¹³ An exception to this is van Rossum, “A ‘Moorish World’ within the Company: The VOC, Maritime Logistics and Subaltern Networks of Asian Sailors.”

¹⁴ ‘Maritime Questions: Conditions of Labour of Coloured Seamen.’ 1928. International Labour Organisation archives, Geneva. MA 25/0.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

of this workforce and emphasising their importance to the business of twentieth century shipping.

Moreover, the actual discussions in the ILO documents regarding these colonial seafarers were themselves rather illuminating of the ways in which Western governments, employers, and seamen's unions viewed their growing numbers. In this, the British seamen's union, the National Sailors' and Firemen's Union, whose leaders was also President of the International Seafarers' Federation headquartered in Antwerp, set the terms of discussion in their combination of hostility to the employment of 'coloured seamen' on grounds that they (rather than the ship owners) were depressing wages, and a veneer of paternalistic concern over their inferior conditions of work, accommodation and nutrition on board ship. The hostility was often couched in terms of safety, with the implication that the language barrier between crews and officers would lead to an incomprehension of commands in emergencies at sea resulting in the sinking of ships. While there was little to demonstrate a higher incidence of sinking with colonial crew, this rhetoric was shared by English and Dutch seamen's unions. Apart from language and safety, the unions also campaigned against the presence of coloured seamen in European ports on the grounds of hygiene and disease, calling on civic authorities to inspect and quarantine the insanitary boarding houses in which transient seamen lived.¹⁸ As a newspaper cutting sent by the Indian Social Club to the ILO pointed out, however, 'out of Indian revenues contributions are annually made to held to maintain Institutions of seamen almost exclusively availed of by Europeans.'¹⁹

The quantitative material in the ILO archive also allows for some comparisons between wages and conditions in the international labour market. This material, however, has certain limitations. For one, the ILO did not seem to receive regular, comprehensive and straightforward replies to its questionnaires and requests for information, thus impeding the task of the historian in following trends in wages and conditions of different seamen.

Governments and employers, in particular, dragged their feet in procuring and providing this

¹⁸ Letter from De Centrale Bond van Transportarbeiders to the ILO titled 'The question of the occupation of people of colour in the Dutch fleet.' International Codification of Seamen's Articles of Agreement. Position of Lascars and Other Asiatic Seamen. 1924. International Labour Organisation archives, Geneva. MA/50/100.

¹⁹ Letter from G. Hill-Snook, Alston House Cardiff (Member of the Local Council) to Editor titled 'Coloured Seamen. Present Allowance "Really Generous"'. Sept 28, 1933. Western Mail and South West News. ILO. Outdoor Relief of Coloured Seamen (Differential scales between Indian and British seamen). Correspondence with the Indian Social Club. ILO, Geneva. MA 25/1.

Indian Social Club was an exclusive club in Essex Court, Temple, London, whose members were a mix of Indian royalty and top industrialists. Among others, were M.M. Bhowanaggee, the Maharaja of Burdwan, the Maharanee of Cooch Behar, Sir Ness Wadia, Mrs Ambalal Sarabhai, D.P. Khaitan, etc.

information, particularly since the economic context immediately following the setting up of the ILO was one of postwar contraction in which shipowners felt that any increase in wages, whether direct or through an increase in crew sizes, was too costly. For another, where the data is not presented in a single currency, presents a problem of comparison. For instance, wage statistics exist in pounds sterling for 1921 for British and French seamen, and 1932 for able seamen from the USA, Netherlands, Britain, Sweden, Denmark, Italy, Germany and France. Detailed statistics are available in gulden for Dutch colonial seamen of all grades for 1921 and 1924 and in rupees for Indian lascars for 1927. This picture needs further filling in from further archival research.

After returning to Britain, I have followed up the British side of these records at the National Archives, Kew. The LAB 13 series under the Ministry of Labour records contain 5,823 files, with extensive correspondence with the ILO and details of research and surveys carried out in response to ILO questionnaires regarding, for instance, hours of labour and seamen's welfare in ports and responses from British seamen's unions. The conjuncture of the Colonial Office with the Ministry of Labour also provides further avenues for research in this direction.

Finally, the experience of undertaking research at the ILO archives was made incredible easy by the ever-helpful and efficient archivist Jacques Rodriquez. The documents are not available in an online catalogue, but Jacques replied to my very first enquiry email with a whole list of pertinent files. Once there, he made sure that I could make the very most of my visit to the archive. Besides this, the old town of Geneva was fascinating, its relation to Calvin and the Reformation, and later to Rousseau. The Maison Tavel, a twelfth century house that has been converted into a museum was also extremely well-curated; it was here that I discovered a fascinating fact of economic history: that apart from Geneva's well-known history in watch-making, a large proportion of its wealth was built on imitation Indian chintz!