

## Working across the Seas: Indian Maritime Labourers in India, Britain, and in Between, 1600–1857\*

MICHAEL H. FISHER

### INDIAN SEAMEN IN THE EUROPEAN WOODEN WORLD

The advent and expansion of trans-oceanic shipping aboard wooden, wind-powered vessels between India and Europe created uniquely onerous working conditions for the Indian seamen who volunteered to labour aboard – conditions distinct from either coastal or land-based employment in either India or Europe. Indian (and European) seamen on such vessels may have been “free labour” prior to boarding ship, but they were in many respects “unfree labour” while at sea.<sup>1</sup> They were unable to change jobs, to vary the amount of labour extracted from them, to increase the compensation or necessities provided, or to quit – in short, to do much to improve their working conditions generally. They sailed for uncertainly long periods of time, confined to constricted, unhealthy spaces and limited diet, almost constantly facing the various dangers of the open sea under the virtually unavoidable, unrelenting, and unalterable hierarchic authority and often brutal physical discipline of European officers.

For most of this period, wars raged in both Europe and India, so these Indian seamen faced threats from hostile navies as well as piratical and meteorological violence. These seamen engaged in intense and necessarily highly coordinated labour with a relatively small but often mixed group of fellow workers of diverse origins; their solidarities were forged over the arduous voyage, often enduring beyond. Their employment terminated in alien ports, during Europe’s “Little Ice Age”, with few resources and limited support networks available there except of their own making.

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1. For discussion of these concepts, see Tom Brass and Marcel van der Linden (eds), *Free and Unfree Labour: The Debate Continues* (New York, 1997). Intermediary labour recruiters were not unique to the Indian Ocean. In Europe, “crimps” specialized in recruiting seamen (including through coercion or deception); some seamen were slaves. See Amitav Ghosh, *In an Antique Land* (London, 1992), and *idem*, “The Slave of MS. H6”, *Subaltern Studies*, 7 (1993), pp. 159–220.

Once ashore, however, they (like seamen generally) were also notoriously free: difficult for port authorities to regulate, discipline, or re-recruit. For centuries, their traditional systems of recruitment and service largely resisted the European-based models of labour relations and regulation which their ship-owning employers sought to impose on them.

The tens of thousands of Indian seamen who served aboard these European, and particularly British, trans-continental ships to Europe during this long transition to “high colonialism” created novel employment patterns aboard and ashore there. Their insistence on recruitment and service under their own headmen and also the economics of their wage and production rates compelled European ship-owners to respond, and often unwillingly defer. Further, when these Indian seamen reached Europe, they interacted through asymmetrical power relationships with the native population and with a range of often conflicting authorities. While some Indian seamen settled there, most participated in transitory communities before returning to India. Many engaged in these maritime labour-gangs as long as they were physically able; others regretted having ventured to Europe even once; a frightfully high percentage did not survive the voyage out, life in Europe, or the passage home. Compiling statistical patterns and drawing upon individual examples, this article considers what it was like to work across the seas between India and Britain during the 250 years from the earliest voyages to the mid-nineteenth century, as much as possible from the perspectives of Indian seamen themselves.

Trade was the lifeblood of the expanding British world-system and Indian maritime labour made British commerce with India possible. Yet, the labour history of these men has only begun to emerge. Much scholarship has described patterns of trade in the Indian Ocean during the pre- and early colonial periods.<sup>2</sup> This article complements this work with consideration of labour relations there. The labour history of European, particularly British, seamen over this period also contrasts with that of Indian seamen.<sup>3</sup> Recent studies have examined Indian seamen working in Britain during later periods when the advent of intercontinental steamships, greater British colonial controls over labour in India

2. See Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System AD 1250–1350* (New York, 1989); K.N. Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750* (Cambridge, 1985); Ashin Das Gupta and M.N. Pearson (eds), *India and the Indian Ocean, 1500–1800* (Calcutta, 1987); Holden Furber, *Rival Empires of Trade in the Orient, 1600–1800* (Minneapolis, MN, 1976); Niels Steensgaard, *Carracks, Caravans and Companies: The Structural Crisis in the European–Asian Trade in the Early 17th Century* (Lund, 1973); Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *The Portuguese Empire in Asia, 1500–1700: A Political and Economic History* (London, 1993).

3. See Isaac Land, “Domesticating the Maritime” (Ph.D., University of Michigan, 1999) and “Customs of the Sea: Flogging, Empire and the ‘True British Seaman’, 1770–1870”, *Interventions*, 3 (2001), pp. 169–185; Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea* (Cambridge, 1987).

under “high colonialism”, social and economic transformations in colony and metropole, and two world wars profoundly altered the experiences of Indian seamen.<sup>4</sup> During the earlier period analysed here, both the economics of these men’s work and the contexts in which they functioned differed markedly from those of the later period. By examining the initial and unevenly changing interactions between indigenous patterns of labour relations and the fundamentally different European models with which they clashed and negotiated, even as power shifted over the centuries, we can begin to extend Indian labour history transnationally beyond India’s shores and chronologically back to a relatively early period.<sup>5</sup>

#### PRE-COLONIAL MODES OF MARITIME LABOUR IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

While there were many pre-colonial patterns of recruitment and service in the Indian Ocean, one that developed most extensively, with disparate advantages for all parties, was the *lascar* maritime labour-gang under a *serang*. A *serang* (a “headman” or labour contractor), recruited each seaman, often customarily termed a *lascar* (from *lashkar*, or *khalasi*, also collectively meaning “a group of armed men, an army”, and, more

4. See G. Balachandran, “Conflicts in International Maritime Labour Markets: British and Indian Seamen, Employers and the State, 1890–1939”, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 39 (2002), pp. 71–100; *idem*, “Circulation through Seafaring: Indian Seamen, 1890–1945”, in Claude Markovits, Jacques Pouchepadass, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (eds), *Society and Circulation: Mobile People and Itinerant Cultures in South Asia, 1750–1950* (New Delhi, 2003), pp. 89–130; N. Benjamin, “The British and Indian Sailors (c.1790–1885)”, in P.M. Joshi and M.A. Nayeem (eds), *Studies in the Foreign Relations of India from the Earliest Times to 1947* (Hyderabad, 1975), pp. 485–496; Frank Broeze, “Underdevelopment and Dependency: Maritime India during the Raj”, *Modern Asian Studies*, 18 (1984), pp. 429–457; Anne Dunlop, “Lascars and Labourers: Reactions to the Indian Presence in the West of Scotland during the 1920s and 1930s”, *Scottish Labour History Society Journal*, 25 (1990), pp. 40–57; Conrad Dixon, “Lascars: The Forgotten Seamen”, in Rosemary Ommer and Gerald Panting (eds), *Working Men Who Got Wet: Proceedings of the Fourth Conference of the Atlantic Canada Shipping Project, July 24–July 26, 1980* (Newfoundland, 1980), pp. 265–81; Shompa Lahiri, *Indians in Britain: Anglo-Indian Encounters, Race and Identity, 1880–1930* (London, 2000); R.G.W. Prescott, “Lascar Seamen on the Clyde”, in T.C. Smout (ed), *Scotland and the Sea* (Edinburgh, 1992), pp. 199–212; M. Sherwood, “Lascar Struggles Against Discrimination in Britain 1923–45: The Work of N.J. Upadhyaya and Surat Alley”, *Mariner’s Mirror*, 90 (2004), pp. 438–455; Laura Tabili, “Construction of Racial Difference in Twentieth-Century Britain: The Special Restriction (Coloured Alien Seamen) Order, 1925”, *Journal of British Studies*, 33 (1994), pp. 54–98 and *idem*, “We Ask for British Justice”: *Workers and Racial Difference in Late Imperial Britain* (Ithaca, NY, 1994).

5. See Norma Myers, “The Black Poor of London: Initiatives of Eastern Seamen in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries”, *Immigrants & Minorities*, 13 (1994), pp. 7–21; M. Sherwood, “Ticket of Leave and Lascar Seamen, Crews for the East India Company”, *History Today*, 40 (1990), pp. 6–8; Rozina Visram, *Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History* (London, 2002), and *idem*, *Ayabs, Lascars and Princes: Indians in Britain, 1700–1947* (London, 1984).

specifically, “the crew attached to an artillery piece”). Lascar referred to their condition of employment, so men of very diverse religious communities, regional, linguistic, and caste backgrounds often worked in a single maritime labour-gang. The members of a single gang also might have varying amounts of nautical experience and skills, as well as physical capacities. What they shared was a willingness to engage to serve on a vessel collectively under the immediate command of a serang, who was not the ship-owning employer. Despite their diversity, lascars on a voyage seem generally to have bonded with each other with shared experiences and marine argot and expertise as the glue.

Some serangs, termed *ghat* serangs (literally “dock or landing head man”, sometimes termed *seer* or “chief” serang), did not themselves go to sea. Men initially seeking work as lascars went first to a ghat serang, as did experienced but unemployed lascars. Wind-driven shipping depended on the monsoon; between seasons lascars depended for food, housing, and cash advances from ghat serangs, which they more than repaid from future wages. The ghat serang negotiated a corporate contract with each captain for a pre-assembled lascar crew for the voyage (or for loading or unloading a ship in port). Only with the coming of European shipping would these contracts regularly be written rather than verbal.

Other serangs also worked aboard the vessel as petty officers – intermediaries between the ship’s captain (sometimes owner-master) and the lascars of their gang. The serang might also serve as ship’s navigator (but European ships usually had their own European sailing masters, although the local knowledge of coasts, hazards, currents, and winds which many serangs possessed would be appreciated by any wise ship-master). The serang aboard ship was assisted by one or more subordinate petty officers: *tindals* (*tandail* or *tandel* “the head of a *tanda* or body of men”, “a gang boss”).<sup>6</sup> Ship serangs and tindals received higher wages from ship-owners and also customary fees from their lascars.

For ship-owners and/or captains, hiring a serang and his maritime labour-gang solved some problems inherent in the industry but also created other tensions. Given the monsoon patterns, wind-powered sailing vessels had to be prepared to leave by particular times or wait until the next annual cycle. A ship idle in port was unproductive. This meant that loading and unloading by longshoremen and assembling the sailing crew prior to departure could be highly time-bound, with all competing ships vying for the same pool of labour for the same short season. Further, captains arriving at an Indian port might not have extensive local connections that

6. See G. Balachandran, “Searching for the Sardar: The State, Pre-Capitalist Institutions, and Human Agency in the Maritime Labour Market, Calcutta, 1880–1935”, in Burton Stein and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (eds), *Institutions and Economic Change in South Asia* (Delhi, 1996), pp. 206–236.

would enable recruitment of such labourers on an individual basis. Rather, through customarily arrangements with ghat serangs who possessed effective recruitment networks for labour-gangs, these possible delays might be obviated. Further, communication with – and discipline of – the diverse seamen who composed these labour-gangs would be the ship serang's direct responsibility. This would prove particularly important for European officers, who were culturally and by social class quite different from lascars.

This mode of labour recruitment, however, also had drawbacks for ship captains and owners. They dealt with ghat serangs who controlled the labour supply and therefore wage-rates. The monsoon patterns also provided the ghat serang with leverage at times of peak demand when he could extract the most from desperate captains fearful of missing the sailing season. Serangs also represented to some extent the interests of the lascars collectively, which made them more difficult for officers to divide and subdue. Therefore, the class tensions in any workplace, and particularly in such a total environment as a ship at sea, took on different configurations when a ship was even partially manned by a serang and his lascar maritime labour-gang as opposed to individually recruited seamen. European ships, even when supported by an Indian-based factory run by their East India Company, nonetheless would perforce participate in this indigenous serang system in order to obtain lascars.

When such modes of labour recruitment and service, historically common in the Indian Ocean, interacted with conditions and contexts brought from Europe, even more complications eventuated. European seamen (and non-Indian Asian seamen) had different cultural identities, interests, and expectations from Indian seamen, even if they served on the same ship. European nations had particular laws and customary practices which sometimes conflicted with the serang system concerning fundamental presuppositions about labour relations. Further, capitalist joint-stock corporations – including the English East India Company upon which we will concentrate – functioned differently from other kinds of shipping that plied the Indian Ocean, including by using written contracts and regulations for seamen enforceable by colonial and metropolitan police and judicial courts. Thus, lascar labour-gangs under serangs and European-style shipping comprised two distinct systems that interacted in contested ways that shifted over the centuries.

## EUROPEAN SHIPS FIRST SAIL INTO THE INDIAN OCEAN

For increasing numbers of Indian maritime workers, the initial arrival of European ships in the Indian Ocean at the end of the fifteenth century, and then the secular increase in the number of such vessels over the following centuries, created novel opportunities but also significant

challenges. We need not rehearse here the larger political and economic changes in the Indian Ocean brought about first by the Portuguese and then by the northern European East India Companies. Rather, we can focus on the labour history of this transition, concentrating on lascars working for the most extensive of the companies, the English.

As the English East India Company entered the ongoing networks of trade in the Indian Ocean from the early seventeenth century onward, virtually all its ships faced the problem of replenishing their onboard labour supply. European seamen died in astounding numbers, in particular from both the harsh conditions aboard ship and tropical diseases on arrival. Many deserted, seeking riches and/or sensual pleasure as soldiers of fortune ashore. The Royal Navy (whose own ships also lost seamen in the Indian Ocean) also conscripted prime European seamen from merchant ships there, at rates occasionally up to one-third of the entire crew.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, almost every arriving ship sought Indian seamen to replace them and enable the ship to return to Europe.

Some East India Company ships, particularly in the early seventeenth century, signed on Indians as individual sailors who contracted personally with ship-owners, as was the practice in Europe. Thus, in 1614, we find three Indian seamen in London negotiating the terms of their employment on the voyage home.<sup>8</sup> Company ships would continue to hire seamen as individuals over the period considered here, but generally this was confined to Europeans or people of mixed ancestry.

Many Company ships perforce or by choice followed the more widespread Indian Ocean pattern of lascar maritime labour-gangs, hired under a serang as a block. While many captains resented their dependence on serangs, the Company soon recognized the right of designated ghat serangs as official labour contractors. For example, in 1699 the Company declared that, in Bengal, “Serang Doud [...] shall be our Serang to furnish our ships with Lascars”.<sup>9</sup> The position of ghat serang remained an inheritable proprietary right into the early nineteenth century. Contracts negotiated between the ghat serang and the captain for a passage to Britain often ran for six or more months. The ghat serang received a fee from the captain, prorated for the number and alleged skills of lascars, tindals, and serang whom he supplied. Customarily, half the contracted wages had to be paid in advance by captains, from which the ghat serang deducted debts and fees owed him by lascars before passing the rest on. Each ship’s log

7. Benjamin, “The British and Indian Sailors”, p. 487.

8. The Company’s Directors refused their request to take their three English wives back with them, considering it unfitting “for such women to go among so many unruly sailors” for such a long voyage; Great Britain, Public Record Office, W. Noel Sainsbury *et al.* (eds), *Calendar of State Papers, Colonial Series*, 27 vols, (London, 1860–1926), vol. 2, p. 275.

9. Declaration December 1699, Home Miscellaneous Series 36, fo. 450, British Library [hereinafter BL].

listed lascars by name (with their signature or mark) but in a section customarily separate from the rest of the crew and designated for the lascar labour-gang.<sup>10</sup> On arrival in Britain, the captain was obliged to give his ship's serang the remainder of the contracted wages due the lascars, which the serang then distributed, minus his own fees. The serang also conveyed wages due deceased lascars back to their relatives in India. Even ashore, serangs continued to exercise authority over the lascars in his crew, although there was no legal reason they had to accept it in Britain.

At first, lascars, serangs, and tindals generally had salaries quite comparable with other Indians and Britons of their class. Lascar salaries ranged considerably over time and specific conditions, but in the early seventeenth century were roughly 15 to 22 shillings monthly (equivalent in today's purchasing power of £85 to £125).<sup>11</sup> Indeed, Company officials in India complained from the beginning about what they regarded as excessively high pay. For example, in 1637–1638, an English official at Masulipatnam wrote of the need to hire “these country people at extraordinary great wages to sayle in our ships”, due to the shortage of European sailors.<sup>12</sup> Further, captains and Company officials perceived Indian seamen, despite their relatively higher cost, as generally less productive: physically weaker and morally less willing to fight an enemy than Britons.

Due to continued demand for lascars, their wages during the mid-eighteenth century were 23 to 30 shillings monthly (worth approximately £140 to £185 in today's purchasing power).<sup>13</sup> Indian petty officers had appropriately higher wages: 28 to 40 shillings monthly for serangs (in the mid-eighteenth century), slightly less for tindals; serangs and tindals additionally collected fees from their lascars. For comparison, Indian soldiers (*sepoys*) apparently received less than lascars, in the late eighteenth century only 6 to 9 rupees (roughly 12 to 18 shillings) monthly. Army petty officers (*naiks* and *havildars*) received 16 to 20 rupees (some 32 to 40 shillings) monthly.<sup>14</sup> Under the British, however, sepoys usually had

10. The East India Company's records, now in the BL, contain thousands of ship's log and account books.

11. John J. McCusker, “Comparing the Purchasing Power of Money in Great Britain from 1264 to Any Other Year Including the Present”, Economic History Services, 2001; URL: <http://www.eh.net/hmit/ppowerbp/>.

12. William Foster, *English Factories in India*, 13 vols (Oxford, 1906–1927), vol. 1634–1636, pp. 30, 45, 50.

13. Wages are cited in various currencies of fluctuating values. Thus, these are only estimates. See, for example, Court minutes, 14 April 1757 and L/MAR/B/series, *passim*, BL, and Foster, *English Factories*, (1634–1636), pp. 186–187, 280. See also Paul C. van Royen, Jaap Bruijn, and Jan Lucassen (eds), “Those Emblems of Hell”?: *European Sailors and the Maritime Labour Market, 1570–1870*, *Research in Maritime History*, 13 (1997); McCusker, “Comparing the Purchasing Power of Money in Great Britain”.

14. For example, Bengal Secret and Military Consultation, 25 August 1777; Infantry



continuous employment, while lascars worked only seasonally (and, as we will see, generally only on the passage to Britain, not once there or on the return voyage).

The wages paid British sailors on these same trans-oceanic ships rose from 8 to 9 shillings monthly in the early seventeenth century (roughly half that of lascars) to 30 to 45 shillings by the mid-eighteenth century (30 to 50 per cent more than lascars), depending on their experience and level of skill.<sup>15</sup> Thus, there was a marked shift in respective wage levels between lascars and British seamen (British wage increases would widen this disparity significantly by the mid-nineteenth century). In calculating relative costs to ship-owners of lascars versus British sailors, however, owners had to pay the additional expenses of maintenance in Britain and passage home of lascars but not Britons (see below).

Not surprisingly, labour relations between lascars and British officers frequently proved acrimonious. Life on board these relatively tiny and fragile vessels was hellish for all. During the Company's first twenty years, less than half its ships ever returned from Asia; between 1700 and 1818, 160 Company ships sank or were captured.<sup>16</sup> For Indian seamen, linguistic and other cultural differences between them and their British officers often exacerbated the inevitable labour confrontations. Under such conditions, the ship serang served like a shop-steward, representing the lascars against the captain. The time of disembarkation and final "paying off" in Britain, when the contradictory expectations of the crew and owners culminated, often proved a particular time of confrontation. Many serangs and their lascars turned to the East India Company's Court of Directors, British law courts, or other British authorities for redress of grievances inflicted by their British captains; for instance, such petitions have survived from serangs and lascars of fifteen ships between 1667 and 1757.<sup>17</sup> British authorities often supported lascars, given the egregious nature of some of the abuses against them, but also instituted laws highly detrimental to them.

#### NAVIGATION LAWS SNARE INDIAN SEAMEN IN BRITAIN

For two centuries, the labour market for Indian seamen in Britain was legally suppressed by Parliament. The British mercantilist Navigation Acts, particularly those passed from 1660 on, privileged those ships

Establishment and Bengal Military Consultation, 17 March 1779, National Archives of India, New Delhi.

15. K.N. Chaudhuri, *English East India Company: The Study of an Early Joint-Stock Company, 1600–1640* (London, 1965), p. 105.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

17. Court minutes, 19 November 1679 to 13 October 1742; Dispatches to Bengal, 11 November



defined in law as British.<sup>18</sup> Non-British ships were excluded entirely from certain kinds of trade with Britain and suffered higher tariffs on other designated commodities. For most of this period, the Acts defined as British only those ships with a crew at least three-quarters British – as well as being British-built, British-owned, and British-captained.

Through their constructions of ethnic categories, these Acts profoundly and particularly affected Asian seamen by defining them as “non-British”. In contrast, African and Caribbean seamen could be classed as “British”. The Royal Navy justified this as necessary to produce a pool of experienced and trustworthy merchant seamen ready for conscription – men the Navy considered worthy fighters. The Navy generally regarded Asian seamen as lacking sufficient physical and moral strength to plunge themselves into battle; in contrast, African-descended sailors reputedly embodied these qualities, as did British seamen, of course. In practice, the Navy impressed and hired substantial numbers of Indians, although this reflected its frequent desperation for manpower rather than its preference. Thus, for example, in 1749 at the end of the War of Austrian Succession, the Navy discharged and consigned to the Company for repatriation fifty-six Indian seamen who had survived its service.<sup>19</sup> Further, British seamen favoured these regulations against Indians – men they increasingly regarded as competitors as British notions of nationality and race developed over these centuries.

The Navigation Acts thus created an unintended surplus of unemployable Indian seamen in Britain. Ships arriving from Asia were excused from the requirement of three-quarters British crew since the government recognized the necessity of hiring Asian seamen there for the voyage home. Yet, on leaving Britain, these Acts precluded ships which wished to be classed as British from employing Asians above one-quarter of the crew.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the Company’s Directors periodically instructed its outgoing ships to have all-British crews, thereby minimizing future dependence on lascars but exacerbating the unemployment of lascars already in Britain.<sup>21</sup>

The Directors and other British authorities struggled henceforth with the consequent perennial problem of growing numbers of stranded and unwanted Indian seamen in their midst. While some owners made provision for the lascars their ships brought to Britain, others did not, simply discharging them into British society. Throughout the period covered in this article, newspaper reports repeatedly blamed the Directors

1757, E/4/616(I), 633, para. 62, BL.

18. The most crucial was Act 12, Car. 2, c. 18 (1660). Parliament periodically modified these acts until largely repealing them in 1849 and 1854.

19. Court minutes, 1–8 November 1749, 6 December 1749; BL.

20. In war, this was relaxed to require only one-quarter of the crew need be British; e.g. Act 13, Geo. 2, c. 3 (1740).

for the presence of so many Indian seamen “daily strowling about [Britain’s] Streets, and begging”.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the Directors intervened to repatriate lascars by shipping them home, on occasion having to bail them out of British jails first.<sup>23</sup> Generally, in accord with the Navigation Acts, they arranged for lascars to travel back to India free as passengers – but, out of deference to the Company’s profits, at the cheapest possible cost, regardless of the detrimental effects of short provisions and unhealthy living conditions this entailed.

Over time, the financial obligations of the Company toward these lascars proved considerable. At the end of the seventeenth century, for example, the Directors allotted 6 pence daily per man while in Britain, plus return passage of £4 to £6 for each lascar and £10 for each serang.<sup>24</sup> Since this was roughly equivalent to the wages already paid them for the voyage in, it doubled the cost of employing a lascar. The Company regularly charged these expenses to the owners of the ships which had brought those particular lascars to Britain, when they could be identified; otherwise, the Company itself had to pay.<sup>25</sup>

In 1689, the Directors tried an innovation to save this passage money. They ordered lascars to work on their voyage home, not for wages since the Navigation Acts largely forbade employment, but simply to cover their costs.<sup>26</sup> Serangs made this impossible by (quite reasonably) objecting to work without pay in violation of the terms of the agreement they had contracted before leaving India. In 1693, for example, Serang Pulsetty on behalf of his five lascars and Mahmood Hussan on behalf of his seven argued successfully against this non-contractual requirement, demanding either payment of wages or free passage as passengers.<sup>27</sup> This 1689 experiment died in the face of the objections by serangs. Nevertheless, in actuality, many captains evidently forced lascars to work – despite officially being passengers with their passages prepaid.<sup>28</sup>

Serangs in Britain also learned how to put political and moral pressure on the Directors. On at least four occasions early in the eighteenth century, serangs sent petitions not only to the Directors, but also to the British royal family.<sup>29</sup> Their faith in the authority of the Crown over the Directors

21. For example, Court Resolution, 8 November 1671; BL.

22. Court minutes, 24 November 1714, 23 December 1713, 17 October 1718; BL.

23. For example, Court minutes, 17 November 1749; BL.

24. The Company allotted £10 each for European privates on the same vessel; e.g. Court minutes, 28 September 1688, 17 February 1693, 23 June 1693; BL.

25. Court minutes, 18 November 1685, 9 November 1687, 21 December 1691, 15 March 1694, 4 April 1700; BL.

26. Court minutes, 24 March 1689; BL.

27. Court minutes, 1 February 1693, 29 March 1693; BL.

28. Act 55 Geo. 3, c. 116 (1814–1815). Parliamentary Papers, Returns (Commons), 1814–1815, vol. 3, paper 471, pp. 217–229.

29. Court minutes, 19 April 1706, 11 December 1706, 21 January 1713, 23 October 1713,

seems indeed to have helped draw attention to their cases, since in each instance officials in the royal establishment wrote the Directors demanding an explanation. On the other hand, so “clamorous” was Ghulam Mahmud, serang of the *St George* who petitioned Queen Anne in 1713, that, although he succeeded in his case in Britain, the Directors blacklisted him and his tindals, ordering Company’s officials in India never to employ them again.<sup>30</sup>

During the seventeenth century, the frequent lack of an explicit contract between the serang and the captain often led to strong differences between them over payment of wages and working conditions. After a particularly bitter disagreement between the serang and the captain of the *Montagu* in 1706, the Directors attempted decisively to solve this problem. To avoid in future inciting the “clamorous temper” of the serangs, the Directors ordered each of its port officials in India to require a written labour contract before a ship could leave. The captain and the lascars were all to appear in person and sign an “equitable” agreement, countersigned by the local Company’s agent, copies of which were kept by the serang, the captain, and local Company official, with yet another copy sent to Britain.<sup>31</sup>

In reality, few lascars seem to have received their full wages, the total shrinking at the time of payout due to various deductions. These began even before the voyage began. The ghat serang normally took as his share about 20 per cent of the lascar’s entire salary, plus any loans or provisions he had advanced. The ghat serang’s accountant deducted an additional fee (usually one anna per rupee, 6.25 per cent) for himself. During the voyage, ship serangs appear to have regularly charged lascars under their customary and occasional fees, including fines for alleged violations of discipline and payments for clothing and other supplies. Captains likewise levied fines for sundry alleged infractions and also charged highly for required or optional clothing and supplies from the ship’s store. Further, the official British tariffs on all seamen included fees to Greenwich Hospital (for disabled seamen); from the late eighteenth century onward, lascars also had 1 shilling monthly deducted by the Merchant Shipping Office in London and another fee taken by the Navy Agent.<sup>32</sup> In all, of the contracted salary due on disembarkation in Britain, lascars often received less than half. Nevertheless, what they received could be a substantial sum for a working-class man at the time, for example, account books from 1693 show some serangs receiving in London £15 cash each and lascars £4.<sup>33</sup>

Once in Britain, most Indian seamen determined to seek entertainment

4 November 1713, 10–15 February 1721; BL.

30. Court minutes, 2–21 January 1713; BL.

31. Letter Book from Managers, 7 February 1706; E/3/96, BL.

32. *The Times*, 9 December 1814; *Morning Chronicle*, 30 November 1785, 1 December 1785.

33. For example, Court minutes, 29 March 1693, but payments varied widely; see L/MAR/B/

and opportunities. Like many seamen around the world, many lascars quickly spent their pay and fell into destitution. Others, however, found employment, married, and settled in Britain. Marriages in Britain between Indian men and British women would continue as a frequent occurrence and from the seventeenth century onward Indian sailors became a visible feature of British society, particularly, but not exclusively, in the dock areas of east London.<sup>34</sup> Indian seamen who failed in their new country or simply wished to return home relied on the Directors to provide them basic maintenance and free passage back to India. A few saved or earned enough to pay their own passage home, as did eight lascars in 1744.<sup>35</sup> However, many evidently returned to India with little or nothing materially to show for their long labours, although they had learned much about Britain. They thus knew better what to expect when they approached a ghat serang for future voyages bound there.

#### SERANGS AND EUROPEANS COMPETE IN CALCUTTA

In India, ghat serangs struggled for centuries against European merchants and ship captains, as well as Company officials, over control of the supply of lascars. The expansion of British colonial power, particularly in the three presidency capitals (all major ports), encouraged Company officials and British merchants to exert more control over Indian labour. In 1780, apparently as part of Governor-General Warren Hastings's larger efforts at "reform", the Calcutta government prevented Buddooh Syrang from inheriting the position of ghat serang there. He protested to London that "his late Father had served the Company in providing and training Lascars for the Shipping and Train of Artillery in Bengal", but the Calcutta authorities had appointed someone else to that "office".<sup>36</sup> Buddooh therefore argued that he had been illegally deprived of his property rights, and petitioned the Directors to order restoration of his father's legacy. The Directors recognized the principle that the post was property which should be inherited and ordered an investigation (although it is not clear if they ultimately installed him in the post).

About this time, the Calcutta authorities also supported an appeal by European ship captains and merchants to replace the ghat serangs with a British official as sole supplier and regulator of lascar labour. In 1783, these

series, *passim*, BL.

34. For example, in 1697, some Asian seamen joined the crowds watching the public execution of pirates at Wapping Dock; Harihar Das, "Early Indian Visitors to England", *Calcutta Review*, 3rd series, 13 (1924), pp. 83–114, 84. See also Douglas A. Lorimer, *Colour, Class and the Victorians: English Attitudes to the Negro in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Leicester, 1978); Roxann Wheeler, *Complexion of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture* (Philadelphia, PA, 2000).

35. Court minutes, 20 February 1744; BL.

Table 1. *Pay regulations proposed by Europeans in Calcutta, 1783.*

(In sicca rupees)	During peace	During war
Serang	15	20
1st tindal	12	15
2nd tindal	10	12
1st lascars	6	7
2nd lascars	4	5

Europeans petitioned Governor-General Hastings to appoint a British Registrar of Lascars and also to fix wage rates.<sup>37</sup> Making their argument (but not telling the full story), they wrote of the “great hardships, delays, hindrances, difficulties, and an unnecessary expense in the procuring proper Seafaring Men”, due “to a certain Person called a Seer [‘chief’] Serang, from whose Impositions both they and the said Seafaring Men are subjected to grievous and heavy losses”. The merchants continued that before the ghat serang would supply lascars, he demanded three months wages in advance, much of which he kept himself (they neglected to add that the ghat serang had usually advanced money to lascars awaiting employment). Further, he did not supply all the men until the very last moment before sailing, when desperate captains had to accept whatever low quality and inexperienced men he provided: “the said Seer Serang does frequently instead of able Seamen put on board [...] men kidnapped or forcibly impressed and altogether unused to the sea and unacquainted with the Business of a Seamen.” Finally, the merchants set out the monthly wages that they wanted the government to fix by regulation (Table 1).

These proposed wages were approximately the current rate for serangs and tindals, but only about half for lascars.<sup>38</sup> While the merchants thus ostensibly argued for a more bureaucratic and efficient process, they really meant one under British, not Indian, control.

A few months later, the Bengal government indeed passed a regulation that attempted to enforce all that these Europeans requested.<sup>39</sup> This

36. Court minutes, 15 March 1780, see also 18 July 1764; BL.

37. Petition to the Governor-General from the Principal Merchants and Ship-owners of Calcutta, 19 February 1783; Home Miscellaneous Series 190, fos 65–103, BL. Such efforts were not unique to India. See M. Quinlan, “Regulating Labour in a Colonial Context: Maritime Labour Legislation in the Australian Colonies, 1788–1850”, *Australian Historical Studies*, 29, 111 (1998), pp. 303–324.

38. Lascars would also receive *batta* (supplement) of 10 rupees monthly, if not provisioned by the owners. See, for example, Court minutes, 14 April 1757 and Marine Department, L/MAR/B/ series; BL.

39. “Rule, Ordinance and Regulation for Ascertaining and fixing the Wages to be Paid to the Native Seafaring Men belonging to the Port of Calcutta”, registered with the Supreme Court of Calcutta, 7 July 1783; Home Miscellaneous Series 190, fos 65–103, BL.

established a British “Marine Register Officer” (on the model prevailing in Britain) who would replace the ghat serang. All Indian seamen would pay 1 anna per rupee (6.25 per cent) of their wages plus a 1 rupee fee to be listed in his books. The officer would also find an “abode” for the seamen awaiting assignment. He would hold exclusive authority to supply seamen to all ships, delivering them as requested by captains on twelve days’ notice. Soon after this system was imposed, the merchants found to their horror that it failed to deliver the expected results. The ghat serangs held such power – particularly the loyalty of lascars – that they prevented the Marine Register Officer from supplying men. Within a year, the European merchants of Calcutta again petitioned the Company, begging the revocation of this regulation and the return to the old system.

Thus, ghat serangs fended off this and (over the next half-century) further British attempts to take control over lascar labour. In 1790, British applicants for the post of Marine Register Officer promised to deliver all that the European merchants and captains had sought in their earlier petition, to no avail.<sup>40</sup> Then, the Calcutta government ordered its Committee on the State of Marine to investigate and report about the power and alleged abuses of ghat serangs. Yet, in 1793, the British Superintendent of Police in Calcutta reiterated these same accusations about “the rapacity and villainy of Ghaut Serangs”, who used their labour monopoly to supply insufficient numbers of inexperienced Indians at exorbitant wages on the eve of sailing, whom European captains perforce accepted rather than miss the season.<sup>41</sup> In 1795, when British employers offered wages that were too low, lascars refused to work.<sup>42</sup> When one British captain resorted in 1798 to kidnapping and sailing off with lascars who had only agreed to load his ship in port, virtually all lascars boycotted work on all British-bound ships, despite Governor-General Wellesley’s repeated public assurances that the offending captain would be punished.<sup>43</sup> Further, in 1800, British merchants accused lascars of wholesale arson: taking wage advances and then torching their ships so that they could abscond.<sup>44</sup>

Over the following decades, British authorities increasingly tried to regulate lascar wages and employment conditions. For example, in 1814, the Government of India specified the type and amount of clothing, bedding, and rations (including Indian spices) issued them, as well as the

40. Home Public Consultation, 6 October 1790, nos. 15–17, National Archives of India.

41. Home Public Consultation, 22 November 1793, no. 3, National Archives of India.

42. Home Public Consultation, 29 February 1795, no. 33, and 15 May 1797, no. 18, National Archives of India.

43. Home Public Consultation, 28 June 1799, no. 7; 16 August 1798, no. 22; and 26 November 1798, no. 7; National Archives of India.

44. Home Public Consultation, 4 February 1800, no. 22, National Archives of India, and numerous cases in *Calcutta Monthly Journal* for this period.

volume of space allotted to each seaman for sleeping, and ordered that a surgeon and specified medicines must be aboard.<sup>45</sup> As the Company's own inspectors reported, however, these regulations were often not fulfilled, with lascar death rates of 30 to 40 per cent on some ships inbound and up to 50 per cent on the passage home, when these men were supposed to be unemployed passengers.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, in 1815, Parliament created a "Committee on Lascars and Other Asiatic Seamen" to investigate the entire system of lascar employment which concluded, in part, continued reliance on serangs was "regrettable" but necessary, since no other system could provide and manage the lascars needed.<sup>47</sup> Thereafter, Parliament amended the Navigation Acts to further exclude Asians and required the Governor of each Presidency to certify as truthful a ship-owner's declaration that it was "impossible to procure a crew of British seamen" before that ship could hire a lascar crew in India.<sup>48</sup> Nonetheless, until the mid-nineteenth century, lascars and ghat serangs largely resisted repeated efforts by British merchants and Company officials to take over the system of maritime labour supply, so essential to the anglocentric world-system but also vital to the lives of Indian seamen.

#### LASCAR EMPLOYMENT TO 1857

Despite such conflicts over recruitment in India, the number of Indian seamen voyaging to Britain from the mid-eighteenth century onward rose significantly, albeit unevenly due to the interactions of socio-economic, cultural, and political forces, most beyond the power of lascars to affect. Much of the unevenness reflected fluctuations in overall trade between India and Britain which rose over the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, declined during the post-Napoleonic world depression, and then rose dramatically thereafter.<sup>49</sup>

The advent of intercontinental steam ships and the changing economies and societies of Britain and India also altered the labour history of lascars. Most British captains in India preferred European seamen, so their demand for lascars varied inversely with the supply of British seamen. Many British

45. Marine Department, Papers Relating to the Care of Lascars, 1793–1818; L/MAR/C/902, vols 1–2, pp. 1–13, BL.

46. William Hunter, *Essay on the Diseases Incident to Indian Seamen, or Lascars* (Calcutta, 1804); Lascar Papers, Home Miscellaneous Series 501, vol. 1, fos 1–94, BL.

47. Parliamentary Papers, Returns (Commons), 1814–1815, vol. 3, paper 471, pp. 217–229.

48. Act 55, Geo. 3, c. 116, section 8. For copies of such certificates see Bombay, Political Outward or Order Books for 1818, Maharashtra State Archives, Mumbai.

49. For example, British exports to India more than doubled from 108,870 tons (1834–1835) to 252,153 tons (1849–1850) while British imports from India more than tripled from 83,776 to 280,897 tons; Parliament, House of Lords Debate 2 April 1852, Commons debate 19 April 1852, in T.C. Hansard (ed.), *Parliamentary Debates* (London, 1812–) series 3, vol. 120, pp. 546–580, 806–868.



Table 2. *Asian seamen arriving in Britain, 1760–1855.*<sup>50</sup>

Year	Reported arrivals that year
1760	138
1780	167
1803	224
1804	471
1805	603
1806	538
1807	1,278
1808	1,110
1809	965
1810	1,403
1811	929
1812	1,193
1813	1,336
1814–1815*	1,000–1,100
1821–1822	509
1855*	3–3,600

\* estimates

sailors were caught up by the Royal Navy during the continuing Anglo-French wars (until 1815) and then discharged wholesale thereafter. Yet, the correlation was not perfect: the mid-1820s, for example, saw a severe shortage of British sailors available for India-bound ships, but the number of lascars hired to go to Britain also declined significantly.<sup>51</sup> Further, Parliament opened new spaces for ever larger numbers of “private” ships as it ended the East India Company’s monopoly over trade with India in 1814, suspended for twenty years its right to trade there in 1834, and then took over the Company’s authority in 1858. Each of these had powerful implications for lascar employment – and the consistency of records about them. Nonetheless, careful use of available evidence can enable us roughly to delineate the fluctuating patterns of lascar labour going to Britain (Table 2). Many lascars made multiple trips to Britain, and thus appear more than

50. Periodically, the Directors or Parliament ordered compilations of statistics about lascars, but no systematic accounting was maintained. These compilations followed varying principles and categorizations (e.g. occasionally including Chinese and other Asians). Nevertheless, supplemented with informed estimates by British writers of the time, these figures permit an understanding of the scale of lascar presence in Britain. The shipping season covered parts of two calendar years, so some differences between years may not be significant. To 1822, they are based on Lascar Papers, Home Miscellaneous Series 501, vol. 1, fos 1–94, BL; and Parliamentary Papers, Returns (Commons), 1823, vol. 17, paper 491, pp. 149–156. The 1855 estimates come from Colonel Hughes who asserted that 10,000–12,000 lascars served the British merchant fleet, with 5,000–6,000 reaching Britain annually, of whom 3,000–3,600 were Indian. Cited in Visram, *Ayabs, Lascars and Princes*, p. 52.

51. Shipping Committee minutes, 7 January 1825, 20 April 1825, 22 November 1825, 26 July 1826, BL.

once in these figures. Nevertheless, by any reasonable calculation, tens of thousands of lascars reached Britain over this 100-year period.

Lascars continued to serve in substantial labour-gangs, which comprised much of their ship's crew, rather than as scattered individuals. In 1813, for example, only 32 ships arriving from India in Britain reported lascars aboard. Their proportion of lascars ranged from 20 per cent to over 50 per cent of the crew. The average size of a lascar gang was 34 – the largest being 56 and the smallest 16. Overall, of the 3,311 total seamen aboard these 32 ships, about 30 per cent were lascars.<sup>52</sup> In contrast, during the year July 1821–June 1822, only 7 of the 197 ships arriving in London from India reported lascars aboard (in addition, Liverpool, Hull, and Greenock/Glasgow had 22 ships arrive, none with lascars reported). This was only 22 per cent of the number of ships arriving with lascars in 1813. On these 7 ships, however, lascars still comprised large labour-gangs: 110, 107, 86, 72, 66, 38, and 30 lascars respectively (there were only 91 British and 21 “other foreign” sailors on these 7 ships).<sup>53</sup> That equalled 509 lascars, less than 5 per cent of the total seamen arriving, compared to 10,000 Britons and 1,000 “foreigners” (some of whom may have been Indian sailors serving as individuals, rather than in lascar labour-gangs). This was a much smaller proportion of the total manpower and less than half the absolute number of lascars of 1813. Yet, ships on this intercontinental trade had grown larger; the average size of a lascar crew was 73 men, over double that of 1813. Thus, relatively fewer ships carried virtually all of the incoming lascars in larger crews than earlier.

Many British officers treated lascars brutally. Such brutality stands clearly revealed, for instance, in the memoirs of Captain Robert Eastwick, who spent his career (1792–1825) mostly on ships in Asia. He considered lascars as virtual animals, easily panicked, useless in a crisis, and not worth saving in a wreck. On one voyage from England to India in 1810, his ship, the *Elizabeth*, carried 320 lascars (mostly passengers being returned home).<sup>54</sup> When this ship sank off Dunkirk, Eastwick remorselessly used an oar to beat off as many lascars as he could, so that the lifeboat in which he saved himself would not swamp (as he himself shamelessly and unregretfully reported). Of the lascars aboard, 310 died in the wintry waters (along with many Europeans and 8 Indian female servants). To some Britons, including men like Eastwick, lascars appeared not as individuals but as a collective mass.

Lascars were, however, not cheap labour. In terms of the actual voyage to Britain alone, the Company calculated that it neither gained nor lost

52. Lascar Papers, Home Miscellaneous Series 501, vol. 1, fo. 124, BL.

53. Parliamentary Papers, Returns (Commons), 1823, vol. 17, paper 491, pp. 149–156.

54. Robert Eastwick, *Master Mariner: Being the Life and Adventures of Captain Robert William Eastwick*, Herbert Compton (ed.) (London, 1891), pp. 262–282; *The Times*, 1 January 1811.

money by using lascars instead of British sailors. The Directors believed that due to differences in physical and moral strength (especially in cold weather), three lascars were equivalent in manpower to two Europeans, so lascar wages were comparably only two-thirds as much.<sup>55</sup> Lascars also received less expensive provisions and less sleeping space. Similarly, prize money for capturing enemy ships also followed the two-thirds formula.<sup>56</sup> Thus, on a given passage to Britain, the Company expended no more for the larger number of lascars it felt necessary than for better-paid British sailors. Each lascar, however, received one-third less than each Briton.

Further, after lascars reached Britain, they entailed substantial financial and political costs for the Company. Until 1834 (when Parliament suspended its right to trade in Asia), the Company contracted with private lodging-keepers, suppliers, and surgeons in London to shelter, feed, clothe, cure, and manage these men at fixed rates per capita and also with ship-owners to carry them back as pre-paid passengers. During the 1804–1813 period, the Company's average expenditure for maintaining each lascar in Britain and returning him to India was £37, totalling for all lascars £363,600 for that decade (equivalent to over £19 million today).<sup>57</sup> This per capita expenditure was much more than the entire wage paid the lascar for the voyage (roughly a shilling per day on the passage in; most lascars were unpaid returning home). Employing British sailors carried no such expense following the end of their contract.

Additionally, the British public and Parliament held the Company morally and legally responsible for all Indians in Britain, especially allegedly indigent or anti-social ones. Yet, the Directors lamented in vain to Parliament in 1815, their lack of police powers over lascars: "the impossibility in this free country of confining those persons within the prescribed limits, and of thereby preventing their intercourse with the dregs of society, which gives the Lascars of vicious dispositions facility in selling their bedding and clothing, and of contracting loathsome disorders".<sup>58</sup> Thus, even at times of peak demand, the Directors only reluctantly recognized the necessity of hiring lascars. To keep down the number arriving in Britain, the Company wanted as large a pool of British seamen on its outgoing ships as possible, to compensate for their expected losses. Thus, for example in 1808, the Directors reiterated that all their outbound ships must have entirely British crews – even though they were

55. Shipping Committee minutes, 22 February 1804, 18 June 1828; Draft of Charter-Party, L/MAR/1/17, fo. 43, BL; Parliament, House of Commons debate 25 November 1801, William Cobbett, *Parliamentary History of England*, 36 vols (London, 1806–1820), vol. 36, pp. 288–302.

56. For example, Shipping Committee minutes, 24 September 1813; Court minutes, 13 August 1823, BL.

57. Lascar Papers, Home Miscellaneous Series 501, vol. 1, fo. 120, BL; McCusker, "Comparing the Purchasing Power of Money in Great Britain".

58. Lascar Papers, Home Miscellaneous Series 501, vol. 1, fos 69–75, BL.



Figure 1. Self-reported origins of the serang/tindals (O), lascars (L), and ship's servants and peopys (S) of the *Hercules*, sailing from Calcutta to England, 1818.

allowed one-quarter non-British crews under the Navigation Acts.<sup>59</sup> Parliament also periodically discouraged lascarp employment in the Atlantic.<sup>60</sup>

Only rarely can we discover the origins of the lascars in a crew. Many served under Europeanized or culturally ambiguous names, although it is clear from ship-logs and account books that people from many ethnic and religious communities might serve together in a single lascarp labour-gang, often generically labeled “Indian”. A rare example where the crew's self-reported origins were recorded was the ship *Hercules* (sailing from Calcutta to Britain in 1818). Figure 1 demonstrates that this nominally “Indian” crew of fifty included: six lascars from southeast Asia; a tindal, two lascars, and a servant from the Arabian Peninsula (plus a servant from Mauritius); in addition to thirty-nine men from India.<sup>61</sup> While most of those from India came from Bengal Presidency, fifteen (including Serang Baxo [Bakhsh]) had origins along India's southern or western coasts.

59. Lascarp Papers, Home Miscellaneous Series 501, vol. 1, fo. 24, BL. In later years, with increasing shortages of British seamen, the Directors allowed up to a quarter of the crew on outgoing vessels to be Indians, which still made them legally British ships.

60. For example Act 42 Geo. 3 (1802), c. 61 which officially prohibited lascars from serving on ships west of the Cape of Good Hope, and Act 55, Geo. 3 (1815), c. 116 which amended the Navigation Acts to exclude Asians from the category “British”.

61. Note: one servant gave Cheran Chupah [sic] as his birthplace, which cannot be identified. Further, Mauritius is located further south than indicated. In addition, the six seacornies (helmsmen) came from Penang, Malinga, and Malacca, and three from Manila, while the captain, two officers, gunner, and carpenter were all Europeans; Home Miscellaneous, volume 253, fos

The geographic diversity of the serang and tindals, and between them and the other crew members, highlights how the ghat serang assembled them ad hoc in Calcutta. Unlike Indian labour-gangs in factories or indentured labourers, whom a headman (*sardar* or *kangani*) often recruited from his own home village or region, these maritime workers came together through their employment, and forged bonds during their passage. Their subsequent solidarity in Britain as mutually supportive shipmates suggests how powerful that experience was.

### LASCAR SOLIDARITIES IN BRITAIN

Once ashore in Britain, lascars in a labour-gang often continued their ship-born camaraderie, under their serang. He negotiated for them corporately against their employers and other British authorities. He also assisted British authorities by exerting discipline over his lascars. Nonetheless, other identities, including homeland and individual lascar interests, cross-cut these solidarities and created others.

The period following the lascars' arrival was often one of confrontation with their employers and other groups in Britain. Some lascars stayed aboard temporarily and unloaded their ships, receiving extra pay for this.<sup>62</sup> Such work, however, placed them in conflict with British – particularly Irish – stevedores, with whom they occasionally fought.<sup>63</sup> Frequently, lascars disembarked and appealed under the leadership of their serang directly to British authorities for redress of grievances.<sup>64</sup> One serang, Doud Gouber Gash, (speaking through a translator) in 1823 described his role as “an officer looked up to as the father and protector of his men, and appointed by them as the receiver and distributor of their wages, and guardian of their privileges”.<sup>65</sup> This serang, who had made several previous voyages to Britain, led his lascar crew to complain to London's Lord Mayor: he “handed a long epistle to his Lordship, in which the petitioners

135–138, National Archives of India. Confirming these patterns, similarly diverse lascar crews are found for other ships in Home Miscellaneous, volume 253, fos 203–206; volume 425, fos 6–8, National Archives of India. See also Balachandran, “Circulation through Seafaring”.

62. The autobiography of Joseph Emin (1726–1809) is a rare recounting of the life of a man who worked his way from Calcutta to London as a seaman in 1751, unloading his ship, and then living there periodically for a decade. See his *Life and Adventures of Joseph Emin, An Armenian, Written in English by Himself* (London, 1792) and Michael H. Fisher, “Asians in Britain: Negotiation of Identity through Self-Representation”, in Kathleen Wilson (ed.), *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660–1840* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 91–112.

63. For example, Irish stevedores fought Asians in two such riots in 1813. Shipping Committee minutes, 14 July 1813, 31 August 1813, BL.

64. For example, Court minutes, 3 January 1798; Shipping Committee minutes, 28–30 June 1815, 12–19 July 1815, 2 August 1815, 1 September 1815, 6–15 December 1815, 19–26 June 1816, 27 May 1818, 8 July 1818, 13–27 January 1819, 2 February 1819, BL.

65. *The Times*, 4 July 1823.

described themselves as in a state of starvation, and treated with great cruelty in this free country”. They refused to leave until they had been paid. The British captain admitted that he owed them wages, but asserted they would only run away and squander it; he promised to pay them when they boarded.

British authorities sometimes regarded such acts or protest as desertion and riot, arresting the serang “ringleader” to suppress the rest.<sup>66</sup> Other times, depending on the particular circumstances and how effectively serangs represented their cases, British authorities – including the Directors, Naval Agent, municipal officials, and law courts – might consider and act on lascars’ complaints.<sup>67</sup> For example, in 1813–1814, the Naval Agent in London reportedly collected £262 10 shillings in fees deducted from lascars’ pay (at 1 shilling per month each), but collected for lascars £1,571 in disputed wages from ship-owners.<sup>68</sup> To some extent, therefore, lascars had agency in gaining compensation for provable breaches of contract or regulations by ship-owners.

In the lodgings that the Company provided (until 1834), the barracks was divided into rooms, each with a heating stove. Self-organized groups of seven to twenty-five lascars from the same ship generally lived and cooked in the same room under the direction of their serang, apparently reflecting solidarities formed aboard the harsh voyage as well as ethnic and religious identities. However, while on board and then in the lodgings ashore, members of a crew apparently cooked and ate separately, divided by religious identity.<sup>69</sup> Lascars also clashed with both native Britons and other seamen.

There were repeatedly large-scale riots which pitted Indians against British service workers and seamen in London’s streets. For example, in 1803, three lascars armed with cutlasses broke into the City of Carlisle public house in Whitechapel, seeking to recover the substantial sum of £150 they claimed that local sex-workers there had stolen from them. The landlord had them arrested. The Directors bailed them out, paid the damages, and put them aboard an outgoing ship, not to protect the British community from them, but rather the reverse: “for their better protection from the women of the town”.<sup>70</sup> Elite British fears about the predations of the British poor, especially the female British poor, on Asian seamen would recur. Just two years later, in October 1805, lascars took over the

66. For example, *The Times*, 23 September 1796.

67. Court minutes, 26 May 1802, 21 July 1802, 16 July 1806; Home Miscellaneous Series 501, fos 1–93, BL.

68. *The Statesman* [Calcutta], 21 July 1813; *The Times*, 9 December 1814, 3d; Shipping Committee minutes, 22 July 1813, BL.

69. Emin describes initially eating separately from Europeans, and never mentions dining with the lascars onboard; Emin, *Life*, pp. 44ff.

70. *The Times*, 6 October 1803.

streets of Shadwell, east London, in a large-scale tumult in which fifteen people were hospitalized and nineteen arrested.<sup>71</sup> Only a month after that, lascars seized the streets east of the Tower of London one Friday night, claiming a sex-worker there had robbed one of their number.<sup>72</sup> In 1808, a quarrel between a drunken but armed British sailor and a single lascar brought 400 lascars out into the streets in his support. A passing squad of British militia drove them back with bayonets.<sup>73</sup>

Larger identities like Indian, Chinese, Arab, or Malay also apparently remained potent onboard ship and in Britain. For example, the same ship might have both lascars and Chinese seamen, although they evidently customarily served in separate labour-gangs; tensions between them occasionally flared in London. Indeed, in 1785 groups of Indians fought Chinese.<sup>74</sup> Similarly, in 1806, 150 Indians fought 300 Chinese who were supported by some Arab seamen.<sup>75</sup> The alleged causes were an escalating conflict initially generated on the ship *Skelton Castle*, which had sailed to London with 150 lascars and 20 Chinese seamen aboard, and jealousy over some local British women. In London, other Chinese (and Arabs) apparently supported these 20 Chinese seamen against the lascars who had sailed with them. Since most lascars and Arabs were Muslim, and most Chinese seamen were not, this was evidently not a religious conflict.

On a smaller scale, in 1808, three Muslim Malay seamen killed a Muslim Indian lascar, Imambacchus. An Englishwoman, Sarah Williams, testified that she had been living with the victim in a room nearby on Cable Street, east London, for the previous month. One night, she took 7 shillings from one of the Malay seamen, Glosse, to get drunk and then left the Blue Gate public house (on nearby Ratcliffe Highway) with him for sex. The victim arrived just then and caught them. The Malay seaman was joined by a Malay shipmate and a third Malay from another ship. Together, they mortally wounded the lascar. Testifying on behalf of the victim were a Muslim serang and two lascars from the accused's own ship. The jury convicted the Malays of manslaughter. Though clearly based in sexual rivalry, the sides in the affray were formed around solidarities based on origin that cut across shipmate lines.<sup>76</sup>

After 1834, when Parliament suspended the Company's right to trade in Asia and therefore its legal responsibility to lodge and feed lascars, private entrepreneurs, including some Indians, established lodging houses of their own, particularly in east London's docklands – Poplar and Limehouse.

71. *The Times*, 15 October 1805.

72. *The Times*, 26 November 1805.

73. *Annual Register* (1808), 50, Chronicle, p. 13.

74. *Annual Register* (1785), 27, Chronicle, pp. 242–243.

75. *Annual Register* (1806), 48, Chronicle, pp. 450–451; *The Times*, 7 October 1806, 3a–b.

76. Proceedings of the Old Bailey, 1 June 1808, pp. 280–288, case 395.



This soon became known as the “Oriental Quarter”. Given the exclusively male population of arriving seamen, and the common cultural expectation that women were necessary to provide particular services, a distinctive pattern developed. The Indian male rooming-house operator often had a British woman partner.

One of these proprietors, Abdool Rahman of Surat, came to England as a lascar in the 1840s but decided to settle. He first established himself as a crossing-sweeper (clearing passage for ladies and gentlemen across the dung-laden street in exchange for gratuities) at St Paul’s Churchyard, and learned much about British society. When Nepali Ambassador, Jung Bahadur, visited London in 1850, Abdul Rahman joined his suite as a translator for his servants.<sup>77</sup> He then used the money he received to establish himself as operator of two lodging-houses designed for lascars in Blue Gate Fields, Limehouse. Allegedly, he also provided opium. After some twenty years there, Abdul Rahman finally sold his houses and shipped back to India as a serang.<sup>78</sup>

In 1842, the Church Missionary Society surveyed and reported the dire “state of the Lascars in London”. Subsequently, evangelicals proposed a charity house, and gathered £15,000 (including Indian donations totalling £5,000).<sup>79</sup> In 1856, “The Strangers’ Home for Asiatics, Africans, and South Sea Islanders” opened in Commercial Road, Limehouse, under the leadership of its Secretary and Manager, Lieutenant-Colonel R. Marsh Hughes, late of the Company’s army.<sup>80</sup> This linking of various ethnicities of the working classes collectively as “Strangers” reflected current British attitudes. Since Parliament had reimposed legal responsibility for lascars on the Company in 1854, its Directors contributed hundreds of pounds of the Company’s money to this Home annually until 1858.<sup>81</sup> The Home assumed many of the paternalistic functions earlier exercised by the Company, including identifying, maintaining, and managing lascars (and other indigent Indians), working with their serangs in prosecuting police and legal charges against defaulting ship-owners, and arranging for lascar employment or passage home.

77. *Indian News*, 16–17 June 1850, cited in John Whelpton, *Jang Bahadur in Europe: The First Nepalese Mission to the West* (Kathmandu, 1983), pp. 232–233.

78. Joseph Salter, *Asiatic in England: Sketches of Sixteen Years’ Work among Orientals* (London, 1873), pp. 30–31, 275–278.

79. Foreign Political Consultation, 1 May 1857, National Archives of India; Hughes Letter 24 January 1879, Political Department Home Correspondence, L/P&J/2/59, BL; *Illustrated London News*, 56 (1870), pp. 253–254; Salter, *Asiatic in England*, pp. 6–7.

80. Court minutes, 14–28 November 1855, 16 April 1856, 22–30 December 1857, 12–26 January 1858, 3–10 February 1858, 3–10 March 1858; Political and Military Committee Memoranda, 22 December 1857, BL; Salter, *Asiatic in England*, pp. 66ff; *The Times*, 20 November 1855.

81. Court minutes, 1856–1858, *passim*, BL. The Home continued until 1927.

## CONCLUSION

After the mid-nineteenth century, there were many changes in the lives and employment patterns of lascars. Steamships required fewer skilled seamen, so many Indians ended up instead as poorly paid manual or service labourers – shovelling coal into boilers or attending on passengers.<sup>82</sup> Tensions also increased between British seamen and Indian lascars, particularly as the former unionized and exerted political pressure to legally advantage themselves and disadvantage Indians. According to a 1848 House of Commons Report, lascar wages were only 10 rupees (5 shillings) per month, tindals 12 rupees, and serangs 20 rupees, while British able seamen received 90 rupees (45 shillings).<sup>83</sup> These factors, and the abundant supply of lascars, drove down wages to only a fraction of their actual seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century levels (to about the rates proposed by Calcutta merchants in 1783). The 1850s also saw many stories in the British press about lascars as arsonists of British ships.<sup>84</sup>

In India, British authorities continued to pressure ghat serangs in order to seize control over lascar labour. Among the markers of this shift was the 1850 Merchant Seamen Act passed by the Governor-General in Council (and revised in 1859) which required brokers to procure seamen to be licenced by a government-appointed Registrar, with all seamen agreeing to contract on a prescribed form with fixed monthly wages, and a definitive list of seamen delivered by each captain to the Registrar.<sup>85</sup>

In Britain, racial attitudes also shifted over the late nineteenth century, to the detriment of Indians. These had many causes including the bloody conflicts in India (1857) and Jamaica (1865), as well as pseudo-scientific ideas derived from Darwinism and British imperialism generally. Scholars including Dixon, Dunlop, Prescott, Sherwood, and Tabili draw different interpretations from evidence about attitudes toward Britons, especially British seamen, toward Indian lascars serving or living among them.<sup>86</sup>

Over the 250 years considered in this article, lascars entered and altered the maritime labour market on sailing ships between India and Europe. Their efforts, and those of serangs, to work on European ships but outside

82. See Daniel Thorner, *Investment in Empire: British Railway and Steam Shipping Enterprise in India, 1825–1849* (Philadelphia, PA, 1950); R.O. Roberts, “Comparative Shipping and Shipbuilding Costs”, *Economica*, New Series, 14, 56 (1947), pp. 296–309.

83. D.C. Alyin’s Evidence in Second Report of the Select Committee of the House of Lords Appointed to Inquire into the Policy and Operation of the Navigation Laws, House of Commons paper no. 431 of 1848, cited by N. Benjamin, “The British and Indian Sailors”.

84. For example, *Annual Register* (1851) Chronicle, 4 March 1851, pp. 20–21; *The Times*, 8 October 1853, 18 October 1853, 20 October 1853. See also Benjamin, “The British and Indian Sailors”, p. 492.

85. *Ibid.*, pp. 489–490.

86. Dixon, “Lascars: The Forgotten Seamen”; Dunlop, “Lascars and Labourers”; Prescott, “Lascar Seamen on the Clyde”; Sherwood, “Lascar Struggles”; Tabili, “Construction of Racial Difference”, *idem*, “*We Ask for British Justice*”.

European recruitment and employment patterns, remained remarkably strong over this period. Thus, as Balachandran argues for a later period, their labour history is the “site of interactions of many working class histories [...] where categories of race, class, and nation collide and contaminate one another [...] where we can derive insights into historical negotiations of rival, overlapping, and complementary solidarities”.<sup>87</sup>

87. Balachandran, “Conflicts in International Maritime Labour Markets”, pp. 71–100.