To Take Arms Across a Sea of Trouble
The “Lascar System,” Politics, and Agency in the 1920s

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Introduction

In the interwar period, a system for the movement of men, arms, and printed matter developed into a political network that in imperial sources came to be called the “lascar system.” Lascars were Indian seamen who worked for British and international merchant shipping companies and had contacts with trade unionists, communists, anarchists, and other politically active parties across the world—in particular in port towns such as Hamburg, Antwerp and Marseilles. They became key players in the politics of the interwar world, and especially in a still-colonised India, which was subject to various censorship regulations and a panoply of repressive legislation. A number of lascars became crucial in the emerging communist movement and in trade union politics. In a world of increasingly stringent border controls, restrictions on the movement of people, and paranoia about political radicalism and its ability to “infect” new areas, the lascars’ mobility became an asset to political movements and a source of anxiety for states.

Given this, it is surprising that the literature on lascars seldom, if ever, addresses the question of their political activities. This essay takes some steps in that direction, focusing on the 1920s, when the “lascar system” took shape. “Lascar” is of course a name given to a profession, not an identity or a political ideology; and yet the importance of this profession in the politics of the early twentieth century, and of the interwar period in particular, is far too important to ignore or treat as mere coincidence. One of our arguments here is that historians’ inability to take account of lascars’ political activities is an internalisation of a static view of lascarness.

Unsurprisingly, since most of these activities were illegal, there is little direct testimony by lascars on their own political activities. Such testimony as can be found in interrogation reports or, at one remove, when an informer provided information to police or intelligence, are bound by a particular grammar of evasion or of apparently fulfilling the demands of the informer’s paymaster. The standard problem of finding the insurgent mostly in the “prose of counter-insurgency” of colonial reporting is thus unavoidable; but it is possible, we believe, for a careful reading of these sources to reveal the contours of lascar political activities.
The Lascar and His Fragments

Lascars were among the South Asians who travelled the world most frequently, and in the largest numbers, in a period where most inhabitants of British India and the princely states were relatively immobile. This is often forgotten when work is done on the mobility of non-elite imperial subjects in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries. Much of the literature on the First World War and India, for instance, assumes that South Asians’ encounters with “the West” on a large scale, and certainly at a non-elite level, first occurred with the wartime movement of Indian troops to Europe. This assumption omits lascars, who, once the war broke out, were by virtue of their mobility stranded in large numbers in infelicitous situations—working not only on captured British vessels but also for German shipping companies, and thereafter finding themselves civilian prisoners of war.

There is of course a body of work on the lascars, though the first full-length monograph on the subject appeared only in 2012. Mostly written within the parameters of labour history, this literature has been instrumental in providing insight into the world of lascars. Perhaps understandably, then, the literature on lascars as “the muscles of Empire,” as one historian described them, is dominated by structural analyses of their place in the maritime economy of British imperialism, or by a mode in which the lascars appear as exploited workers—victims of labour regimes that restricted and contained their freedom of contract and spaces to manoeuvre, thereby undermining their apparent mobility. Attempts to argue that, structural constraints notwithstanding, lascars displayed a relatively high degree of agency still tend to reduce that agency to the ability to subvert the structures of control and surveillance that were set in place by governments and merchant shipping organisations.

As a result, the existing literature renders the lascar in fragments, as a structural victim with limited agency. “Political” activities, in these readings, consisted in setting up and participating in trade unions (and little else); it seems to be assumed that by emerging to a “higher” level of politics beyond that of trade unionism (famously and not unreasonably derided by Lenin, among others, as narrowly economistic and inadequately political), the lascar left his lascarness behind, after which he ceases to be the concern of the economic historian or the labour historian. A recent study of lascar involvement in smuggling arms and illegal literature in the 1920s—so far the only piece of work to treat this theme—creates a dichotomy between “revolutionary” activities and those associated with the “illegal economy,” attributing to the lascars the latter but not the former motivation. Both the hopes of revolutionaries and the fears of colonial officials that the lascar system would be politically radicalising were belied by seamen’s self-interested search for profit. The profit motive is contrasted with the politically-motivated use of the lascar networks by outsiders, thereby once again erasing the politics of lascar activities in favour of the alleged “culture” of illegal trade that was the world in which seamen supposedly saw themselves.

Labour historians have documented how lascars had long been a part of European mercantile and imperial networks that, in the case of the British at least, stretched as far back as the early seventeenth century. By the middle of the nineteenth century, approximately ten- to twelve-thousand lascars were said to be
employed on British merchant ships. This figure rose dramatically in the following decades, so that by 1914 the number of lascars employed on British vessels stood at approximately fifty-two thousand. This of course doesn’t take into account lascars who were employed on other European or American merchant vessels. During this time there were a number of significant changes to the conditions and terms of employment, patterns of recruitment, unionisation, and so on. It was largely in these terms that lascars were understood and written about in colonial sources, as well as afterwards by historians who attempted to read “against the grain,” without always perceiving the grain. This was equally true for agencies, like the newly-founded International Labour Organisation, which restricted themselves to reporting on the lascars’ terms and conditions of employment, and consequently for historians who used these sources. As a consequence of the lenses imposed by such reporting, the lascar has become the elusive object of labour history, a person who cannot speak for himself and must be spoken for.

Yet the figure of the lascar also appeared in radically different forms. It is not inaccurate to say that the vast majority of lascars could be slotted into the mould of the archetypical lascar who was enmeshed in a variety of exploitative relationships. But this focus often conceals how many lascars renegotiated their lascar-ness. During the Great War, and in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution, the lascar began to be viewed as the potential subversive, whose unparalleled mobility afforded him proximity to “subversive” ideas and the opportunity of evading the imperial surveillance network. In part, this unease was a reflection of and in continuity with colonial anxieties regarding the very act of travelling. Thus, networks of students, intellectuals, labourers, migrants, and even pilgrims were viewed with suspicion by colonial authorities. For example, by the turn of the century, British as well as Canadian authorities attempted to impede the migration of Indians to North America, and especially to Canada. This anxiety only grew with the formation of revolutionary networks by Indian migrants and exiles seeking to overthrow the British Empire. Shores beyond British India, and especially spaces where revolutionary cells operated, were viewed by colonial authorities with paranoid fixation as hotbeds of sedition. Indians transiting through these spaces were at risk of being “corrupted” and misled by radical ideas and politics. Travelling therefore could be an explicitly political act and one that could incur the wrath of empire.

This was particularly true as far as the lascar was concerned, because of course it was their travelling that made them lascars. But if lascars were not merely lascars, some lascars were also not quite lascars; and the flatness and inadequacy of the category “lascar” becomes clearer if we look more closely at diverse incidents that have in common the rubric “lascar.” In common with many other categories in colonial India, the “lascar” was an imperial construct: attempts by imperial administrators and shipping companies alike to circumscribe lascar roles in terms of places of origin, of predictable behaviour patterns and cultural traits that included inefficiency, illiteracy, and ignorance, have been much recorded. It was also, as we shall see, possible for lascars to manipulate these prejudices and stereotypes to their own benefit, or for their own protection.
There were numerous examples that justified colonial anxieties regarding the lascar networks. The case of "Dada" Amir Haider Khan provides the best known and meticulously (self-) documented account of how the transition from "lascar" to "revolutionary" came about. Born in a small village in the Potohar plateau in Northern Punjab, Dada dropped out of school at an early age and ran away from home. He ended up in Bombay where he found work on board a shipping vessel. His first assignment was on a vessel that supplied British Indian troops fighting the Ottoman army in Mesopotamia during the First World War. Thereafter, he spent nearly a decade visiting various regions around the world, including Western European, East Asian, and North American ports. The vessels he worked on provided him with his first initiation into radical politics, which was, in part, driven by experiences of labour exploitation and racial discrimination. Also important were his engagements with his fellow workers: workers like his friend Joe, who was an Irish nationalist and son of a prominent revolutionary. Joe provided him with his first political introduction to the injustice of the British Empire. Dada also had the opportunity to engage with radical politics in port cities, which had experienced a dramatic upsurge in trade union activities after the turn of the century, especially after the onset of the Bolshevik Revolution. That said, trade unions were not always welcoming of lascars, whose employment hinged on the fact that they were cheaper labour and therefore in a position to undercut the wages received by European sailors.

In 1918, Dada deserted his ship in New York. He was looking to find employment elsewhere, preferably on American vessels where conditions were reputed to be better. He spent the next few years serving on board various vessels and acquired other skills (including flying!). During this time he was also in sporadic touch with disdient groups working for Indian independence in the United States, such as the Friends of Freedom for India (where he met the American radical, Agnes Smedley, among others), and the Ghadar Party. While working in a car factory in Detroit he got in touch with the Communist Party of the USA (CPUSA). By that time, Dada was thoroughly committed to revolutionary politics. In turn, the CPUSA, in collaboration with the Ghadar Party, made arrangements for Dada and five other Ghadarites to travel to Moscow for political and military training in 1926. Once in Moscow, these individuals attended the famed Communist University of the Toilers of the East. Moscow of course was the centre of world revolution and offered the necessary infrastructure and support to aspiring revolutionaries, particularly from the colonised world. The University was run under the direct auspices of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. This institution served two sets of students. The larger group was from the Soviet Union. The other was primarily from the "colonial and semi colonial east." Thus, aside from Indians, Dada found himself studying alongside activists from Japan, Turkey, China, Greece, Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia, as well as "a few Negroes from the USA." These "students" were given the task of working towards two inseparable (and often incompatible) objectives: national liberation and socialist revolution. They were regularly trained by Red Army officers in the use and maintenance of various rifles, heavy machine guns, pistols, revolvers, and hand grenades. They were also...
required to draw topographical maps and demonstrate their familiarity with military science and warfare.28 This training was instrumental for Dada’s political career, and he was now fully in the sights of the Intelligence Bureau and nominated in absentia as co-defendant in the Meerut Conspiracy Case. After his training, Dada returned to India and visited Russia a number of times in the predictable guise of a lascar. In doing so, he became one of the mobile conduits through which “seditious” ideas and materials made their way into the subcontinent. The lascar network then, was ripe with possibilities for engaging with radical politics.

Dada was in many ways an exception, but there were still plenty of opportunities for ordinary seamen to become politicised during the course of their travels. Some were carriers of “seditious” literature sent by exiles like M. N. Roy. A close reading from the interrogation report of a lascar can serve to demonstrate the landscape of political activity, as well as the interlocking of the lascar networks with networks of exiled Indians abroad:

During our stay at Hamburg for about 8 or 10 days, after 2 or three days Abid Husain and a shop keeper of Hamburg came to our ship... In the afternoon I came to learn from Abid Hussain that a meeting of the seamen would be held at a place called Sampoli 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 were sitting accommodation of 50 or 60 persons. There were 50 or 60 chairs and three tables. I also saw newspapers, books, registers arranged in the form of a Library.29

The remnants of the networks of exiles and former prisoners of war who had gathered in Germany during the Great War continued to operate after the war, with a renewed political energy that came from the revolution in Russia and the anticipated revolutions in western Europe, particularly in Germany. Members of the wartime Berlin India Committee were joined by newcomers like M. N. Roy, who during the early 1920s made Berlin his base and Hamburg port his preferred conduit for communication with India.30

Besides the above persons I saw there Abid Hussain, Ali, Ibrahim, Manandra Nath [Manabendra Nath Roy] and another up country man called Khan who is a Pathan. This Pathan said that he was a member of some British regiment and deserted it during the last great war. Manandra Nath was the only Hindu among them...31

The opportunity for political mobilisation of lascars in locations away from the immediate control of British imperial authorities was also sought. In some situations, speakers tried to gently guide lascars’ political consciousness in desired directions:

Ibrahim is an up country Mohammadan. He addressed us in Hindustani and said that Indian seamen were poorly paid and there was no place in Hamburg where they could meet together and so they wanted to 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. He then requested all present to give their names and addresses for membership of the Union.32
“Ibrahim” was one of the aliases of Khushi Muhammad, a close associate of M. N. Roy, who was known to operate out of Hamburg port.33 These meetings often took place with the blessings and sympathy of German political groups, and often also of the German police, because the new German regime had decided by and large to continue with its sympathetic treatment of anti-British exiles in Germany.34 This is borne out by the testimony of a lascar under interrogation:

While the meeting was going on 10 or 12 Germans were noticed in the room. But they were not attending meetings. Two policemen in uniform armed with rifles were standing at the gate of this club who were directing us that Indian’s meeting were going to be held inside. For about an hour the meeting was held. After the meeting dissolved we left the place and the others also went away. The Bengali Baboo had European dress and the others were also in European costumes. They spoke German amongst themselves.35

The presence and organisation of the Indian exile networks that interacted with the lascars did not go unnoticed by the imperial authorities. On one occasion, British administrators thought they had pulled off a diplomatic triumph by persuading the Weimar regime to expel the remaining Indian exiles who were conducting their subversive activities in Berlin. They were surprised to be rebuffed by German diplomatic circles, as well as by Charles Tegart, the redoubtable chief of the Calcutta Police, who was a key figure in anti-terrorist operations. The German diplomatic corps believed that the exiles knew too much about Germany during the war, and therefore that they should continue to be hosted even if many of them were communists well to the left of the Weimar regime. Tegart believed that the network of informers that had been built up in Germany in the wake of the Great War was worth preserving, and for that reason the exiles should be left in Germany; should they have to move elsewhere, the British police and intelligence services would have to build new networks.36

An interrogation was also an opportunity to perform a role within the grammar provided by colonial assumptions about lascar identities and abilities, and a lascar was not necessarily directly forthcoming if asked about his role in politically subversive activities. He could well afford to play on the stereotypes about his ignorance and political manipulability:

Before we departed some English books were placed on a table by Ibrahim who requested us to take them. Some took about 15 or 20 copies which they brought on board SS Matiana. As none could read the books, they were placed on ship. Khalique could read a little and may have some copies...When we came out of the place of meeting Ibrahim told us that revolvers and cartridges were very cheap there and if we purchased them they would be very useful in Calcutta. But we were afraid to purchase any revolver there as custom officers searched us in every port.37

This is either a transparent account of what happened or, as is more likely if viewed in light of other contradictory testimonies provided by lascars under interrogation,38 a skilful manipulation of the expectations of the audience. Clearly, European ports with a strong presence of political exiles and lascars were spaces for the education
of ordinary lascars in political matters, as well as spaces of contact and transfer of seditious literature and arms. A lascar under interrogation would scarcely have been believed if he professed ignorance about this system altogether; indeed, he was under interrogation for reasons of his having been incriminated already. It was, then, better to present himself as a relatively helpless onlooker caught up in the events that unfolded around him: he knew there was literature of a kind being transported, but he could not read it and did not know what it was; and of course he would not dare to transport arms because it was too dangerous even if it could have proved profitable.

There were other variations of subversion as well, such as Indians from a non-“lascar” background who utilised this network to smuggle themselves into and out of British India. The following excerpt from a police report illustrates this trend very well:

One Kanshi Ram, son of Devi Chand, of Jalal village, Gujranwala district, arrived in Bombay from Liverpool on the 31st December, 1925, by the SS Trafford Hall, on which he served as a seaman. The Shipping Master, Bombay, described him as a seaman of an unusual type who had given a certain amount of trouble on board, and he was found by the Customs Authorities at Bombay to be in possession of literature of a decidedly anti-British nature. According to his own statement Kanshi Ram matriculated at the Punjab University in 1916 and after doing various odd jobs…proceeded to America…There he claims to have earned sufficient funds to keep himself while obtaining degrees in Law and Oratory, as well as his M.A. Reports received from abroad show that in March 1925 this man signed on at New York as a member of the crew of the SS City of Shanghai by which ship he travelled to Liverpool via Australia, under the assumed name of Abdul Rashid. He informed a fellow seaman that he had gone to America about 5 years before to work for the independence of India, but that, in view of the failure of the movements started by Messrs. Gandhi and Das, he had decided to return to India to start a new agitation. He is further alleged to have displayed two revolvers and to have claimed that he could arrange for the dispatch of arms and ammunition from America.

The possibility of travelling as a lascar was the best, and often the only, option for travelling incognito as a political radical. Having no passage money, and having attracted the attention of the police, the communist Muzaffar Ahmad (who planned to travel to Europe in 1923 to meet M. N. Roy) wrote that “there was no hope of my getting a passport. If I was to go, I had to go by working on a ship.” Passport procedures required a higher level of accountability than a seaman’s certificate, for which one had to have contacts in the shipping business: one had to know, pay, or possibly bribe a shore serang, who organised recruitment of shipping labour, and then get on board. “As it was more likely for people like me to go as a saloon-worker,” Ahmad wrote, the police would monitor that department, and after that, the deck. But because he seemed a frail man, his best bet for getting past the surveillance net would be as a coal stoker, as the police would probably not think of this department.

It helped, of course to be a Muslim, or at least to masquerade as one, for Muslims
were known to work as lascars, and in the colonial version of Aristotelian logic, lascars were Muslims and only Muslims could be lascars—unless perhaps one was a Christian. These were among the colonial stereotypes alluded to earlier in this essay. From Calcutta port, at least, it was apparently near-impossible to get a job on a ship if one looked like or was assumed to be an educated Bengali Hindu, who were by definition seen as potential subversives and political agitators. Incidents illustrating this were commonplace: on 3 January 1927, a policeman of the Special Branch accosted two youths who had entered the Shipping Office on Strand Road, Calcutta. “Seeing them to be Bengali,” the officer noted, “I enquired them their caste, and the reason of their going there [sic].” They said that they were Christians, and so he brought them in for questioning. In April, one Rabindranath Datta, son of Hemendranath Datta, tea garden proprietor in Tippera, was picked up for questioning while waiting for a friend, one A. Berry, who used to work as the butler on a ship. Datta told the police that Berry had said he could organise a job for him. Datta had first made a false statement to the police, saying he was a Christian, and later allegedly admitted he was a Brahmo. The police would stop and arrest all Bengali youths who tried to get jobs on ships or who “loitered” in the port area. Of course, they often rounded up harmless persons who were unemployed and wanted to go away and see the world. Hindus would therefore try to take on Muslim names, and sometimes were arrested on that count.

It was not completely impossible to get a seaman’s certificate as a Hindu, however. One Surendra Bejoy Bhattacharji was known to have exported elephants, leopards, and snakes for the Indo-Swiss Company to Hamburg Zoo. In possession of a seaman’s certificate, he left Calcutta on 8 July 1925 on SS Birkenfels and reached Hamburg on 2 September 1925. He then left Hamburg on 6 January 1926 holding a British passport and arrived at Calcutta by SS Liebenfels on 27 February 1926. In Hamburg he had looked after the animals; he went once to Berlin from Hamburg to the Indo-Swiss office in “Magdaburger [sic] Platz” and met a German employee of the firm who arranged for his passage. He also met Jotin Hui, ex-Bengal detenu, and an employee of Indo-Swiss in Berlin. Earlier, Bhattacharji, like so many before him, had been “challenged while found loitering in the shipping office, Calcutta” on 27 June 1925. The Indo-Swiss Company was run by ex-Bengal “terrorists” from Zürich and Calcutta, and was strongly suspected of transporting banned literature and arms with their employees on their return voyages.

There were thus several routes to, or motives for, lascarness, and perhaps four different, if overlapping, kinds of lascars. First, there were people who really were full-time lascars, with the attendant dangers and problems of an oversaturated supply of labour, employment for only part of the year, discriminatory pay, etc., as described ideal-typically in the labour history mode. These were the only people officially counted as “real” lascars. Second were people who used this network as a front for their political activities—there were only a few ways in which one could move in the empire or across the world, and this was one of them, and this became especially important as passport and visa regimes were tightened. Third were people who used this network for temporary employment, as a means to work their way from place to place. Fourth, there were those who started as lascars and moved into political activities. The overlaps and ambiguities need always to be kept in mind. Experiences of racial discrimination, financial hierarchies, and harsh labour regimes
could of course be politicising experiences, and those who acted as couriers of arms or illegal literature for communist, anarchist or “terrorist” organisations, were sometimes unsuspecting and sometimes willing couriers, with a variety of self-conscious motivations.

What is curious is that all the categories of persons described above worked as lascars, and of course were all subject to the regimes of control and conditions of employment that applied to that work, but that only the first category was considered a “genuine lascar” by the agents and agencies of the colonial state. “Lascar” in this reading ceases to be a profession, and acquires an indelible identity that permeates every aspect of his being, characteristics of which do not include self-consciously political activity. Historians have tended to reproduce this fallacy in an absent-mindedly well-meaning manner—one is tempted to recall Judith Butler’s remarks on the fixing of the category “woman” in order to have a subject to liberate—and it is important to recognise this in order to avoid doing the same.

**Imperial Anxieties, Mechanisms of Control, and the Politics of Seamen**

In line with the colonial imagination’s favoured assumption that ordinary people were immune to political consciousness unless misled by outside agitators, officials in the 1920s began to address the “danger of Indian Seamen being corrupted by Bolshevik agents at foreign ports.” At times, the outside agitator could also appear in the form of the non-Indian seaman, who was particularly well placed to smuggle proscribed literature and, of more serious concern, arms and ammunition into India. This fact was not lost on Indian radicals. M. N. Roy for instance, in his correspondence with Muzaffar Ahmed in 1922, suggested that the Vanguard and other literature could be “sent with European sailors.” This was in addition to recruiting Indian seamen going to India and Germany, for which he urged Muzaffar to “capture” the seamen’s union and get “some of their own men employed on boats coming to Genoa.” The seamen’s unions were of course already politicised, and did not have to await a communist-led takeover to turn to politics, although their willingness to take on board larger political causes was not always un-problematically positive. In 1920, at the outset of the Non-Cooperation Movement, for instance, police reported that the Indian Seamen’s Association was allegedly approached by a member of the Khilafat Executive Committee to organise a strike in connection with non-cooperation; apparently a representative of the Association demanded Rs 20,000 to bring this about, whereas the Khilafat Committee was only willing to pay Rs 10,000. The police themselves were sceptical of the report, but also asserted that they had “independent information” that one Maniruzzaman Islamabadi was attempting to persuade “the khalasis and lascars, the majority of whom come from Chittagong, to take up the cause of No-Co-operation [sic].”

Colonial authorities were well aware that “the channels of dispatch” for proscribed literature were “principally seamen,” Indian or otherwise. Of greater concern, though, were attempts to smuggle arms and ammunition, for which the outsider could be used with greater effect. The report quoted below was typical:
In October 1921 information was obtained in England that a German firm had sent about 150 automatic pistols to India. Five cases of smuggling by German seamen involving 15 revolvers or pistols and 218 rounds of ammunition, were detected at Indian ports in January 1922, and information was received that two consignments had been safely landed. In February a revolver was obtained in the course of enquiries regarding arms smuggling in Burma from ocean going steamers. In April an informant succeeded in buying another revolver [and] 24 rounds. A Punjabi Muhammadan was reported to have told an informer in March that he had friends on ships who could supply 10, 20, or 50 revolvers at a time.\textsuperscript{60}

Thus, “the greatest danger may be apprehended from foreign vessels arriving at India ports.”\textsuperscript{61}

It was also believed that the German government, despite the cessation of hostilities at the end of the First World War, continued to support Indian agitators and to turn a blind eye, at least, to German seamen transporting arms for Indian revolutionaries. There is no reason to assume that these seamen’s motives were revolutionary rather than pecuniary, but of course the one does not exclude the other, and cooperation between Indian revolutionaries and German and Indian seamen is clear, as evident in Hamburg port. It was the German Seamen’s Union that had assisted the return to India from Moscow of the communist Nalini Gupta, along with some arms and ammunition.\textsuperscript{62} One George Inglis, who spoke a little German and had been in jail for forgery, apparently overheard four German seamen—Schall, Löffler, Mairer and Heine, who were convicted and sentenced to two years for being in possession of several revolvers and ammunition—talking amongst themselves. Upon his release, Inglis reported the conversation to the police. One of the Germans, Schall, had been taken away for separate interrogation and upon his return was questioned by his other three colleagues as to what he had said. Inglis overheard them refer to a man called “Chakrabarty,” for whom the arms were intended, and to “Harrison Road.” He also named one Reuff, who was apparently crucial to the network of arms transport. Inglis further reported that the group had managed to land two full consignments of arms before being captured. “Chakrabarty,” the police regretfully noted, was too generic a name for them to pin down a particular person as a suspect.\textsuperscript{63}

The seriousness with which the threat of seamen was treated was reflected in how the entirety of the imperial machinery—from the highest to the lowest echelons of administration, from the Secretary of State for India down to the lowly Serang of the shipping vessel—was mobilised to counter the threat. Discussions extended to port and police authorities beyond India, British consular officials, various trade boards in India and Britain, and owners of shipping companies. In September 1923, Sir William Duke of the India Office wrote to Lord Inchcape, owner of Peninsular and Oriental (P&O), which had a near-monopoly of British mercantile traffic to and from India,\textsuperscript{64} informing him about the attempts of Indian revolutionaries to export literature and recruit seamen in Genoa, Marseilles, and Hamburg. Particularly notorious were the various seamen’s clubs which were a front for communist and revolutionary activities. Inchcape was informed how in Hamburg, for instance, Indian seamen were given books by M. N. Roy, told that a
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union was being formed for securing better terms of employment, and introduced to a "discontented Muhammadan who had lived for some time in Kabul and had reached Hamburg via Moscow and Berlin." Inchcape was asked to warn the captains of his vessels that visited Hamburg and other continental ports.  

In turn, Inchcape expressed gratitude for the information he periodically received from the India Office. He assured Duke that we would do everything possible to "prevent our Lascar crews from getting contaminated." He also updated Duke on how "each individual Captain of ours sailing to India has been personally interviewed and warned of the necessity for keeping a strict watch for any parcel being brought on board." Inchcape went beyond issuing straightforward warnings: in a generic letter addressed to the captains in his massive fleet, not marked by any strong ability to distinguish different strands of Indian political agitation, he wrote:

My Dear Captain,

I don’t know what truth there may be in it, but I have very good reason to believe that there is a Ghandianism [sic] propaganda going on with the object of raising an agitation—communistic and dangerous—amongst our Indian crews. I have no reason to believe that this has caught on with our lascars and firemen to any extent so far, but I am told that there is a possibility of the ringleaders attempting to get a certain number of men—who are not really seamen—into the steamers with object of furthering the movement. It is of the utmost importance that this should be checked and I would ask you, your Chief Officer and your Chief Engineer to put a careful watch on the men who sign on and to discard any in regard to whom you and they may the slightest doubt.

Your deck and engine men serangs are known to you and through them for the most part your crews are recruited. It would be advisable to see that the serangs you engage and the tindals who are under them are decent fellows and it is also most desirable that you and all your officers and engineers should show a kindly disposition to your Indian crews, helping them in matters of difficulty and endearing them to your service by kindly acts.

I understand 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.

Perhaps you will show this letter to your Chief and Second Officer and to your Chief and Second Engineer and ask them to treat it in confidence as I ask you to do and then to destroy it. 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.

Kindly acknowledge this by saying you have received my letter marked "A" and have carried out my wishes.

Yours sincerely,

Inchcape

The letter also provides a glimpse of the line of argument which held that the "shipping companies should treat their lascar seamen so well, in all particulars, that they
are immune to infection." The Government of Bombay gave this suggestion, which was quickly seconded by other governments and departments. Yet at the same it was acknowledged that these measures were impossible for any government to administer or enforce. And as Cecil Kaye, Director of the Intelligence Bureau, suggested, it was futile to expect that these measures would remedy the situation. After all, “social attempts at betterment of the lascar’s lot” had already been made in England. There was a “lascar’s welfare league,” “Sailors Homes in all the big ports in India,” and a cast of philanthropists and politicians who campaigned on behalf of the lascars. As far as Kaye was concerned:

Human nature being what it is, there will always be agitators, and always be people to listen to them: the ignorance of the Lascar will be likely to make him an easier prey than most, but will also be unlikely to make him a really useful agent. The Bombay Govt. letter, in effect, asks whether the Govt. of India have considered any method of bringing about a change in human nature, as specially manifested by the lascar; the answer to which is obvious. Again, this was one view within the imperial machinery. For others, and especially the Bombay Government, “the danger of such propaganda, the ease with which an unintelligent class like the lascars can be corrupted, and the difficulty of exercising any effective check on a mass of obscure individuals makes the danger a real one.” A rather narrow, and contradictory, view of lascars and politics continued to prevail, despite evidence to the contrary that was in government hands: “genuine” lascars were simple people who were not dangerous unless “agitated” by outsiders; lascars who were politically active were therefore not genuine lascars. But by a strange twist in the argument as presented by Kaye, a lascar contented with his lot was not deemed to be necessarily immune to “agitators,” because of his “ignorance,” combined apparently with “human nature.” Thus, it was not possible to agree that better conditions for lascars was a goal worth striving for—certainly it was not considered a goal worthwhile in its own right.

The divergence of views, and in particular, the impossibility of developing a watertight system of control and surveillance, only underscored how difficult the situation faced by the imperial machinery really was. There were already numerous instances of abuse and exploitation of loopholes in the regulatory regimes that ostensibly were designed to control lascars. Such was the case with, for example, the ubiquitous “Continuous Discharge Certificate,” which was designed to ensure that lascars would only be discharged at the ports from which they were hired for a particular return voyage. In theory, this meant that revolutionaries could not bypass the system by posing as lascars and gaining employment on shipping vessels bound for India from other ports. Nor for that matter—given the onerous regulations relating to the hiring of lascars at Indian ports—could they simply sign up for work on board a shipping vessel leaving from India to other ports. Yet, in practice, this was precisely what happened on a number of occasions; indeed Muzaffar Ahmad seems to have relied on this being relatively simple. The following excerpt from a report filed by the Captain of the SS Karonga illustrates this trend very well:

I want to report how two young Indian men of revolutionary character were signed on Articles of our steamers in the cases where the men were to join the
vessel at some other port, such as Singapore or Colombo. I also stated that such young men would not be seamen and could easily be distinguished from such, as they are educated far and above the ordinary Lascar and generally have had no previous sea service.

I have to report that two young men of this character were signed on Articles on of this steamer, one at Calcutta on the 18th of October 1923 and the other at Singapore October 31st 1923, the latter coming from Calcutta with the crew as a substitute for a “Failed to join.” It soon became apparent to both the Chief Engineer and myself that these two young men were not Lascars, and to discover they had never been at sea before, in fact one possesses a continuous discharge to that effect, the other having a continuous discharge certificate showing previous service in other ships, although he confessed to me that he was formerly in the Indian Army and had never seen the sea before leaving Calcutta.

Long before arriving New York I came to the conclusion that these two young men were proceeding to the United States for some unlawful purpose and after events proved my conclusion to be correct.

Those “after events” concerned an Indian man who came to the port and offered a $100 bribe to the watchman at the gate to allow those two men to escape from the ship. The three were apprehended and later indicted by a grand jury in New York. The two suspected revolutionaries had given their names as “Moileoolla” and “Rodooulla” and declared themselves as “Mohomedans” from Sylhet.73

Of course we have no way of knowing whether or not these identities were fabricated, but this incident provides a glimpse of the manifold ways in which colonial and mercantile controls were regularly bypassed. Clearly, it was possible to obtain and use fabricated discharge certificates to sign on to ships leaving India or at other ports. In addition to the fact that identities could fabricated relatively easily, with the help of a seaman’s certificate, it was also clear that political actors could use colonial categories—which dictated who could be hired from where—to evade systems of surveillance and control. The captain of the Karonga complained in his report on the two Sylheti deserters that he had been plagued by “a tremendous number of lascar desertions” in foreign ports; that this was the first time that the New York authorities had decided to do anything about desertions; and that the man who had offered the bribe to the watchman had been “instrumental in the desertion of many genuine lascars from our steamers.” For him a “genuine lascar” was not one with political motives for travelling, unlike the two deserters whose case he described.74

This account sits uneasily with the argument that desertion into a racially hostile environment where the lascar stood to forfeit pay and could be prosecuted by the immigration authorities of the country in which he deserted was an exceptional case brought about by extremely oppressive conditions.75 Clearly, there were existing networks in various ports—Hamburg being a notable example that we have dealt with here, Marseilles being another—which would enable a lascar to find protection and shelter in the event of his choosing to “desert,” for whatever reason. And as the captain lamented in the case of the two Sylhetis, the consequences of desertion were not necessarily terrible: if caught, the deserters would be deported back to India,
and no one would be any the wiser as to their motives for desertion or for wanting to be in that port in the first place. 76

The colonial government was thus well aware of the relative ease with which these “scenarios of regulation” could be bypassed and they introduced a number of measures during the 1920s and beyond. Some of these were incredibly specific. For instance, the Secretary of State issued a directive to the effect that Lascar Transfer Officers in England were to report directly to the India Office every instance of the engagement at a port “of a lascar whose papers are missing and appear to be unsatisfactory.” 78 Attempts were also made to expand variations of this scheme by involving British consular officers in the U.S—for example, to “inform the port authorities in India of any cases in which undesirable natives attempt to return to that country.” 79 Yet, while the Secretary of State was able to get these measures implemented in Britain, he was unable to do the same in the U.S., where British consular officials were quick to dismiss the scheme as impractical. 80 Here then lay the rub. Irrespective of whichever schemes the imperial government came up with—and there were plenty—they were, by and large, open to circumvention by determined political actors who may or not have been “genuine lascars.” 81

Conclusions

In the great political movements of the early twentieth century, the figure of the lascar was a crucial one, enabling the movement of persons, arms, banned literature, and ideas. The aim of this paper has been to return lascars to the wider context of the history of these times, rather than to contain them within unhelpful binaries of elite versus non-elite, self- or collective interest versus political or revolutionary interest, and thereby to leave them to the reductionist gaze of the labour historian. What this paper has sought to show is that lascars were the logical carriers for a number of reasons, but that they were not immune to the effects of what they carried—to play on the old disease metaphor for a moment. The lascars also could, and did, play on stereotypes about them as ignorant and docile, at the same time that their mobility enabled them to meet and connect people across the world. It was not lost on various political movements that they could use lascars and their networks, since they did not need passports (indeed they were the only network of travelling Indians who did not require passports) and there were too many of them for surveillance to be truly effective.

The figure of the lascar in the colonial imagination repeats Gayatari Spivak’s famous argument as farce in reverse: the lascar is the subaltern unable to speak; when he speaks he ceases to be a lascar. It is this expectation that it was impossible for the lascar to exercise agency in a meaningful way that made them politically useful—as a category. The lascar’s strength lay in the fact that by entering politics he become more than a lascar, and yet the ability to continue being a lascar was part of his anonymity. The irony is best illustrated by Dada Amir Haider Khan, the former lascar “masquerading” as a lascar. Historians would do well not to take this too seriously.

We do not know enough about the ideological commitments of the persons who worked as lascars in this period to build a reliable picture of the spaces; nor can we enter the minds of individuals in retrospect to distinguish between “real” and “pro-
claimed” motives—to decide, that is, whether “the” lascar saw himself as a “trader” or a “revolutionary,” or both, or neither. We can of course take existing testimonies at face value, but this is particularly problematic given that the typical lascar testimony is the police interrogation. But a few notes on the importance of lascars in a wider sense would be important to our understanding of the history of the period. We are not sure we want to keep the dichotomy between trade union activism and genuine politics too alive here, Lenin’s views notwithstanding, as we think that the boundary blurs very quickly: the openness of many lascars to the egalitarian message of world socialism cannot be completely disconnected from their experiences and struggles for “economistic” goals, collective (trade union) or individual (trader) ones. A wider question arises from this: how does one decide what the “correct” or “adequate” reading of an ideological framework is, which allegedly qualifies an individual to be considered “political” in a complete sense?

Historians’ lack of attention to the importance of lascars in politics is not merely due to the difficulty of the source materials; it stems in part from internalising the “genuine” and “non-genuine” lascar dichotomy, which maps too easily onto the dichotomy of non-elite and elite. Lascars belong in the larger context of history; they could not remain isolated from the wider impulses of the times. We could just as easily turn this into a dichotomy between the closely related fields of labour history and communist history (for both of which the colonial accounts are all too often read not “against the grain,” but far too literally), and which nonetheless manage to compartmentalise themselves. In such a reading, the lascar as labouring man and victim of colonial and capitalist oppression is somehow separated from the lascar as political figure, “awakening” to politics. We need, as we do in the case of (other) human beings, to understand lascars’ political inclinations not as organised or coherent ideology, but as related to lived experiences, dealing with the movement of ideas, the processes of formulating them and of translating them, and acknowledging the complexity and intermingling of motives and ends.
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Secondary Literature


Notes

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1 Labour historians refer to the “lascar system” or “lascar networks” as a form of labour organisation; imperial officials, by contrast, tended to use this term in the interwar period for the political networks of arms smuggling, the importing into India of banned literature, and the movement of people “masquerading” as lascars.

2 Guha, “The Prose of Counter-Insurgency.”

3 Visram, Ayahs, Lascars and Princes; Sherwood, “Race, Nationality and Employment.”

4 Omissi, Indian Voices of the Great War.

5 Roy, “South Asian Civilian Prisoners of War in First World War Germany.”

6 Balachandran, Globalising Labour.

7 The diversity of professions and life trajectories of persons who had begun their working lives or spent much of them as lascars is attested to by Samia Khatun’s recent PhD Thesis, Camels, Ships and Trains.

8 Broeze, “The Muscles of Empire.”

9 Broeze, “Underdevelopment and Dependency.”

10 Ahuja, “Mobility and Containment.”

11 Balachandran, “Cultures of Protest in Transnational Contexts”; Balachandran, Globalising Labour. An earlier paper by the same author—on the tactics of evasion, including name-changing and name-transposing (first, middle, and last names being juggled), used by lascars to evade the networks of surveillance and control imposed upon them by shipping companies and colonial officials—is a useful indication that the lascars had greater agency than is usually attributed to them. This article enlarges that argument by extending its purview to political activities. Unfortunately, we have not been able to trace a published version of that paper. Balachandran’s long-awaited monograph, though invoking lascar political activities, describes these as unusual, and restricts his analysis to trade union activities. See Balachandran, Globalising Labour, 3. Nevertheless, the body of work that he has produced stands out for acknowledging the agency of persons working as lascars. This work appeared in print after the present article had been written and the referees’ reports had been received, and we are glad that we were nonetheless able to take it into account while revising the article.


13 Hyslop, “Guns, Drugs and Revolutionary Propaganda.” Hyslop uses British intelligence records, one of the sets of sources used in this essay, from the Indian Political Intelligence (IPI) files in the India Office Records; his readings of the testimonies therein are, we believe, very literal-minded—on which, more below.

14 Fisher, “Working Across the Seas,” 26. There are wider perspectives, not central concerns of this article, that have been addressed with reference to lascars, in particular the interconnections made across the Indian Ocean or the Pacific, and on global connections in general, though often relating to different periods of time. See for example Goodall, “Port Politics” and Goodall et al., “Jumping Ship—Skirting Empire.”

15 Ahuja, “Subaltern Networks under British Imperialism.” Remarkably, this piece does not reference any primary sources. See also Ahuja, “Networks of Subordination—Networks of the Subordinated,” which does refer to some primary sources.


17 The reference here is of course to Guha, “The Prose of Counter-Insurgency.”

18 For an elaboration of this assumption, see Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” For a notable attempt to place lascars in the context of the movement of ideas, see Frost, “Asia’s Maritime Networks and the Colonial Public Sphere,” though the use of “public sphere” seems questionable here.

19 See for instance Johnston, The Voyage of the Komagata Maru; see also British Library: India Office Records (IOR): L/PJ/12/1.

20 The best example of which was the Ghadar
Party in North America. Other groups operated in Europe, such as the India House in London and the Berlin India Committee in Germany.

21 Broeze, “Maritime India.”

22 See Gardezi, Chains to Lose, Life and Struggles of a Revolutionary.

23 Ibid. 169–71.


26 On the Ghadar Party’s intellectual allegiances, see Ramnath, The Haj to Utopia.

27 For their political training, “students” were required to learn Russian and keep themselves abreast of the latest political developments. A key part of their course was the daily reading of newspapers which, in the case of Indian students, were translated and discussed by their Indian interlocutors at the University. Additionally, students were taught political and economic geography, anthropology, Marxist philosophy, and history. They were also taken for educational “excursions” and camping trips during the summer where group discussions on politics and training in military tactics took place.

28 Gardezi, Chains to Lose, 538–98.

29 IOR: L/P&J/12/52, Note on “Indian Communist Party” dated September 1923, in “Conveyance of Seditious Literature to India—Correspondence with Shipping Companies,” f. 2.


31 IOR: L/P&J/12/52, f. 2.

32 IOR: L/P&J/12/52, f. 2.

33 “Khusi Mohamed, alias Mohamed Ali, alias Ahmad Hassan, alias Sepassi (see official correspondence with Berlin) alias Ibrahim, at present in Hamburg under name Ibrahim. Believed to be engaged in sending arms and seditious literature to India.” No. 4, in “List of Indian agitators to be removed from Germany,” entry in file on “Removal of Indian agitators from Berlin,” c. 1924, IOR: L/PJ/12/223, f. 13.

34 IOR: L/PJ/12/223.

35 IOR: L/PJ/12/52, f. 2.

36 IOR: L/PJ/12/223; National Archives of India (NA): Home (Political) 263, 1925; NA: Home (Political) 139/I & K.W., 1925.

37 IOR/L/P&J/12/52, f. 2. Hyslop cites this report in “Guns, Drugs and Revolutionary Propaganda,” but takes at face value the testimony reproduced here, including the fact that lascars could not read the literature they were transporting—he does not note the part that “Khalique could read a little.”

38 For several instances of this form of testimony, see Roy, “South Asian Prisoners of War in First World War Germany”; for an understanding of the idioms of such interrogation see 55, 69. The piece compares testimony of the same individual lascars in British and German sources, providing ample evidence that they understood the differing idioms and expectations that were to be played upon.


40 Ahmad, Myself and the Communist Party of India, 330.

41 On passport regimes, see Mongia, “Race, Nationality, Mobility.”

42 The payment to an intermediary in order to secure employment on a vessel was almost always rendered in official documents as a bribe.

43 On the roles and connections of the serangs see Balachandran, “Searching for the Sardar.” This partakes of an old labour history debate with which we are not concerned here; but we might want to call into question the structural analysis of serangs’ relationships with recruited labour if Ahmad expected easy access to a job on board ship. That is certainly not to suggest that there is not enough evidence to indicate the existence of such structural relationships; rather, this is simply to point out that these relationships could also often be negotiated and outmanoeuvred.

44 In the end, he failed to go, first having to cure his scabies, and then getting bitten by a dog. As a result of his failure to leave, he was arrested. Ahmad, Myself and the Communist Party of India, 330.

45 On recruitment by region and community, see Broeze, “Maritime India During the Raj,” 447; Broeze, “Muscles of Empire,” 45.


47 “Butler” is the term given to the serang or middleman who recruited the saloon hands.


Broeze, “The Muscles of Empire.”

Butler, Gender Trouble, 11.

NAI: Home (Political) 372/I 1924, 4.

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55 See also IB Sl No 105/22, File No 61/22: “Arms and ammunition—seizure of revolvers in the possession of German seamen in Calcutta,” WBSA, Calcutta; Hyslop, “Guns, Drugs and Revolutionary Propaganda.”

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Broeze, “Maritime India.”

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Our emphasis.

IOR: L/P&J/12/52. A copy of this letter was also forwarded to the India Office.


NAI: Home (Political) 372/I 1924, 5.


See above.


NAI: Home (Political), 372–I 1924, 15.

Ahuja, “Mobility and Containment,” 120–3.

NAI: Home (Political), 372–I 1924, 15.

The phrase is Ahuja’s: “Mobility and Containment,” 115.

Letter from the India Office to the Board of Trade, London, dated 16/08/1923, NAI: Home (Political), 372–I 1924, 23.


See for instance IOR: L/P&J/12/53 which details how the system was bypassed through the “Singapore Club”—described as a “meeting place” for Indians—in Antwerp in 1929.