Shipping Lords and Coolie Stokers

Class, Race, and Maritime Capitalism in the Early Twentieth Century

Ravi Ahuja

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Introduction: 'Lascar' Seamen and 'Racial Management' under Steamship Capitalism

'True stories' of shipwrecks were sure to find a ready market in 1930 and Robert L. Hadfield, a prolific commercial writer churning out a diverse range of pulp fiction, was clearly aware of this when he launched, in that year, a popular history of 'maritime disasters' in the first three decades of the twentieth century – a narrative professedly 'drawn from authentic sources'. The book included a brief account of the shipwreck of the Royal Mail Ship *Egypt* in 1922, which Hadfield introduced with the following words:

> An unsatisfactory business, this sinking of the liner *Egypt*. Seamanship was not lacking, nor was vigilance against the enemy fog, but good order and discipline fled in the face of peril. A lascar crew, child-like in its respect for authority well exerted, but also child-like in its incontrollable fears during danger if the guiding hand be absent, failed in its duty and brought death to many of its members and to the passengers in its care.[1]

A 'lascar' was, in the jargon of British imperialism, a South Asian seafarer – an ambiguous term that carried, however, legal meaning as it denoted

1 Robert L. Hadfield, *Sea-Toll of Our Time: A Chronicle of Maritime Disaster during the Last Thirty Years Drawn from Authentic Sources*, London: H. F. & G. Witherby, 1930, p. 180.

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an inferior contractual status than that stipulated in the 'articles of agreement' for 'European seamen'. The denomination 'lascar' was the maritime equivalent for the inland 'coolie': it indicated not only lower levels of compensation for wage labour but also inferior racial status and a high degree of unfreedom. In the interwar period, the real wages of 'lascars' could amount to as little as a fifth of those of British seamen, while other contractual and non-contractual working conditions were likewise worse, ranging from reduced shipboard accommodation and cheaper provisions via less regulated work time and unenforceable accident compensations to a severely constricted right to terminate contract. British shipowners clearly considered this racially subordinated colonial segment of their maritime workforce a competitive advantage and pushed forward with its expansion: if 8 per cent of Britain's merchant seafarers had been categorized as 'lascars' in 1886, this share had trebled to almost a quarter by 1930, when Hadfield published his book.[2]

Hadfield's account of the *Egypt* disaster had only the loosest of connections to 'authentic sources', as we shall see. But, to ensure the commercial success of his book, it was surely more essential to satisfy his readers' expectations and to evoke resonance with what they may have considered 'common sense'. The opening paragraph thus latched on to a timeworn theme of colonial ideology that had been immortalized in Rudyard Kipling's infamous 1899 poem: the 'white man' had to carry the 'burden' of directing the 'new-caught' childlike (as well as devilish) 'sullen peoples' of the colonies and put them to good, rational use.[3]

How 'authority [be] well exerted' by the 'guiding hand' on board ship was seldom formulated in explicit terms, was unlikely to be recorded, and very rarely reported from a critical perspective. Even among unionized British workers, few disowned publicly the imperial ideology of colonial labour discipline, but George Hardy, a former militant of the

2 The literature of 'lascars' is extensive as will be discussed below. For a brief overview of the main features of 'lascar' employment on British steamers see Ravi Ahuja, 'The Age of the Lascar: South Asian Seafarers in the Times of Imperial Steam Shipping', in Joya Chatterji and David Washbrook (eds), *Routledge Handbook of the South Asian Diaspora*, London: Routledge, 2013, pp. 110–22.

3 Rudyard Kipling, 'The White Man's Burden', in *The Writings in Prose and Verse of Rudyard Kipling*, vol. 13, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1899, pp. 479–80.

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syndicalist Industrial Workers of the World in North America and, subsequently, in Britain a leading figure of the communist seamen's Minority Movement, was one of them. In 1915, he joined the crew of a Belgian freight ship sailing to Congo with a predominantly African crew. 'One day,' he recalled in his memoirs,

> the Africans on my four to eight morning watch . . . failed to scrub out chalk marks from the passengers' deck games. The boatswain's mate rushed at the nearest African sailor and kicked him hard, again and again. 'That's the only way to make the savage work,' he told me. 'You must make them work.'[4]

And he would hear this very sentence – 'they must be made to work' – reiterated time and again by 'white' officials, missionaries, and settlers in Congo.[5] This was, he observed, the central dogma and perpetual mantra of a violent labour regime he associated not only with Belgian colonialism but with imperialism in general. Habitual – even structurally embedded – physical violence, as encountered by Hardy, was certainly a regular trait of many racialized labour regimes including those, as we shall see, in imperial shipping. Yet the methods of 'racial management', of employing racial subordination to fulfil the imperative of 'making them work' were not reducible to boot, stick, and whip.[6] They were being perpetually elaborated and refined on various sites of capitalist production dispersed over large parts of the globe that included the slave societies of the Americas as much as colonial territories in Africa and Asia. While theories and practices of 'racial management' remained deeply inconsistent and varied according to their field of application, they also bore common characteristics as all of them were premised, as I shall argue, on notions of commodified labour.

This book approaches these common characteristics by scrutinizing one such field of 'racial management': the imperial labour regime that

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4 George Hardy, *Those Stormy Years: Memories of the Fight for Freedom on Five Continents*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1956, p. 61.

5 Ibid., pp. 64–6.

6 The concept has been introduced into the debate in a seminal article to which we shall return severally: Elizabeth Esch and David R. Roediger, '"One Symptom of Originality": Race and Management of Labor in US History', in D. R. Roediger, *Class, Race, and Marxism,* London: Verso, 2017, pp. 115–56.

regulated the work process on board British steamers. It does so by excavating the microhistory of the same shipwreck that Hadfield dealt with in a few prejudiced sentences: the sinking of the S.S. *Egypt* in 1922. For the extensive documentation generated around this fatal event gives us a close-up view of a racialized labour regime at work: daily routines that remained unrecorded under normal circumstances were fleetingly visible, as if illuminated by lightning, at the very moment when they broke down on a sinking ship. But, before we move up close, we need to step back: shipwreck accounts are far from straightforward. They follow, almost unconsciously, long-established moral, legal, and narrative conventions, which need to be unpacked and fractured to allow for a critical analysis. If Robert Hadfield and many subsequent writers submitted to established expectations to sell their shipwreck stories, we cannot afford to do so for our own purposes. Instead, we must find a vantage point that allows us to break free from such conventions and read the documents in unexpected ways that were neither intended nor even perceivable by their authors. We must, therefore, first lay out the historical contexts of our analysis, disclose the theoretical propositions from which we proceed and consider to what extent existing research can help us in our undertaking. These, too, are conventions, of course, namely the commonly tedious ones of academic scholarship, and readers may be tempted to flip over the rest of this introduction to get to the 'meat of the story'. Yet, as the aim of this book is explicitly *not* to conjure up contemplative empathy with people of another age but to facilitate critical engagement with enduring structures of social power and exploitation, it will help if the premises of the narrative are open on the table.[7]

The ship has figured throughout history as the most dramatic materialization of human engagement with the forces of nature and of the limitations of that engagement. The urge to exchange goods along coastlines and across the seas provoked maritime risk-taking and

7 The point that the empathetic approach to history was ultimately conservative and irreconcilable with an emancipatory 'concept of history' was emphasized by Walter Benjamin. If we are to overcome the intellectual and political vacuity of the identitarian neo-romanticism of our own time, this remains, I believe, a fundamental issue to address. Cf. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, *1938–1940*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2003, pp. 391, 401, 405f.

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technological ingenuity in diverse societies, though the expanding commodity circuits in the long history of capitalism have reshaped the ship as a social institution and as a technical artifact in an accelerating rhythm.[8] More specifically, the exponential growth of maritime trade, the fundamental changes in the political economy and social organization of shipping, and the repeated technological transformations since the second half of the nineteenth century are historically without precedent.

The rise of the steamship as a bulk carrier permitted (in combination with expanding railway and telegraph networks) not only explosive growth of the volume of maritime trade, but also accelerated and regularized rhythms of commodity exchange. This increased, in turn, the ability to coordinate and distribute commodity production across far-flung geographical regions and generated an incessant diversification of goods and of labour forces to be exchanged and moved profitably between the continents. As maritime logistics became more fully integrated with a progressively generalized process of capitalist production, shipping was transformed from an activity controlled by merchant capitalists or, since the seventeenth century, by joint stock trading companies, into an industry in its own right. When steamers turned into ever more giant, technologically complex, and costly machines requiring an equally capital-intensive and fundamentally transformed port infrastructure, this new shipping industry came into its own. Highly capitalized as well as specialized shipping businesses emerged that were, in turn, confronted with an unrelenting drive towards a centralization of shipping capital by way of cartels and mergers. They stood a chance to withstand this vortex of centralization only if they could gain privileged access to (preferably imperial) state power to secure subsidies, infrastructural support, and market control. The age of steam shipping drew to a close in the interwar decades with a shift from coal- to diesel-fuelled shipping, and container shipping eventually emerged as the dominant form of bulk carriage after the Second World War. As a result, maritime transport became even more capital intensive, and shipping capital was driven to further centralization, while dramatic new changes in business

8 For a recent analytical overview of the interconnected histories of capitalism and of shipping see Liam Campling and Alejandro Colás, *Capitalism and the Sea: The Maritime Factor in the Modern World,* London: Verso, 2021.

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organization, maritime technology, and port infrastructure signified yet another distinct period in shipping history.

It is less well appreciated, however, that the age of steam shipping, lasting from about the 1860s to the mid-twentieth century, also brought about historically specific labour regimes as well as a thoroughly transformed and distinctly organized set of labour processes. If skill profiles and shipboard hierarchies on a steamer diverged fundamentally from those of the sailing ship, the need for massive inputs of labour power remained. As steamers required sizeable crews (that included firemen laboriously working the coal and stewards catering to increasing numbers of passengers), seafaring continued to be a large, politically indispensable, and highly visible occupational sector in many parts of the world. When the International Labour Organization was created in the wake of the First World War and against the backdrop of a global revolutionary crisis, it was, therefore, no coincidence that the establishment of international labour standards in maritime transport was high on their agenda.[9]

The shift from coal to oil and diesel had already reduced the labour intensity of ship propulsion in the final decades of the age of the steamship, but, from the mid-century onwards, container shipping permitted a mechanization of cargo handling and a more dramatic reduction of the maritime workforce, which was further sharpened as overseas passengers came to prefer aircrafts to liners. Maritime social space was now transformed beyond recognition as harbour facilities were removed from lively and often politically unruly urban waterfronts to sparsely populated and socially invisible suburban port zones.

If we can thus trace at least two major transformations of the maritime world of labour within the space of little more than a century, maritime labour historians have nevertheless tended to emphasize continuities rather than changes in this world. As most of them have been mainly concerned with the history of labour relations (rather than work processes) this perspective has been plausible on many counts. In international maritime labour law, for instance, changes appear to have been gradual rather than radical in the past two centuries and a pronounced

9 Leon Fink, *Sweatshops at Sea: Merchant Seamen in the World's First Globalized Industry, from 1812 to the Present*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011, pp. 149–52.

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transnational mobility and multilingual composition persists as a defining feature of the maritime workforce across the ages. Ports like Liverpool, Marseille, Hamburg, Bombay, or New York, on which much of the archival evidence for maritime labour relations is focused, thus did not present themselves as less cosmopolitan in the age of steam than they had in the age of sail. Seen from the outside, furthermore, the very work site of the ship, characterized simultaneously by its movement between jurisdictions and by its extreme insularity (that some scholars have even perceived as the perfect precondition for the emergence of a 'total institution') has suggested a long continuity or even a trans-historical nature of shipboard hierarchies and forms of conflict.[10]

Finally, certain ethnic patterns of maritime recruitment survived the age of sail and did so, at first sight, without much alteration. The predominantly South Asian maritime labour force known to Europeans as 'lascars' (derived from the Farsi word *lashkar* for military labour) appears to be a prominent case in point.[11] If 'lascars' replenished as early as in the sixteenth-century crews on Portuguese (and subsequently on Dutch, French, and British) trading vessels in the Indian Ocean, seafarers of the same designation continued to be hired for British and German steamship liners 400 years later. Such 'lascar' workforces have been the subject of extensive research over several decades and a sizeable corpus of writings has emerged that covers a wide array of relevant themes. Much of the research has been concerned with the presence of 'lascars' in British and other North Atlantic port cities and with attempts of such seafarers to opt out of the maritime labour market and find a foothold as immigrants. Rozina Visram's pioneering work placed the 'lascar' in a long-term history of South Asian immigration;[12] Michael Fisher examined the highly visible 'lascar' presence in London in the

10 Cf. Heide Gerstenberger, 'Men Apart: The Concept of "Total Institution" and the Analysis of Seafaring', *International Journal of Maritime History* 8, no. 1 (1996), pp. 173–82.

11 Henry Yule and A. C. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases* . . . , new 4th ed., New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1984 (1st ed. 1903), pp. 507–9.

12 Rozina Visram, *Ayahs, Lascars and Princes: The Story of Indians in Britain 1700–1947,* London: Pluto Press, 1986; Rozina Visram, *Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History*, London: Pluto Press, 2002. As for more recent publications see for instance Shompa Lahiri, 'Patterns of Resistance: Indian Seamen in Imperial Britain', in A. J. Kershen (ed.), *Language, Labour and Migration*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000, pp. 155–78.

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early nineteenth century and particularly during the Napoleonic Wars;[13] Laura Tabili's work stands out in particular from a more extensive literature on racist policies in early twentieth-century Britain targeting the immigration and employment of 'coloured seamen';[14] and community activists, anthropologists, and historians documented and analysed the experiences of South Asian immigrants with a seafaring background in the interwar and middle decades of the twentieth century.[15]

Conrad Dixon initiated another line of inquiry focusing on the employment relations of South Asian seafarers and their racialized legal regulation in the British Empire, assuming, once again, a long-term perspective that covered crews of sailing vessels as much as those of steamers a century later.[16] Gopalan Balachandran's wide-ranging studies took account of many aspects of South Asian maritime labour history but were particularly thorough in their analysis of conflicts over the regulation of 'lascar' mobility and employment relationships in the early decades of the twentieth century[17] – a field of intensive research, which

13 Michael H. Fisher, *Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian Travellers and Settlers in Britain 1600–1857*, Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004.

14 Laura Tabili, *'We Ask for British Justice': Workers and Racial Difference in Late Imperial Britain*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994. Earlier, groundbreaking research in this area was conducted by Marika Sherwood. See for instance her 'Race, Nationality and Employment among Lascar Seamen, 1660 to 1945', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 17, no. 2 (1991), pp. 233f (229–44).

15 Caroline Adams (ed.), *Across Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers: Life Histories of Pioneer Sylheti Settlers in Britain*, London: Eastside Books, 1994 (1987); Yousuf Choudhury, *The Roots and Tales of Bangladeshi Settlers*, Birmingham: Sylheti Social History Group, 1993; Yousuf Choudhury, *Sons of the Empire: Oral History from the Bangladeshi Seamen Who Served on British Ships during the 1939–45 War*, Birmingham: Sylheti Social History Group, 1995; Katy Gardner, 'Keeping Connected: Security, Place, and Social Capital in a "Londoni" Village in Sylhet', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14, no. 3 (2008), pp. 477–95; David Holland, 'Toffee Men, Travelling Drapers and Black-Market Perfumers: South Asian Networks of Petty Trade in Early Twentieth Century Britain', *Twentieth Century British History* 30, no. 2 (2019), pp. 145–73; Ceri-Anne Fidler, 'The Impact of Migration upon Family Life and Gender Relations: The Case of South Asian Seafarers, c.1900–50', *Women's History Review* 24, no. 3 (2015), pp. 410–28.

16 Conrad H. Dixon, 'Seamen and the Law: An Examination of the Impact of Legislation on the British Merchant Seaman's Lot, 1588–1918', doctoral thesis, University College London, 1981.

17 Balachandran's important research, much of it previously published in numerous articles, is conveniently compiled in Gopalan Balachandran, *Globalizing Labour? Indian Seafaring and World Shipping, c. 1870–1945,* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012.

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others, including the present author, cultivated as well.[18] Yet other researchers examined the history of 'lascar' employment in the context of an Indian Ocean maritime economy and culture,[19] and some shifted the temporal scope of this research back into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[20] A diverse body of writings has been concerned with unearthing forms of labour militancy among a South Asian maritime workforce that was regularly represented, in colonial imaginations, as particularly 'docile'. Some authors focused, in this regard, on modalities of shipboard conflict both on sailing vessels and on steamers[21] with a recent intervention emphasizing the continuity of behavioural patterns.[22] Others, taking

18 See, e.g., Ravi Ahuja, 'Mobility and Containment: The Voyages of South Asian Seamen, c. 1900–1960', *International Review of Social History* 51 (2006, supplement), pp. 111–41; Ravi Ahuja, 'Networks of Subordination – Networks of the Subordinated: The Case of South Asian Maritime Labour under British Imperialism (c. 1890–1947)', in Harald Fischer-Tiné and Ashwini Tambe (eds), *Spaces of Disorder: The Limits of British Colonial Control in South Asia and the Indian Ocean*, London: Routledge, 2008, pp. 13–48.

19 See for instance Janet Ewald, 'Crossers of the Sea: Slaves, Freedmen, and Other Migrants in the Northwestern Indian Ocean, c. 1750–1914', *American Historical Review* 105, no. 1 (2000), pp. 69–91; Jonathan Hyslop, 'Steamship Empire: Asian, African and British Sailors in the Merchant Marine c.1880–1945', *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 44, no. 1 (2009), pp. 49–67; Heather Goodall, Deevlana Ghosh, and Lindi R. Todd, 'Jumping Ship – Skirting Empire: Indians, Aborigines and Australians across the Indian Ocean', *Transforming Cultures eJournal* 3, no. 1 (2008), pp. 44–74.

20 Matthias van Rossum, 'The Rise of the Asian Sailor? Inter-Asiatic Shipping, the Dutch East India Company and Maritime Labour Markets (1500–1800)', in Sabyasachi Bhattacharya (ed.), *Towards a New History of Work,* New Delhi: Tulika, 2014, pp. 180–213; Ghulam Nadri, 'Sailors, Zielverkopers, and the Dutch East India Company: The Maritime Labour Market in Eighteenth-Century Surat', *Modern Asian Studies* 49, no. 2 (2015), pp. 336–64; James W. Frey, 'Getting Away with Murder: The Wrongful Deaths of Lascars Aboard the *Union* in 1802', special issue, *International Review of Social History* 59 (2014), pp. 45–68.

21 Aaron Jaffer, *Lascars and Indian Ocean Seafaring, 1780–1860: Shipboard Life, Unrest and Mutiny*, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2015; Michael H. Fisher, 'Finding Lascar "Wilful Incendiarism": British Ship-Burning Panic and Indian Maritime Labour in the Indian Ocean', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 35, no. 3 (2012), pp. 596–623; Ravi Ahuja, 'A Freedom Still Enmeshed in Servitude: The Unruly "Lascars" of the S.S. City of Manila or, a Micro-History of the "Free Labour" Problem', in Ravi Ahuja (ed.), *Working Lives and Worker Militancy: The Politics of Labour in Colonial India*, Delhi: Tulika, 2013, pp. 97–133.

22 Naina Manjrekar, 'Violent and Not Quite Modern? Lascars and Everyday Resistance Across the Sail-Steam Divide', Special Issue on Maritime History, *Labour History* 116 (2019), pp. 29–55.

a cue from Frank Broeze's pathbreaking work,[23] have been more concerned with forms of unionization, large-scale industrial action, and labour movement internationalism that became feasible and increasingly organized among South Asian seafarers only after the First World War and particularly during the Second.[24]

The level of interest that 'lascars' have attracted among researchers in recent decades may come as a surprise, even if we consider that one out of four crew members of the British merchant marine, by far the largest commercial fleet internationally, was hired in the 'lascar' recruitment ports of Calcutta and Bombay in the interwar period. In addition to these roughly 50,000 men, almost as many were registered in some years as having been recruited for other steamers, and an unknown but unquestionably sizeable number of South Asian seafarers found work on the subcontinent's numerous coastal sailing vessels. If this was indeed a very sizable workforce, the main reason for the growing interest in its history may still have to be located for the main part in the ideological context of our own time, and, specifically, the two decades between the fall of European state socialism and the global financial crisis of 2008. This was a time when deafening neoliberal 'globalization' narratives were ubiquitous, when the 'prehistory of globalization' was a career-building and commercially promising sector of historiographical manufacture, and when even those who dared to dissent often believed that a mere inversion of the hegemonic discourse – counter-histories of a 'globalization from below' – offered a radical alternative. For the latter, a seemingly uninterrupted cosmopolitan tradition of plebeian oceanic culture and of maritime work, a longue durée history of the 'motley

23 Frank Broeze, 'The Muscles of Empire: Indian Seamen and the Raj, 1919–1939', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 18, no. 1 (1981), pp. 43–67; Frank Broeze, 'Militancy and Pragmatism: An International Perspective on Maritime Labour, 1870–1914', *International Review of Social History* 36, no. 2 (1991), pp. 165–200.

24 See in particular Gopalan Balachandran, 'Conflicts in the International Maritime Labour Market: British and Indian Seamen, Employers, and the State, 1890–1939', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* 39, no. 1 (2002), pp. 71–100; David Featherstone, 'Maritime Labour, Circulations of Struggle, and Constructions of Transnational Subaltern Agency: The Spatial Politics of the 1939 Indian Seafarers' Strikes', *Antipode* 55, no. 5 (2022), pp. 1411–32; Diane Kirkby and Lee-Ann Monk, 'Indian Seamen and Australian Unions Fighting for Labour Rights: "The Real Facts of the Lascars' Case" of 1939', *Labour History* 113 (2017), pp. 209–39; Heather Goodall, 'Port Politics: Indian Seamen, Australian Unions and Indonesian Independence, 1945–47', *Labour History* 94 (2008), pp. 43–68.

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crew' seemed a promising addition to a proliferating literature on 'subaltern agency'. If Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker's riveting history of a 'revolutionary Atlantic' had made a highly suggestive (if perhaps not always compelling) case for a diverse yet coherent radical, emancipatory, and anti-capitalist tradition that had been forged by often maritime plebeians as they crossed oceans in the seventeenth to early nineteenth centuries, might it be possible that 'the lascar's' contributions to this tradition just needed to be recovered from the condescending ignorance of posterity?[25]

Yet the implicit presupposition of an unbroken transhistorical identity of 'the lascar' reveals itself as implausible as soon as we think it through in concrete terms: Can we really assume that South Asian seafarers remained involved in largely the same social relations irrespective of whether they worked the sails on a moderately sized vessel owned by an eighteenth-century British 'country trader' in the Indian Ocean or whether they toiled in the engine room of an infinitely more capital-intensive twentieth-century passenger liner run by a globally operating and state-subsidized shipping conglomerate? If such questions have rarely been asked in historical writings, this is due to two limitations of the otherwise rich research into the history of maritime labour and particularly of steamship labour.

The first limitation, alluded to already, is that labour historians (of South Asia as well as of other regions) have tended to approach the history of seafarers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from firm ground rather than from heaving decks on the ocean: vantage points of their examination have been largely the 'sailortowns' of port cities or the inland regions from which ship workers were recruited, and much less their – admittedly less abundantly documented – floating work sites. The second – and connected – limitation derives from the unfortunate parting of ways of labour history with economic and business history, which has been almost pervasive in recent decades. Historians of British shipping in the nineteenth and twentieth century thus analysed changing business models and technologies as well as the inextricable entanglements of the shipping industry with the imperial state, but have rarely stooped to consider the implications of their findings for the

25 Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: The Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic*, London: Verso, 2002.

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management of labour. Labour historians, in turn, have closely studied the colonial dimensions of maritime labour recruitment, but most of them appear to have lost the inclination to examine the place of labour in business strategies. While the relations of workers to the state have been highlighted, the relations between labour and capital remained largely in the shadows. The consequences of both limitations are much the same: while land-based vantage points and a focus on the state permitted analyses of the regulation of recruitment, international mobility, and contractual labour relations, historians' avoidance of the work site and their reluctance to engage with shipping capital and its changing and diverse accumulation strategies meant that labour management on board ship – the work process, the moment when maritime labour power was utilized and set into value – was given short shrift. This shortcoming is, as we shall see, particularly pronounced for ship-work after the age of sail though it is not unique to this field of labour history. Studies of labour processes on board steamers are rare, accordingly, and the only systematic investigation I have been able to trace is an excellent German-language monograph that owes much of its acuity, perhaps, to having been jointly authored by a historical sociologist (Heide Gerstenberger) and a ship's-engineer-turned-historian (Ulrich Welke).[26]

To anticipate one of the arguments of the present book, close attention to the labour process allows to perceive and explain momentous shifts in the composition of the maritime workforce and a heightened importance of 'race' in the management of ship-work in the age of steam. For the proverbial 'motley crew' that was multilingual, ethnically diverse, and had joined the ship from ports all over the globe became much less frequent in the age of steam than it had been in the age of sail (or would be in the age of the container). Instead, steamship crews were more likely to be ethnically segmented than 'cosmopolitan': the departmental structure of the ship's hierarchy that emerged with the spread of the new propulsion technology and the expansion of maritime passenger traffic, i.e., the compartmentalization into deck, engine room, and cabin crews, each with their own chain of command, could be mirrored by an ethnic compartmentalization along these organizational divisions.

26 Heide Gerstenberger and Ulrich Welke, *Vom Wind zum Dampf. Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Handelsschiffahrt im Zeitalter der Industrialisierung*, Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 1996.

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The point is certainly not that the pervasiveness of racist stereotypes in the age of imperialism has been overlooked in the existing historiography. It has been well known that the attributes of 'docility', inferior physical strength, lack of skill, and 'unmanliness' were regularly attached in British discourses to 'lascars', other 'coloured seamen', and even more generously to all seafarers who did not happen to be 'white' and British. It has also been pointed out that specific work capacities (to bear with extreme heat or cold, for instance) were believed to be inherent qualities of particular 'races'. At issue is, however, whether it is sufficient to study merely the most overtly abusive linguistic expressions of maritime racism and expose their evident irrationality. I argue that racist ideology must be examined in the context of social relations of power shaped by the (il)logic of capital accumulation. This presupposes that the racism of the most powerful classes in society, the structurally dominating form of racist ideology and social practice, needs to be examined with the greatest care even if the linguistic forms in which this hegemonic racism has been expressed may appear less violent. This presupposes conversely that white working-class racism can be examined in isolation from the study of boardroom racism only at the risk of concealing the roots of modern racism in structures of social power under capitalism.

At the level of language, this implies that the politics of 'polite' ethnic renaming should be regarded as a common practice of racist subordination and do not possess the quasi-magic quality of disarming racism that contemporary liberal identitarians seem to ascribe to them. The racist content of publicly and officially used categories like 'lascar', 'coloured seaman', or 'native seafarer' becomes fully perceivable only if we make explicit that they were used as publishable and recordable equivalents for the deliberately offensive 'nigger' that was commonly used to refer to South Asian as much as to African seafarers on British and other Euro-American ships at least until the mid-twentieth century. Joseph Conrad's infamous choice of the title *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* for his first commercially successful novel was no inadvertent slip-up, as I will show.[27] The title did not merely reflect contemporary linguistic usage but condensed the gist of a novel that naturalized racialized social hierarchy. No obfuscation on the part of liberal or radical literary

27 Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'*, ed. Cedric Watts, London: Penguin, 1989 (1st ed. 1897).

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scholars, no mannerly asterisk, nor retroactive retitling (as in a recent German retranslation) will make this go away.[28] Crucially, and for all practical purposes, the usually restrained language employed to regulate the working conditions and residential entitlements of 'coloured seamen' *defined* a social position that implied, reinforced, and enabled violently abusive everyday racism.

The key issue, I argue, is not *how* ethnic categories of workers were denominated but the fact of ethnic categorization itself. For these categories, whether they were articulated in overtly insulting or politely disguised racist terms in the interwar period or, as is more likely a century later, in a seemingly less offensive 'culturalist' idiom, have had very practical implications for the management and for the experience of labour.[29] Modern racism is deeply informed by the logic of commodification (and so is postmodern culturalism): if commodities are qualitatively distinguished according to their useability, modern essentialist ideologues assign specific features of usability and differential use values to racially (or culturally) defined sections of the global workforce. This can be observed historically for all forms of commodified labour ranging from slavery to presumably 'free' waged work.

While studies on racially segmented labour markets have been undertaken frequently and for many decades, the role of 'racial management' in capitalist labour processes is still insufficiently understood. I argue that the blatant irrationality of theories of racially defined labour value – we will have to engage with some more hair-raising outpourings in this book – does not preclude their practical utility for capital. And this utility is only revealed if racialized practices of managing labour processes are closely investigated. If pioneering studies of this kind have been undertaken for the post-slavery USA, I propose that connected and similar practices unfolded in the British Empire and, in all likeliness, elsewhere.[30]

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28 This refers in particular to the interpretations of this novel offered by Edward Said; see below, p. 51. The novel was republished in German in 2020 under a misleading title that translates as 'The Nobody of the "Narcissus"': Joseph Conrad, *Der Niemand von der 'Narcissus'*, transl. Mirko Bonné, Hamburg: Mare Verlag, 2020.

29 For a contemporary application of cultural essentialism to the management of 'human resources' see Geert Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions, and Organizations across Nations*, 2nd ed., Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001.

30 See especially the work of David Roediger and Elizabeth Esch as discussed in more detail in subsequent chapters.

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In this book I argue, more specifically, that 'racial management' provided the imperial British shipping industry with a feasible alternative to regularized and more expensive forms of employment and with a means to avoid or delay heavy investment in technologically more advanced fixed capital.

I had promised transparency at the beginning of this introduction – the analytical instruments and my main contentions are now on the table. What they are worth remains to be seen, as we move on from abstract concepts and theories to a concrete historical field of forces where numerous social actors engaged with each other in complex ways, all in pursuit of their respective interests and motivations. For 'racial management', a modality of class relations buttressed by racist status ascription, assumed historical reality only through multiple and contradictory practices of numerous social actors: practices of coercion and of consent, of adaptation and of resistance. Such constellations of social practices can be grasped by historians most distinctly whenever they assume a relatively stable form: when they 'crystallize', as it were, if only for a (historically) brief moment. Such fleetingly stable constellations can emerge in various forms – they can converge, for instance, on a certain event or also in the life history of a particular individual.

In this book, we will mainly reconstruct an *event* comprising a shipping disaster and its judicial and political aftermath – an event during which the practices of a racialized labour regime became discernible as if seen through a magnifying glass. But, as we proceed through the stages of this event, we will find that its very nature and the ways in which it was recorded tinged the emerging picture in a specific colour: the efficacy of power structures is highlighted more than their limitations. The final chapter, therefore, shifts the perspective and probes the unusual life history of a rebellious South Asian fireman to assess the scope for challenging the racialized labour regime of British imperial shipping in the early twentieth century. But, to reach this more hopeful vista, we must first descend from the airy heights of abstraction to the stifling workplaces of a steamer's stokehold.

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7

Communication Collapse: The Steamship and 'Naval Hindustani'

The signal for 'boat stations' was five short blasts from the ship's fog whistle, which was operated with steam from the engine room. Indian seafarers were familiar with this signal and expected to hear it after a collision.[1] It never came on the S.S. *Egypt*, however, and could no longer be given within minutes as seawater flooded the stokehold and extinguished the boilers.[2] Chief Officer Cartwright, according to his statement, 'sang out' the order 'clear away boats' but 'did not sound the signal on the steamer's whistle as [he] did not think it was necessary as everybody seemed to be on deck'.[3] Testimonies by British members of the deck crew confirmed Cartwright's version by stating that he had ordered them orally to 'boat stations' within minutes of the collision.[4] Indian witnesses did not confirm this assertion, however, and some of them, including experienced deck crew, even insisted that no orders had been given whatsoever.[5] How do we explain these starkly irreconcilable

1 TNA, BT 239/2 '"Egypt" in Collision with "Seine"' (depositions by Mahomed Adam and Moossa Fackeer, 2 June 1922).

2 TNA, TS 34/8 'R.M.S. Egypt' (depositions by Sidney Herbert French, Supernumerary Second Mate, p. 18; Gordon Dixon Brown, Third Officer, p. 81).

3 Ibid. (deposition by Chief Officer Charles Walter Cartwright, p. 8).

4 Ibid. (depositions by Donald Lennox Gates, boatswain, p. 39; Edward W. Ruskin, quartermaster, pp. 47, 49; Cecil Charles Nelson, quartermaster, p. 55).

5 TNA, BT 239/2 '"Egypt" in Collision with "Seine"' (deposition by Moossa Fackeer, 2 June 1922); NMM, Caird Library, P&O Collections, 65/3, f. 261 (draft statements of

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accounts? Was this a matter of miscommunication at a basic linguistic level? Were the Indian seafarers simply unable to understand the chief officer's command? This explanation was explicitly ruled out in court. When cross-examining fireman Sabdin Fazuldin, the P&O's legal counsel asked: 'Is "Boat stations" the same in your language as in English?' The reply had been a terse 'Everybody says "boat stations"'. When this translation was challenged, interpreter Challis repeated: 'I was asked if there was a difference in the language, and he said everyone understood boat stations as it was spoken in English.' The matter was settled by the judge himself who remarked that the witness's statement 'was intelligible to me'.[6]

Another explanation for the discrepancy of the testimonies might have been that the Indian crew had not paid attention to the officers' commands in their state of panic – an explanation suggested by more than one British witness.[7] Yet the fact, confirmed in both Indian and British testimonies, that large sections of the Indian crew initially proceeded to the bridge deck casts doubt on this version of the story. Indian witnesses stated explicitly that they had turned to the bridge not only for life jackets but also with the purpose of asking the captain and the chief officer for orders. However, no order had been given, they insisted, leaving them to fend for themselves.[8] A clamour for commands would not have been an unusual reaction in a situation of crisis. The memoirs of the communist stoker Amir Haider Khan show that even the most rebellious seafarers accepted the obligation to fulfil their 'sea duty' out of an 'instinctive sense of discipline'. They acquiesced in principle to a

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Mohamed Adam, f. 261; Moossa Fackeer, f. 278); TNA, TS 34/10 'R.M.S. Egypt: Transcript of Court Proceedings', Fifth Day: 28 July 1922 (examinations and cross-examinations of Barrum Mustapha, p. 86.

6 TNA, TS 34/10 'R.M.S. Egypt: Transcript of Court Proceedings', Fifth Day: 28 July 1922, pp. 79f.

7 TNA, TS 34/8 'R.M.S. Egypt' (depositions by Roberto Florio Bevan, passenger, p. 4; Alexander Nicol Cameron, 2nd Officer, p. 12; Sidney Herbert French, Supernumerary 2nd Mate, p. 16; Harry Scott, quartermaster, p. 43; Thomas Harvey, quartermaster, p. 51; Arthur Popple, joiner, p. 60; William John Hamilton, 3rd Engineer, pp. 84, 86).

8 TNA, BT 239/2 '"Egypt" in Collision with "Seine"' (deposition by Moossa Fackeer, 2 June 1922); NMM, Caird Library, P&O Collections, 65/3, f. 278 (draft statement of Moossa Fackeer); TNA, TS 34/8 'R.M.S. Egypt' (depositions by Moossa Fackeer, p. 85, and Mohammed Adam, p. 90; TNA, TS 34/10 'R.M.S. Egypt: Transcript of Court Proceedings', Fifth Day: 28 July 1922 (examinations and cross-examinations of Barrum Mustapha, p. 86; Moossa Fackeer, p. 90; Mohammed Adam, p. 100).

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hierarchical structure of command on board ship since dangers were a permanent presence at sea and emergencies required swift and closely coordinated action.[9] The Indian crew of the *Egypt* was no exception apparently.

The suspicion that the *Egypt*'s officers had failed to put their commands through to the Indian crew, that language barriers had impeded effective rescue operations, had lingered on ever since the *Egypt* disaster made headlines: newspapers had referred to this issue severally.[10] In the course of the inquiry, the solicitor general received an anonymous letter suggesting that the proficiency of the ship's officers in Indian languages and, more particularly, their ability to convey orders to the crew ought to be examined in court:

> Dear S-G,
>
> You are probably aware of the cause of the trouble – perhaps you are not.
>
> LANGUAGE.
>
> Lascars. Native Indian Language – Gujerathi and other Indian languages.
>
> Lascars also speak a few words of 'Hindustani' (a lingua franca).
>
> P.[&]O. Officers speak a few words 'Hindustani' and no other Indian language.
>
> They are not required by Company to pass any language test. They could not write or read names of Crew in any Indian language.
>
> Now you have had some P.[&]O. Officers in the box who swore they spoke the native language.

9 Amir Haider Khan, 'I Break with the Old World' (Part I: Nasik manuscript 1939–1942, typed copy with editorial markings by Hasan Gardezi, Pakistan Study Centre, University of Karachi), p. 252. For a brief discussion see Ravi Ahuja, 'A Freedom Still Enmeshed in Servitude: The Unruly "Lascars" of the S.S. City of Manila or, a Micro-History of the "Free Labour" Problem', in Ravi Ahuja (ed.), *Working Lives and Worker Militancy: The Politics of Labour in Colonial India*, Delhi: Tulika, 2013, pp. 111f. A moderately edited version of this important autobiographical text has been published in Hasan N. Gardezi (ed.), *Chains to Lose: Life and Struggles of a Revolutionary. Memoirs of Dada Amir Haider Khan*, Karachi: Pakistan Study Centre, 2007. In this book, I refer to the unedited manuscript version for reasons explained in chapter 12.

10 'Discipline of Egypt's Crew', *Manchester Guardian,* 2 August 1922, p. 3; 'Ships' Officers and Hindustani', *Dundee Advertiser*, 7 August 1922 (see below for details).

> Recall all of them and ask if they will act as interpreters when you examine the lascar witnesses, ask them to write a native mans [*sic*!] name. Ask them to say to the lascars:
>
> 'There is no need for alarm. Keep calm. Do exactly as you are told and every one will be saved. If you disobey I will shoot you.'
>
> The fact is there is only one medium of communication between officers and lascars[,] the translator – the 'sorrang'. There is only one of him.
>
> The lascars did nothing: they were waiting for orders – but the sorrang could not be everywhere.[11]

The last sentence with its claim that the 'lascars' 'were waiting for orders' corroborates the Indian witnesses' version and suggests that the author may have been an eyewitness him- or herself and, with some probability, a British member of the *Egypt*'s deck crew. The phrases proposed for the 'language test' betray assumptions on how 'coolie sailors' were to be dealt with properly on board a British ship: they do not contain any specific orders or technical terms connected to the lowering of boats or other rescue operations, but merely an unspecific assertion of absolute authority backed up with the threat of armed violence. The letter was duly filed, but the prosecutor general chose not to look too deeply into the matters it raised when he examined the *Egypt*'s officers.

Despite its coarseness, the letter was well-informed and concerned a politically contentious issue: British trade unionists, supported by sections of the British public, had used for long – and would continue to use for many years – the argument of linguistic barriers to substantiate their claim that the employment of 'lascars' and other 'alien' seafarers involved high risks, especially in emergency situations, and should be restricted for this reason.[12] The tactical use of this argument for

11 TNA, TS 34/8 'R.M.S. Egypt' (anonymous letter to the Solicitor General).

12 The topic cropped up time and again as early as in the inquiries of the Manning Committee of 1896 but resulted in a restriction on the employment of 'alien' seafarers only ten years later. A coalition of shipping and imperial interests made sure, however, that 'lascars' were excluded from these restrictions on the grounds that they were 'imperial subjects' and thus technically not 'aliens'. For a concise overview see Marika Sherwood, 'Race, Nationality and Employment among Lascar Seamen, 1660 to 1945', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 17, no. 2 (1991), pp. 233–41.

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exclusionary purposes does not disprove by itself the validity of the claim that restricted communication channels among the crew created additional safety risks in times of emergency. The claim needs to be examined on its own merits and cannot be disregarded merely on account of the self-interested reasons for its employment.

Turning to the testimonies of the Indian witnesses we find, however, that they did not refer to any incident of linguistic miscommunication on board the *Egypt* but rather to a communication *refusal* on the part of the officers, whether caused by inability or by unwillingness. Moreover, they even recounted orders that were comprehensible in terms of language but did not seem to make sense otherwise. Several khalasis and stokers reported that the captain and other officers had ordered them out of the lifeboats, insisting that the ship was not foundering and that there was no need for rescue operations.[13] These testimonies are corroborated by the statements of surviving Goan stewards that were recorded by Joseph Baptista in even greater detail immediately after their return to Bombay, i.e., independently from the depositions that were taken in far-away London almost simultaneously from the eight selected witnesses – a congruence that is even more striking if we consider that most of the latter belonged to different linguistic segments of the crew.[14]

Yet, if the captain had intended to reassure the crew, he failed: a number of the Indian seafarers had previously served, as has been mentioned already, on ships torpedoed by German submarines and knew a foundering steamer when they went down with one.[15] 'The ship is finished', Baram Mustafa remembered telling the second engineer when seawater flooded the stokeholds, even before he scrambled up the engine room ladder to find a life jacket, a boat, or any other means of

13 TNA, BT 239/2 '"Egypt" in Collision with "Seine"' (deposition by Barrum Mustapha, 2 June 1922); NMM, Caird Library, P&O Collections, 65/3, f. 278 (draft statement of Moossa Fackeer); TNA, TS 34/10 'R.M.S. Egypt: Transcript of Court Proceedings', Fifth Day: 28 July 1922 (examinations and cross-examinations of Barrum Mustapha, p. 86; Moossa Fackeer, p. 90).

14 '"Egypt" Disaster: The Lascars' Version' (letter by Joseph Baptista), *Bombay Chronicle*, 19 June 1922.

15 Ibid.; TNA, TS 34/10 'R.M.S. Egypt: Transcript of Court Proceedings', Sixth Day: 31 July 1922, p. 10 (examination and cross-examination of Phillip Azevedo); TNA, TS 34/8 'R.M.S. Egypt' (deposition by William John Hamilton, 3rd Engineer), p. 34.

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saving his life.[16] Then orders were either not forthcoming from the officers or merely seemed to serve the goal of getting the 'natives' out of the way rather than involving them in rescue operations either actively or passively. Consequently, many of the crew hurled themselves into the sea just as numerous passengers did, with or without wooden gratings or boxes to cling to.[17] Others crowded the lifeboats – even those that were hopelessly jammed in their davits.[18] When hierarchical communication collapsed and the ensuing chaos fuelled desperation, it was *sauve qui peut* indeed.

No mention is made of this clamour for commands or of the failure to give them in the testimonies of Captain Collyer and his chief officer, Cartwright, nor did the prosecutor general or even the India Office's legal counsel choose to press them for an explicit response to this allegation by several Indian witnesses. 'Horniman's law' applied again. When the court had the two officers recount their actions in the decisive twenty minutes after the collision, Collyer reported to have mainly tried to assess the damage and then instruct the wireless operator to call for help. Cartwright claimed to have seen only a single 'lascar' when supervising the rescue operations and attending to the lowering of some lifeboats.[19] The second officer, Alexander Cameron, did mention, in distinction to Cartwright and only when asked directly, that 'lascars' helped to lower the boats.[20] Yet, even in their own testimonies, there is little evidence for an attempt on the part of the deck officers to coordinate rescue operations – of distributing crew and

16 TNA, BT 239/2 '"Egypt" in Collision with "Seine"' (deposition by Barrum Mustapha, 2 June 1922); TNA, TS 34/10 'R.M.S. Egypt: Transcript of Court Proceedings', Fifth Day: 28 July 1922 (examination of Barrum Mustapha), p. 83.

17 See, e.g., NMM, Caird Library, P&O Collections, 65/3, f. 264 (draft statement of Mohamed Adam); ibid., f. 270 (draft statement of Phillip Azevedo).

18 TNA, TS 34/10 'R.M.S. Egypt: Transcript of Court Proceedings', Second Day: 25 July 1922 (examination of Captain Collyer), p. 8; TNA, BT 239/2 '"Egypt" in Collision with "Seine"' (deposition by Thomas Whyte, 30 May 1922); TNA, TS 34/8 'R.M.S. Egypt' (deposition by Gordon Dixon Brown, 3rd Officer), pp. 21f.

19 TNA, TS 34/8 'R.M.S. Egypt' (depositions by Andrew Collyer, Master, and Charles Walter Cartwright, Chief Officer), pp. 1–6; TNA, TS 34/10 'R.M.S. Egypt: Transcript of Court Proceedings', First Day: 24 July 1922 (examination of Captain Collyer), pp. 87–90; ibid., Second Day: 25 July 1922 (examination of Captain Collyer), pp. 7f; ibid. (examination of Charles W. Cartwright), pp. 62–4, 67.

20 TNA, TS 34/10 'R.M.S. Egypt: Transcript of Court Proceedings', Second Day: 25 July 1922, pp. 108f (examination of Alexander Cameron, Second Officer).

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passengers more evenly between the swung-out lifeboats or of establishing command over the Indian crew through the usual conduit of the serangs. Among the *Egypt*'s officers, only the second engineer, Thomas Whyte, recounted a successful effort to mobilise Indian crew for the lowering of boats.[21] The suspicion, raised by Joseph Baptista in Bombay after the *Egypt* disaster, that the commanding officers had at first underestimated the gravity of the damage and thus lost crucial minutes for the initiation of rescue operations may not have been entirely off the mark.[22]

If the testimonies of the Indian witnesses provide direct evidence for the collapse of hierarchical communication, this finding is confirmed indirectly not only by the gaps in Collyer's and Cartwright's testimonies, but also by the decision to exclude from the Indian witnesses the serangs – an absence that was hardly lost on the court but explicitly raised as an issue only at the very end of the proceedings by the India Office's legal counsel.[23] As a result, the crucial link in the chain of command between the British officers and the Indian crew was removed from the examination. This decision was taken, whether or not in communication with the P&O headquarters, in Brest and with the consent of the company's representative in France by the first officer, Cartwright, who had been in charge of the rescue operations.[24] The latter was thus given the opportunity to pre-empt uncomfortable questions concerning his own performance as a commanding officer. The court could, however, reconstruct that the khalasi serang, i.e., the senior foreman of the 'lascars' in the deck department, had been sent away in the first lifeboat that left the sinking *Egypt* – a decision 'greatly to be regretted' in the court's opinion.[25] The assumption underlying this statement was

21 TNA, BT 239/2 '"Egypt" in Collision with "Seine"' (deposition by Thomas Whyte, 30 May 1922).

22 '"Egypt" Disaster: The Lascars' Version'; '"Egypt" Disaster' (letter to the editor by Joseph Baptista), *Bombay Chronicle*, 21 June 1922. See also 'The Egypt', *Daily Herald,* 24 June 1922.

23 TNA, TS 34/10 'R.M.S. Egypt: Transcript of Court Proceedings', Eighth Day: 2 August 1922, p. 126.

24 NMM, Caird Library, P&O Collections, 65/1 (letter to P&O directors from James Beveridge, Brest, 25 May 1922).

25 BL: OIOC, IOR/L/E/7/1123, F. 1989, Commerce & Revenue Department, Loss of the S.S. Egypt (Report of Court on the loss of the S.S. Egypt, 4 September 1922, with Annex), p. 3.

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never spelled out explicitly but is easy enough to grasp: when the khalasi serang went, the linguistic tie between the chief officer and the 'lascar' crew snapped, the chain of command broke, and the khalasis were either ignored or dismissed. Neither had they been provided with life jackets, nor were they given meaningful orders, which may well have created the impression among the Indian crew that the task of securing their survival was rather low on the list of priorities of the *gora malum*, the 'white' officers. Our evidence suggests that the collapse of communication may have raised to an existential level the suspicion of racial subordination – a suspicion that was nurtured by the structure of 'racial management' Indian seafarers were subjected to whenever they signed up on a British steamer.

Of course, there is no possibility of an ex post examination of Captain Collyer's and Chief Engineer Cartwright's linguistic abilities or willingness to communicate with the Indian crew. Our 'cold case' will remain cold in this regard. We can merely reconstruct the expectations which British shipping concerns employing large numbers of Indian crew had in regard to the language skills of their officers. If the British India Steam Navigation Company had asked their officers in the early years of the century to acquire a knowledge of 'Hindustani' – a language that could be mastered, their spokesman asserted, in about three months – the P&O Company would continue to formulate similar demands in later years.[26] The officers' actual knowledge of a very basic maritime Hindustani, the so-called 'lascari bat' ('lascar' talk, 'lascar' argot), remained unexamined, however, and chains of communication could be fragile as a consequence. In 1912, when examining the loss of the P&O Liner *Oceana*, the Board of Trade's Court of Inquiry was, on the one hand,

> satisfied that the officers of the ship had observed the company's rule to make themselves conversant with Lascari. On the other hand the quartermasters had to admit that their directions to a lascar boat's crew would have to be given largely by signs, and this cannot be considered satisfactory in an emergency.

26 *MMC*, vol. 2, Evidence, p. 586 (examination of Captain Walter Ernest Hutchinson, Marine Superintendent to the British India Steam Navigation Company).

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They suggested that the acquisition of language skills should be 'stimulated by the prospect of some small extra reward', which would encourage the attainment of a 'working knowledge of the simple tongue used by the native seamen'.[27] No formalization of obligations was considered at the time. Ten years later, in the case of the *Egypt*, Captain Collyer asserted before another Court of Inquiry that he was to report regularly to the company on the knowledge of 'Hindustani' of all senior officers in the deck and the engine-room departments and that a lack of that knowledge could be an impediment to promotion.[28] The court, however, appeared to be unimpressed with the level of implementation of this company policy:

> The ship's Officers all stated that they could speak Hindustani, by this they meant Lascari Bat as spoken on board ship. The P. and O. Company encourage their officers to learn the language, but do not make it essential. The Court thinks it of high importance that the Company should insist upon a knowledge of the language.[29]

The matter, on which they commented, had regained public attention already in the weeks after the *Egypt* disaster. The P&O's management took notice, for instance, of a letter to the *Dundee Advertiser* written apparently by an 'old India hand' who declared that in twenty voyages between Britain and India 'in not a single instance have I run [into] ships' officers who had anything but the very merest acquaintance with colloquial Hindustani'. The letter writer referred to the practice of some of the major railway companies in India who demanded that officers were to 'pass the colloquial test within eighteen months of his appointment' and recommended a similar regulation for the merchant marine.[30] A Royal Navy officer, Lieutenant Commander Frederick Southwell

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27 TNA: MT 23/264 'Behaviour of Lascars at Loss of "Oceana"', 1912 (excerpts from *Lloyds List*, 26 June 1912).

28 TNA, TS 34/10 'R.M.S. Egypt: Transcript of Court Proceedings', Second Day: 25 July 1922 (examination of Captain Collyer), pp. 13f.

29 BL: OIOC, IOR/L/E/7/1123, F. 1989, Commerce & Revenue Department, Loss of the S.S. Egypt (Report of Court on the loss of the S.S. Egypt, 4 September 1922, with Annex), p. 5.

30 'Ships' Officers and Hindustani', *Dundee Advertiser*, 7 August 1922 (the press cutting is preserved in NMM, Caird Library, P&O Collections, 65/2).

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Piper, wrote to the P&O's chairman with the proposal for the establishment by the company of a 'School of instruction in Lascari Bat' in London, recommending himself as a qualified teacher and offering, 'as the prospects of promotion are poor', to resign from 'His Majesty's service' if he was given the job.[31] The managing directors did not waste time on considering the offer; they declined with polite promptness.[32]

Primers and dictionaries of 'lascari bat' had been published in Britain for more than a century, the first being Thomas Roebuck's 'English and Hindoostanee Naval Dictionary' of 1811. Apart from a short grammar of 'Hindustani', this volume contained a list of technical vocabulary and of 'sea phrases' – the key commands required to navigate a sailing vessel. This dictionary had been compiled with the help of a British shipmaster with decades of experience in the Indian Ocean 'country trade' and, crucially, of four equally seasoned Indian serangs, all of them bearing Muslim names but originating from various shores of the subcontinent, mainly from the West Coast (Kutch in the Northwest, Gogha in Gujarat, Kolaba on the Konkani coast South of Bombay) but one also from Chittagong in East Bengal.[33] The dictionary reflected, in its own specific form, the communication patterns, problems, and needs of an age of sail when the proverbial 'motley crew', consisting, in the Indian Ocean, of sailors who originated from anywhere between Sumatra and East Africa, was still the rule.[34] This was a time when sailors needed to 'know the ropes' of a sailing ship: this complex, multipartite, and manually regulated early modern machine was mirrored in an equally intricate vocabulary, the knowledge of which was part of the seafarer's skill.[35]

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31 NMM, Caird Library, P&O Collections, 65/2 (letter by Lieutenant Commander F. Southwell Piper, 9 September 1922).

32 NMM, Caird Library, P&O Collections, 65/2 (letter by Managing Directors to Lieutenant Commander F. Southwell Piper, 12 September 1922).

33 Thomas Roebuck, *An English and Hindoostanee Naval Dictionary of Technical Terms and Sea Phrases* . . . , London: Black, Parry & Co., 1813 (London reprint of the original Calcutta edition), pp. ii–iii, vi–vii.

34 For a brief account of a 'motley' 'lascar' crew of a British sailing ship in 1858 that combined seafarers from all coasts of the Indian Ocean between Sumatra and East Africa see Amitav Ghosh, 'Of Fanás and Forecastles: The Indian Ocean and Some Lost Languages of the Age of Sail', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 21 June 2008, p. 56. See also Aaron Jaffer, *Lascars and Indian Ocean Seafaring, 1780–1860: Shipboard Life, Unrest and Mutiny,* Woodbridge: Boydell, 2015, pp. 10–16.

35 On the technological status of sailing vessels as a manually regulated but complex machine see Heide Gerstenberger and Ulrich Welke, *Vom Wind zum Dampf.*

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This vocabulary had roots in various Indian languages as well as in naval English but contained also numerous words of Portuguese origin – Iberian maritime technology had been appropriated by Indian Ocean shipbuilders for centuries and its terminology had entered a lingua franca understood by sailors across this extended maritime landscape.[36]

Yet Roebuck's dictionary, as Amitav Ghosh rightly pointed out, hardly provided a key to that link language: rather it combined a vocabulary of multiple linguistic roots with the grammar of North Indian 'Hindustani' (or, Urdu) to create a *language of command,* a means of unidirectional communication that British officers could acquire quickly and that allowed them to manage their Indian Ocean crews effectively.[37] Hence according to its extended title, the book was 'calculated to enable the Officers of the Hon. East India Company's and Country Service, to give their orders to the Lascars with that Exactness and Promptitude, which, upon many Occasion, must prove of the greatest Importance'.[38] In the short grammar introducing the dictionary, the section on verbs began, quite consistently, with the following sentence: 'The imperative, in the second person singular, is the root of every verb in the Hindoostanee Language; and it is this portion of the verb which is most required by the Officers and others, in giving their commands to the Lascars.'[39] Roebuck's dictionary thus combined a glossary of maritime hardware, mainly nouns denominating the parts of a sailing vessel and its rigging, with verbs in their imperative form.

'Lascari bat', then, was a specialized and simplified language of command, akin to the latinized 'military Hindustani' that was studied and used by the British officers of the 'British Indian Army' during that period.[40] Patterns of lived communication went beyond this narrowly

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Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Handelsschiffahrt im Zeitalter der Industrialisierung, Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 1996, p. 184 and *passim.* On the linguistic aspects see Ghosh, 'Of Fanás and Forecastles', p. 58.

36 Cf: Ghosh, 'Of Fanás and Forecastles', p. 59; Kirti Narayan Chaudhuri, *Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 151 and *passim*.

37 Ghosh, 'Of Fanás and Forecastles', p. 60.

38 Roebuck, *An English and Hindoostanee Naval Dictionary*, title page.

39 Ibid., p. xxxix.

40 For a systematic examination of 'Anglo-Hindustani' including its military variety see Alison Safadi, 'The Colonial Construction of Hindustani 1800–1947', doctoral dissertation, Goldsmiths' College, University of London, 2012. See also Nile

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restricted language of command, however, and we can also assume that multilingualism was not uncommon among skilled Indian sailors who spent their working lives among 'motley crews' with long waiting periods in foreign ports. Herman Melville recalled, for instance, from his seafaring days in the 1830s, that he had encountered in Liverpool 'several men' who spoke 'very good English' among the 'lascar' crew of an India-built British sailing vessel, the 'country boat' *Irrawaddy*. He particularly remembered in graphic detail a long conversation on matters of shipbuilding with one of the Indian sailors.[41]

Roebuck's dictionary was revised, enlarged, and republished numerous times, the most extensive edition being that of 1882 by George Small, a missionary associated with the 'Asiatic Strangers' Home' in Limehouse, London. By then, the sailing vessel was increasingly being replaced by the steamship. This process went along with a complex process of partial 'deskilling' and 'reskilling' that affected large sections of the crew, while only a minority acquired higher formal and certified levels of technical skill for the operation and maintenance of the new machineries of propulsion, loading, and hauling. Quite strikingly, the technical vocabulary of Small's dictionary of 'lascari bat' remained unaffected by these momentous technological changes: it continued to provide translations for every sail, spar, and rope, but maintained a curious silence on the gratings, rakes, and flame tubes of the fireroom.[42]

A. I. Valentini, an employee of the P&O Company, compiled a new phrasebook and dictionary of 'lascari bat' towards the end of the century, which aimed at the 'young officers' serving his employer and other shipping companies, but remained, to a large extent, in the framework provided by Roebuck almost a century earlier.[43] 'Lascari bat' was still

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Green, *Islam and the Army in Colonial India: Sepoy Religion in the Service of Empire,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 143.

41 Herman Melville, *Redburn: His First Voyage,* New York: Harper & Brothers, 1855, pp. 216–20.

42 George Small, *A Laskari Dictionary or Anglo-Indian Vocabulary of Nautical Terms and Phrases in English and Hindustani* . . . , London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1882.

43 A. I. Valentini, *Lascari-Bât: A Collection of Sentences Used in the Daily Routine of Modern Passenger Steamers, Where Lascars Are Carried as the Deck Crew; Also a Copious English-Lascari Vocabulary*, London: Miller & Sons, 1896 (2nd ed.). I have only been able to trace the second and third editions of 1896 and 1901 respectively, but we can assume that the second edition was published shortly after the first as its preface refers to the 'rapid sale of the first edition'. Ibid., p. 5.

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conceived as a language of command based on a deliberately simplified 'Hindustani' and the terminology of the sailing ship was meticulously itemized even now. Yet the transformed structure of the work that seamen were now expected to execute on the decks of a steamer was to some extent taken into account. The phrasebook thus included new chapters with detailed and precise commands concerning the unending paint work required to protect steel-built ships from corrosion, the more complex cargo work on much larger vessels, but also the handling of lifeboats and other safety issues that assumed a greater urgency when mail steamers carried unprecedented passenger loads.

Some of these commands appear, in the light of the *Egypt* disaster, acutely pertinent even as they suggest standards that were not always met: 'For each man on board there is a lifebelt' (15), 'When the fire bell rings, then must go quickly each to their station' [*sic*] (37), 'They must be daily drilled, in order to get the boat away quick when wanted' (43). However, the boiler and engine rooms at the bottom of the steamer's hull did not seem to exist even in Valentini's thoroughly revised version of *Lascari-Bât*. While the *ag-vala* (literally 'fireman') was mentioned at least in the vocabulary, even the extended subtitle that Valentini chose left no doubt that 'lascari bat' was meant to be the language of command on the decks and not below: 'A collection of sentences used in the daily routine of modern passenger steamers, where lascars are carried as the deck crew . . .'[44]

When Norwood Harrison's *Manual of Lascari Hindustani* appeared in its fifth edition in 1928, the age of sail was positively over: now, oil-fuelled and diesel-motorized ships were progressively replacing the once-revolutionary coal-burning steamer. Another revolution of shipping technology had thus occurred since the publication of Valentini's *Lascari-Bât* three decades earlier, but the transformation of ship-work was reflected even less in Harrison's *Manual* than in the older book: the ship's changed hierarchy of command was accounted for – '*bura mistery sahib*' (roughly, the 'great master mechanic') being the title invented for the chief engineer – but the technical vocabulary remained solidly that of the age of sail.[45] Even though Harrison claimed that the book was

44 Ibid., p. 136; inside title page.

45 Norwood Harrison, *A Manual of Lascari-Hindustani with Technical Terms and Phrases* (5th extended ed.), London: Imray, Laurie, Norie & Wilson, 1928, p. 3. The first edition of this book was published in 1905.

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'written more especially for the use of Officers and Engineers of steamers carrying lascar crews', its reduced engagement with the technical terminology of contemporary shipping allowed Harrison to extend its readership to 'those who have the management of lascars and of other uneducated natives of British India' and include decidedly non-maritime yet apparently useful 'Hindustani' translations of sentences like: 'I want a solar hat', 'Coachman, go back to the hotel' or 'Shikari [hunter], is there any game near here?'[46]

A late addition to this corpus of naval dictionaries was Shedden Chalmers Parry's *Lascar Hindustani for Ship-Surgeons*, published in London in 1930. This thin booklet of forty-eight pages confirms the paradox pattern that the need for translating the terminology of maritime technology between European and South Asian languages appears to have declined just at a time when the employment of Indian seafarers on British merchant vessels reached its historical climax. Parry's flimsy brochure barely contained specific references to maritime work: even the particularly relevant section entitled 'Accidents' merely mentioned falls down the hatch or overboard, but not, for instance, the heat cramps or the burns that clenched and branded the bodies of firemen. The booklet was also more careless in matters of transliteration (and thus less concerned with ensuring the comprehensibility of commands) than earlier dictionaries: if the first seven entries in the 'Regimen' section were all concerned with sending 'lascar' patients back to their duties, the order 'You must go to work immediately' was translated, for instance, as '*Ubhi toom karm kurner hoenga, jow*.'[47] Alison Safadi's observation that the quality of the language training British officers received in 'military Hindustani' declined steeply in the early decades of the twentieth century can be extended to 'lascari Hindustani' also.[48]

It was not as if the technology of a steamer was less complex than that of a sailing vessel or required a less differentiated vocabulary. A brief glance at the parallel history of maritime dictionaries mediating between European languages makes this clear. Such works had been published since the early 1700s, assembling terminologies of navigation and of the

46 Ibid., pp. iii, 118–20.

47 Shedden Chalmers Parry, *Lascar Hindustani for Ship-Surgeons*, London: W. J. Clark, 1930.

48 Cf. Safadi, *The Colonial Construction of Hindustani*, pp. 76–9.

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sailing ship's 'machine parts' just like Roebuck's 'English and Hindoostanee' dictionary about a century later. Yet the historical trajectory of European language dictionaries diverged as they came to be adapted to the changes in shipping technology almost immediately. Karel Pieter ter Reehorst's multilingual *The Mariner's Friend or Polyglot Indispensable*, published simultaneously in the Netherlands, Britain, and Germany in 1849 and clearly designed for the practical use of navigators, already included twenty-two entries that were compounds of the word 'steam'.[49] Across the Atlantic, 'an Illustrated Nautical Polyglot Containing Drawings and Descriptions in English, German, French, Spanish, Italian and Scandinavian [*sic*]' was published in New York in 1883 – a large-sized if slim volume that referred even in its title not only to sailing vessels but also to 'steamers, engines and boilers'.[50]

Two years later, Heinrich Paasch, surveyor to *Lloyd's Register* in Antwerp and a leading maritime expert of the time, published a substantial and hands-on trilingual 'marine dictionary' in English, French, and German that, too, covered sailing technology as much as that of steam. Paasch dedicated a full quarter of its 203 amply illustrated pages to the vocabulary of the stokehold and the engine room – almost exactly as many as he reserved for the conventional terminology of masts and spars, sails and rigging.[51] This work would set the standard for maritime dictionaries and 10,000 copies of its various editions were reportedly sold during the author's lifetime.[52] When its fourth edition was posthumously published in 1908, Spanish and Italian translations were provided as well. The dictionary now comprised more than 800 pages

49 Karel Pieter ter Reehorst, *The Mariner's Friend or Polyglot Indispensable, and Technical Dictionary, of . . . Nautical-, Steam- and Shipbuilding-terms, Commercial and Scientific Expressions . . . in Ten Different Languages: English, Dutch, German, Danish, Swedish, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and Russian . . .* , Amsterdam: 1849.

50 J. C. Coxe, *An Illustrated Nautical Polyglot: Containing Drawings and Descriptions in English, German, French, Spanish, Italian and, Scandinavian, of the different classes of sailing vessels, also of steamers, engines and boilers, to which is added a complete list of ship chandlery, stores, engineers' supplies, tools, &c., also rendered into the above six languages*, New York: n.a., 1883.

51 Heinrich Paasch, *From Keel to Truck: A Marine Dictionary in English, French and German*, Antwerp: Ratinckx Frères, 1885.

52 Christiane Villain-Gandossi, 'De Robert Estienne a Heinrich Paasch: La place du vocabulaire maritime dans les dictionnaires plurilingues', in D. L. Newman and M. v. Campenhoudt (eds), *Maritime Terminology: Issues in Communication and Translation*, Brussels: Hazard, 1999, pp. 22–46.

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to which an extensive appendix of plates and indices in all five languages had been added. The author had felt obligated, in his preface to the third edition, to justify the continued attention to the terminology of the sailing vessel, even though the relevant sections were now dwarfed by those dealing with the machinery of the steam ship.[53]

Yet the new technical vocabulary of steam propulsion was used and mastered only by the ship's engineers and a small number of qualified engine-room mechanics, while the greater part of a steamer crew, even those employed in the stokehold, did not require this terminology to fulfil the role they were assigned to in the labour process. If dictionaries of 'lascari bat' lost much of their maritime specificity, and most glaringly in regard to the ship's propulsion, this may well have mirrored the transformed, more segmented, and on the whole reduced communication requirements on board a late nineteenth-century steamship. Ship engineers had risen, in the course of the latter half of the nineteenth century, from humble artisan origins to become a highly qualified, specialized, and powerful section of the maritime workforce.[54]

At the same time, everyday work processes had become less uniform, less complex, and perhaps less communication-intensive for the large majority of the sizeable crews of coal-burning steamers: while the sailor of old days had to know the numerous parts of the ship's rigging by name to follow the mate's orders, the range of tasks of a steamer's deck crew had been narrowed down considerably, which made it less problematic to channel much of the communication required on a day-to-day basis through middlemen-translators – the much-quoted serangs and tindals.[55] Down below the waterline, in the steamer's coal bunkers and stokehold, large numbers of trimmers and firemen moved coal, fed the most advanced steam engines in a surprisingly low-tech way, and were prevented by rigid shipboard hierarchies from enhancing and diversifying their skills.

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53 The full preface of the third edition was reproduced in the German version of the fourth edition: *From Keel to Truck: Marine-Wörterbuch englisch-französisch-deutsch-spanisch-italienisch*, Hamburg: Eckardt und Messtorff, 1908. This edition was simultaneously published in Britain as Heinrich Paasch, *From Keel to Truck: Dictionary of Naval Terms, English-French-German-Spanish-Italian*, 4th ed., revised and enlarged, London: David Nutt, 1908.

54 Conrad Dixon, 'The Rise of the Engineer in the Nineteenth Century', in G. Jackson and D. M. Williams (eds), *Shipping, Technology and Imperialism*, Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996, pp. 231–41.

55 See p. 169.

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The dramatic collapse of communication during the last twenty minutes on the S.S. *Egypt* that is revealed so clearly in the minutes of the Board of Trade inquiry, I conclude, may well have had deeper causes that followed from the modalities of labour management on board coal-burning British steamers at that time. The following three chapters, therefore, turn specifically to the hierarchically organized labour processes in coal bunkers and firerooms of large steam vessels. For these were the daily work-routines the Punjabi coal trimmers and firemen of the S.S. *Egypt* found themselves subjected to – the very men singled out as the main perpetrators of panic in many of the European narratives on the ship's foundering.

10

Gains of 'Racial Management': Manning Scales and Liner Schedules

The management of labour in the British merchant marine did not limit itself, however, to maintaining centralized control through steep formal hierarchies on board ship that were reinforced, if convenient, by ethnic and linguistic segmentation. Elizabeth Esch and David Roediger have shown how US management 'experts' practised, in the early years of the twentieth century, an obscurantist kind of racial algebra seeking to express in equations and tables how the presumably divergent physical and intellectual capacities of human 'races' could be harnessed and combined most effectively for the benefit of the employer.[1] One particularly influential propagator of such ideas, who succeeded in building a career on his 'racial management expertise', was the mining engineer and future US president Herbert Hoover, who summed up his calculations in 1909 as follows:

> Much observation and experience in working Asiatics and negroes as well as Americans and Australians in mines, leads the writer to the conclusion that, averaging actual results, one white man equals from two to three of the colored races, even in the simplest forms of mine work such as shoveling or tramming. In the most highly skilled

1 Elizabeth Esch and David R. Roediger, '"One Symptom of Originality": Race and Management of Labor in US History', in D. R. Roediger, *Class, Race and Marxism,* London: Verso, 2017, pp. 138–42.

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> branches, such as mechanics, the average ratio is as one to seven, or in extreme cases even eleven.[2]

If a Chinese worker, as Hoover believed, 'required' only a sixth or even a twelfth of the pay of a 'white' worker, optimizing the racial composition of a workforce was thus a mere matter of balancing racially defined wage costs and racial productivity rates.[3] The cultivation of such theories of scientistic racism did not necessarily require the hothouse of US post-slavery society, however, as Esch and Roediger's account might suggest.[4] Very similar ideas proliferated in Britain's Indian Empire, too. The ability to identify and rate the subcontinent's most valuable 'martial', 'seafaring', or 'coolie races', it has been pointed out before, had been held in high esteem as a branch of colonial governance knowledge since the latter half of the nineteenth century, and was further elaborated in the First World War in the light of a growing concern for securing a greater 'efficiency' of labour.[5]

In the shipping industry, rough calculations of how many Indian trimmers and firemen were required to replace a 'European' seaman and speculations about the relative efficiency of 'white' and 'coloured' crews under the climatic conditions of the North Atlantic and the Red Sea respectively had been circulating in British shipping circles for a long time. In the mid-1890s, the Board of Trade's Manning Committee had received starkly diverging responses on questioning British seamen, officers, and shipowners about the relative efficiency of 'lascar' and European crew. While some insisted that three Indian seafarers were required to do the work of one European sailor or fireman, actual manning scales seemed to suggest that 'mixed crews' with a sizeable 'lascar' component were generally about 50 per cent larger than those comprised of 'white crew' only.[6] Witnesses who gave evidence to the Mercantile Marine Committee in 1902 had concurred that a 'native'

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2 Herbert C. Hoover, *Principles of Mining: Valuation, Organization and Administration*, London: McGraw-Hill, 1909, p. 163.

3 Esch and Roediger, '"One Symptom of Originality"', pp. 140f.

4 Elizabeth Esch and David Roediger, *The Production of Difference: Race and the Management of Labor in U.S. History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 3–16 and *passim*.

5 Cf. chapter 5, above.

6 *Manning Committee*, vol. 1, Report, p. 20.

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stokehold crew should be about twice as large as a 'European' or 'British' 'black gang' while, by strange coincidence, and very conveniently for the shipowners, a 'lascar' trimmer or fireman supposedly required only half the accommodation space deemed necessary to keep up the health and work capacity of a European stoker.[7] These rules of thumb could be turned into formal calculations and staffing formulas such as those to be found in Liversidge's *Engine-Room Practice*. This manual presented detailed (though somewhat inconsistent) computations to the effect that a 'European' fireman could work between 0.71 and 0.729 tons of coal per hour, depending on the size of the respective liner, while 'natives' would move between 0.378 and 0.417 tons.[8]

The positivistic exactitude of these figures reflects the belief that 'race' possessed an objective, measurable quality or *essence*, which allowed taxonomic comparison in terms of work capacity and market value. Yet, if their tabulations displayed precise data with great confidence, the taxonomers of race, Hoover as much as Liversidge, found it characteristically hard to maintain coherence in their calculations. The elusiveness of 'racial essence' as much as the multiple variables of the labour process foiled attempts to calculate crewing requirements solely on the basis of a ship's total indicative horsepower or fire-grate surface.[9] Correspondingly, we have already observed that the figures available for the average work capacities assigned to stokers and trimmers were rather inconsistent.[10] The very messiness of the data indicates that computational exactitude sat uneasily with the actual work organization in the boiler room, with a labour process that defied rigid standardization as it engaged perpetually with a 'zone of uncertainty' contingent upon numerous variables: 'There are many minor causes', admitted the

7 *Manning Committee*, vol. 2, Minutes of Evidence . . . , pp. 149, 161.

8 John G. Liversidge, *Engine-Room Practice: A Handbook for the Royal Navy and Mercantile Marine*, London: Charles Griffin & Co., 1923 (11th ed.), pp. 25–6.

9 Esch and Roediger have pointed out that Hoover, in various statements and publications, pronounced the most divergent ratios of racially defined work capacity – but always with equal confidence. Esch and Roediger, '"One Symptom of Originality"', pp. 138–42. In Liversidge's calculations, inconsistencies are perceivable in regard to the recommended size of engine-room crew: 'native' crews should have been considerably larger if we extrapolate from the figures given for the individual work capacity of a 'native' stoker, which was stated as amounting to about 50 to 60 per cent of that of a 'European' fireman. Liversidge, *Engine-Room Practice*, pp. 25–6.

10 See pp. 127–8.

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Manning Committee in 1896, 'for making the work to be done below greater or less.'[11] By 'factoring in' nebulous notions of 'racial essence', this mess was further compounded.

The proposed exactitude of measurements of racially determined work capacity thus reveals itself as an attempt to rationalize an irrational premise. In the age of empire, just as in our own time of 'neoliberal' capitalism, ideological unreason fancied the costume of mathematical reason. Yet such notions of essential, measurable, and manageable difference between 'races' (or, in a present-day identitarian rendering, between nationally defined 'cultures'), have been too persistent in the history of late capitalism to be brushed away on grounds of logical inconsistency alone.[12] For racist (or culturalist) essentialism has served not only – in the sphere of social ideology – as a keystone of counter-enlightenment irrationalism, it has also maintained – in the sphere of labour management – some practical utility for employers that needs to be examined and explained. When Indian seafarers came to be employed in ever larger numbers, essentialized racial difference served as a seemingly self-explanatory shorthand for hierarchies that were steeper and for levels of stigmatization that were higher even than those experienced by the stokehold crews recruited from among the 'Liverpool Irish' in British ports.

For the labour relations of 'lascars' and other 'native seamen' differed substantially from those of 'European' seamen not only with regard to wages and other forms of compensation but, even more importantly, with respect to their level of personal subordination. Legally, these differentials were sanctioned, for Indian workers, not merely in divergent contractual conditions, but in a *bifurcation of the work contract* itself in British-imperial maritime law, i.e., in the creation of a separate category of work contract for 'native seamen' that was referred to as 'lascar (or, Asiatic) articles of agreement'. Ideologically, the reduced formal freedom of 'lascar' contracts (particularly evident in the severely restricted right to terminate contract) was justified by ascribing to these seafarers a

11 Cf. footnote 58 on p. 136. *Manning Committee*, vol. 1, Report, p. 27. For a pertinent analysis see Heide Gerstenberger and Ulrich Welke, *Vom Wind zum Dampf. Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Handelsschiffahrt im Zeitalter der Industrialisierung*, Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 1996, pp. 195–7.

12 Cf. Geert Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions, and Organizations across Nations*, 2nd ed., Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001.

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peculiar racial essence that could be harnessed to useful purposes only by specific, skilfully deployed means.[13] If management preferences shaped labour relations of steamship workers in ways that turned racial stigma into a resource for the fortification of steeply hierarchical labour processes, this tendency was given a natural appearance when it was claimed that essential racial difference transformed itself smoothly – *organically* as it were – into contractual difference and, more specifically, into differential entitlements to formal contractual freedom.

Historians like G. Balachandran, Laura Tabili, or myself have examined the work relations of 'native' seafarers that were forged in increasingly racialized maritime labour markets and have done so from various angles, including the specific forms of legal regulation that combined the above-mentioned racialized maritime labour law with harsh and equally racialized immigration restrictions for 'native' seafarers.[14] For, under 'Asiatic Articles', Indian seafarers could be denied shore leave in port while being prevented, by immigration laws, from disembarking in several important shipping destinations that included the US and Australia.[15] Thus, they could be compelled to work continuously even in port, while desertion rates were pushed down, which contributed substantially to the uninterrupted and punctual performance of steamer operations. Moreover, Indian seafarers were not permitted to terminate their contracts in a port outside the Indian subcontinent. Shipowners could 'transfer' seafarers and even entire crews without their consent to any other vessel in any British port in case their services were no longer required on the ship they had originally been

13 OIOC, India Office, E&O, L/E/9/957, 3256 (1926), p. 3: Brief for the International Labour Conference on Seamen's Articles of Agreement. See also Ravi Ahuja, 'Networks of Subordination – Networks of the Subordinated: The Case of South Asian Maritime Labour under British Imperialism (c. 1890–1947)', in Harald Fischer-Tiné and Ashwini Tambe (eds), *Spaces of Disorder: The Limits of British Colonial Control in South Asia and the Indian Ocean*, London: Routledge, 2008, pp. 13f; Ravi Ahuja, 'Mobility and Containment: The Voyages of South Asian Seamen, c. 1900–1960', *International Review of Social History* 51 (2006, supplement), pp. 115–20.

14 Gopalan Balachandran, *Globalizing Labour? Indian Seafaring and World Shipping*, c. 1870–1945, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 58–93; Laura Tabili, *'We Ask for British Justice': Workers and Racial Difference in Late Imperial Britain*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994, pp. 41–57; Ahuja, 'Networks of Subordination'; Ahuja, 'Mobility and Containment'.

15 OIOC, India Office, E&O (Seamen) L/E/9/974: Shore leave for lascar crews. See also Ahuja, 'Mobility and Containment', *passim*.

hired for.[16] At London's Victoria Docks alone, a port facility largely catering to liners, about 8,000 Indian seafarers annually were reported to have been transferred to other ships in the early years of the twentieth century.[17] Maritime newspapers regularly carried advertisements like the following: 'Wanted Lascar Crew of about forty-two hands all told for steamer, not later than 21st inst. Apply, B. J. Sutherland and Co. 38, Sandhill, Newcastle.'[18] If such transfers were far from uncontentious and sometimes openly resisted by Indian crew, shipowners insisted on them in order to avoid temporary but costly labour shortages as well as the expenses for the repatriation of crew with expired contracts.[19]

While studies examining such practices remain useful and relevant, they address merely one side of the racialization of maritime labour in the age of the steamship: they emphasize the labour market rather than the work site, study labour *relations* rather than the labour *process*, or, in other words, they examine the *sale* of labour power, not its *extraction*. In what follows, we shift the focus to the organization of work, and since a comprehensive analysis of the interdependent labour processes in a steamship liner's three departments would require a book of its own, we can merely discuss, pars pro toto, the engine room – the department below decks where the increase in the employment of Indian seafarers had been most dynamic.[20] We will ask what the managerial advantages of racializing stokehold labour might have been on steamers and particularly on liners like the S.S. *Egypt*. The question is, in other words: Can we trace any managerial compulsions and needs in the organization of shipping operations that nurtured the shift from the proverbial 'motley crew' of the sailing vessel to the increasing racial segmentation

16 See the instructions for Lascar Transfer Officers in OIOC, India Office Records, Commercial & Revenue Papers, L/E/7/1120, File 1495 (1922).

17 *MMC*, vol. 2, Evidence, p. 107.

18 *Lloyd's List,* 11 December 1906, p. 9.

19 Ravi Ahuja, 'A Freedom Still Enmeshed in Servitude: The Unruly "Lascars" of the S.S. City of Manila or, a Micro-History of the "Free Labour" Problem', in Ravi Ahuja (ed.), *Working Lives and Worker Militancy: The Politics of Labour in Colonial India*, Delhi: Tulika, 2013, pp. 101–7, contains a detailed account and analysis of once such contentious transfer.

20 As early as in 1892, when the proportion of 'lascar' employment in the British merchant marine did not exceed 12.6 per cent, they were reported to have accounted for almost a third of the firemen and trimmers engaged on steamers in the foreign trade. *Manning Committee*, vol. 1, Report, p. 19.

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of the steamer (and specifically the liner) crew? To approach this question, we need to step back for a moment to ask whether there were any fundamental differences in the requirements and options of management for the operation of sailing vessels, on the one hand, and those for the operation of steamers, on the other?

Two key differences appear to have been conducive to modalities of 'racial management' in steam shipping: Firstly, the division of labour on steam vessels was, as we have seen already, much more compartmentalized than on sailing ships. On a steamer, labour processes were sharply divided between the two or three departments, each of them with a separate chain of command headed respectively by the chief officer, the chief engineer, and, on passenger liners, the purser.[21] Further compartmentalization took effect within the engine department between the engine-room and stokehold crews and also between engineers, specialized mechanics, stokers, and trimmers. While the latter two occupations were considered unskilled, their work navigated a complex 'zone of uncertainty' nevertheless, which required the autonomous, flexible, and knowledgeable cooperation of workers thereby potentially subverting officers' authority.[22] To supervise this elastic, inherently instable process of cooperation was a highly laborious management task, which, to some extent, could be delegated, however, to foremen like the serangs and tindals. This layer of intermediaries curbed the 'black gang's' autonomy in organizing their work while simultaneously reducing the need for – potentially contentious – end-to-end communication along the chain of command. 'No leading fireman or engine-room petty officer of an ordinary British steamer can compete', wrote Captain W. H. Hood, 'with the engine-room serang in keeping control of the black squad.'[23] In short, the compartmentalized division of labour on a steam vessel created the desire and the means for a partial 'outsourcing' of management tasks. Direct communication was conversely, at least under

21 See p. 12.

22 Cf. Gerstenberger and Welke, *Vom Wind zum Dampf*, p. 199; Valerie Burton, 'The Work and Home Life of Seafarers with Special Reference to the Port of Southampton 1871–1921', doctoral dissertation, London School of Economics, 1988, p. 140. For a narrative account of a perhaps typical conflict between an engineer and the 'black gang', see Karl Helbig, *Seefahrt vor den Feuern. Erinnerungen eines Schiffsheizers*, Hamburg: Hans Georg Prager Verlag, 1987, pp. 275–8.

23 W. H. Hood, *The Blight of Insubordination: The Lascar Question and Rights and Wrongs of the British Shipmaster*, London: Spottiswoode & Co., 1903, p. 50.

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standard conditions, less necessary, which permitted and facilitated an 'ethnic' segmentation of the crew.[24]

The second key difference favouring modalities of 'racial management' was grounded both in the technology and in the economics of steam shipping, which exerted a much more rigorous compulsion to secure continuous operation and reduce unavoidable interruptions to a minimum. In navigational terms, a steam vessel's manoeuvrability ceased when the pressure dropped in its boilers. Failing to keep up the pressure while at sea thus put at risk the ship as well as the lives of crew and passengers.[25] Interruptions of the labour process were, therefore, to be avoided at sea under all circumstances. In economic terms, moreover, the much higher capital intensity of steamships as compared to sailing vessels meant that they could not be allowed to lie idle in port, and the decline of maritime freight rates in the late nineteenth century further increased the pressure to cut down on demurrage. To sustain work intensity in ports of call and reduce lay days, fluctuations in labour supply on account of land leave, 'failure to join' or 'desertion' needed to be curbed.[26] Moreover, maintenance work could neither be neglected nor taken care of only in port without risking extended and expensive periods of repair. Much of this work, therefore, had to be dealt with at sea implying a further intensification of work.[27]

The requirement of continuous operation both at sea and in port was perhaps somewhat less compelling in the case of so-called 'tramp steamers' that had longer amortization periods, delivered goods to a port to take up new cargo, and needed more lay days in harbour for this purpose. Crucially, as the profitability of 'tramp' businesses hinged on low shipment costs for bulk commodities, fuel saving often took priority

24 For a similar argument emphasizing 'divide and rule' tactics see Laura Tabili, '"A Maritime Race": Masculinity and the Racial Division of Labor in British Merchant Ships, 1900–1939', in Margaret S. Creighton and Lisa Norling (eds), *Iron Men, Wooden Women: Gender and Seafaring in the Atlantic World, 1700–1920*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1996, pp. 181f.

25 Cf. Frank T. Bullen, *The Men of the Merchant Service Being the Polity of the Mercantile Marine for 'Longshore Readers*, London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1900, pp. 308–10.

26 Cf. *MMC*, vol. 2, Evidence, pp. 77, 98.

27 Cf. Gerstenberger and Welke, *Vom Wind zum Dampf*, pp. 190–2; Alston Kennerley, 'Stoking the Boilers: Firemen and Trimmers in British Merchant Ships, 1850–1950', *International Journal of Maritime History* 20, no. 1 (2008), pp. 208–10.

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over speed. No loss of time at all could be allowed, however, in the case of the ocean liners that were more costly while having a shorter period of usage as they competed perpetually for size as well as speed. For liners, as opposed to tramps, were running on tight and inflexible schedules, which were determined by the needs of passenger and postal services.[28] In 1898, the P&O Company was, for instance, contractually bound to provide a weekly mail steamer service between London and Bombay within 14.5 days, which meant a reduction of travel time by more than 60 per cent in comparison to the 23 days required twenty-five years earlier.[29]

These key traits of the steamship's (and particularly the liner's) economy heightened the importance of issues of authority and discipline – and they did so in particular ways. In the stokehold, that 'zone of uncertainty', the actual expenditure of labour power required to 'keep up the pressure' was fairly unpredictable. We have heard already that the machinery was proverbially fault-prone and that different qualities of coal varied in caloric value as well as in the proportion of ashes and clinker they would yield. These were, however, only two of the numerous variables that implied strong fluctuations in labour demand.[30] Chronic undermanning on British merchant vessels – a state conceded only reluctantly by the report of the Manning Committee in 1896 – exacerbated the situation, triggered conflicts in the stokehold, or, from the perspective of management, raised problems of safety and discipline.[31]

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28 Cf. S. G. Sturmey, *British Shipping and World Competition*, London: Athlone Press, 1962, pp. 88, 239f, 249–52. Liners were almost exclusively passenger vessels (which often carried mail and cargo also) before the 1930s when cargo liners became more prevalent. See also Liam Campling and Alejandro Colás, *Capitalism and the Sea: The Maritime Factor in the Modern World,* London: Verso, 2021, pp. 217, 228 and *passim*.

29 House of Commons, *Report from the Select Committee on Shipping Subsidies: Minutes of Evidence*, London: H.M.'s Stationery Office, 1901 (statement by Sir Thomas Sutherland), p. 233 (question 4232).

30 Cf. Kennerley, 'Stoking the Boilers', pp. 208–10; Gerstenberger and Welke, *Vom Wind zum Dampf*, pp. 204–10. For a descriptive account of an incident requiring repair of boilers while at sea, see Helbig, *Seefahrt vor den Feuern,* pp. 275–8.

31 The report stated that the committee had not attempted to 'press charges' of undermanning and insisted that the 'large majority of British ships' was manned adequately, but admitted 'that in certain classes of ships there is a tendency to reduce the number of men, out of proportion to the adoption of improvements in the rig or

Let us return, for a moment, to the logbook entries of the shipmaster of the S.S. *Clinton* regarding the disorderly fireman, Patrick Hughes.[32] The conflict arose, it appears, over unpaid overtime enforced (or, from Hughes's perspective, over wages 'robbed') for the removal of ashes. We can see immediately how 'racial management', namely the employment of Indian firemen on Asiatic Articles, might have made a difference. While working hours remained legally unregulated in British merchant shipping in general,[33] informal work-time arrangements – two four-hour shifts per day in the case of stokers – were considered a customary entitlement by European seafarers and, in principle, even by the shipping industry, though overtime and infringement on rest periods were common.[34] The much-quoted and equally informal 'khalasi watch' system, by contrast, explicitly required 'lascars' to be available whenever needed and was officially acknowledged in 1896.[35] Valentini's 'lascari' dictionary for P&O steamers provided a command formula for this practice: '*Yih log, hamesha taiyar hona, rat-ko, dinko*' ('These people are to be always ready, day and night').[36] In practice, Indian stokers appear to have been often employed in *three* four-hour watches,[37] though the Government of India reported to the ILO in 1929 that *two* four-hour watches were customary as much as for 'white' firemen.[38] In sum, and as

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labour-saving appliances of the vessels, and that many vessels which have been referred to in evidence, or reported on by courts of inquiry, have not been so manned as to conduce either to the safety or the well-being of the crews'. *Manning Committee*, vol. 1, Report, p. 6. See also 'Seafarers Under Steam: "Each Task Has Its Man, and Each Man His Place"', Maritime History Archive, More Than a List of Crew, mha.mun.ca.

32 See p. 148.

33 Conrad H. Dixon, 'Seamen and the Law: An Examination of the Impact of Legislation on the British Merchant Seaman's Lot, 1588–1918', doctoral thesis, University College London, 1981, p. 203; Burton, *The Work and Home Life*, pp. 116f; 'Hours of Labour in the Mercantile Marine: Labour Conditions', *International Labour Review* 5, no. 2 (February 1922), pp. 321f (322–8).

34 Cf. *MMC*, vol. 2, Evidence, p. 194. See also Burton, *Work and Home Life*, pp. 116f.

35 *Manning Committee*, vol. 1, Report, p. 20; Hood, *Blight of Subordination*, pp. 48f; *MMC*, vol. 2, Evidence, p. 200.

36 A. I. Valentini, *Lascari-Bât: A Collection of Sentences Used in the Daily Routine of Modern Passenger Steamers, Where Lascars Are Carried as the Deck Crew; Also a Copious English-Lascari Vocabulary*, London: Miller & Sons, 1896 (2nd ed.), p. 15.

37 See, e.g., Liversidge, *Engine-Room Practice*, pp. 23, 30.

38 International Labour Office, International Labour Conference, Thirteenth Session: The Regulation of Hours of Work on Board Ship, ILO: Geneva, 1929, pp. 202–10.

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in more openly 'unfree' labour relations, working time was not separated from off time by legal regulation, while 'custom' appears to have been a particularly elastic concept in this case. In conflicts over the length of the working day, the shipmaster would also have had less occasion to feel 'powerless': the exercise of sharp and coercive disciplinary action against a recalcitrant 'lascar' was less likely to be contested in court and, unlike Patrick Hughes, an Indian seafarer would not have been able to sign off in Rio de Janeiro or withdraw legally from the master's authority in any other port outside India.

Yet difference was not merely held up by law and custom. 'Native' firemen were bound into an even steeper and, crucially, *mediated* structure of shipboard hierarchy that reduced (though it did not rule out) the likeliness of direct conflict with the shipmaster on his bridge or the chief engineer down below. For the serangs and tindals, the intermediaries used by British shipping companies to recruit as well as supervise the work of Indian seafarers functioned as a buffer between the 'white' officers and the 'native' crew.[39] 'In a British ship which carries an Indian crew,' wrote Amir Haider Khan in his memoirs, 'it is a sarang through whom the authorities make man [sic] work for unlimited hours' – whose mediation made, in other words, 'khalasi watches' possible.[40] This hierarchical arrangement encumbered an egalitarian tendency emerging, as Valerie Burton has argued, among European stokehold crews that 'worked as gangs, organized and disciplined by their own rules': a need for close cooperation at work the flip side of which was a

39 Balachandran has cautioned that the central role of the serang as a disciplinary agent existed more in the reifying, essentializing minds of British colonizers than in actual practice, which he perceived to be more ambivalent. See esp. Balachandran, *Globalizing Labour?*, pp. 68–78; Gopalan Balachandran, 'Searching for the Sardar: The State, Pre-capitalist Institutions and Human Agency in the Maritime Labour Market, Calcutta, 1880–1935', in B. Stein and S. Subrahmanyam (eds), *Institutions and Economic Change in South Asia*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996, pp. 206–36. I agree that the power of intermediaries was never absolute or uncontested and that recruitment networks were far from all-encompassing and possessed relative stability only. However, my evidence suggests that intermediaries were sufficiently effective to be of practical utility for European shipping companies and that their networks were sufficiently durable to persist for generations and adapt to changing conditions. See esp. Ahuja, 'Networks of Subordination'.

40 Amir Haider Khan, 'I Break with the Old World' (Part I: Nasik manuscript 1939–1942, typed copy with editorial markings by Hasan Gardezi, Pakistan Study Centre, University of Karachi), p. 225. See also p. 228.

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tendency towards industrial militancy or, in the employers' dictionary, 'insubordination'.[41] It is not as if relations between 'lascars' and these middlemen were harmonious or free of tension – we do have various accounts of conflict and at times of open confrontation, including an unusually detailed sequential narrative by Amir Haider Khan, which I have analysed closely elsewhere.[42] But serangs possessed means of control over their men that were not available to 'white' officers including, crucially, systematic indebtedness – a contractual bond that was not infrequently reinforced and secured by ties of village or kinship networks.[43]

Family links between Indian crew members appear to have been common even among the lower ratings of the stokehold.[44] Shipping concerns like the P&O favoured such continuity – their nautical inspector reported with some pride that the 'natives' 'stick by the Company. There are men there almost for generations.' The P&O's 'lascars', he added, were 'almost an institution of the company'.[45] A retired shipmaster of the British India Steam Navigation Company (BISN) confirmed that the 'lascar' took 'a greater interest in a ship than the British seaman'.[46] Such statements were repeated time and again but clearly need to be taken with a pinch of salt. For the shipping industry, it was surely easier to keep the moral high ground by conjuring up paternalistic bonds with the 'lascar' while deploring the depravity of British seafarers than by admitting that considerations of cost played a role in the increasing displacement of the latter by the former. And yet, other evidence, including the memoirs and reminiscences of seafarers, corroborate a certain stability of maritime village links in areas as far apart as interior Goa, coastal Gujarat, northern Punjab, and Sylhet in

41 Burton, *The Work and Home Life*, p. 140.

42 Ahuja, 'A Freedom Still Enmeshed'.

43 Cf. Ahuja, 'Networks of Subordination'.

44 The importance of such links for accessing the maritime labour market, for coping with periods of illness and unemployment, as well as for opening up new opportunities of subsistence are discussed repeatedly and at length, for instance, in Amir Haider Khan's autobiographical text 'I Break with the Old World'. See also chapter 13, below.

45 Examination of John Charles Almond, *Manning Committee*, vol. 2, Minutes of Evidence . . . , pp. 582f.

46 Examination of William Cosens, *Manning Committee*, vol. 2, Minutes of Evidence . . . , p. 781.

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Eastern Bengal as well as the importance of family links for gaining access to the maritime labour market.[47]

There is also evidence for the fact that the age range of Indian trimmers and firemen was somewhat wider than that of their European colleagues and competitors who were usually younger adults. Between 1891 and 1911, less than a third of all British seamen on foreign-going ships were older than thirty-five, while up to half of the stokehold crew was below thirty.[48] A study of a sample of crew lists even found that, between 1850 and 1950, the average age of British workers in the fireroom was just over thirty.[49] Indian shipping law as well as ILO conventions digressed from European legislation, however, in that they permitted well into the 1930s the employment of Indian adolescents as trimmers and stokers. This was justified by British officials with the fantastic claim that 'in a tropical climate a boy reaches maturity much earlier than in Europe'.[50] Among Indian crews, the recruitment of trimmers in their late teens, at times even at the age of ten or twelve, appears to have been rather common.[51] 'A young man who intends to qualify for employment in the engine-room', an official letter from Bengal stated in 1911, 'usually commences his career as a coal trimmer at about 16 years of age; he seldom goes away in a vessel by himself, but is almost invariably accompanied by a relative holding some post in the engine-room.'[52] At the same time, it was also known that middle-aged men continued to

47 I have explored some of these links in some detail in my 'Networks of Subordination'. See also Yousuf Choudhury, *The Roots and Tales of Bangladeshi Settlers*, Birmingham: Sylheti Social History Group, 1993, pp. 42, 57–9.

48 Valerie Burton, 'Counting Seafarers: The Published Records of the Registry of Merchant Seamen', *Mariner's Mirror* 71, no. 3 (1985), p. 316.

49 Kennerley, 'Stoking the Boilers', p. 202.

50 League of Nations, *International Labour Conference, 2nd Session, Genova 1920*, International Labour Office: Geneva, 1920, p. 146 (Captain Duncan Vines, delegate of the Government of India). See also OIOC, BoMP P/8587, A205–8, A393–95; ibid., P/8838, A49–50 (February 1911): Despatch from Government of India to Secretary of State, 20 October 1910; ibid., P/11535, A35–36 (27 January 1926); R. K. Das, *History of Indian Labour Legislation*, Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1941, pp. 126–9; E. C. Tsandis, 'International Maritime Labour Law: A Case Study of the ILO's Attempts to Develop Aspects Thereof', doctoral thesis, London School of Economics, 1992, pp. 120–5.

51 See, e.g., Minutes of the Evidence recorded by the Indian Mercantile Marine Committee, n.l., n.d., p. 643.

52 OIOC, BoMP P/8587, A319–20 (July 1911): Letter from the Government of Bengal to the Government of India, Department Commerce & Industry, 29 March 1911.

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be recruited by serangs even when their physical strength was beginning to ebb: 'There have been instances of grandfather, father, and son in the same ship', reported the P&O Company's nautical inspector.[53] This permitted a skill transfer that could begin at an earlier age while the experience of seasoned stokers was preserved in the workforce for a longer period and could be utilized for purposes of supervision and on-the-job training. Those in their twenties and thirties could be relied upon for full performance, while Indian village boys were groomed for future service besides taking care of auxiliary tasks. 'Racial management' thus also provided means for the *maintenance of uncertified skill*: a certain stabilization (or, in the nautical inspector's words, 'institutionalization') of the workforce and the harnessing of inter-generational modes of supervision and skill transfer held substantial advantages for managing the 'zone of uncertainty' in the stokehold.

The wider generational scope certainly contributed to the larger size of 'lascar' boiler-room crews exceeding European 'black gangs', as we have seen, often by 50 per cent and sometimes more. If the report of the Manning Committee had conceded in 1896 that undermanning and a 'tendency to reduce the number of men' was endemic in 'certain classes' of British merchant vessels, the simultaneously expanding practice of hiring considerably larger 'lascar' crews begs explanation: at a time when freight rates dropped and shipowners sought to reduce the wage bill, how do we account for what appears to be, at first sight, a case of inadvertent 'excess employment'?[54] Spokesmen of the shipping industry often repeated the above-mentioned and presumably 'scientific' calculations of comparative racial efficiency to justify this unevenness of manning scales, though some also mentioned that the larger size of 'native' crews meant that ships 'are better worked, kept in better order, and generally more efficient as mail and passenger ships than they would be with European crews'.[55]

When official commissions interviewed British seafarers, the respondents would often use a language of white supremacism that denied their

53 Examination of John Charles Almond, *Manning Committee*, vol. 2, Minutes of Evidence . . . , pp. 582f.

54 *Manning Committee*, vol. 1, Report, p. 6.

55 The quote is from the testimony of J. C. Almond, Nautical Inspector of the P&O Company to the Board of Trade's Manning Committee in 1894: *Manning Committee,* vol. 2, Minutes of Evidence . . . , p. 582; see also p. 771, and vol. 1, *Report*, p. 20.

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competitors any physical prowess or skill, any efficiency or courage. 'Lascars' were inept in the stokehold, declared, for instance, fireman James Coyle before the Mercantile Martine Committee: 'They could not do the work; they were not strong enough, and absolutely no use. It took four of them to do one Britisher's work.'[56] Thomas Alty, another stoker, appeared less inclined to racial stereotyping, however, as he hinted at uneven relations of power and issues of labour management. He believed that British officers preferred 'foreign' crew because 'they seem to do as they like with them; they think we can speak our mind too freely'. As for numerical proportions, he observed that work in the stokehold was 'very trying, but there are a couple of them ["lascars"] to do the work of only one of our men, *and that makes a lot of difference down in a stokehold*'.[57] Unfortunately, Alty was not questioned any further by the committee on how exactly the employment of more men made 'a lot of difference', but we can find some clues in the statements of other witnesses. Hence several testimonies of shipowners and officials asserted that steam pressure could be kept up more evenly and that coal consumption could be reduced when employing 'native' firemen. The spokesman of the Liverpool Shipowners' Association stated, for instance, that

> the inferiority of the Lascar firemen in physique is an advantage, as he cannot put on a great deal of coal at a time, and he is, therefore, constantly stoking putting on small quantities of coal, so that the steam pressure is evenly maintained. The European fireman, on the other hand, will put on a great deal, and have a rest, and the consequence is loss of pressure, and the result is that ships which employ Lascars are able to keep better time than ships employing European firemen.[58]

The Superintendent of Liverpool's Mercantile Marine Office held the same view:

> A European fireman exposed to the radiant heat of the furnace when opening doors to coal, naturally threw as much coal as possible on the

56 *MMC*, vol. 2, Evidence, pp. 347f.
57 Ibid., pp. 333f. Emphasis added.
58 Ibid., p. 531.

> fires, shut the doors, and rushed away, sometimes on deck to cool – result: reduction of pressure followed by excess. The Asiatic did not care so much for the heat, and was only capable of putting or throwing on a moderate supply, and repeating the operation when necessary – result: uniform pressure and less consumption.[59]

The Board of Trade's principal Marine Department official for London joined the chorus by informing the committee that 'since the introduction of Lascars I am told that the consumption of coal has decreased, and the speed of ships has increased'.[60] If such claims were generally substantiated in the jargon of 'racial management' by referring to the 'lascar's' presumed 'inferior physique' and lesser sensitivity to heat, another more plausible (but for shipowners also somewhat less comfortable) explanation was clearly that less restrictive manning scales enabled the stokehold crew to tend to the fires more efficiently, i.e., to feed them more frequently and regularly with smaller quantities of coal rather than tossing in heavy shovelfuls at longer intervals.

More men made 'a lot of difference', too, with regards to those unending and crucial ancillary tasks like preventing an accumulation of clinker and ashes next to the furnace, which jeopardized the quick repairs of the machinery that could become necessary at any time and had to be seen to, while at sea, without letting off in the production of steam. Certainly, at least some of these maintenance tasks could be taken care of while the ship was in port and when reduced boiler pressure did not pose any danger for the security of the vessel. But, even then, the compulsion to continuity did not cease to matter, since the capital intensity of large steamers and the speed requirements of mail contracts forced their owners to reduce lay days and keep them in perpetual motion.[61]

However, issues of discipline played out quite differently at sea and in port: while at sea, the physical seclusion of the ship made it much harder to break the chains of command that had been forged to

59 Ibid., p. 21.

60 Ibid., p. 137.

61 See footnote 29 of this chapter, above. See also Freda Harcourt, 'British Oceanic Mail Contracts in the Age of Steam, 1838–1914', *Journal of Transport History* 9, no. 1 (1988), p. 15.

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impose a rigid hierarchy upon its work processes.[62] For absconding (or 'desertion' in the militarized language of merchant shipping) as a historically widespread means to escape individually from oppressive labour relations was impossible, of course, for as long as the ship was at sea.[63] Moreover, the fact that the safety of vessel, passengers, and crew depended on the continuous production of steam pressure embedded a disciplinarian mechanism in the labour process itself while reinforcing the legitimacy of the ship's structures of authority.[64] In ports of call, the situation was quite different, however. Here, it was considerably easier to evade the authority of ship's officers and engineers by signing off, by overstaying land leave, or by 'jumping ship', which could cause unexpected labour shortages and costly delays.[65]

The steam shipping industry comprised several segments and business models, however, which were not in the same way affected by such shortages and delays. Tramp shipping was less dependent on high speed and punctuality. 'Tramps' could, therefore, put up more easily with underpaid, undermanned, contractually 'freer', radically casualized, and consequently highly unstable crews.[66] As long as proletarian neighbourhoods in port cities like Liverpool or Cardiff

62 I agree with Heide Gerstenberger's argument that the tendency of historians to frame the ship as a 'total institution' is misleading if it suggests that maritime authoritarianism is a direct consequence of shipping technology rather than the result of social choices, negotiations, and conflicts. At the same time, the peculiar position of the ship in social space – mobile *and* secluded when in operation – enables forms of discipline that are more difficult to implement elsewhere. Cf. Heide Gerstenberger, 'Men Apart: The Concept of "Total Institution" and the Analysis of Seafaring', *International Journal of Maritime History* 8, no. 1 (1996).

63 On desertion of workers see Matthias van Rossum and Jeanette Kamp (eds), *Desertion in the Early Modern World: A Comparative History*, London: Bloomsbury, 2016; Marcus Rediker, Titas Chakraborty, and Matthias van Rossum (eds), *A Global History of Runaways: Workers, Mobility, and Capitalism 1600–1850*, Oakland: University of California Press, 2019.

64 Cf. Ahuja, 'A Freedom Still Enmeshed', pp. 109–11.

65 See p. 152.

66 An engineer surveyor of the Board of Trade, extensively quoted in the report of the Manning Committee, described in graphic detail how a process of work intensification had led to serious undermanning and to a decline of maintenance work particularly in the stokeholds of 'cargo steamers' (most of which would have been categorized as 'tramps'). *Manning Committee*, vol. 1, Report, pp. 24f. See also *MMC*, vol. 2, Evidence, pp. 35, 164, 613.

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supplied an overabundance of poorly paid and precariously employable firemen, mostly poor 'whites' but also African or Yemeni crew, they were readily hired for tramp stokeholds.[67] Owners seemed to be less concerned about the reputation of these men for drink, for insubordination, and for 'backing out' on contracts after one voyage – a reputation that was partly an expression of class prejudice and partly, as Tony Lane observed, a reflection of behavioural patterns rooted in a culture of casual employment.[68] The situation was different, however, in the upper segment of the industry. 'A liner', aspiring engineers were thus informed by Liversidge's variously reprinted manual,

> steams almost continuously at full speed; stopping for a period of a few hours to coal at ports of call, she steams to her destination, where she may stay from ten to fourteen days. On her return to the home port, after an interval of from one to five weeks, she starts on another voyage. Consequently there is very little time or opportunity for repairs to be made between the terminal ports.[69]

One such schedule was described in more detail:

> The Routine in the P. and O. Service. – The following outline sketch of this routine is given as an example of the general conditions under which a mail steamer is worked. The longest voyage is from London to Sydney, and is about 12,500 miles . . . The principal ports of call and the lengths of stoppages are as follows: Gibraltar; Malta, 8 hours; Brindisi, 14 hours; Port Said, 3 hours; Aden, 6 to 12 hours; Colombo, 18 to 24 hours; King George's Sound, 6 to 8 hours; Adelaide, 12 hours; Melbourne, 36 hours; Sydney, nearly a fortnight.
>
> The tubes of the boilers are swept as far as possible, and all fires are cleaned at each port of call. This requires considerable management

67 For the link between casual employment patterns and the business model of the 'tramp' steamer, see Burton, *Work and Home Life*, esp. pp. 70–4. See also Tabili, '"A Maritime Race"', pp. 177f.

68 Cf. Tony Lane, *Liverpool: City of the Sea* (2nd ed.), Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997, pp. 59–82.

69 Liversidge, *Engine-Room Practice*, p. 29.

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> as steam is required for working the cargo, and it is not advisable to light up the auxiliary boiler for short stoppages.[70]

The port time of a liner was thus measured in hours rather than days, and this tight schedule implied that the boilers could not be allowed to cool down in most ports of call. Amir Haider Khan thus remembered from his own childhood days in the early 1910s that he, along with a gang of other Bombay street urchins, was regularly hired by a contractor to clean the smokestacks, flues, and boilers of British steamers. 'The worst of all jobs', he wrote in his memoirs,

> was cleaning the inside of steam boilers. At first they would put out the fire and then hot water and steam pressure were let out. After that an engineer from a ship would open the man-hole cover by loosening the nuts. Thereafter the contractor's men would force small boys into the hot boiler through the manhole, which, due to about two or three months continuous steaming, would not cool down at once. In fact we were forced to get in often when vapours were still coming out, causing burns and suffocation. If our bare skin came into contact with the surface of the metal, we used to get horrible blisters.[71]

If Liversidge believed that cleaning duties in port required 'considerable management', this was mainly a question of coordinating a variety of work tasks and of ensuring the availability of the required workforce.[72] This was, of course, much facilitated if the liner's own crew could be prevented from taking shore leave or even signing off and if they could be deployed to work tasks continuously even during the short stays in port. Accordingly, in the opinion of the superintendent of the Mercantile Marine Office in Liverpool, the fact that 'Lascar and other Asiatic seamen' were 'not given to going on shore at every port' was one of the reasons why it was 'not difficult to understand how they soon were preferred in regular lines'.[73] His Cardiff counterpart added that 'lascars'

70 Ibid., pp. 30–1.
71 Khan, 'I Break with the Old World', part I, p. 151.
72 Liversidge, *Engine-Room Practice*, p. 31.
73 *MMC*, vol. 2, Evidence, p. 21.

remained 'by the ship during her stay in port, and work on board during that period'.[74] The representative of the Liverpool Steamship Owners' Association stated that 'in port all necessary work can be done by Lascars; whilst if you have a European crew, native labour would have to be employed ashore', and his trade union opponent from Birkenhead concurred:[75] 'Where the Lascars are employed no shore gang is employed.'[76] These statements contained some exaggeration: contract workers, including juvenile 'scorfers' or 'scalers' like the ones described for Bombay by Amir Haider Khan, were regularly employed in British ports as well.[77] If a liner was worked by an Indian crew, this merely meant that casual port labour had to be hired in smaller proportions, as a reinforcement for specific tasks and not as a replacement for crew on land leave.

However, if continuous, uninterrupted operation was the crucial problem of labour management on steam-powered ocean liners, no single, inescapable solution for this problem sprang up by itself from either the technology or the economy of the liner. Multiple responses to the problem could emerge from processes of political and social contestation and, in the case of British liner companies, at least two alternative strategies appear to have been found: Valerie Burton has shown that liner companies using Southampton as a home port sought to regularise their liner workforces by increasing their pay and reducing turnover. Average wages of British stokers employed in the liners of Cunard, the American Line, or the White Line thus appear to have been about 20 per cent higher than those paid to firemen serving on tramp steamers. In order to 'counter-balance the attractions of wages in the American mercantile marine and ashore in the United States and Canada', the highest wages were paid in the North Atlantic liner service. The typical stoker serving on these British ocean liners was 'white' and English, a family man settled in Southampton or

74 Ibid., p. 61.

75 Ibid., p. 531. For a similar statement by Captain W. H. Hood, see *Manning Committee*, vol. 2, Minutes of Evidence . . . , p. 581.

76 *MMC*, vol. 2, Evidence, p. 244.

77 James Lynch, a fireman examined by the Manning Committee in 1894 stated that 'the better part of the firemen have been scorfers' and regarded this a kind of 'apprenticeship' period for work in the stokehold. *Manning Committee*, vol. 2, Minutes of Evidence . . . , p. 581. For a graphic description of the employment of older children and adolescents as 'scalers' in early twentieth-century Liverpool, see James Hanley, *Boy,* Bury St. Edmonds: André Deutsch, 1990 (1st ed. 1931), pp. 28–60.

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thereabouts and in long-term employment, while Liverpool stokers of often Irish descent were avoided on account of their reputation for carelessness and truculence. Local men were believed to be more likely to remain 'with their ships for the duration of the round voyage' and 'particular preference was given to men who had sailed with the company before'. Labour turnover was much lower accordingly on Southampton liners than on tramp steamers and the desertion rate appears to have been negligible.[78] At the same time, as Burton emphasizes, the 'foreign going passenger liner was, perhaps, the most authoritarian of civilian workplaces and the liner crews the most tightly controlled of all workforces'.[79]

From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, the British India and P&O companies, however, pioneered an alternative approach replacing British crew, and particularly stokers, with Indian seafarers. Even though this process of replacement was in full swing long before the Suez Canal was opened in 1869, P&O chairman and managing director, Sir Thomas Sutherland, strongly linked it to this event when questioned by the House of Commons Shipping Subsidies Committee in 1901.[80] 'When our ships first went through the Suez Canal,' he said, 'we endeavoured to work them entirely by Europeans, but found it impossible to do so owing to intemperance and insubordination.' He conceded that he could 'quite believe that a vessel going at a slow rate of speed, and not being tied down to time, might employ Europeans quite as well in the tropics' but insisted that a mail steamer could not do that. On being questioned whether firing was not 'as hard on a tramp steamer as it is on a regular liner' he retorted that 'a liner, and by that I mean a mail steamer, has to be at each point at a given date, and we found our European crews would not bring us to those given points at those given dates'. Sutherland revealed that – despite the much lower pay of Indian seafarers – about a third of the P&O's annual wage bill was spent on 'natives' by the turn of the century.[81] The Manning Committee observed correspondingly that

78 Burton, *Work and Home Life*, pp. 80–101.

79 Ibid., p. 130.

80 In 1902, the Mercantile Marine Committee assumed that the P&O Company had been manning their ships with 'lascars' for about sixty years. *MMC*, vol. 2, Evidence, p. 296; see also Hood, *The Blight of Insubordination*, p. 13.

81 House of Commons, *Report from the Select Committee on Shipping Subsidies: Minutes of Evidence*, London: H.M.'s Stationery Office, 1901 (statement by Sir Thomas Sutherland), pp. 252, 254 (questions 4598, 4619, 4621).

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'Lascar crews' were 'carried principally in the P. & O., British India, and other large liners', which included the Liverpool-based Hall Line as well as the Glaswegian City Line.[82]

If Sutherland emphasized issues of endemic insubordination among British seafarers as well as the climatic conditions of the 'tropics' as the main reasons for his preference for 'native' crews, deeper causes thus seem to lurk behind. Asian stokehold crews could facilitate uninterrupted operation at sea because their size could be augmented, as we have seen, to comprise an internal labour reserve without increasing labour costs. This internal labour reserve permitted a levelling out of the typical fluctuations of workload in the stokehold and the high incidence of sickness in this work environment. It also enabled the employment of an additional layer of subordinate intermediaries to supervise the labour process more closely. Further, this labour reserve allowed for a wider range of age groups among trimmers and firemen than was usual among 'white' British liner crews, thereby preserving skill and providing for its transfer to very young Indian village boys. In sum, the existence of this internal labour reserve explains the repeated insistence of shipping spokesmen that liners could be kept in better shape and that tight schedules were fulfilled more reliably with a 'lascar' crew.[83]

Indian seafarers were quite aware of this management model. Hence Amir Haider Khan, remembering his first attempt to gain seafaring employment with a 'lascar' crew in early 1915, observed that in 'those days in most of the big coal-burning ships were employed some extra men who were signed on as firemen or coal passers' but were in fact deployed to cleaning tasks in the 'engine room or other auxiliary work', and also served as substitutes when regular stokers and trimmers were taken ill.[84] If 'extra men' were recruited in Bombay and Calcutta while 'undermanning' was the rule in British ports, this may well explain

82 *Manning Committee*, vol. 1, Report, p. 20. One of the most vocal public advocates of 'lascar' employment, William Hogg Hood, was a ship master in the service of the Hall Line. *Manning Committee*, vol. 2, Minutes of Evidence, p. 576; for the City Line see p. 52; Hood, *The Blight of Insubordination*, p. 17; *MMC*, vol. 2, Evidence, p. 48. Both companies were eventually absorbed into the Ellerman group.

83 *Manning Committee*, vol. 1, Report, p. 20; vol. 2, Minutes of Evidence . . . , pp. 582, 771, 775; *MMC*, vol. 2, Evidence, pp. 531, 543.

84 Khan, 'I Break with the Old World', part I, p. 156.

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why an overseer for the Liverpool shipping company Gillison & Chadwick claimed that one engineer had told him 'he would sooner go for less wages if we would give him Lascars'.[85] The racist stereotypes commonly used to vindicate the larger size of these crews were thus condensed and ideologically supercharged verbalizations of perfectly workable and cost-saving management practices.

If the internal labour reserve of 'lascar' crews facilitated the uninterrupted operation at full capacity of the steamer's power plant at sea, the peculiar combination of immigration law, of the 'Asiatic Articles', and of informal modalities of control through intermediaries served the same purpose while simultaneously tying Indian crews more tightly to their ships even in ports of call. The practice of 'khalasi watches' thus undercut customary work-time arrangements on steamers by asserting the claim to unlimited availability during the voyage. A racialized form of maritime labour contract and anti-Asian immigration restrictions combined to keep the workforce available even in ports of call, push down the rate of attrition, and stabilize the workforce without raising the costs of employment. If similar elements of contractual unfreedom remained, in the twentieth century, justifiable for 'white' wage workers under circumstances of exceptional crisis or war, 'racial management' offered a route of circumvention available at all times: the structural tension between the compulsion to continuity in the labour-intensive work processes of the steamship, on the one hand, and the disruptive potentials of formally 'free' wage labour, on the other, could be resolved, without raising labour costs, through the racialization of labour relations and labour process.[86]

The intricacies of such calculations were rarely spelled out as they were generally presented in those rickety frames of racial taxonomy. Yet, when oil replaced coal and maritime labour relations were, for the second time since the invention of the steamer, fundamentally transformed in other parts of the shipping world, 'racial management' and the privileged access of British shipping companies like the P&O to apparently unlimited reservoirs of colonial labour gave the stokehold stigma of the 'hairy ape' a second if brief span of life.

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85 *Manning Committee*, vol. 2, Minutes of Evidence . . . , p. 692.

86 Cf. Alessandro Stanziani, *Sailors, Slaves, and Immigrants: Bondage in the Indian Ocean World, 1750–1914*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 125–33.

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