

## “Lord of the Forecastle”: *Serangs*, *Tindals*, and Lascar Mutiny, c.1780–1860\*

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ABSTRACT: This article focuses on the diverse body of seafarers from the Indian Ocean region known as “lascars”. Very little is known about mutiny amongst those employed aboard European merchantmen during the age of sail. Private voyage journals and other sources offer scattered glimpses of demonstrations, strikes, and assaults on officers. Lascars used such tactics to air grievances, resist unpopular orders, and extract concessions from their superiors. They also took part in more serious forms of mutiny, in which they murdered captains, commandeered ships, and expropriated cargoes. The depositions taken in connection with such incidents provide an unparalleled window on to their working lives. Labour intermediaries known as *serangs* and *tindals* feature prominently in these various disturbances. The unique position they occupied enabled them to undermine European officers and even depose captains. Their involvement in shipboard uprisings serves as a reminder of the ways in which mutiny could be staged, manipulated, and controlled.

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### INTRODUCTION

There is now an extensive literature devoted to “lascars”, a fluid term used to describe sailors from the Indian Ocean region employed on European vessels. Although sometimes used only to denote south Asian seafarers, it might also include those of south-east Asian, Arab, or African origin.<sup>1</sup>

\* Research for this article was supported by generous grants from the Arts and Humanities Research Council, the William Edwards Educational Charity, and the Economic History Society. I would like to thank those who commented on my paper at the “Mutiny and Maritime Radicalism in the Age of Revolution” conference in June 2011 and subsequent workshops. I am also grateful to David Arnold, Margaret Makepeace, Michael H. Fisher, Gopalan Balachandran, and others who kindly read drafts.

1. For a discussion of the various terms used to describe different non-European seafarers, see David A. Chappell, “Ahab’s Boat: Non-European Seamen in Western Ships of Exploration and Commerce”, in Bernhard Klein and Gesa Mackenthun (eds), *Sea Changes: Historicizing the Ocean* (London, 2004), pp. 75–89.

Lascars who visited or settled in Britain have been studied in great detail.<sup>2</sup> Lascar employment after the advent of steam shipping has also received much attention.<sup>3</sup> Historians have examined various forms of protest and disorder carried out by lascars in a range of contexts, including ship-burning in Indian ports, rioting in London, disputes with the East India Company, resistance to missionary activity, attempts to combat discrimination, and discontent aboard steamships.<sup>4</sup> The existing scholarship includes some discussion of mutiny, although this has mostly been confined to incidents that took place during the twentieth century. These include protests by non-European crews during World War II and the Royal Indian Navy mutiny of 1946.<sup>5</sup> Much less is known, by contrast, about shipboard unrest amongst lascars during the age of sail.<sup>6</sup>

This article focuses on episodes of lascar mutiny which occurred on sailing ships from the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. During this period lascars were to be found on a range of different vessels, including slavers, whalers, convict transports, and warships. The most widespread use of lascar crews, however, was on British merchantmen trading to Indian Ocean ports. East India Company ships, which made the long voyage between Britain and India, were forced to hire lascars in order to replace the huge numbers of European sailors lost to disease,

2. Conrad Dixon, "Lascars: The Forgotten Seamen", in Rosemary Ommer and Gerald Panting (eds), *Working Men Who Got Wet: Proceedings of the Fourth Conference on the Atlantic Canada Shipping Project, July 24–July 26, 1980* (St John's, NF, 1980), pp. 265–281; Rozina Visram, *Ayabs, Lascars and Princes: Indians in Britain 1700–1947* (London, 1986); Michael H. Fisher, *Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian Travellers and Settlers in Britain 1600–1857* (Delhi, 2004).

3. Ravi Ahuja, "Networks of Subordination – Networks of the Subordinated: The Ordered Spaces of South Asian Maritime Labour in an Age of Imperialism (c. 1890–1947)", in Ashwini Tambe and Harald Fischer-Tiné (eds), *The Limits of British Colonial Control in South Asia: Spaces of Disorder in the Indian Ocean Region* (Abingdon, 2009), pp. 13–48; Gopalan Balachandran, *Globalizing Labour?: Indian Seafarers and World Shipping, c.1870–1945* (Delhi, 2012).

4. Michael H. Fisher, "Finding Lascar 'Wilful Incendiarism': British Ship-Burning Panic and Indian Maritime Labour in the Indian Ocean", *South Asia*, 35 (2012), pp. 596–623; Shompa Lahiri, "Contested Relations: The East India Company and Lascars in London", in H.V. Bowen, Margarette Lincoln, and Nigel Rigby (eds), *The Worlds of the East India Company* (Woodbridge, 2002), pp. 169–181; Shompa Lahiri, "Patterns of Resistance: Indian Seamen in Imperial Britain", in Anne J. Kersten (ed.), *Language, Labour and Migration* (Aldershot, 2000), pp. 155–178; M. Sherwood, "Lascar Struggles Against Discrimination in Britain 1923–45: The Work of N.J. Upadhyaya and Surat Alley", *Mariner's Mirror*, 90 (2004), pp. 438–455; Balachandran, *Globalizing Labour?*, ch. 6.

5. Tony Lane, *The Merchant Seamen's War* (Manchester, 1990), ch. 7; Dipak Kumar Das, *Revisiting Talwar: A Study in the Royal Indian Navy Uprising of February 1946* (Delhi, 1993).

6. For a description of unrest aboard the *Lady Campbell*, see Amitav Ghosh, "Of Fanás and Forecasts: The Indian Ocean and Some Lost Languages of the Age of Sail", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 43 (2008), pp. 56–62, 60–62.

impressment, and desertion.<sup>7</sup> Country ships or privately owned vessels which traded between Asian ports also relied heavily on lascars, typically employing a small number of European officers to manage a predominantly lascar crew.<sup>8</sup> The lascars who worked aboard these vessels are often overlooked in the existing literature because many never left the Indian Ocean region. It is impossible to determine exactly how many lascars were employed aboard British ships at any one time. A conservative estimate put this figure at between 10,000 and 12,000 in 1855.<sup>9</sup>

Lascars served under their own petty officers. The most important of these was the *serang*, whose duties corresponded to those of a boatswain. He was usually assisted by one or more *tindals*, who acted as boatswain's mates and were headed by a *burra-tindal*. These intermediary figures have been the subject of much discussion amongst historians of maritime labour. Gopalan Balachandran and Ravi Ahuja have provided particularly wide-ranging studies of their activities as recruiters, disciplinarians, creditors, and trade unionists during the era of steam shipping. This has shed light on the problems they caused their employers, the ways in which they were portrayed by contemporaries, and the limits of their power.<sup>10</sup>

The role that *serangs* and *tindals* played in unrest on board sailing vessels remains unexplored. After discussing the position such figures occupied on board ship, this article examines their involvement in various types of mutiny. These included commonplace confrontations with officers, as well as more serious forms of shipboard uprising.

#### SERANGS AND TINDALS ABOARD SAILING VESSELS

*Serangs* and *tindals* enjoyed various privileges aboard merchantmen. Above all, they were given much higher wages than their subordinates. Lascars shipping out of Bombay, for example, received Rs 7 per month at the end of the eighteenth century, whereas *tindals* were paid Rs. 10–12 and *serangs* Rs 20.<sup>11</sup> Some travellers claimed that *serangs* also wore visible

7. Michael H. Fisher, "Working across the Seas: Indian Maritime Labourers in India, Britain, and in Between, 1600–1857", *International Review of Social History*, 51 (2006), Supplement, pp. 21–45, 26.

8. Anne Bulley, *The Bombay Country Ships, 1790–1833* (Richmond, 2000), ch. 13.

9. Visram, *Ayabs, Lascars and Princes*, pp. 52–53.

10. Gopalan Balachandran, "Searching for the *Sardar*: The State, Pre-Capitalist Institutions, and Human Agency in the Maritime Labour Market, Calcutta, 1880–1935", in Burton Stein and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (eds), *Institutions and Economic Change in South Asia* (Delhi, 1996), pp. 206–236; Ravi Ahuja, "Mobility and Containment: The Voyages of South Asian Seamen, c. 1900–1960", *International Review of Social History*, 51 (2006), Supplement, pp. 111–141, 132–137.

11. Bulley, *Bombay Country Ships*, p. 234.

symbols of their rank.<sup>12</sup> Herman Melville described a flamboyantly dressed *serang* aboard a fictional country ship in *Redburn*, who “was arrayed in a red army-coat, brilliant with gold lace, a cocked hat, and drawn sword”.<sup>13</sup> Regrettably, few visual representations of lascars have survived from the age of sail. One rare exception, a set of watercolours produced by Robert Temple in the early nineteenth century, depicts a well-robed *serang* (Figure 1) and a more modestly clad, barefoot lascar (Figure 2).<sup>14</sup> The allocation of space may have been another marker of status amongst lascar crews. George Earl, an experienced seafarer, wrote of lascars who “always sleep on deck, as the small forecabin appropriated to their use will scarcely contain their boxes, and if any space should be left, it is monopolized by the *serang*”.<sup>15</sup>

Language barriers between officers and lascars rendered the use of intermediaries particularly important. Some Europeans managed to become proficient in the languages of their crews. Seasoned captains, such as John Adolphus Pope, became adept linguists who were able to issue complex orders to their lascars.<sup>16</sup> Using Roebuck’s fascinating dictionary and phrase-book, Amitav Ghosh has explored the unique lexicon that emerged during such encounters.<sup>17</sup> Despite cases of adaptation, however, complaints about the difficulties of communicating with lascars were very common. When James Innes was travelling as a supercargo along the coast of China in 1836 he became irate at the situation aboard the *Fairy*. He complained that “we have six Manila men who cannot speak one word of anything except bastard Span[ish], we have eight Lascars who know nothing of anything except Bengalee, our mates and app[rentice]s speak solely English”.<sup>18</sup> *Serangs* and *tindals* were employed to bridge these linguistic divides. On board some vessels they would have been the only lascars able to communicate with the captain.<sup>19</sup>

12. James Wathen, *Journal of a Voyage, in 1811 and 1812, to Madras and China; Returning by the Cape of Good and St. Helena in the H.C.S. the Hope, Capt. James Pendergrass* (London, 1814), p. 10.

13. Herman Melville, *Redburn: His First Voyage*, 2 vols (London, 1849), II, p. 22.

14. Robert Temple, “Serang, or Cockswain of a Bombay Pilot Boat”, “A Klassee, Sailor” (1810–1811), watercolours, WD315, British Library, London [hereafter BL].

15. George Windsor Earl, *The Eastern Seas, or Voyages and Adventures in the Indian Archipelago, in 1832–33–34, Comprising a Tour of the Island of Java – visits to Borneo, the Malay Peninsula, Siam, &c.; also an Account of the present State of Singapore, with Observations on the Commercial Resources of the Archipelago* (London, 1837), p. 82.

16. Anne Bulley, *Free Mariner: John Adolphus Pope in the East Indies, 1786–1821* (London, 1992), p. 58.

17. Ghosh, “Of Fanás and Forecasts”, pp. 58–60; Thomas Roebuck, *An English and Hindoostanee Naval Dictionary of Technical Terms and Sea Phrases, As Also The Various Words of Command Given In Working a Ship, &c. With Many Sentences Of Great Use At Sea; To Which Is Prefixed A Short Grammar Of The Hindoostanee Language* (Calcutta, 1811).

18. James Innes, “Diary of James Innes” (1833–1834), 19 December 1833, MS JM/A7/231, Cambridge University Library [hereafter CUL].

19. Balachandran, “Searching for the *Sardar*”, p. 210.

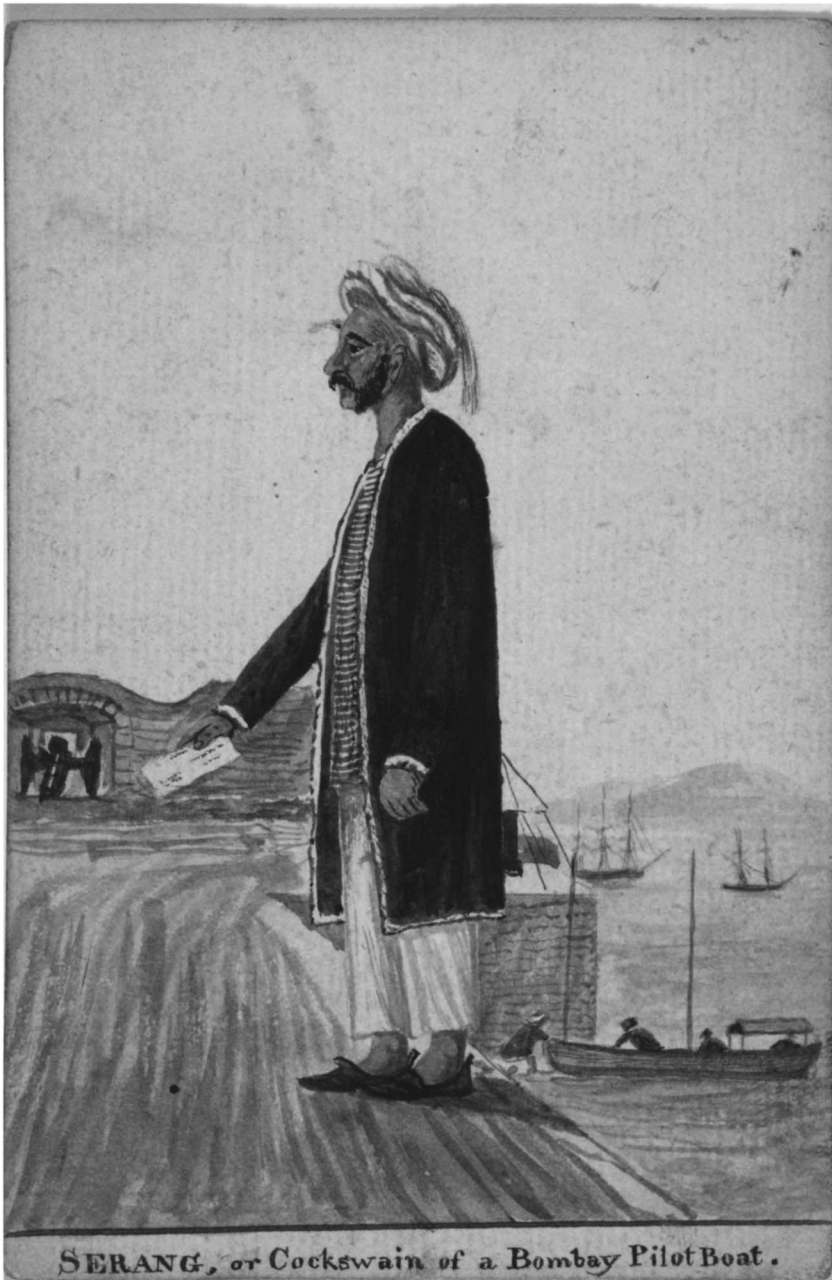


Figure 1. *Serang*, or cockswain of a Bombay pilot boat.  
*The British Library Board, D40013-59 WD 315 no.59. Used with permission.*

The position occupied by *serangs* and *tindals* could vary considerably from ship to ship. The area of discipline is particularly representative of this. Lascar petty officers were entrusted with the task of punishing their subordinates, preventing them from deserting, and containing unrest.<sup>20</sup> The customary response to any disturbance amongst lascars would have been to call one of these figures on deck. Those who remained loyal to their employers featured prominently in the suppression of mutiny. When two Malay lascars belonging to the *Sagor* began stabbing their shipmates in 1826, the ship's *serang* was summoned immediately. He failed to stop the mutineers throwing the captain overboard but was the only member of the ship's company to offer them any resistance.<sup>21</sup>

For every captain who allowed his *serang* to be "lord of the forecandle", however, there were others who chose to interfere.<sup>22</sup> Friction between Europeans and lascar petty officers could result from differing approaches to punishment. Captain George Bayly, for example, described the steps he took when he found one of his *tindals* beating some new recruits: "I called the Tindal and told him I had not been accustomed to see the rope's end at work on board of my Ship and gave orders that the scene of the evening should never be repeated."<sup>23</sup>

The use of violence by *serangs* and *tindals* undoubtedly provoked resistance amongst their subordinates, although this rarely appears in the archives. As Ahuja states, "there were probably numerous instances when lascars clashed with serangs [...]. Such conflicts usually remained unrecorded as most of them were resolved or suppressed informally on board ship."<sup>24</sup> A diary kept aboard the *Lady Campbell*, an East Indiaman travelling to Calcutta in 1825, provides a rare example of such confrontations. Robert Ramsay, the author, described how:

[...] the Serang [...] having ordered one of his men to work, on the man's refusing, struck him, the man resented it, and a contest ensued; the 1st Mate gave the Serang a rope's end and desired him to beat the man, which was done, the Serang treating him over the head & face; the man caught the Serang by the hair, which was coiled up on his head, and pulled him by it.<sup>25</sup>

20. Ahuja, "Mobility and Containment", pp. 135–136.

21. Evidence of Marco Muntro, 14 September 1826, Proceedings of a Court Martial on two Malays reputed to have murdered Mr Langley, owner of the *Sagor*, and a lascar, Home Miscellaneous [hereafter HM], H/669, p. 603, India Office Records [hereafter IOR], BL.

22. Colburn's *United Service Magazine and Naval and Military Journal*, 3 vols (London, 1847), II, p. 115.

23. Quoted in Pamela Statham and Rica Erickson (eds), *A Life on the Ocean Wave: The Journals of Captain George Bayly, 1824–1844* (Carlton South, VIC, 1998), p. 246.

24. Ahuja, "Mobility and Containment", p. 135.

25. Robert Ramsay, "Journal of a Voyage from Gravesend to Calcutta by a Cadet in 1825", 3 January 1825, JOD/5, National Maritime Museum, London [hereafter NMM].

The *tindal* made no attempt to assist his superior during this scuffle, as was his duty, causing the mate to reprimand him for his conduct. His retort hints at another threat to the authority of serangs. According to Ramsay, “the Tindal replied it was not his business, that the Serang was in the wrong; and that he was not a countryman of the Serang’s”.<sup>26</sup> *Serangs* often had problems managing the diverse crews under their supervision and could easily fall victim to groups of lascars who shared a common background.<sup>27</sup>

The financial control that the *serang* sometimes exercised over his lascars has been discussed in great detail. As has been shown, it was customary for him to take charge of a crew’s wages and pay them after making his own deductions, a practice which gave him considerable opportunity to swindle his subordinates. Many *serangs* also maintained complex ties of debt with their lascars.<sup>28</sup> Only occasionally are we given an insight into the ways in which these relationships affected the maintenance of order on board sailing vessels. A commander named Andrew Cheyne, for example, implied that the *serang*’s position as creditor could be used as a lever to undermine the authority of the captain. During a trading voyage in 1843 he accused one of his lascars of theft, claiming that the man had “at the Serang’s suggestion broken open my desk, and abstracted 20 dollars to pay the Serang some gambling debt”.<sup>29</sup> The corrupt practices of *serangs* were sometimes cited as a motive for violence against them. When a group of lascars belonging to the *Newport* killed their *serang* during a voyage from Madras to Penang in 1797, newspapers claimed that they had been defrauded by him shortly after joining the ship.<sup>30</sup>

Both the captain and the *serang* could play a part in the religious life of a crew. As was the case in other trades, the captain’s spiritual outlook could have a significant impact on the tenor of a voyage. He could grant religious holidays, dictate what form of public worship took place, and forbid behaviour that he deemed to be immoral.<sup>31</sup> Captains of an evangelical bent may have used their position to preach to Muslim and Hindu lascars. A passenger travelling from Batavia to Dover aboard the *Bengal Merchant* in 1815 described the master’s habit of making the crew attend divine service. In one diary entry he complained “that ridiculous thing of reading the Prayers of the Church of England to the Lascars, Chinamen, Malays

26. *Ibid.*

27. See, for example, *Calcutta Gazette*, 15 February 1798, p. 1; Evidence of Shaik Hussain, 6 September 1826, Proceedings of a Court Martial on two Malays reputed to have murdered Mr Langley, owner of the *Sagor*, and a lascar, HM, H/669, p. 604.

28. Ahuja, “Networks of Subordination”, pp. 28–29.

29. Quoted in Dorothy Shineberg (ed.), *The Trading Voyages of Andrew Cheyne, 1841–1844* (Canberra, 1971), p. 293.

30. *Calcutta Gazette*, 15 February 1798, p. 1.

31. Margaret S. Creighton, *Rites and Passages: The Experience of American Whaling, 1830–1870* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 102–104.



Figure 2. *Klassee*, i.e. sailor.

*The British Library Board, D40013-50 WD 315 no. 50. Used with permission.*



(unacquainted with the Language) again took place, and which in my humble opinion must tend to bring the Protestant religion into contempt”.<sup>32</sup>

Religious concerns associated with food were often cited as a potential cause of conflict between lascars and their European officers. When Charles Nordhoff, the American journalist and writer, recalled his time on a country ship, he claimed that “so slight a misdemeanour on the part of any of the Europeans as handling any of their cooking utensils, or drinking from their water cask, would produce an instantaneous remonstrance”.<sup>33</sup> Officers undoubtedly became frustrated with attempts to maintain ritual cleanliness. Storing food separately, keeping eating spaces apart, and allowing lascars to butcher their own animals would have presented many difficulties aboard a cramped sailing vessel.<sup>34</sup> Europeans also implied that religious strictures against certain foodstuffs had no place at sea. Captain Crawford of the *Investigator* expressed surprise at the refusal of Muslim sailors to eat turtle “even when in a dying state from the Scurvy and suffering under the greatest privations on board ship”.<sup>35</sup> Other commanders are reported to have complained about the practice of fasting during Ramadan on the grounds that it hampered a crew’s ability to work.<sup>36</sup>

Captains permitted their lascars to hold various religious festivals at sea. These involved feasting, music, and processions.<sup>37</sup> Anthony Mactier described one which took place during the voyage of the *Surat Castle* to India in 1797. The ceremony, which may have been associated with Muharram, featured lascars who “intoxicated themselves with Opium and wounded their breasts and other parts of the body with Swords [,] dancing all the while to the Sound of the Tom Tom”.<sup>38</sup> The licensed disorder

32. [Anon], “Journal of a Voyage in the *Bengal Merchant*, from Batavia to Dover via the Cape and St Helena” (1815), 2 July 1815, RUSI/NM/162, NMM.

33. Charles Nordhoff, *Nine Years a Sailor: Being Sketches of Personal Experience in the United States Naval Service, the American and British Merchant Marine, and the Whaling Service* (Cincinnati, OH, 1866), pp. 228–229.

34. For a discussion of similar issues in relation to an earlier period, see A. Jan Qaisar, “From Port To Port: Life on Indian Ships in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries”, in Ashin Das Gupta and M.N. Pearson (eds), *India and the Indian Ocean, 1500–1800* (Calcutta, 1987), pp. 331–349, 336–340.

35. John Crawford, “A Diary kept on board the Honourable Company’s Surveying Ship INVESTIGATOR by J. Crawford, her Commander” (1818–1819), 9 December 1818, MS 353, National Library of Australia, Canberra.

36. Edward Thomson, *Our Oriental Missions*, 2 vols (Cincinnati, OH, 1870–1871), II, p. 38.

37. Alexander Gardyne, “Journal of the ship RELIANCE from Deal to Calcutta, 1827–28, kept by Alexander Gardyne, passenger”, 16 April 1828, IGR/27, NMM; Edward James, *Brief Memoirs of the late Right Reverend John Thomas James, D.D., Lord Bishop of Calcutta; particularly during his Residence in India; gathered from his Letters and Papers* (London, 1830), pp. 1–2.

38. Anthony Mactier, “Journal of a Voyage to India” (1797–1798), 20 December 1797, RCMS 63/9, CUL. For a discussion of similar rituals performed by lascars in London see Fisher, *Counterflows to Colonialism*, pp. 161–162.

associated with such occasions may have provided lascars with a means of releasing tension. Whether they ever turned sour or got dangerously out of hand is unknown. As Margaret S. Creighton has shown, this was always a risk when allowing “Crossing the Line” festivities to take place.<sup>39</sup>

*Serangs* appear to have taken centre stage during many of these events. Certain ceremonies involved the *serang* leading his men aft to pay their respects to the captain.<sup>40</sup> “On the first evening the new moon makes its appearance”, wrote George Bayly whilst in command of the *Hooghly*; “all hands dress themselves in their best garments and headed by the Serang come aft on the quarter deck, make their salaam to the Captain and Officers and return forward on the opposite side of the deck”.<sup>41</sup> Regrettably, observers seldom described the manner in which these gestures were delivered or whether the occasion was ever used to surreptitiously insult the captain.<sup>42</sup> A passenger travelling to India aboard the *Reliance* in 1828 drew attention to the garb worn by *serangs* and *tindals* during a similar ceremony. Alexander Gardyne declared that the petty officers on board his ship “were positively irresistible, the Grand Turk himself could not have made a greater dash than did Serang Ally & his Vizier Abraham”.<sup>43</sup> Although many of these customs reaffirmed the authority of the captain, they could also highlight his distance from the crew whilst cementing the *serang*’s position at its head.

#### LASCAR PROTEST AT SEA

Balachandran has argued that lascar crews aboard steamships rarely adopted violent or demonstrative means of improving their conditions. “Mutinies”, he writes, “may have worked in certain circumstances on eighteenth century sailing vessels. But they had become unsustainable in the more regulated late-nineteenth century steam environment.”<sup>44</sup> Ascertaining whether mutiny, or indeed any form of protest, was “sustainable” aboard sailing vessels is very difficult. Roebuck considered it necessary to include two vernacular terms for mutiny – *dunga* and *fusad* – in his dictionary, both of which were probably translated as “riot” or “disturbance”.<sup>45</sup> To what extent they were used by lascars and how they were understood remains unclear.

39. Creighton, *Rites and Passages*, pp. 121–123.

40. E.g. [Anon], “Journal of a Voyage from Port Glasgow to Bombay and the Persian Gulf” (1828), MS 9594, p. 12, National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh.

41. Quoted in Statham and Erickson, *Life on the Ocean Wave*, p. 247.

42. Cf. David Arnold, “Salutation and Subversion: Gestural Politics in Nineteenth-Century India”, in Michael J. Braddick (ed.), *The Politics of Gesture: Historical Perspectives* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 192–211, 206.

43. Gardyne, “Journal of the ship RELIANCE”, 17 April 1828.

44. Balachandran, *Globalizing Labour?*, p. 266.

45. Roebuck, *An English and Hindoostanee Naval Dictionary*, p. 74.

Reconstructing the events to which these words were applied is hindered by a lack of available source material.

Acts of shipboard protest seldom appear in official documents. The logs of East Indiamen contain scraps of information relating to collective demands for better food, assaults on officers, and other disorderly incidents. Such entries rarely provide detailed information on these occurrences, whilst inconsistent log-keeping practices preclude any attempt to estimate their frequency.<sup>46</sup> Lascar unrest was sometimes mentioned in newspapers and official correspondence if it resulted in court action or was linked to a more serious disturbance. Collective refusals to work by the crews of the *Governor Raffles* in 1813 and the *Wilhelmina* in 1819, for example, were recorded only because they were the prelude to murderous attacks against captains.<sup>47</sup>

Private sea journals contain a wealth of information on lascars.<sup>48</sup> They often provide the best insight into everyday protest, since diarists wrote about mundane conflicts between officers and crew that would otherwise have passed unrecorded. Helenus Scott kept a detailed diary of the time he spent on the *Natalia*, a large Danish ship travelling from Bengal to Suez in 1779. The retired East India Company surgeon made numerous references to the vessel's lascar crew. He described the meagre rations on which they subsisted and accused the captain of being "a selfish ill bred fellow who thought of nothing but himself, his own ease, convenience and gluttony". He also noted the man's unsympathetic reaction when one of the lascars fell overboard.<sup>49</sup> Of particular interest is his account of a protest which took place towards the end of the voyage. Having been employed all day in the ship's boat, "the lascars [...] took sulk, threw down their oars, and refused to work nor would either threats, promises, or offers of money prevail on them to take them up again".<sup>50</sup>

As Scott's account suggests, lascars employed aboard sailing ships used the collective withdrawal of labour to express discontent and bargain with their officers. Singing may have played a part in this process. Lascars and other maritime workers across the Indian Ocean used rhythmic chants whilst rowing, loading cargo, and performing other strenuous tasks. As in other contexts, they were probably used to coordinate slowdowns.<sup>51</sup>

46. See, for example, the *Cuvera*, 24 March 1799, L/MAR/B/369A; *Arran*, 27 July 1800, L/MAR/B/520A; *Buckinghamshire*, 3 March 1817, L/MAR/B/18A, Ships' Journals, IOR.

47. *Calcutta Gazette*, 3 March 1814, p. 1; Statement of James Nicholls or Nicholas, 2 August 1819, Board's Collections [hereafter BC] 17222, p. 82, F/4/635, IOR.

48. Ghosh, "Of Fanás and Forecastles", p. 60.

49. Helenus Scott, "Journal of a Journey by the Red Sea and Egypt from Bombay to England, 1799", 10 May 1799, Scott Family Papers, VII, A2266, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney.

50. *Ibid.*, 23 May 1799.

51. Creighton, *Rites and Passages*, p. 131.

The inability of officers to understand these songs would have made them a powerful means of disrupting work.<sup>52</sup> Comments made by travellers also suggest that they may have contained obscenities or were even intended to annoy Europeans.<sup>53</sup>

*Serangs* and *tindals* were well placed to organize strikes.<sup>54</sup> They occupied an important position within the highly integrated system of sailing-ship labour and could obstruct the efficient running of a vessel by mistranslating instructions, refusing to relay orders to their subordinates, or simply commanding their men to stop working. This is illustrated by a work stoppage orchestrated by a *tindal* belonging to the *Centaur*. The incident was described by Jane Penelope Herring, the captain's wife, who made the following diary entry for 21 June 1850:

Had a regular mutiny on board this morning [...] the man that was the first cause of it was told to do something on which he was incompetent & when apprehended he took out his knife [...] Mr. Blunt [the first mate] ordered him in irons when the [...] Tindal called all his men [...] & forbid them to work till he should be released, & as Mr. Blunt did not wish the work to stop, especially as Tony [the captain] was not on board he made him free at which they all went to their duty again.<sup>55</sup>

The *tindal's* victory was short-lived. When the captain returned to the vessel, the man was punished. In response to this, one of the other *tindals* armed a portion of the crew with bamboo sticks and led a brief assault on the officers.<sup>56</sup> This demonstrates the ease with which minor protests by lascars could descend into violence.

*Serangs* and *tindals* could play a key role in the process of negotiation between captain and crew. Such figures, as scholars have shown, acted as spokesmen for their subordinates.<sup>57</sup> Disputes over pay, welfare, safety, and other issues could easily become confrontational. When the *Bombay Merchant* arrived at Al-Mukalla on the Arabian coast in 1821, an argument broke out between Captain Hyland and his *serang*. They had reportedly been quarrelling for a number of weeks. According to newspapers:

On their arrival at Maculla, the Serang went into the Captain's cabin, and asked for leave to go on shore with the rest of the crew. This was refused, the Captain

52. Ramsay, "Journal of a Voyage from Gravesend to Calcutta", 7 April 1825 (second entry, p. 85); Bulley, *Bombay Country Ships*, p. 228.

53. R.C. Oakley, "Journal of a Voyage from England to Bombay by way of Cape of Good Hope and back by Way of Egypt" (1828–1829), 19 October 1828, D/PLR/F52, Dorset History Centre, Dorchester.

54. Balachandran, "Searching for the *Sardar*", p. 210.

55. Jane Penelope Herring, "Private Journal of JANE PENELOPE HERRING. Being the Personal Log of a Voyage in the 'CENTAUR'" (1849–1850), 21 June 1850, Mss Eur C 925, India Office Private Papers, BL.

56. *Ibid.*

57. Ahuja, "Mobility and Containment", p. 133.

saying, that only one at a time could be allowed to leave the vessel. An altercation ensued, and several of the crew were seen assembled aft on the vessel's deck.<sup>58</sup>

The crew ignored the captain's commands, and what had begun as a request for shore leave quickly turned violent:

[...] the Serang ordered the boat to be hauled up alongside, on which the Captain threatened to fire into her, if any one got into her and put off. The Serang and some of the crew laid hands on the Captain, who extricated himself with some difficulty from them. [The captain] then ordered the Sookhannee [helmsman] to bring up the irons to confine the Serang; the Sookhannee refused, and the Serang said they would put the Captain in irons. The Chief Officer then brought up the irons, which the Serang carried off, and going forward, armed himself with a broken oar, threw down some bamboos for the crew, and made use of strong language. The crew went on shore in the boat, leaving the Captain, the Chief Officer, and two others in the ship.<sup>59</sup>

Faced with such a complete breakdown of order and unable to secure aid from the local ruler, the captain decided to abandon the vessel and return to India with another ship. The *serang* took charge in his absence, sailed back to Bombay, and disposed of the cargo to the satisfaction of its owners, adding insult to injury by arriving before his former commander. Hyland labelled the incident as “insurrection and piracy”, but British officials refused to treat it as such.<sup>60</sup>

Although it did not always have such dramatic consequences, the ability of *serangs* and *tindals* to incite violence could clearly pose a serious threat to the captain's authority. Troublesome petty officers could be replaced mid-voyage, although this depended on the availability of suitable replacements from amongst the crew.<sup>61</sup> Punishing such figures could also prove difficult. Gardyne described a mutiny that erupted aboard the *Reliance* when lascars showed solidarity with two of their *serangs*:

After Tea this evening we were considerably alarmed by the whole body of our Lascars rushing forward & threatening violence. It appears that orders had repeatedly been given that they should have no lights after 6 O'Clock, this order they had, it seems, determined to violate this evening; the consequence was the 2 Serangs, or chiefs, were taken & put in Irons upon the Poop where they called up their men to a rescue who all instantly obeyed the summons, & a scuffle ensued.<sup>62</sup>

58. *The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register*, XIV (London, 1822), p. 98.

59. *Ibid.*

60. The Memorial of Henry William Hyland, late master of the Grab Ship Bombay Merchant, 26 September 1821, Bombay Public Proceedings [hereafter BPP], 3 October 1821, P/345/65, p. 1887, IOR.

61. See for example Shineberg, *The Trading Voyages of Andrew Cheyne*, p. 293.

62. Gardyne, “Journal of the ship RELIANCE”, 17 November 1827.

The captain decided to make an example of the head *serang*, who was flogged in the presence of the entire ship's company. All other lascars charged with mutiny were acquitted, apparently in belief that "the punishment about to be inflicted upon their Leader would produce the desired effect".<sup>63</sup> Whether this was a common response to unrest is unclear, although it is far from unlikely, given prevalent ideas about the status of *serangs* amongst their crews.<sup>64</sup> Although no attempt was made to disrupt the flogging, Gardyne implied that something of a tense atmosphere prevailed aboard the vessel for a few days afterwards. Awoken by loud noises in the middle of the night, he described his reaction as follows: "I was immediately on my legs with my hands upon my [...] Gun, supposing, (as I heard no wind nor other indications of a storm,) that our black friends in the forecabin had arisen to avenge the affront offered them on the person of Serang Ally."<sup>65</sup>

*Serangs* could exercise considerable control over what was communicated to the captain, hindering the ability of lascars to make personal appeals. This predicament was well expressed by a man called to give evidence at London's Old Bailey in 1857. The first mate of the *Dominion* stood accused of abusing lascars during a voyage from India. The captain sought to refute these charges and at one point implied that appeals could be made directly to him, alleging that "when the men had anything wrong, they complained to me". These words were contradicted by a lascar named Moyadeen. When questioned by the court about the process of airing grievances, he replied "the *serang* and the Burrah Tindal were over me; how could I go to the captain – it was the *serang* I should make the complaint to".<sup>66</sup>

Mutiny could provide lascars with a means of circumventing their petty officers. Successful acts of collective protest would have been dangerous without the collusion of a *serang* or *tindal*, but not impossible. When the *serang* of the *Charlotte Jane* ignored complaints made by his subordinates, they took matters into their own hands. The ensuing mutiny was recorded by Julius Berncastle, a passenger travelling aboard the 750-ton country ship from Bombay to China in 1849. Having worked all night in the rain, the lascars became angry when the mate ordered them to a new task instead of allowing them to eat breakfast: "one and all of them refused to go on with the work, and came aft in an insolent manner, to complain to the Captain, as it appears they had done to the Serang, without his giving a due

63. *Ibid.*, 19 November 1827.

64. Balachandran, "Searching for the *Sardar*", p. 210.

65. Gardyne, "Journal of the ship RELIANCE", 23 November 1827.

66. Evidence of William John Green, evidence of Moyadeen, Trial of John Greer, 26 October 1857, 118571026-1004, Old Bailey Proceedings Online [hereafter OBPO], available at <http://www.oldbaileyonline.org>

consideration to their reasonable demand”.<sup>67</sup> This attempt by the lascars to express their complaint quickly turned violent. According to Berncastle, this was the result of a misunderstanding between officers and crew: “The mate, being the only one who understood their language, without going into the case, reported it as an act of open mutiny, pushed them forwards hastily, and several blows were exchanged. Their numbers being overpowering, the cutlasses were called for, not knowing how it would end.”<sup>68</sup>

The mutiny was eventually suppressed by force. The captain’s desire to punish those involved was probably tempered by fear of provoking another revolt. In a classic show of punishment, one of the mutineers was tied up in preparation for a flogging before being given a last-minute reprieve. The captain then addressed the crew’s original complaint, promising that their meals would not be interrupted again. The *serang*, meanwhile, was summoned to the quarterdeck and reprimanded for ignoring the concerns of his lascars.<sup>69</sup> Faced with conflicting demands from their subordinates and superiors, *serangs* and *tindals* could thus find themselves in difficulty. As Samita Sen has remarked in reference to factory labour of a later period, the intermediary’s peculiar position was “derived from the tightrope he walked between the employers and the workers – at moments of crisis he could be caught in the crossfire”.<sup>70</sup>

#### SEIZING THE SHIP

Lascars were also involved in more serious forms of mutiny, in which they murdered captains, commandeered ships, and expropriated cargoes (Figure 3). These premeditated attempts to take control of vessels mostly conform to Cornelis J. Lammers’s description of “seizure of power” movements.<sup>71</sup> References to such incidents appear as far back as the early eighteenth century, official records noting uprisings aboard the *Mary Galley* in 1713, the *Recovery* in 1755, and the *Tryal* in 1767.<sup>72</sup> Country ships appear to have been particularly vulnerable, since their commanders had few defences against

67. Julius Berncastle, *A Voyage to China: Including a Visit to the Bombay Presidency; the Mahratta Country; the Cave Temples of Western India, Singapore, the Straits of Malacca and Sunda, and the Cape of Good Hope*, 2 vols (London, 1850), I, p. 270.

68. *Ibid.*, pp. 270–271.

69. *Ibid.*, pp. 271–272.

70. Samita Sen, *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India: The Bengal Jute Industry* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 127.

71. Cornelis J. Lammers, “Strikes and Mutinies: A Comparative Study of Organizational Conflicts between Rulers and Ruled”, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 14 (1969), pp. 558–572, 563.

72. York Fort to Court of Directors, 10 September 1713, Sumatra Factory Records, VIII, G/35/8, fos 233v–234r; Fort William to Court of Directors, 8 December 1755, para. 145, Letters Received from Bengal [hereafter LRB], E/4/23; Fort William to Court of Directors, 31 December 1767, para. 11, LRB, E/4/28, IOR.

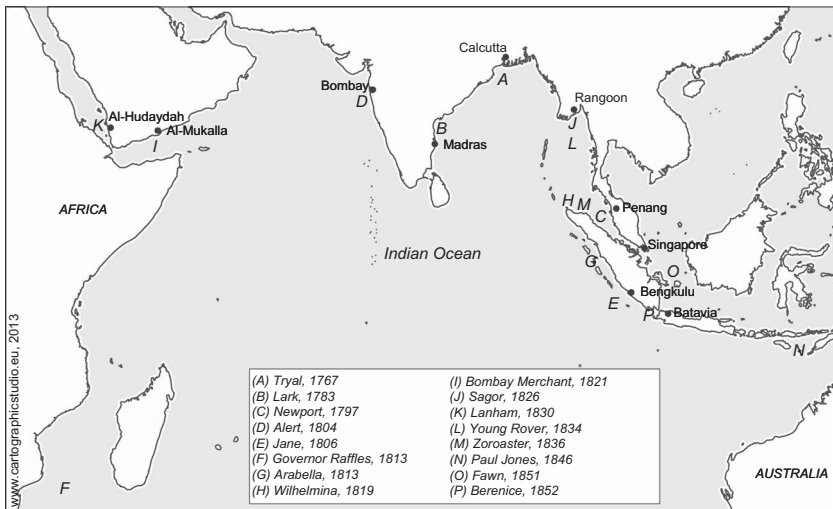


Figure 3. Selected ships with mutinous lascars crews.

sudden attack. Nordhoff claimed to have seen a structure resembling the *barricado* of a slave ship aboard one vessel – “stretching across from the mainmast to each rail, ten feet high, which was put up every evening at sunset, and abaft of which no Lascar was allowed to come at night” – but there is no evidence to suggest that this was a widespread practice.<sup>73</sup> Beyond their ability to take ships, the Indian Ocean region offered lascars a vast constellation of ports, islands, and kingdoms in which to shelter. Fugitive mutineers can be traced to areas of Hadramaut, India, Burma, Sumatra, and Java.

White sailors tended to side with their captains during these uprisings. They served in small numbers aboard country ships, and evidence suggests that many were treated leniently.<sup>74</sup> Nonetheless, collaboration between Europeans and mutinous lascars was not unknown. When several lascars were put on trial for attempting to seize the *Queen of the Teign* in 1853, attention was drawn to an English sailor named David Fairfold, who had failed to assist his officers in suppressing the mutiny. It transpired that he had promised to help the mutineers sail to California once they were in control. Evidence given by the captain hints at how the man had come to be on familiar terms with his south-east Asian shipmates: “I had occasion to disrate Fairfold during the voyage [...] I sent him forward with the Lascars – he slept in the same part of the ship with the Lascars by way

73. Nordhoff, *Nine Years a Sailor*, p. 228.

74. Robin Craig, Ann Nix, and Michael Nix (eds), *Chronometer Jack: The Autobiography of the Shipmaster, John Miller of Edinburgh (1802–1883)* (Dunbeath, 2008), p. 28.



of punishment”.<sup>75</sup> Accounts of lascars sharing plunder with Europeans can also be found amongst the records.<sup>76</sup>

From the 1780s onwards the East India Company began to keep increasingly detailed files on mutiny. Although these reports are often fragmentary, they provide an unparalleled window onto the working lives of lascars. Investigations involved taking lengthy depositions from captains, mates, servants, slaves, and suspected mutineers. Lascars touched on a wide range of subjects when interrogated, including their previous voyages, their wives ashore, their relations with sailors from other regions, and their dealings with Indian Ocean rulers. They sometimes used the opportunity to denounce their former commanders, complaining that they had been “unable to bear the beating and maltreatment of the Captain and mate”, “irregularly paid, badly fed and often punished”, or subject to commanders who “beat every Person in the Ship’s Company for every trifling occasion”.<sup>77</sup> Other lascars admitted that the lure of valuable cargoes of gold, silver, or opium had induced them to mutiny.<sup>78</sup>

Mutiny narratives are always difficult documents to interpret. As in other contexts, such testimony was heavily shaped by the judicial process.<sup>79</sup> Lascars concocted elaborate stories to explain their actions, made attempts to distance themselves from their former shipmates, and subtly altered the accounts they gave to downplay their own involvement.<sup>80</sup> The leadership of *serangs* and *tindals* was undoubtedly subject to exaggeration by their shipmates. Prosecutors, meanwhile, were under great pressure to convict those who were caught. Apprehending mutineers could be a difficult, lengthy, and expensive undertaking. British agents were often forced to use bribery and intimidation to recover fugitives.<sup>81</sup>

75. Evidence of William Tapling Stooke, Trial of Alie and Ahalt, 24 October 1853, 118531024–11116, OBPO.

76. The Declaration of Franciso DeCosta, 22 July 1783, Madras Public Proceedings [hereafter MPP], 21 August 1783, P/240/57, IOR.

77. Further Examination of John Henrick, 22 October 1834, BC 64350, p. 72, F/4/1581; Statement made by Pedro de Vas, 22 September 1836, BC 69433, p. 664, F/4/1724; The Declaration of Millapillee Niersemloo, 22 July 1783, MPP, 21 August 1783, P/240/57, IOR.

78. See, for example, Prisoner’s Defence, 14 September 1826, Proceedings of a Court Martial on two Malays reputed to have murdered Mr. Langley, owner of the *Sagor*, and a lascar, HM, H/669, p. 604.

79. Kim A. Wagner, *Thuggee: Banditry and the British in Early Nineteenth-Century India* (Basingstoke, 2007), ch. 1.

80. See, for example, Prisoner Draman’s Statement, 19 May 1819, BC 17222, pp. 13–23, F/4/635; information taken before Thomas Dunman, Justice of the Peace for Singapore, 27 December 1844, Bengal Judicial Proceedings [hereafter BJP], 5 March 1845, no. 164, P/142/29, IOR.

81. See, for example, Forbes & Co. to James A. Grant, Secretary to Government, 2 March 1805, BC 3486, pp. 34–36, F/4/182; Translation of a letter from Mr Pringle to the Governor of Suhar, 16 December 1804, BPP, 21 June 1805, P/343/24, pp. 3612–3613, IOR.

Officials bemoaned the costs of sending suspects to courts endowed with the necessary Admiralty jurisdiction to try them.<sup>82</sup> Faced with these obstacles, it would have been convenient to cast lascar petty officers as ringleaders. Only the better documented cases of mutiny allow a detailed examination of the ways in which they were able to use their position to depose captains.

Claims that *serangs* and *tindals* were able to bring about uprisings are difficult to dismiss. Evidence suggests that such figures could employ various means to incite their men to seize ships. When the *Jane* was captured by French privateers off Bengkulu in 1806, Captain Jansen relied upon his *serang*, named Ismail, and two *tindals* to retake the vessel. The lascars under their command appear to have been motivated less by a sense of loyalty to the British than by the *serang*'s promise to share out the ship's cargo.<sup>83</sup> After overpowering the French, Ismail and the *tindals* took possession of some gold dust that was on board and gave portions of it to the crew. A small quantity was even presented to the French sailors, apparently to placate them. Jansen tried to stop this redistribution, but was powerless to do so.<sup>84</sup> The incident provides a rare example of how lascars responded to conflict between European powers in the Indian Ocean, in this case by exploiting it to their advantage. More research is needed into this area, particularly in order to address claims that lascars were invariably "useless in action".<sup>85</sup>

Mutiny revealed the dangers of delegating the use of violence to intermediaries at sea. If a captain allowed one of his subordinates to become the most feared man aboard ship, he placed himself in an extremely dangerous position. Few cases illustrate this better than that of the *Lark*, a snow-brig seized during its voyage along the Coromandel Coast to Madras in 1783. Captain Dean's crew appear to have been in an unsettled state for at least a week prior to his murder at the hands of the *serang*. One sailor later made the particularly revealing claim that, during this period, another member of the crew had tried in vain to incite a mutiny. He deposed that "the Captain found fault with the Cussab [deck steward] for serving out more water than the fixed Allowance and struck him a blow on the Face [...] the Cussab thereupon called to the Ship's Company to assist him in his Defence but none came".<sup>86</sup>

82. For example, T. Parr, Resident at Fort Marlborough, to George Udny, President of the Board of Trade, 1 February 1806, BJP, 10 July 1806, no. 15, P/129/25, IOR.

83. *Calcutta Gazette*, 18 June 1807, p. 4.

84. Deposition of Monsieur Bernelot and Monsieur des Places, examination of Ismail Serang, examination of the Second Tindal, examination of the First Tindal, Monsieur Jenistree's deposition, Monsieur Latoore's deposition, 5 January 1807, BJP, 19 June 1807, no. 51, P/129/36, IOR.

85. C. Northcote Parkinson, *War in the Eastern Seas, 1793–1815* (London, 1954), p. 343.

86. The Declaration of Franciso DeCosta, 22 July 1783, MPP, 21 August 1783, P/240/57, IOR.

The night that Dean was killed witnessed a similar confrontation. Shortly before it took place, the *serang* tried to embolden the crew by giving them alcohol. This was obtained from the cargo and served out in an almost ceremonial manner:

[...] the Syrang [...] procured a Gimlet from Jack a Slave Boy belonging to the Captain and gave it to a Sea Cunny called Francisca [*sic*] DeCosta who went down into the hold and drew a small Tissal or pot of Arrack which he brought up to the Forecastle where the such part of the Ship's Company who were off duty drank of it & the Syrang sent the Cussab to call the others to come down and drink likewise.<sup>87</sup>

The *serang* then went on deck, apparently with the intention of provoking the captain. A boy employed as cook described what took place when Dean enquired about the time:

The Captain [...] came upon the Poop and asked the Syrang how many Glasses it was? who said it was three Glasses but the Captain said it was only two and struck the Syrang a blow on the Face from whence he bled [,] the Captain and Syrang afterwards came struggling together from the Poop on the Deck where they both fell down and the Syrang called to the Ship's Company to assist him and the Tindal in the meantime flogged the Hands with a Rope commanding them to go and they accordingly went [and] seized the Captain by the Hair of his head [,] his legs and Arms and threw him overboard.<sup>88</sup>

Animosity between lascar petty officers and their superiors could play an important role in mutiny. Evidence suggests that *serangs* and *tindals* who had been humiliated by Europeans were sometimes able to foment uprisings as a form of retaliation. A mutiny which took place on board the *Fawn* near Singapore in 1851 was attributed to personal conflicts of this nature. Witnesses drew attention to a beating the *burra-tindal* had received at the hands of the mate shortly before the mutiny. The *burra-tindal*, who appears to have led the attack against the ship's officers, was reported to have pushed other members of the ship's company aside in his determination to find the mate.<sup>89</sup> As in the case of the *Lark*, accusations were made that threats had been used to persuade other lascars to participate. One account claimed that "the tindal went round to each man asking what side he was going to be on, threatening that if he was on the Captain's side, the tindal and his people would kill him".<sup>90</sup>

87. The Declaration of Millapillee Niersemloo, 22 July 1783, MPP, 21 August 1783, *ibid.*

88. The Declaration of Vaspillee Chimboodie, 22 July 1783, MPP, 21 August 1783, *ibid.*

89. *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 12 December 1851, p. 3; *The Straits Times*, 16 December 1851, p. 3.

90. *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 17 October 1851, p. 2.

Once in control of a vessel, lascars began overturning many aspects of established shipboard order.<sup>91</sup> Mutineers are reported to have destroyed logbooks, slept in the cabins of captains, and divided cargo amongst themselves.<sup>92</sup> Lascars usually executed their European officers, sometimes boasting to their shipmates about these acts of revenge. Crew members from the *Arabella* claimed that the lascar who murdered their captain in 1813 proclaimed “your Captain has plenty of fat, which I have let out”.<sup>93</sup> Those who were spared were put to work about the ship. An English sailor from the *Paul Jones* complained that, after seizing the ship in 1846, mutinous lascars had ordered him to “wash down the Decks, and then to cook breakfast for them”.<sup>94</sup> Rape may also have been used to settle scores during mutiny, as implied by restrained courtroom reports of lascars “lying on the Captain’s lady”.<sup>95</sup> The bodies of dead Europeans were thrown unceremoniously into the sea. What mutineers did with those of lascars killed during fighting is unclear, although a deposition from one case suggests that they were treated with more respect. A lascar from the *Zoroaster* claimed during interrogation in 1836 that “the Corpse of [the tindal] was removed into the Cuddy, placed on the Table, and covered with a sheet”.<sup>96</sup>

It was not uncommon for *serangs* to take control of commandeered vessels, indeed some mutinies merely brought about a change at the highest levels of a ship’s hierarchy. When lascars seized the *Alert* during a voyage from Calcutta to Bombay in 1804, one of their *serangs* appears to have adopted the role of captain. Having sailed the vessel to Al-Mukalla, he told the local authorities that all the Europeans had died at sea. An informant soon provided the British with an alternative version of events, claiming that “on the Passage this Sultaun Syrang with some of his Gang had rushed into the Cabin when the Captain and Officers were at Table after dinner and murdered them every one and assumed the Command of the Vessel and directed & disposed of every thing as he pleased”.<sup>97</sup>

91. Cf. Clare Anderson, “‘The Feringees are Flying – The Ship is Ours!’: The Convict Middle Passage in Colonial South and Southeast Asia, 1790–1860”, *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 42 (2005), pp. 143–186, 170–171.

92. The Declaration of Vaspillie Chimboodie, 22 July 1783, MPP, 21 August 1783, P/240/57; The Voluntary Deposition of John Parr Seaman respecting the murder on board the “Paul Jones”, 25 November 1846, BC 120312, pp. 13–14, F/4/2319, IOR.

93. Examination of Muhammed Serrif, 6 November 1813, BJP, 19 July 1814, no. 6, P/131/42, IOR.

94. The Voluntary Deposition of Henry Gray Seaman respecting the murder on board the “Paul Jones”, 25 November 1846, BC 120312, p. 18, F/4/2319, IOR.

95. *The Straits Times*, 16 December 1851, p. 3.

96. Statement made by Pedro de Vas, 22 September 1836, BC 69433, p. 665, F/4/1724, IOR.

97. Robert Henshaw, Customs Master, to James A. Grant, Secretary to Government, 20 December 1804, BC 3486, p. 3, F/4/182, IOR.

The ability of *serangs* and *tindals* to supplant captains was strengthened by the considerable sailing experience and “local knowledge” which they possessed.<sup>98</sup> Navigational skill could play a major role in mutiny.<sup>99</sup> *Lascars* were sometimes forced to divert commandeered vessels hundreds of miles in order to find refuge from British retribution. Those who seized a ship without being able to navigate soon encountered problems. Officials claimed that the mutinous crew of the *Tryal* had “continued a long while at Sea without knowing where they were”, until they drifted towards Balasore and were caught in 1767.<sup>100</sup> Mutineers from the *Young Rover* were forced to go to their captain, whom they had imprisoned in the hold, to ask for advice on how to get to Rangoon in 1834.<sup>101</sup> The most daring mutineers made attempts to sell their plundered cargoes. When the *Lanham* was seized in 1830, her crew called at Al-Hudaydah to dispose of textiles and other goods. Suspicion was soon aroused by “the manner in which the Syrang [...] who now Commands her lavished money”.<sup>102</sup>

*Serangs* and other leading mutineers may have mimicked the appearance of their former captains. As Clare Anderson has demonstrated, this highly symbolic act was a recurring feature of mutiny aboard convict vessels.<sup>103</sup> The case of the *Berenice*, a British barque commandeered en route to Sydney in 1852, provides a striking example of such behaviour. Having killed their captain, the crew sailed to Java but were soon caught by the Dutch. A detailed report was sent to the British, claiming that the “situation held by Ali, who was *Serang* [...] together with his influence over the conspirators, placed him, both during, and after the commission of the crime, at the head of the plot”. Whether this was an exaggeration on the part of Batavian officials is impossible to determine, particularly without access to the original court transcripts. The report also charged him with dividing plunder, commanding others to wash blood from the decks, and ordering the destruction of the vessel. In a particularly damning passage, he was accused of aping the dead captain. “Chests were forced open, and the contents taken out and laid before Ali, who had dressed himself in the Captain’s clothes and seated in his chair, telescope in hand, enacted the part of the Commander of the Vessel.”<sup>104</sup>

98. Fisher, “Working across the Seas”, p. 24.

99. Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700–1750* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 229.

100. Fort William to Court of Directors, 31 December 1767, para. 11, LRB, E/4/28, IOR.

101. Examination of Justo, 21 October 1834, BC 64350, p. 78, F/4/1581, IOR.

102. J.C. Hawkins, Commander of HCSW *Clive*, to J. Pepper, Commander of HCSW *Coote*, 1 February 1830, BPP, 17 August 1830, no. 4, P/12/53, IOR.

103. Anderson, “The Feringees are Flying – The Ship is Ours!”, p. 171.

104. Translation of a letter from the Governor General of Netherlands India to the Governor of Prince of Wales Island, Singapore and Malacca, 24 October 1854, BC 189636, pp. 3–9, F/4/2692, IOR.

Lascar crews were able to commandeer European ships throughout the last eight decades of East India Company rule, yet the scope for doing so diminished dramatically as the nineteenth century progressed. Sailing vessels could easily be worked and navigated by lascars, whereas the engineering skills required to operate steamships were closely guarded by Europeans.<sup>105</sup> In addition, safe havens for mutineers in the Indian Ocean gradually disappeared with the extension of imperial control over the region's ports, coastal territory, and shipping. The associated expansion of road, rail, and telegraph networks would have further hindered the ability of fugitive lascars to evade capture.<sup>106</sup>

### CONCLUSION

Studying lascars as migrants can have the effect of obscuring the time they spent afloat and risks placing too much emphasis on the experiences of those who journeyed to Britain. Reconstructing mutiny and other events that took place at sea presents many difficulties due to the fragmentary nature of the available source material. Such occurrences were recorded sporadically in private diaries, ships' logs, official correspondence, and newspapers. These documents provide little more than scattered glimpses of shipboard life and its day-to-day conflicts. The most prevalent forms of mutiny were probably demonstrations, strikes, and scuffles with officers. It is clear that lascar crews used these tactics to air grievances, resist unpopular orders, and extract concessions from their superiors. Evidence suggests that such action was a familiar feature of labour relations on sailing vessels. Disputes arose from issues common to all seafarers, such as discipline and welfare, as well as from those which were culturally specific to lascars, such as ritual cleanliness.

*Serangs* and *tindals* could play a pivotal role in everyday protest. As was the case aboard steamships, their spheres of responsibility often overlapped with those of the captain. Their seafaring ability, linguistic skills, use of physical punishment, financial control over their subordinates, and their place in the religious life of a crew made them alternative centres of authority. This position could enable them seriously to undermine their European officers. Heading deputations, interfering with work routines, and inciting violence were some of the means by which they could disrupt shipboard order.

*Serangs* employed aboard sailing vessels were arguably amongst the most powerful of all labour intermediaries. Under certain circumstances, they were able to depose captains and assume command of ships. They were,

105. Kenneth McPherson, *The Indian Ocean: A History of People and the Sea* (Delhi, 1993), pp. 236–237.

106. Michael Pearson, *The Indian Ocean* (London, 2003), ch. 7.

of course, irrelevant to some mutinies and killed during others. Their leadership was also exaggerated by prosecutors and their former shipmates. Nonetheless, allegations that they could engineer crises, exploit disaffection to further their own ends, or use coercion to incite uprisings were not without foundation. Their involvement in shipboard uprisings serves as a reminder of the ways in which mutiny could be staged, manipulated, and controlled.